

## BOOK 23 Breaking the Two Desires by Imam al-Ghazali

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### Prologue

The most serious destructive trait is the desire of the belly. This led Adam and Eve to be expelled from the Abode of Permanence after they ate from the forbidden tree, revealing their nakedness. The belly is the source of desires and associated ailments, with the desire for sex being a consequence. These topics will be further explained through sections on the virtue of hunger, discipline to suppress the belly's desire, and the desire for sex.

### The Merit of Hunger

Allah's Messenger said: 'The son of Adam fills no receptacle worse than his belly. A few small morsels suffice; if not, fill one-third with food, one-third with drink, and one-third with air.' He also said: 'The believer eats with one belly, while the hypocrite eats with seven,' meaning he eats seven times more or has seven times greater desire. 'Belly' here is a metaphor for desire, not physical capacity. Abu Hurayra noted: 'The Messenger never gave his family wheat bread for three days,' and Umar warned: 'Beware of overeating, as it causes weight in life and decay in death.'

Al-Fudayl ibn 'Iyad addressed his own soul in the following manner: "What is it that you fear? Are you afraid of hunger? Do not be, as you are of negligible significance in the sight of Allah. Those who endured hunger were the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him, and his Companions.' Additionally, Sahl ibn 'Abd Allah al-Tustari articulated: "On the Day of Judgment, no act of virtue surpasses refraining from excessive consumption of food in emulation of the Prophet, may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him."

### The Benefits of Hunger and the Defects of Satiety

Only distinguished scholars and individuals who have experienced hunger themselves comprehend the reasons for the benefits of hunger, owing to the widespread commendations of hunger. Hunger encompasses a variety of benefits.

**The first benefit** is heart purification, illuminating natural disposition and sharpening spiritual insight. Satiety causes stupidity, blinds the heart, and clouds the brain. Luqman told his son: 'When the stomach is full, thoughtfulness sleeps, wisdom is silent, and organs stop worship.'

**The second benefit** is the soft, clear heart's ability to perceive joy from God's remembrance. Many recite remembrance words with presence but feel no joy. Al-Junayd said: 'Can anyone place a nosebag of food against his chest and still expect to find Allah's sweetness?'

**The third benefit** is brokenness and humility, ending reckless joy and pride, which lead to tyranny and ignoring Allah. Nothing humbles the soul like hunger, which makes it submit to its Lord. When offered worldly riches, the Prophet said he preferred to eat one day and go hungry the next, enduring hunger to seek Allah and thanking Him when full.

**The fourth benefit** of hunger is empathy for those with afflictions. A full person forgets hunger, which explains why Yusuf (peace be upon him) said he fasts to avoid forgetting the hungry, as hunger fosters mercy and pity for God's creations. A full stomach blinds one to the pain of others.

**The fifth benefit** is breaking desires that lead to disobedience and overcoming the soul that incites evil. Desires originate from various foods, and reducing intake weakens them. Bliss resides in mastering one's soul, while wretchedness is when the soul dominates. Like controlling a beast through hunger, the soul can only be tamed through hunger, as fullness makes it strong and rebellious.

**The sixth benefit** of consuming modest amounts of food is the promotion of good health and the prevention of illnesses, as these are often the result of overeating and the accumulation of excess humours in the stomach and veins.

**The seventh benefit** is reduced expenditure, as minimal eaters are content with limited provisions. Conversely, overeaters face a daily struggle with their stomachs, prompting the question: 'What will you eat today?'

**The eighth** is to prefer others over oneself by giving surplus food to orphans and the poor. A servant's true wealth is what he gives in charity, earning reward in the afterlife. Otherwise, he eats or wears out his possessions. Giving surplus food in charity is better than overeating or being satiated.

### **The Discipline Used in Breaking the Desire of the Belly**

Know that the novice ought to observe certain duties regarding his belly and the food he eats.

One of these duties is that he should consume only that which is lawful, for worship along with consuming the unlawful is like building on sand. We have already mentioned what ought to be observed regarding the degrees of scrupulousness in the book of the Lawful and the Unlawful.

One responsibility is gradually reducing food intake, especially for those accustomed to large amounts. Sudden drastic reduction can cause weakness and adverse effects. The best approach is incremental, such as cutting a mouthful from two loaves daily. After a month, intake can be safely limited without harm. However, appropriate food amounts vary per individual.

Among these responsibilities is the various types of seasoning consumed with bread, and the practice of travelers on the spiritual journey is to abstain from desires.

Once 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, learned that Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan indulged in various foods, he asked his servant to notify him when dinner was served. When he entered, Yazid offered to share his meal. They were served meat and broth, which 'Umar accepted to share. When roast meat was brought, Yazid reached for it, but 'Umar refused, saying: 'Allah! Allah! O Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan! One type of food after another? By Him in whose hand is 'Umar's soul, if you oppose the practices of the predecessors, you will be led to walk a different path from theirs.

In summary, moderation in all matters is crucial, especially regarding appetites and the soul. Neither neglect nor excess should prevail. Extremes are undesirable; the best lies in balance. While hunger can be praised as a form of moderation, extreme hunger is unnecessary. Knowledge teaches that moderation is key, and even when striving for spiritual practices like fasting or night vigil, the Prophet forbade excessive dedication. Absolute self-denial is neither realistic nor intended by the Sacred Law.

If you've learned this, you should understand that a moderate approach involves eating to avoid burdening the stomach and hunger. The purpose of eating is to sustain life and gain strength for worship.

### **Sexual Desire**

Humanity's desire for sexual intercourse serves to ensure continuation through progeny but can pose risks if not moderated. The strongest appetite is for women, which can become excessive or insufficient. Excessive desire may dominate the intellect, leading to inappropriate acts, while a lack of desire is also problematic. The ideal is to keep this desire moderate, guided by reason and Sacred Law. When excessive, it can be managed through hunger or marriage. Prophet Muhammad advised that those able should marry to lower the gaze and protect chastity, and fasting can diminish desire when marriage isn't possible. Access to wholesome foods helps handle these trials.