

## Flow, Fasting and *Falaah* (part 1 of 2)



I am covered in sweat and my heart rate has gone through the roof. I could walk, and my body is telling me to sit down, or at least walk, but I crank the peddles, powering my mountain bike up the stony piece of single track. I can't get enough air into my lungs to feed my burning legs, but I keep going.

No one is forcing me up this mountain. It's not some cruel punishment meted out by a tyrant for misdemeanours. I choose to do this. Why? Is it because of the descent that follows the painful climb? Partly, but then that has its own madness, hurtling down a hill over rocks and roots at speeds where a crash might well result in serious injury or worse, but the smile it leaves on my face when I reach the bottom remains in my heart long after it has left my face. So again: Why? After I ride my mountain bike, having made it up grueling climbs and technical descents I feel a profound sense of happiness that can only come from having accomplished something worthwhile. That paradox is that in order to feel that I needed to suffer. In fact the harder that task, the more the suffering, the more profound and longer lasting the sense of accomplishment. It is because of this that some women manage to have large numbers of children despite the enormous pain and hardship it entails, not only in carrying and delivering that child, but in bringing it up, because of the profound sense of achievement that undeniably is connected with that activity.

This sense of profound happiness and satisfaction is what has come to be known as *optimal experience*, and what is commonly referred to as a "state of flow". It is most intense when a person is so completely absorbed in an activity, when body and mind are one and everything is just "happening." It is most commonly experienced during sports, but in fact it can be achieved during a huge range of physical as well as mental activities, but they all share some common traits. This state of optimal experience or "flow" is only reached under certain conditions which have been identified.

**Firstly** the activity must not be too difficult or too easy. If it is too hard, a person would become demotivated and if it is too easy they would become bored. Ideally it should be on the very edge of one's abilities, pushing the limits and out of the comfort zone. The reason for this is that although the

task itself maybe be hard, or even unpleasant, the end result is that the individual would achieve the knowledge that they have improved themselves. It is this feeling of having improved that is the key, because it is connected to person's feeling of self worth. This is enhanced when one contributes even in some small way to the betterment of humanity.

**Secondly** the activity should be defined, in the sense of a specific goal and provide immediate feedback.

**Thirdly**, another important dimension is that the activity must be autotelic. This means the activity is done for itself, as opposed to doing it for some external factor. Some people have autotelic personalities. These are people who are internally driven, and as such may exhibit a sense of purpose and curiosity. This determination is an exclusive difference from being externally driven, where things such as comfort, money, power, or fame are the motivating force, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, writes in his book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*

“An autotelic person needs few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what he or she does is already rewarding. Because such persons experience [flow](#) in work, in family life, when interacting with people, when eating, even when alone with nothing to do, they are less dependent on the external rewards that keep others motivated to go on with a life composed of routines. They are more autonomous and independent because they cannot be as easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life.”

These are the people who have embraced the inner struggle on the path to true happiness.

Again and again in survey after survey people are asked what do they think is the most important key to happiness and the response is always the same: Money. If not money it is some external thing connected to it. People imagine that relaxing, watching a movie, listening to music, drinking alcohol or taking drugs or having sex are the activities that make one happy; it certainly is true that whilst one is involved in them they do result in enhanced states. In fact research shows that when people are actually asked to rate those experiences while and after they are involved in them they actually rate them low in the happiness stakes. The things that people actually rate the highest in the happiness stakes are the “flow” experiences. Perhaps happiness is not even the right word to describe this state, since it is more profound and lasting. The point being is that most of us think that happiness lies in the material things, and we exert huge amounts of time and effort in trying to acquire a bigger house, faster car, more fashionable clothes,

sexier partner, but the joy we get from these things fades away very quickly. It's called hedonistic entropy. Soon enough we become familiar and bored with those things and we aspire to something newer, faster, sexier, bigger, better, which if and when we get it we are soon bored of that. It's the dream of the pursuit of this happiness through externalities that drives the consumer society. It's a dream that is of course a lie. Things don't make people happy. Happiness is an inner condition. It is achieved by exerting effort, by struggling to gain mastery and control of oneself, and by then applying oneself to achieving what is worthwhile.

One could hardly find two different ideas of happiness. One is about self indulgence, and the other is about self discipline and controlling one's whims and desires, yet it is becoming increasingly clear and the evidence is stacking up as to which one actually makes humans happy.

It is a paradox. In order to feel true happiness one needs to struggle; the nobler the struggle, the greater and more long lasting and profound the sense of happiness. It is clear to see then in the context of this why religious people live happier lives. All organised religions, by virtue of being organised, lend themselves towards optimal experiences and development of autotelic personalities. Why is the dimension of being organised so important? This is simply connected with self discipline and the ordering of consciousness. It is through regular prayer, devotions, fasting, charity etc., that a person learns self control and discipline. They are not only doing these things when they feel like it, they do it irrespective of the feelings they might have. These are simple lessons in self mastery.

The narrative that we all too often hear is how we are all victims of our genes and upbringing and circumstance. It is as if we were helpless puppets in the hands of fate. We often hear the complaint that "my parents made me like this", or "the trauma she suffered made her like that", and as well "that's just the way I am." Of course significant emotional events do impact our behaviour, but we are not helpless victims. We can change.

## (part 2 of 2)

Let us take fasting as an example. At some point when a person fasts they begin to feel thirsty and hungry. What we call hunger and thirst are basic biological processes that cause signals to be sent to our brain, which basically tell us "eat", "drink", but we consciously choose to over ride these signals, to reject basic biological functions and commands because we have consciously chosen that there is a more important objective. The factors that motivate us are very important, since the more they are connected with basic needs the less positive effect it will have and less optimal the experience will be. For example, a person

who fasts out of fear of getting caught eating or drinking, or for health reasons, will not benefit on the same level as one who, for example, does it completely with the intention to please God. The former reasons are based on externalities, where as the latter is autotelic. Even so, whatever the reason, fasting teaches us we can override our impulses, that we are not complete “victims” of our biology. The fasting Muslim is given an added interesting dimension, in that the time for fasting is prescribed, from dawn to sunset, and that not delaying in eating and drinking or breaking the fast is also part of the discipline. The fast is defined. One is encouraged to break the fast with others, and provide food and drink for the fasting person. The fasting Muslim, then has in the fast all the ingredients for flow. The action is defined, not too easy or too difficult, it is autotelic and one feels that one has improved as a person and participated in or contributed to the group. These conditions actually also apply to the five regular daily prayers, the obligatory charity and the pilgrimage to Makkah, indeed almost any act of worship.

The key to success in the inner struggle is intention. It is intention that gives focus to consciousness and whatever the consciousness, or mind is occupied with is the direction one will inevitably go. What we think about we become!

This can act as positive loop or downward spiral. If, for example, when you focus constantly on negative things, one’s consciousness becomes preoccupied with that, and then one focuses more on those negative things, which itself makes one more negative and more depressed. The opposite is also true.

Intention is the firm resolve to do something. It is a decision. These intentions are very important, and key to controlling consciousness, and directing oneself in the way one needs to go. It is here that the key to self control and self discipline lies. It is also important to understand that we have limited mental energy. It gets depleted like anything else. Also we get distracted away from those things we intend. We may be trying to set ourselves resolutely on a path but become distracted with doubts and worries. These drain our energy, weaken our determination and can sometimes completely divert our attention. Flow experiences actually increase our mental energy. Why then do people often leave optimal experience for experiences that do little if anything to enhance the quality of one’s life? For example, U.S. teenagers experience flow about 13 percent of the time that they spend watching television, 34 percent of the time they do hobbies, and 44 percent of the time they are involved in sports and games. Yet these same teenagers spend at least four times more of their free hours watching TV than doing hobbies or sports. Similar ratios are true for adults. Why would we spend four times more of our free time doing something that has less than half the chance of making us feel good?

Flow-producing activities require an initial investment of attention before it begins to be enjoyable. If a person is too tired, anxious, or lacks the discipline to

overcome that initial obstacle, he or she will have to settle for something that, although less enjoyable, is more accessible. Many avoid them and instead involve themselves in passive experiences like sitting around and watching TV, because of the initial effort required to do flow activities.

People with self discipline learn to be resolute in their decisions and act on them, and then find ways to get optimal experience from those actions. They will overcome this initial reservation and bring flow into their lives.

One of the most useful things in this regard are the five daily ritual prayers that a Muslim must make. There is a tradition that states that if anyone prays two units of the ritual prayer, or *salah*, and thinks of nothing except Allah (God) all their sins will be forgiven. This is in fact very difficult. It is probably easier to climb Mount Everest! This is because it is very hard to keep out random mental activity, unless one trains oneself to have focus. This is the difference between the prayer of a person who makes the movements and says the words and one who prays properly, with understanding, attentiveness, awe and humility.

One can understand the saying of Prophet Muhammed, may God praise him, when he said: “It may be that all a fasting person gets from his fast is hunger and thirst, and it may be that all a person who prays at night gets from his prayer is sleeplessness.”<sup>[1]</sup>

This inner struggle is called “jihad an-nafs” in the Islamic tradition and a great deal has been written about it. It is said to be the best *jihad*, or the best struggle and that is fighting against one’s desires and passions for the sake of God. It is more than interesting that much of what modern psychologists have come to understand about the human condition has already been expounded upon by Muslim scholars! Indeed anyone familiar with the spiritual tradition in Islam who reads some of the writings on psychology would imagine that these psychologists had cut and pasted from the Islamic writings.

Flow can be experienced in negative and destructive things also. It is not enough to merely link lots of optimal experiences together, if your life as a whole has no meaning or objective.

It is fascinating then that the Quran teaches that God, Allah, the Creator has made life a test and that He has created us in toil and struggle. The successful ones are those who’s intention is most pure and action most correct. It is our intentions, the state of our hearts that God looks at, not our outer appearance such as the colour of our skin, or wealth or status. Purifying this heart, directing our minds towards the noblest goal of serving God, is the key to success (*falaah*), and indeed the very purpose of life. Serving God of course does not just mean prayer, glorification and remembrance of God, but it also means caring for the needs of His creatures. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, said:

**“Verily, Allah, the Exalted and Glorious, would say on the Day of Resurrection: “O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me.”**

**He would say: “O my Lord; how could I visit Thee whereas You are the Lord of the worlds?”**

**Thereupon Allah would say: “Didn’t you know that such and such servant of Mine was sick but you did not visit him and were you to visit him, you would have found My reward in that visit? O son of Adam, I asked for food from you but you did not feed Me!”**

**He would say: “My Lord, how could I feed You whereas You are the Lord of the worlds?”**

**Allah will say: “Didn’t you know that such and such servant of Mine asked food from you but you did not feed him, and were you not aware that if you had fed him you would have found My reward in that deed? (The Lord would again say): O son of Adam, I asked drink from you but you did not provide Me!”**

**He would say: “My Lord, how could I provide You whereas You are the Lord of the worlds?”**

**Thereupon Allah would say: “Such and such of servant of Mine asked you for a drink but you did not provide him, and had you provided him drink you would have My reward in that deed.””<sup>[2]</sup>**

The paradox of happiness is that once you start to look for it, it will escape you. It is only by embracing the inner struggle that we can find ourselves on the road to true happiness.

Watch out for my forthcoming book (*inshallah* – God Willing): “Embracing the Inner Struggle on the Path to True Happiness”.

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#### **Footnotes:**

<sup>[1]</sup> Narrated by Ahmad (8693); classed as Saheeh by Ibn Hibbaan (8/257) and by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Targheeb (1/262).

<sup>[2]</sup> *Sahih Muslim*