

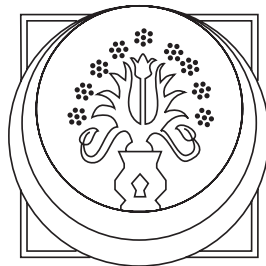
# AL-GHAZĀLĪ

*The Mysteries of Fasting for Children*

FONS VITAE



Imam al-Ghazali  
The Book on the  
Mysteries of Fasting  
for Children  
Book Six from the  
*Ihya Ulum al-Din*



FONS VITAE

# The Book of the Mysteries of Fasting For Children

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Beneficent and the Merciful  
And Prayers and Benedictions on Our Prophet Muhammad,  
his Family, and his Companions

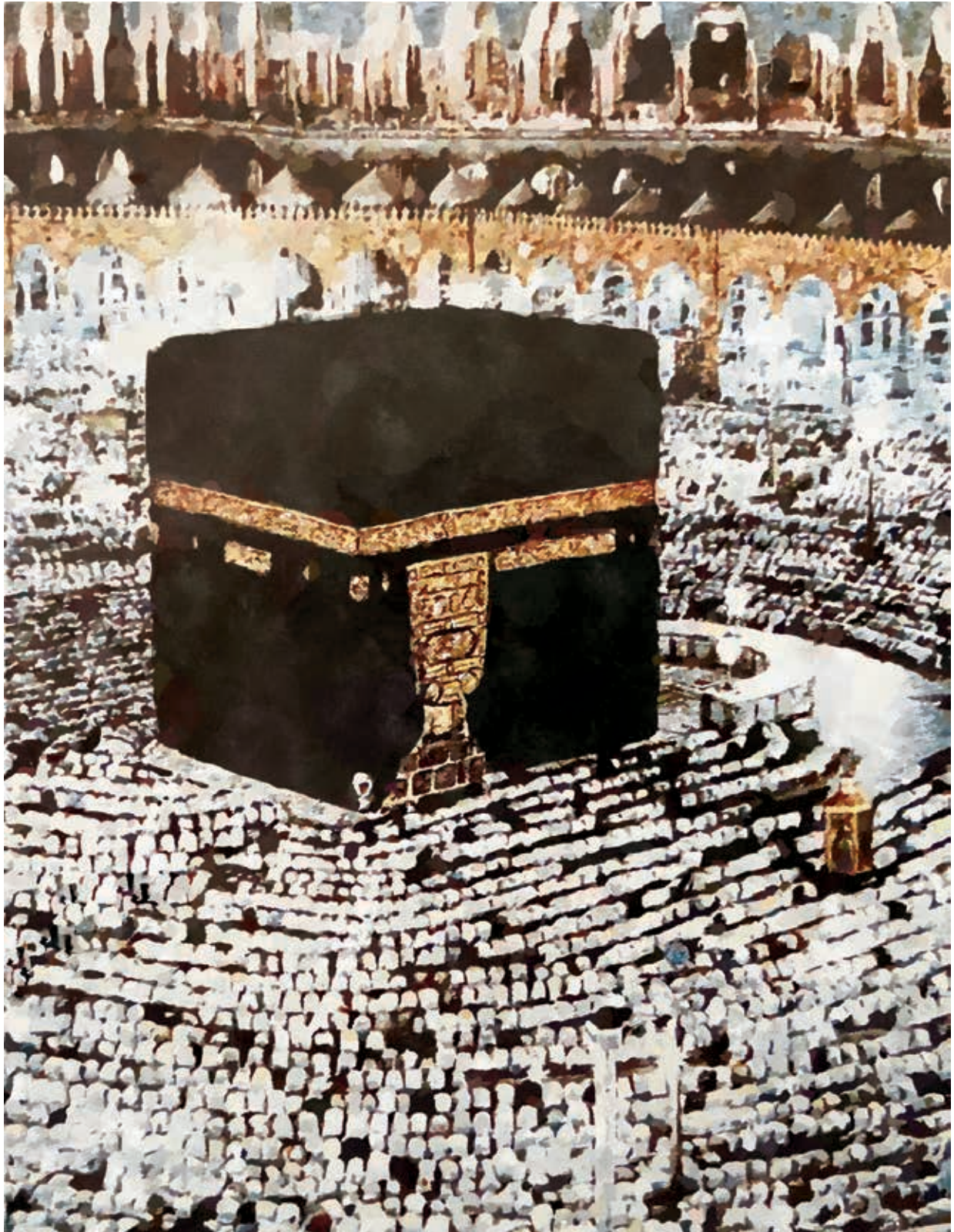
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### Workbook and Teacher's Manual Includes:

1. The Primary Learning Goal.
2. Questions to Think about before and as You Read the Chapter.
3. A Word Bank of New Vocabulary Words and their Definitions.
4. Questions to Answer after you Read the Chapter. These can be answered with the help of your teacher and can also be adjusted for differing age groups. The answers to the questions are included in the Teacher's Manual.
5. Related Qur'anic and *Hadith* Passages for Reflection and Discussion
6. A Selection of Activities for all Ages from which to Choose. The details are included in the Teacher's Manual which follows the Workbook.





*Imam al-Ghazali explains that just as the Ka'ba, and the sacred sanctuary that surrounds it, are especially honored by God ﷻ even though the whole earth is sacred and belongs to Him, fasting is special to God ﷻ among all the ways we are asked to worship.*

## Chapter One

### What Makes Fasting So *Very* Special?

The new crescent moon had been sighted and Ramadan had begun! Today the fasting children had permission to read in the library instead of going to the cafeteria with the other children. Or they could go to the playground, which they did today. Some of the boys decided to play a game of soccer.

As Ahmed kicked the ball, he called out, “Hey, everyone! What if we pray the *dhuhr* prayer in Ustaz Ali’s room? Then maybe we could meet up with him afterwards, if he’s free?” Everyone agreed, and after Khalid scored a goal they made their way to Ustaz Ali’s room.

Khadija and Maryam got the prayer rugs out of the big closet. The girls and boys prepared their own spaces for prayer. None of them would ever forget how Ustaz Ali helped them understand the *inner* meanings of prayer. Before their teacher had explained Imam al-Ghazali’s teachings on the meanings of the prayer positions, they hadn’t paid much attention to the movements they made. Then, when they first heard that they should be in a special state of being for not only *every* movement, but also for each verse and phrase of the prayer, they were afraid it would be too difficult! It was hard to remember to have *presence of Heart*, or a sense of awe or humility during prayer, even though they knew they should remember that they were actually standing before God ﷻ.

But what they had learned, and now practiced, filled them with peace and happiness. They didn’t always remember to have the correct states of *being* in every prayer, of course. But they



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did their best, and loved the moments when they were *aware* during the prayer. They knew that instead of just following along with their lips and limbs while thinking of something else, they should remember that they were literally standing before God ﷻ.

Ustaz Ali welcomed them warmly, “*As-salamu ‘alaykum*, and a blessed first day of Ramadan to you all. Ramadan Mubarak!”

Abdullah replied, “*Wa ‘alaykum as-salam*, and Ramadan Karim!”

“How is your fasting going, on this first day?” asked Ustaz.

“So far, so good, *al-hamdulillah!*” Abdullah replied. Then he added something he’d been thinking about. “You know, sir, we find it easy to fast at school, and even to play sports as long as it’s not too hot! When we’re here, we are busy and distracted from feeling hungry. But I remember that on some days last year, the day seemed really long. Then, I thought a lot about how I was going to make it until *iftar*, and I couldn’t wait to break the fast.”

Ustaz Ali said, “I understand, Ahmed. That happens to everyone, even adults. It happens especially on the first days of Ramadan, when our bodies are still getting used to fasting. Don’t worry.

“First of all, let’s praise God for this great blessing of fasting. Let me share with you some of Imam al-Ghazali’s deepest teachings on this special act of worship which might help.

“Fasting is like a safe fortress. It’s a place we can go to learn how to be less attached to our worldly desires and appetites. Besides having an appetite for delicious food, we could have desires for other things like money, fashion, games, or being popular, these kinds of things that fill so much of our lives.



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Fasting is also a way for us to reach a greater state of peace in our hearts and think less about these kinds of things in our lives. The month of Ramadan is a time when the doors of Paradise open wide.”

The children all imagined the doors of Paradise opening. Light was streaming out.

“The Prophet ﷺ said that Paradise has a special gate called *Rayyan*, which may be entered only by those who fast. And Imam al-Ghazali explained that fasting has both an inner and outer part. The outer part is what we do with our bodies, like giving up food and drink during the day. Now, can any of you think of what should be happening *inside* us, which can’t be seen?”

Khadija suggested, “Like Abdullah said, he can hardly wait for the fast to end – like most people. So maybe it has to do with being patient?”

“That’s right!” said Ustaz Ali. “God says, *The patient ones shall be granted their reward without measure* (39:10). That means a vast reward! And the Prophet ﷺ said that half of fasting is made up of patience. So, fasting teaches us patience, and that happens inside our Hearts. We can’t *see* patience. It’s hidden and invisible.”

Abid added, “Children like me, who are still too young to fast the whole day, can fast half days. I can fast from lunch until sunset!

“If Mother made a yummy cake and left it on the table, I would really want to run up and have some right away! But when we are fasting, we know we have to be patient and wait for later. Fasting is a great chance to polish our Hearts by practicing



*Little Abid added, “Yes, fasting can teach us a lot of different things. What if Mother made a yummy cake and put it on the table? I would certainly want to run up and have a bite right away. But when we are fasting, we have to be patient and wait for later. We get a chance to practice and learn patience which we know is very important.”*

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being patient. That's important.”

Fatima said, “I love it when people are patient. It's much better than being with people who are always in a hurry to be first, or to get something for themselves.

“It's easier to spend time with friends who are content with whatever is happening – not like kids and adults who are always stressed and worried. My Grandma sometimes reminds me of the Qur'anic verse, ‘*God is with those who are patient.*’ Besides, since God is taking care of everything, we can trust Him. So, we can be patient and see what *He* has planned for us. No need to worry.”

“All right!” replied Abdullah. “I am going to try to use this whole month as a great chance to practice and think a lot more about patience.

“Don't you all remember that we learned how important patience is in Imam al-Ghazali's *Book of Knowledge*? It's something we have to learn – how to be patient people. I don't like it when people are impatient with me. So, this is a great time to polish impatience off our Hearts! We have so many times when we can be patient with each other. Every day there are situations with our sisters and brothers, our parents, grandparents – really, with everyone! Plus, there's that huge reward that Ustaz Ali mentioned. It is so amazing that we can't even imagine it!”

“Me, too,” said Khadija. “I'm looking forward to trying to rise up to this challenge. Then not only will we be happy when we get to eat after a long day, but we also have the greater happiness of polishing our Hearts and being closer to God ﷻ!”

Ustaz Ali was very pleased with the children. He related a *hadith qudsi* in which the Prophet ﷺ said that God says, “Truly,

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God Most High boasts to His angels about a young person who has devoted himself to God's worship and service, saying 'Oh, young person, you who have given up your desires and sacrificed this time of health and strength for My sake, to Me you are like one of My angels.'"

Khadija exclaimed, "So does it mean that we children and teens could be more like angels when we fast from food and drink? Are we being more like angels when we keep away from lower desires? When we avoid being busy with the many things of this world and really concentrate on worship and serving others?"

"That's right, Khadija," replied Ustaz Ali.

"Wow!" she replied. Then Khadija continued, "My mother told us that fasting is especially honored by God. Among all the different kinds of worship, fasting is particularly special. Imam al-Ghazali explained that it's like God's honoring the Ka'ba, His Sacred House standing majestically in the sanctuary in Mecca, even though *all* the earth is sacred and belongs to Him."

"Oh, now I see!" said Bilal. "Fasting is extra special among the five pillars, just like Friday is a special day in the week, or just as the Ka'ba and the Haram are special places on earth. That makes it much clearer," he added.

"Yes," went on Ustaz Ali, "and this specialness of fasting has to do with its relationship with God Himself ﷻ. Our beloved Prophet ﷺ taught us that God said, 'Every good deed will be rewarded from ten times to seven hundred times except for fasting. Fasting is (done) only for Me, so I will give a (special) reward for it.'



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“So, children, as Imam Al-Ghazali taught us, this special relationship has two parts. The first is that fasting has to do with our giving up things that are normally allowed – food and drink – for God’s sake. No one can see whether or not a person is fasting. We can’t tell if someone has eaten or had something to drink since dawn. Fasting is invisible. A person’s thoughts and intentions to give something up for God ﷻ are also invisible.”

Maha said, “Other acts of worship like doing *wudu*, praying, giving charity and making Pilgrimage can be seen by others, but *only* Allah ﷻ can see fasting!”

Khalid added, “Fasting is an inner struggle, and learning to be patient makes it easier. It’s true that only God can see this. If we hid and sneaked a cookie or had a sip of water while fasting, no one would know but Him! So, fasting *is* just between Him ﷻ and us.”

Ustaz Ali added, “And there’s a second part of this special relationship with God. When someone’s not eating or drinking, their lower self is weaker. That makes it harder for inner whisperings to creep in from Satan, tempting a person to do the wrong thing. That means that fasting is part of our inner struggle against our false lower selves. When we struggle against bad ideas, God ﷻ will help us. In the Qur’an, He ﷻ says, *If you help God, He will help you and plant your feet firmly* (47:07).

“Think about it, children. Through fasting we learn to resist temptation. We develop the patience and self-control to give up food and drink for part of a day. After Ramadan, that self-control makes us stronger and more able to resist things that are low or forbidden. It makes it easier to stay away from

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things that God ﷻ doesn't like.”

Amina added, “That reminds me of the verse in the Qur'an that I learned, which says, *And those who strive for our sake, We shall guide to Our ways (29:69).*

“Yes, Amina, very good.” Ustaz Ali continued, “Imam al-Ghazali explains that as the things we want in *this* world increase, there are more chances for us to do the wrong thing. That could be something sinful, like stealing. Or it could just be thinking too much about worldly things, like what we own, or what people think of us, instead of noticing all the wonderful blessings that surround us.

“Our belongings, all the things we have, can cause us to be greedy or to show off. He says that having so many worldly things is like having an alluring and lush pasture, which attracts our lower desires and bad deeds like bragging, greed for more, selfishness and not sharing. Those desires for more and more are like hungry goats which will keep returning to that lush pasture because there is so much there for them to play with and enjoy.”

The children could imagine this easily because they had seen naughty goats at the farm, chewing on things that they shouldn't. Now they could imagine goats swarming over a luscious green meadow of all their possessions, nibbling on everything they could. They all knew that they had a lot of clothes, toys and other things, compared with children in other countries. What if they gave away some of their many toys? What if they gave up some of the devices and games that kept them too busy to help out more at home and from doing more good deeds? Maybe their lives would have greater peace – and fewer naughty, nibbling goats wanting more and more stuff!

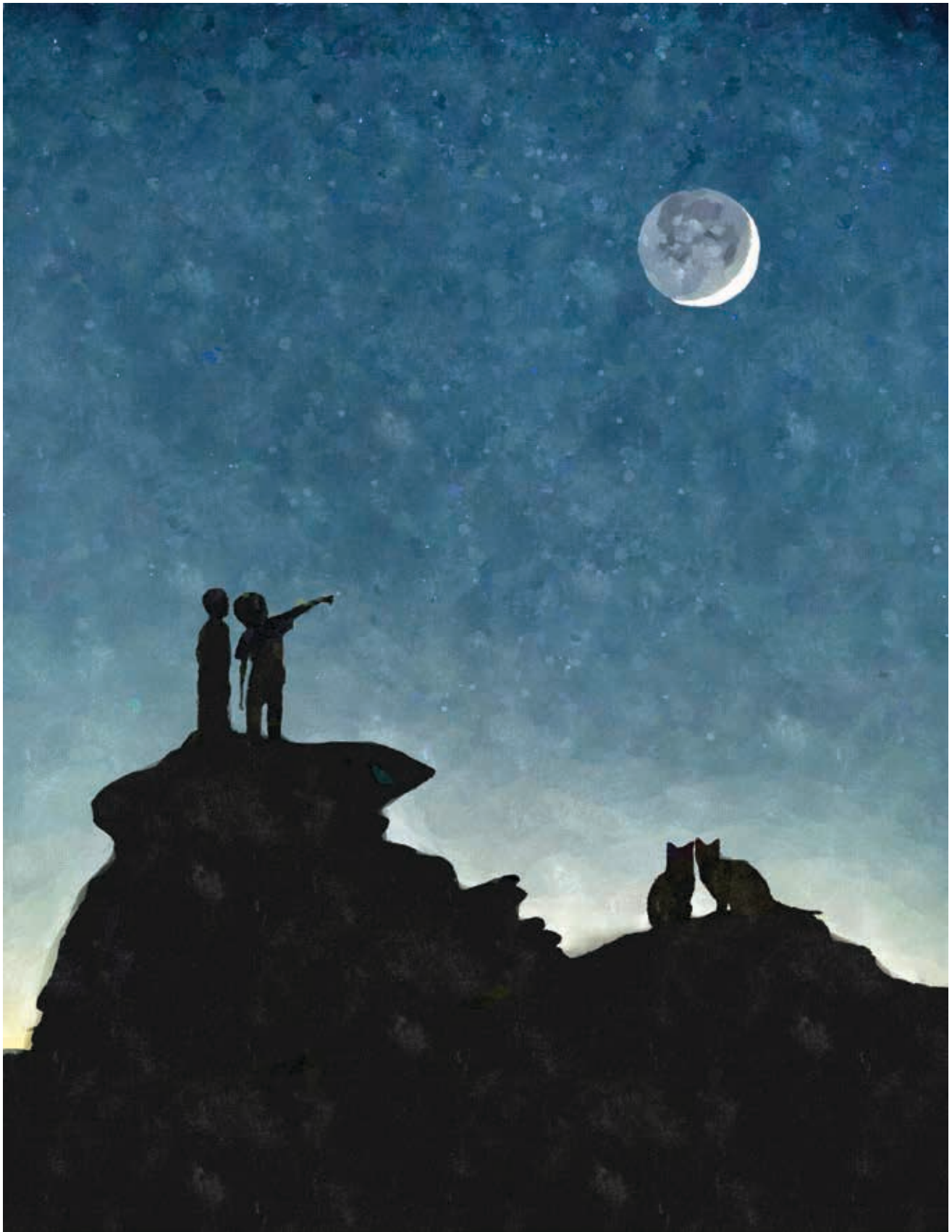
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“So, Ustaz,” said Maryam, “You mean that the virtues that come with fasting are like a shield that protects us? They are also a door to Paradise and help us to get closer to God ﷻ. So, it’s very important for us to learn all about fasting: its outer and inner parts. That means, the obligatory and recommended things we must do – the *fard* and *sunna*. But we also need to learn about a special way to *be* inside of ourselves, our *inner* state of being when we fast – just like what we learned to do when we pray.”

“Exactly, Maryam,” confirmed Ustaz Ali. “According to the Prophet ﷺ, all of the children of Adam ﷻ would be able to gaze on the dominions of the heavens if our Hearts weren’t surrounded by low whisperings. Fasting helps to weaken those whisperings, *al-hamdulillah*.”

The children liked the idea of being able to weaken the whisperings. When an angel inspired them with a good idea, they had learned it was important to act on the good idea quickly because the naughty whispering often prevented them from following through.

The children could feel their pure, golden Hearts shining – their True Selves.



*The children loved the idea of trying to see the moon for themselves. What an exciting experience – being on Earth looking out into the sky as the Earth turned and the distant sun lit up the tiny crescent of the moon itself. By the middle of the month, the moon would be full and then they would know half of the Ramadan fast is complete.*



## Chapter Two

### What We Need to Learn About The Outer Obligatory and *Sunna* Parts of Fasting

The children all very much wanted to keep their golden Hearts, their True Selves, shining! They knew that they were born with this noble self, in a pure state called the *fitrah* in Arabic. They certainly did not want to let it get dirty! Fasting sounded like it could be very helpful and the children wanted to understand all the details of what is involved.

Ustaz Ali looked at the faces of the children, so eager to learn. He began, “My dear and wonderful pupils, there are six outer things in fasting which you *must* do. There are slight differences between these in the different schools of thought, but these are the obligations in our *madhhab*.”

#### The Six Outer Needed Parts

(1) “The first is to watch the night sky for the beginning of the month of Ramadan. It starts when someone sights the new crescent moon. You might be able to see the moon yourselves, but you can also accept the word of an official person or a trusted witness.”

The children loved the idea of going out to look for the moon for themselves. What an exciting experience – looking out into the sky to try to find that tiny sliver of a crescent at around sunset! By the middle of the month the moon would be full, and then they would know that half of Ramadan had passed. Some of them had made a chart of moon phases and had learned the names of the moon as it changed its shape.

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(2) “The second obligation,” continued their teacher, “is to make an intention. Each night during Ramadan, everyone who plans to fast must make a clear, specific intention to fast the next day.”

Amina asked, “Ustaz, if we make our intention, this *niyya*, at the beginning of Ramadan, could it last over the entire month?”

“Good question, Amina.” Ustaz Ali explained, “In our Shafi’i school that Imam al-Ghazali followed, the *niyya* must be said *every* night. It must be *specific*, saying exactly what day you intend to fast. So you say, for example, ‘I intend to fast tomorrow, Tuesday, the fast of Ramadan, made obligatory by God ﷻ.’ You can’t wait until the morning to make this intention, except when you are doing a *nafl*, or extra fast that’s not during the holy month. That means that you need to make the intention before going to sleep.”

Layla asked, “If we just *say* these words by moving our lips, is that enough for it to be a complete intention?”

“As Imam al-Ghazali reminds us,” continued Ustaz Ali, “intentions must come from the Heart. If you are not sure that you will be able to fast and you still say the intention with words, how could that doubt exist together with a clear intention?”

The children tried to imagine how that could happen at the same time inside their shining Hearts. It would be impossible!

(3) “The third obligation is to not allow anything to enter your body during the fast. Not even medicine,” explained the teacher. “If you were sick and needed medicine, you would have to not fast and could make it up on another day.”

“What if you breathe in an insect, or dust? Or you get a lot of water in your mouth when you are making *wudu*, by

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accident?” asked Uthman.

“Uthman, when that happens you are not *intending* to bring those into your body. So your fast is not broken. But what if you *planned* to refresh yourself by gargling lots of water in the back of your throat? That would be breaking your intention to fast. Then, for someone who’s reached puberty, he or she would have to make up that day.”

Uthman nodded his head in agreement. He added, “Ustaz Ali, what if I forget that I’m fasting and eat or drink by accident, and then I suddenly realize it? Is my fast still good? Do I just continue on with fasting?”

The teacher answered, “That is correct. And also, you must remember to be aware of the time. Be extra careful near dawn at *sahoor* time, and around sunset at *iftar* time. Don’t eat or drink too close to dawn, or too quickly right after *maghrib*. You must try to be sure that you’re fasting when you’re supposed to.”

(4 – 6) “The fourth and fifth obligations have to do with grown-ups; you will learn about those later. And the last, the sixth, has to do with throwing up and then swallowing some of what you’ve vomited. That would also break the fast. Of course, most of the time, people who vomit have an illness that would make it difficult for them to fast.”

### If the Fast Gets Broken

Fatima asked, “What can we do if we happen to break the fast?”

Ustaz Ali replied, “Excellent question, Fatima. There are four things that should be done, depending on the circumstances.

“Not everyone has to fast every day of Ramadan. Children

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up to a certain age do not need to fast, and old people may be too weak to fast. People might be sick for a few days, or they might be travelling, which could make fasting difficult. There are several reasons God gives in the Qur'an explaining why some people wouldn't have to fast.

“After a boy or girl has reached puberty, if they have missed or broken the fast because of one of these valid excuses, like being sick or travelling, they need to make up every fast day they have missed (*Qada*). These make-up fasts can be done one day at a time, every so often. Or you could decide to fast them in a row, one day after another. They should be made up before the next Ramadan.

“But once a boy or girl has become *baligh*, or reached puberty, if they *intentionally* don't fast, or break their fast without a valid excuse, they have to make amends (*kaffara*). Grown-ups, who break their fast in certain serious ways, would have to fast for two months in a row for each broken fast day. Or, if they are unable to do that, they would need to feed 60 poor people an amount of grain or dates (two meals' worth) for each day missed.”

Omar exclaimed, “Wow, that's a lot! That really shows how serious it can be to break your fast in certain circumstances. I'll be very careful when I grow up. What other rules are there?”

“The third situation is: Abstaining from food and drink for the rest of the day (*imsak*). That applies when someone has broken his or her fast *on purpose*, without a valid reason. If he or she repents, the fast should still continue for the rest of the day even though the day won't be counted as a fast and must be made up.

“Another situation involves people who are travelling at least



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48 miles. Imam al-Ghazali says that although they are allowed to make up the fast another time, it's best for them to fast while traveling unless they are too weak to do so."

Ruqayya said, "My grandmother is very old and too weak to fast. She gives an amount of money for every day she has missed."

"That is correct," said the teacher. "That is the fourth possibility. It is called 'expiation' or *al-fidya*. If a person is too old or has a chronic illness that won't get better, he or she can pay the *fidya* instead. People used to pay this as grain directly to the poor, but now there are organizations that distribute food to poor people for those who need to pay *fidya* or *kaffara*.

"A pregnant or nursing mother can also pay the *fidya*, if she fears that fasting might harm the baby. But she must make up the days missed as well."

### The *Sunna* Aspects of Fasting

"Well, students, we have nearly finished the outer requirements of fasting – the *fard*. Imam al-Ghazali also mentions the six *sunna* elements of fasting. These are:

1. To delay the pre-dawn meal, and eat as close to dawn as you can. That is, of course, while being sure that one doesn't eat after dawn.
2. To hurry in breaking the fast at sunset with a date or water before doing the *maghrib* prayer;
3. To avoid brushing one's teeth or using a refreshing tooth stick (*miswak*) after noon;
4. To be generous during the month, as you learned from reading *The Mysteries of Charity*.

"I remember what we learned about *Zakat al-Fitr*," said Bilal, "when we were studying *zakat*. Our parents pay that in the

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days before Eid, so that poor people can buy new clothes, and nice food, so they can enjoy the Eid.”

“That’s right, Bilal,” said Ustaz Ali. “That’s an important obligation. But it’s also good to be as generous as possible during Ramadan. Our beloved Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was always extremely generous during this blessed month.

“The other important *sunnas* are:

5. “To recite and study the Qur’an. It’s recommended to recite one part (*juz*) – one thirtieth of the Qur’an every day. That way we will finish reading God’s Book once during this month of fasting. We can also go to the special *tarawih* prayers at the mosque. In some mosques, the imam recites a *hizb* (one-sixtieth) of the Qur’an during the prayers each evening.”

Fatima said, “I can recite half a *juz* each day – a *hizb*. It takes me a half hour. So I’ll try to read through half of the Qur’an in Ramadan, *inshAllah*.”

“That’s great, Fatima, *mashAllah*. May Allah grant you success!” praised Ustaz Ali.

6. “Finally,” he continued, “it is *sunna* to make retreat in the mosque during the last ten days of Ramadan. That is called *i’tikaf*. The Prophet ﷺ did this and asked his family and Companions to join him. It is *sunna* to worship as steadily as possible during the last ten days, since the Night of Power comes during one of them. This *special* Night, on which the Qur’an was first revealed happens on an odd-numbered night. That means, either on the 21<sup>st</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> or 27<sup>th</sup> of the sacred month. Worship during that one night is better than a thousand months!”



*One of the children exclaimed, “Omar, you don’t have to wait until next year! The mosque near my house has a special program during the last ten days. We children take our sleeping bags. During the day we have special classes, a chance to read religious books, and of course, we recite the Qur’an. By already going on retreat at our age, we can start to practice an important sunna of our blessed Prophet, al-hamdulillah! Not only that, we can polish our Hearts by practicing patience!”*

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Omar said, “My father makes a retreat for *i’tikaf* every year. He sleeps at the mosque for ten days and doesn’t leave except for something really important. One time he had to visit a friend who was very sick. Another year he needed to attend the funeral of our great-uncle. He told us that our blessed Prophet ﷺ only left his retreat to use the bathroom or renew his ablution. But these days our mosques have bathrooms and wudu areas, *al-hamdulillah*, so we don’t need to go home for that. I want to join my father next year, for at least a few days, *inshAllah*.”

The children were proud of Omar. They would love to do this, too, when they were old enough to concentrate better. But at their ages they still liked to be active, and it would be hard to stay still for so long.

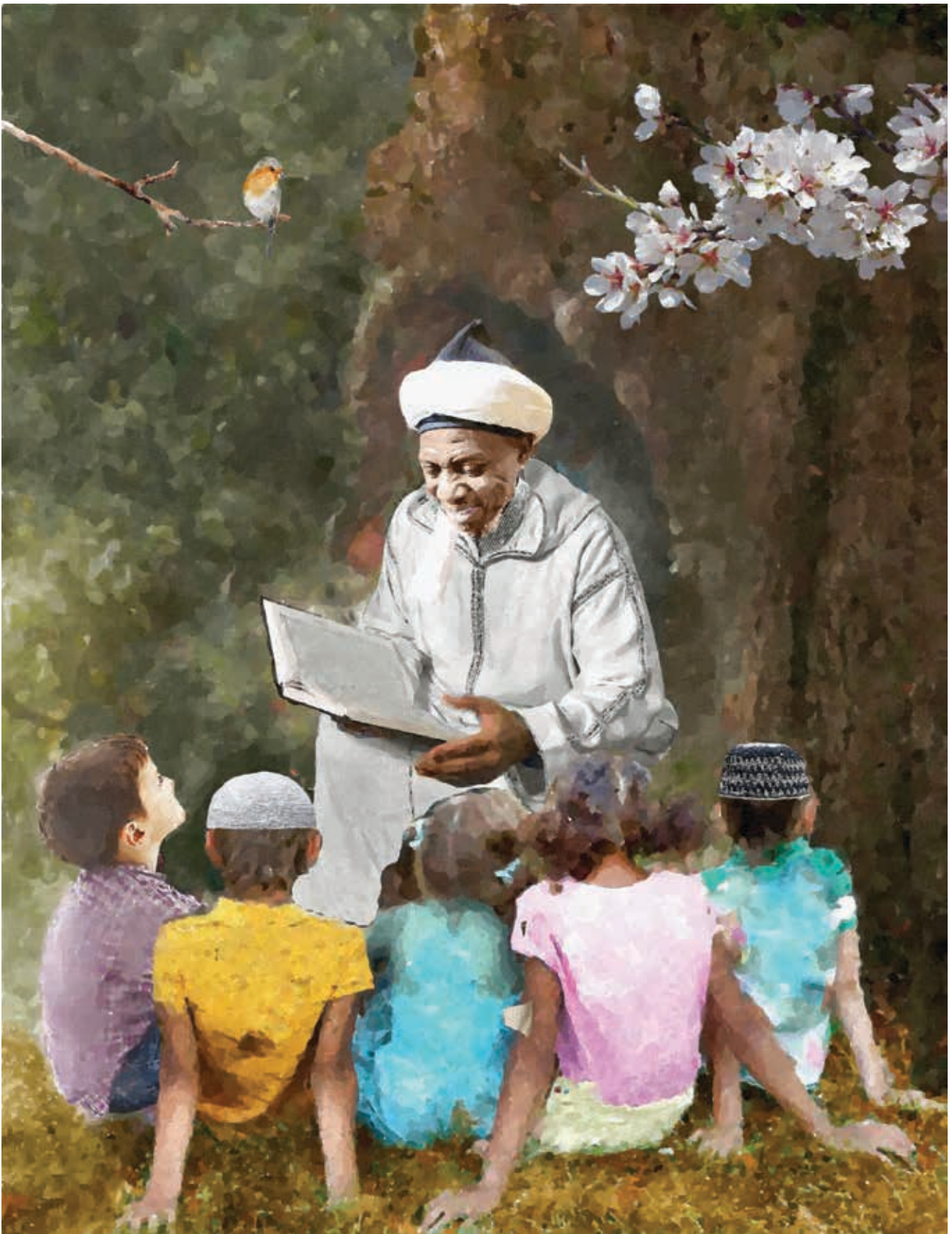
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“That sounds great,” agreed Omar. “I’m going to ask my Dad about it when I get home.”



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*Haj Abdullah smiled contentedly and began, “I am sure you came today because you wanted to learn about the inner conditions of the fast, what Imam al-Ghazali teaches us. You should first know there are three levels of fasting, the one done by most people, then the fasting of the elect, or special folk and thirdly the fasting of the elect of the elect – the really, really special people.” The children wondered if they were special enough to be in the second group.*

### Chapter Three

## On the Mysteries of Fasting and Its *Inner* Practices

“That was a lot to learn,” commented Bilal, as the children left school for home. Everyone was pretty excited. It was a relief to understand more about fasting now that they were doing it again.

Khadija suggested, “Why don’t we pass by our special garden? Maybe Haj Abdullah is there. Then, we could ask him about the *inner* parts of fasting. That’s something we could use right away. Ramadan has only just begun!”

The children all agreed. Now, they really wanted to learn about the *inner* mysteries of fasting. How pleased they were to see their teacher sitting quietly on his tree stump seat in the midst of flowering trees.

“A blessed Ramadan to you all, dear children. How has the first day of Ramadan gone so far?” inquired Haj Abdullah.

Uthman answered. “It hasn’t been very hard on us, *al-hamdulillah*. School went really well. And Ustaz Ali explained the *outer* parts of the fast. He told us what is required and what happens when the fast is broken in different ways. He also mentioned *sunnas* of fasting, like breaking the fast with a date or water. My family always does this, so I was happy to learn that this is what the Prophet ﷺ did.”

Haj Abdullah smiled contentedly and began, “I am sure you came today because you wanted to learn about the *inner* aspects of the fast, as Imam al-Ghazali teaches us.

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“You should first know there are three levels of fasting. The first is the one done by most people. Then there’s the fasting of the elect, those special people whom God ﷻ chooses to bring near. Thirdly, there is the fasting of the elect of the elect – those whom God ﷻ chooses to receive a special kind of knowledge.”

The children wondered if they were special enough to be in the second group.

Haj Abdullah continued, “Group One are those who give up eating, drinking and other lower desires. Group Two keep every part of their body from doing any bad deeds: their hearing, seeing, speaking, their hands and feet. The third group observe a ‘fast of the Heart.’ They fast from all thoughts, concerns or worries about their daily lives in *this* world. These great men and women consider their fast to be broken even by *thinking* of something else besides God ﷻ and the Last Day! They only think of things that support their spiritual inner lives – not their outer worldly doings. This is very rare, but it is possible.

“Imam al-Ghazali says that the people of the Heart say, ‘Anyone who spends his time during the day thinking about what he will break his fast with [at sunset] is committing a sin. That’s because it shows how little trust that person has in God’s goodness and kindness. It shows how little certainty he has that God will provide for him.’

“These special people of the Heart are firstly God’s prophets, peace be upon them, and then those Truest and Nearest to Him. They are the people who turn away from everything but Him, glorified be He ﷻ. They understand the Qur’anic verse, *Say Allah, and leave them to their vain play (6:91).*”

Abid asked, “So these very special people are sent to us as examples of how we should all try to be! We must trust that



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God ﷻ is taking care of each of us in the best way that only He can do. After all, He knows everything. Remember Imam al-Ghazali's story about the ant and the pen? It's great to know that God arranges for the *highest* good to take place in our lives, even if it looks like a difficult trial. You can see how trials and blessings are really both the same thing. They're both just ways of polishing our Hearts and bringing us nearer to God ﷻ.”

Haj Abdullah beamed with joy at Abid's understanding. Abid was learning what truly matters. “Yes,” he continued, “life is really only a spiritual journey. And the six inner practices with the different parts of our bodies which the virtuous people (*al-salihin*) do, can help us all along the Way. Since you are young, this is the *perfect* time to begin to practice what the special people of the second group do.”

The children were thrilled to hear this!

Bilal asked, “You mentioned ‘seeing.’ What can our eyes do to help us fast?”

“Remember, children, how in prayer you learned to lower your gaze? We do that so we won't be distracted from being present before God ﷻ. In the same way, we must be careful not to let our eyes look at anything that may take us far from God.”

“In our house, our parents limit our watching TV during Ramadan except for films that teach us about people with good character qualities. There are many things that are a total waste of time on television. We also spend a lot less time on our devices, on the Internet.” said Fatima.

“That is a very helpful idea,” replied Haj Abdullah.

Layla piped up, “The mouth can really say bad things which hurt other people's feelings. Things like lying, backbiting, and



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slander – what about these?”

“Yes, Layla,” confirmed Haj Abdullah. “These three things *all* break the inner fast. Also, swearing a false oath against someone is a sin of the tongue. The tongue needs to fast along with the rest of the body. It would be better to be silent, repeating God’s names or reciting the Qur’an. The Prophet ﷺ said that fasting is like a protective shield. We shouldn’t say low things or be foolish. If someone wishes to pick a fight with you or speaks badly, you must say, ‘I am fasting’” (Bukhari, Muslim).

“And my Mom says she’s going on a ‘technology fast.’ She’s put away her smart phone and is using a basic phone instead. And she’s only turning it on for some hours each day. Then, instead of answering all those messages and notifications, and those people who want to sell her things, she can focus on Allah,” added Abid.

“Your mother is a wise woman,” responded Haj Abdullah. “What things can you children *avoid doing* that will keep your tongues from breaking your precious inner fast?”

Khalid exclaimed, “No more bragging or arguing! We learned why those things are wrong in Imam al-Ghazali’s *Book of Knowledge*.”

Maha added, “Well, we shouldn’t gossip either, or say mean things! There is way too much of that. And we shouldn’t only stop this bad speech when we are fasting; we should never, ever do it. Those bad habits are way below our *dignity!*”

“*MashAllah*, those are some great points, Maha.” Haj Abdullah further reminded the children of what they had learned in the *Book of Knowledge* about what happens to those who backbite. “Allah says in the Qur’an that it’s just like eating a person’s

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dead flesh. A horrible image! And in his *Book on the Mysteries of Fasting*, Imam al-Ghazali mentions the *hadith* about the two gossiping women who found fasting so difficult they felt they might die. They sent a message to the Prophet ﷺ asking permission to break their fast. And he ﷺ responded by sending them a large bowl with the message, ‘Tell them to throw up what they have eaten into this bowl!’ People watching were shocked to see that they vomited blood! Bits of flesh began filling the bowl.”

“That’s disgusting!” the horrified children exclaimed.

“Of course it is! Because backbiting is *that* terrible,” agreed Hajj Abdullah. “Then the Prophet ﷺ said, ‘These two fasted from what God made lawful for them (*halal* food), but they broke their fast on what God Most High forbade them. They sat down together to backbite about people, and this is some of the flesh which they ate.’ That was what our beloved Prophet ﷺ did, to show us the dangers of backbiting.”

Lina shared, “The other day, I went along with my mom to a tea party with a lot of women. When I heard some of their conversations, I thought to myself, ‘Are they backbiting?’ I whispered to my mom about it, and she decided to help change the conversation. The first time I ever heard about backbiting was when I read the children’s *Book of Knowledge*. I can’t understand why people the world over spend so much time talking badly behind each other’s backs, especially when none of us likes to be talked about. I will try to never do it. It’s too disgusting and wrong, and God hates it.”

The children sat in silence. Lina was right. Everyone hated to be gossiped about, so why did people keep doing it? Just imagine, what if no one *ever* talked badly about another? How peaceful the world would be!

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“The next inner fast is the fast of the ear,” continued their teacher. “Lina made an excellent point. Even *listening* to backbiting, or being silent when it is happening, makes you a partner in this grave sin. Whatever you are forbidden to *say* with your tongue is also forbidden for you to *hear* or listen to with your ears.”

Sitting in the sun’s golden rays, surrounded by the garden birds and other animals who seemed to be listening as well, the children could imagine how their shining eyes and ears could so easily get dirty. They were *too* honorable to let that happen to them! They would *really* try to do the inner fast of the eyes, ears and tongue.

Uthman spoke up, “So, what’s the fourth practice? I guess it must be what we do with our hands and feet! Already, during *wudu*, as we wash our hands, we ask God ﷻ to forgive us for things we wish we hadn’t *done*, and as we wash our feet, to guide us to what pleases Him. We want our feet to carry us to *good* places that we can be proud of.”

“Well said, Uthman.” Haj Abdullah added, “Also, the stomach! We shouldn’t break our fast with large amounts of food, either. When fasting, we are supposed to eat less overall. Of course, you are still growing children and you need to eat well – especially teenagers! But once you’re fully grown, large quantities of food are harmful to our bodies, even if the food itself is healthy.

“The fifth practice is to try not to eat too much when we break our fast. If you make up all the food you missed during the day, and then add all kinds of special desserts and extra nice foods, how can fasting help you overcome the whisperings of the lower self? The goal of fasting is to become *empty*. We curb our bodily desires in order to help our souls improve. But if we only think about what special treats we might enjoy at the *iftar*,

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this is exactly the opposite of becoming empty.

“The spirit of fasting is to weaken the body’s energy by reducing our food intake. That helps increase our spiritual lives. Adults should eat what they normally have for supper, but not add in the lunch they missed.”

Abdullah added, “My father explained the reason why, during fasting, we shouldn’t sleep too much during the day. It’s because we should *feel* some thirst and hunger, and our body becoming weak. That helps us remember God, and cleans and polishes our Hearts. If we still feel a bit weak when we go for the *tarawih* prayers in the mosque at night, it helps keep us feeling our *spiritual* nature. If we are in an empty state and the Night of Power arrives, the Imam says we might be able to glimpse the Heavenly dominion.”

“That’s a great aspiration, my son, *mashAllah!*” Haj Abdullah replied. “Imam al-Ghazali teaches us about God’s ﷻ words, *Verily We revealed it on the Night of Power (97:1)*. He says, ‘whoever places a “feedbag” (the stomach) between his Heart and his breast will be veiled, or prevented from understanding deeper truths. Simply emptying the stomach is not enough to lift that veil. A person needs to put aside his wanting, or longing, for everything except God ﷻ. This, in fact, is the *whole* point. And it begins with simply reducing the amount of food we eat.’”

Fatima exclaimed, “This is amazing! Who would have guessed all of this about fasting? What a great chance to help our spiritual, higher selves grow! When I’m fasting, my hunger can help keep me thinking about this opportunity to polish my Heart a lot of the time.”

Omar added, “I visited a farm once, where horses had feedbags around their necks, which is how Imam al-Ghazali describes

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our stomachs. It makes sense that a lot of heavy food can keep us thinking about this *dunya*, and keep us from remembering our shining Hearts and the Next Life. Feeling a bit hungry and weak is a great help in what he calls ‘the Whole Point!’ It helps our *spiritual* life.”

“And finally,” concluded Haj Abdullah in a low and solemn voice, “there’s the sixth important practice. When we are breaking our fast, we should keep our Hearts in a state between fear and hope. Even if we’ve tried to do the five practices of the special elect people, we cannot be sure that our fast has been accepted by God ﷻ. We don’t know if our actions have brought us nearer to Him.

“After any act of worship, we cannot be thinking, ‘Well, I did a good job. I have done my prayer, or *wudu*, or fast, just exactly as I should have, correctly.’ No, we must be humble. We must remember how weak we are, and how we make so many mistakes. Only God ﷻ is perfect. We love Him ﷻ so much and are trying to please Him and be closer to Him by polishing our Hearts. So, children, these are the six inner aspects of fasting.”

\* \* \*

They children thought about this. Then Abdur Rahman asked, “Haj Abdullah, what happens to someone who pays no attention to the inner aspects of fasting? What about those who only fast from food and drink?”

Haj Abdallah answered, “Imam al-Ghazali explained that for any act of worship to be truly valid and accepted, it must be able to achieve its goal. He says, ‘the goal of fasting is for a human being to realize some attribute of God ﷻ in his own *character*. In the case of fasting, this is God’s Attribute of Everlasting Independence (*al-samadiyya*). God ﷻ is in need of





*“And as he ﷺ recited God’s ﷻ words, the Prophet ﷺ placed his hands on his ears and eyes and said, ‘Hearing is a trust. Sight is a trust.’” The children put their hands over their ears and eyes, feeling these were precious gifts entrusted to them by God ﷻ.*

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*nothing*. When a person fasts, they imitate the angels as much as possible, who are beyond wanting or needing anything.’ I realize, dear children, that these words of Imam al-Ghazali are difficult to understand because they are so deep. But I feel that you *deserve* to hear his teachings and how he speaks.”

Layla spoke up, “That sounds interesting! To try to imitate the angels, who don’t have any of the worldly desires and wants that we struggle against. The angels are nearest to God, so if we try to be like the angels, maybe we can draw closer to God ﷻ, too. We know that the Prophet ﷺ said that he was sent ‘only to perfect good character.’ So, drawing nearer to God ﷻ is not a physical closeness, but learning to have the *character* of those who are near to God, glory be to Him – like the beautiful character of our Prophet ﷺ.”

“Very well put, Layla, and Abdur Rahman,” praised the teacher. “The six inner practices that Imam al-Ghazali describes are so important that he says the fast of someone who doesn’t observe them – keeping his eyes, tongue, ears, and so on free from sin – is incomplete. The ideal, complete way is to fast both inwardly and outwardly. He also mentions that our Prophet ﷺ said, ‘Fasting is truly a trust (*amana*), so let each of you guard his trust.’

“And as the Prophet ﷺ recited God’s ﷻ words, he ﷺ placed his hands on his ears and eyes, and said ‘Hearing is a trust. Sight is a trust.’ These are parts of the trust of fasting. Again, remember: if someone speaks badly to us when we are fasting we should say, ‘Verily, I am fasting – (and then avoid arguing with him or her).’ That is to say, ‘I have been given my tongue as a trust to watch over, so why should I answer (your insults)?’”

The children put their hands over their ears and eyes, feeling that they were precious gifts entrusted to them by God.



*The children were deeply relieved to have been introduced to the inner meanings – the kernels inside the outer husks, the beautiful forms of their faith. Haj Abdullah’s last words were, “O Youth, know that you are in charge of your own Hearts.” And as he slowly disappeared between the trees, Abu Bakr said, “Now we know what to do. And why.”*



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Haj Abdullah rose. It was time for him to leave and for the children to return home to their families. They felt enriched by all that they had learned and understood. Now, they had a whole new way of seeing their lives. They could love and enjoy every aspect of purification and prayer, charity and fasting because they understood the meanings behind them. And they understood the spiritual opportunities each kind of worship offered.

The sun was low in the sky, and they wanted to reach home before sunset to offer the *maghrib* prayer. Haj Abdullah spoke softly, “Children, Imam al-Ghazali reminds us that ‘every act of worship has an outward and an inward aspect. If we compare it to grain, it has both a husk and a kernel. Even the husks have various degrees, and each degree has different levels. So the choice is now *yours* to make. Will you be satisfied with only the outer husk? Or will you seek both the husk and the kernel inside, and thereby join the ranks of those who have been granted wisdom and understanding?’”

The children felt a deep sense of peace. What an honor it was that Haj Abdullah considered them to be serious and grown up enough to receive the teachings that are practiced by the *special* elect. They were so happy that they now knew about the inner meanings – the kernels inside the beautiful outer forms of their faith.

Haj Abdullah’s last words to them were, “O youth, know that you are in charge of your *own* Hearts.”

As he slowly disappeared between the trees, Abu Bakr said, “Now, we know what to do. And *why*.”

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