

THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BREAST FEEDING

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As in so many things, what is natural, normal and ever present in our lives is taken for granted and receives no special notice. The Holy Qur'an reminds us of the signs of Allāh's presence in such natural phenomena as the alternation of night and day, the changes of the seasons and birth and death. What would happen if one of these ever present phenomena were to change or disappear? Life as we know it could not exist. What then is happening to human life as the natural function of breast feeding is being eclipsed by the bottle? The Holy Qur'an speaks of "*the mystic ties of parent and child*" (90:3). This is obviously a sign in the terminology of the Holy Qur'an which should make us search for an appropriate answer - to better understand the wisdom of the Almighty. Why, for instance, does the Holy Qur'an mention that "*the mothers shall give suck to their offspring for two whole years*" (2:233)? Obviously then, nursing is more than nutritional nourishment. It also nourishes the emotional and spiritual development of both the mother and her baby, as I hope to show in this paper.

Nursing a baby was the only way a human infant could be fed and survive until the early 1900's. Then a combination of factors in the food industry made bottle feeding a possibility. No one could have questioned the naturalness of nursing before this. And if the natural mother was not available to nurse another woman took her place. The Holy Qur'an also pays attention to this possibility. Now, particularly in the West, bottle feeding is considered "natural" and "normal" so that the bottle in fact is often used as the symbol for babies on their clothing, in nurseries, airport waiting rooms and the like. And the presence of the bottle can now be seen too in villages throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. It seems that nursing is considered old-fashioned, obsolete, animal-like, and a sign of ignorance and poverty. Breast feeding deserves none of these unfortunate associations. Women are being led by food industry propaganda to believe that bottle feeding confers higher social status on a woman. And the unfortunate

results are higher infant mortality and morbidity, debilitating diarrhea, parasitic infestation from contaminated water added to formula among the poor and the least obvious but most insidious to all - breaking the natural ties or bonds between mother and child.

Unlike the western scientist who claims scientific neutrality or objectivity (who, in fact, removes himself from whatever he is studying as though he were not interesting) I claim neither. I am a Muslim. I am a woman. I am a mother. In addition I happen to be a nutritionist. In fact, I hope that my talk will give both intellectual as well as emotional-spiritual reasons for breast feeding, which is always the best way to raise a human infant. I do not claim to be neutral. In fact, those who claim neutrality are usually kidding themselves. The whole topic of how to feed an infant is an emotionally charged one particularly ever since western scientists and technologists have encouraged bottle feeding. Through many rationalizations to women they have succeeded in weaning the mother away from her natural inclination to nurse, and this for quite a few decades. In fact, the pressures in present-day America are against what is normal and natural. Commercial interests depend on and encourage this for their enormous profits. Because the whole truth about breast feeding has been so carefully screened from women for so long those favoring breast feeding are accused of over reacting. But women who have bottle fed one or more children and then nursed a later child attest to the differences most emphatically. Can any so-called neutral observer, then, really believe there is no significant difference?

The Holy Qur'an being the ultimate truth regarding all things, tells us how the Almighty creates what He wills. And He provides all things, according to His Will, to His greatest creation which is mankind - including nourishment of body and spirit. Man, being created "*out of a clot of congealed blood*", is protected and nourished in the mother's body until ready to be born. And then, Allah Subhanahu wa ta'ala provides the newborn with further protection and aid through his mother - her milk and her mothering

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which includes all the physical emotional and spiritual supports she gives her child.

The physical benefits of breast feeding to both mother and infant are numerous. Most importantly, human milk is the superior food for human infants just as cows milk is the superior food for calves. In the rush to accept the latest so-called laboratory miracles, mothers together with medical professionals have overlooked the fact that the calf grows at a very rapid rate. By one year the calf is fully half-grown. Thus the high mineral and high protein content of cows milk as compared to human milk is suited to the rapidly growing calf. To be made suitable to human infants at all it has to be boiled, diluted and have numerous things added to it. Vitamin B6 was discovered as a result of a particular formula lacking it which caused convulsions in infants. At present more than 100 separate constituents are known to exist in human milk, few of them available to the bottle fed infant.

Human milk is readily assimilated by the infant with rapid emptying of the stomach and with almost 100% protein utilization. Colostrum, present the first few days after delivery, is especially rich in essential amino acids. The fat content of human milk is high in the essential unsaturated fatty acids. Lactose, the primary sugar, aids in the absorption of calcium, increases protein efficiency, and creates an acid medium in the baby's intestine. An almost pure culture of *Lactobacillus bifidus* exists, which prevents the growth of putrefactive bacteria, prevents diarrhea, and gives the breast-fed infant's stool a not unpleasant odor. Even under completely unhygienic circumstances a baby can be nursed without fear of contamination due to the presence of lysozyme. Fewer infections, absence of food allergy, and many immunological benefits derive from breast milk. (8)

An infant's hunger needs are immediate and intense. Nursing meets these needs. Sufficient milk is always available through a natural system of supply and demand. As the baby grows his increasing need for milk is met through stronger sucking which stimulates milk production. Also, human milk changes as the infant grows. Colostrum meets the special needs of the first few days. Human milk also changes during each feeding from low fat milk initially to one high in calories and fat.

An infant's facial structure is specifically designed for nursing. Sucking pads in the cheeks prevent their collapse during the feeding. The flat nose enables easier breathing. The ridged edge of the gums help him grasp and hold onto the nipple while sucking.

Dentists point to the absence of problems frequent to bottle-fed infants including tongue-thrusting, lip and finger sucking, bite deformities, incorrect swallowing, mouth breath and tooth decay. Because the breast-fed infant must suck harder his lip, tongue and jaw muscles show better muscular development.

A woman breast feeding has the natural biological supports in that she secretes the hormone prolactin as long as she continues to nurse. This hormone makes her behave motherly. When prolactin is given to an old rooster he behaves like a mother hen around young chicks. Montagu states in referring to a hen's natural broodiness, "stimulation of the skin apparently constitutes an essential condition in causing the pituitary gland to secrete the hormone most important for the initiation and maintenance of broodiness, namely prolactin. This is the same hormone associated with the initiation and maintenance of nursing in mammals, including the human mother." In animals for as long as the other nurses her young she behaves motherly towards it. As weaning proceeds the mother gradually comes to regard her offspring as just another animal. This points to the importance of the nursing relationship and the close physical contact associated with it, maintaining the motherliness of the mother and the interest of the young.

If the baby is allowed to suck immediately after birth this causes a strong uterine contraction in the mother which helps to expel the placenta, prevents post-partum hemorrhage, and with continued nursing helps her uterus involute rapidly. Nursing is a natural child spacer which folk medicine attests to throughout the world. during lactation ovulation is suppressed. (4) The high levels of prolactin in the mother's body stimulate the ovaries to maintain a high progesterone level. the return of menstruation is delayed anywhere from eight to eighteen months. This also conserves maternal iron. Nursing is also still the best protection against breast cancer (10). Its increase in many parts of the world is directly related to the increasing prevalence of bottle feeding.

While the word breastfeeding may imply that nothing more than feeding a baby is involved, nursing, in the other hand, implies much more. It implies the whole role of mothering as a woman cares for her infant, feeds him comforts him, and loves him. Nursing a baby then, for a mother involves not just giving physical nourishment for his physical growth and development but also it involves provision for his emotional development.

A baby normally communicates through his cry. As

women throughout history and around the world have found, the best, fastest, and easiest way to stop a baby from crying is to let him nurse. He might want to satisfy his hunger. But just as often he might want to satisfy his need to suck, his need to be held, his need to be loved, his need to be rocked to sleep in his mother's arms or just his need to feel secure. A nursing mother, however, who nurses only to meet the infant's hunger, who watches the clock and not the baby, who holds him rigidly or uncomfortably, who lets him cry himself to sleep is nursing as though she were bottle feeding. This could only happen, however, in a society such as this one where the schedules and rules associated with bottle feeding have become the norm.

Nursing can be seen as a symbiotic relationship. In fact, some authors (12) refer to "the nursing couple", emphasizing the mutually met needs of mother and infant, both of them growing and maturing as a result of this relationship. The baby develops as a human infant, physically, giving, and tender person.

Allah Subhanahu wa ta 'ala has given all human beings certain resources to cope with life, to appreciate life, to see the multiple blessings we are given in this life and in this world. Having a baby is a natural gift from Allah Subhanahu wa ta'ala (42:49-50). Breast feeding follows naturally the birth of a child. It is part of the newborn's "resources" to cope with life immediately following the trauma of birth. Comparing the experience of the breast fed infant to prenatal life, Jelliffe points to "the close warm contact of the mother's skin paralleling the warm encompassing amniotic fluid he has just left. The auditory stimulus of the mother's heart continues to be heard. The intrauterine swaying as continued as rocking on the mother's lap. The continuous supply of nutrients transported to the fetus through the umbilical cord is continued almost as continuously by unrestricted breast feeding." (9)

As mentioned before, often what is obvious in this world is somehow unnoticed. One such thing in the Muslim world is the mother nursing her infant. It is so expected. It is so common. It is so everyday that it is neglected. It is overlooked. It is forgotten about. And, in fact, now it is even being replaced - by the bottle. No one notices how special it is or reflects upon the fact that one single infant is dependent on one single mother totally and so completely for a short period of its life. No one reflects on what positive effects it has upon the mother and how it helps her grow and mature. How it effects the baby in learning to respond to human beings and insures his growing normally. Nursing humanizes a child as opposed to

the bottle which tends to mechnize him. Let's look at some of the more insidious aspects of bottle feeding for a moment to see what is really happening. A bottle fed baby is given a schedule. Now why should a baby be put on a schedule? Why can't the mother leave it up to the baby? Surely his cry is the best indicator of when he is hungry or needs something. This is the natural demand feeding which the baby should establish for the mother to follow and not the other way round. Isn't the goal of all these schedules and rules really for the supposed convenience of the mother or other caretaker? And why should we try to mechanize an infant from birth streamlining him into being a robot who will respond to time schedules that are totally unrelated to his biological needs to satisfy his hunger and sucking or emotional needs for love? Are we flying in the face of the wisdom of the Holy Qur'an which directly tells women to nurse their children? The woman herself is also deprived of the joys of nursing and the natural bonding or love for her infant is weakened.

Bottle feeding is not just a simple substitution of one way of feeding an infant for another. It is a way of raising an entirely different individual. Someone who will be held less, who will be handled less, who will be cuddled less, who will feel the warmth of another human being less and who, in the long run, will probably be loved less. Skin-to-skin contact for infants is fundamental for their normal physical development. Montagu states "the evidence indicates clearly that the skin is the primary sense organ of the human infant, and that during its reflex attachment period it is its tactile experience that is critical for its continued growth and development (11).

While the bottle feeding mother can certainly learn to be a good mother and be loving to her child and have her infant respond to her, certainly the cards are stacked against her. This is particularity so in a society where very few women nurse. In a sociey where most women still breast feed, however, a bottle feeding mother probably still gets the same support to be motherly. She would be encouraged to hold her infant instead of propping the bottle, to rock him to sleep in her arms, to sing to him, to hold him tenderly and snugly. Growing up as a child surrounded by nursing mothers the whole loving, easy-going atmosphere associated with breast feeding naturally grows in her as she develops. In the United States however, several generations have already beend denied this natural learning situation. In fact, American young women today who choose to nurse usually run into difficulties because in their whole lifetime they may have never seen a woman nurse a baby.

Taking the United States as a case in point, we can ask what happens to a society when a whole generation of babies are bottlefed instead of breast fed. Do they develop differently? Why is it that so many children feel that they are unloved? Their parents probably do love them, although they probably avoided close physical contact. Isn't the physical need to be held part of being loved and feeling secure? For the infant, isn't the need for intimate body contact necessary for his emotional well being as well? Montagu states unequivocally that "tactile failure in infancy results only too often in estrangement, uninvolvedness, lack of identity, detachment, emotional shallowness and indifference - all marks of the schizoid or schizophrenic personality." (11) Why is it too that ten and twelve year olds are rushing into sexual relationships? Are they perhaps, may need, someone to touch them, to satisfy their unmet infantile needs? Do they just want someone to hold them, caress them, and tell them they are loved? All young mammals snuggle against their mother and litter-mates emphasizing its importance as a biological need. In a tactile sense, these children were denied the very basic need of skin-to-skin contact that a breast fed infant receives repeatedly by his mother who is communicating over and over in a non-verbal way, I love you.

Considering the emphasis the western scientist places on personality development it is surprising indeed that no one bothered to ask what effect the change over to bottle feeding might have - until very recently. And many studies concerned with nursing have, in fact, only focused on the Mother's attitude before actually beginning to nurse. "The impersonal child-rearing practices," states Montagu, "which have been the mode in the United States, with the early severance of the mother-child tie, and the separation of mothers and children by the interposition of bottles, will produce individuals who are able to lead lonely, isolated lives in the crowded urban world with its materialistic values and its addiction to things." He goes on to state, "the contemporary American family constitutes only too often an institution for the systematic production of mental illness in each of its members." (11)

Women who have nursed their children look at bottle feeding mothers with sadness. Just as one can't help but feel pity for a blind person knowing what beauty our eyes can perceive, the nursing mother looks upon the bottle feeding mother with pity particularly because she doesn't know what she has missed. Not to be misunderstood, yes a mother who offers the bottle can certainly be a very good mother, especially if she

has grown up in a society that nurses. But when a woman who herself has been bottle fed chooses the same method for her own children, what then? Has she lost many opportunities for physical and emotional closeness in her own childhood that might reflect even more strongly on her own children? If, for instance, she wasn't held while being fed might she feel uncomfortable or even negative towards holding her own baby? In Harlow's work with monkeys striking results were found. Those monkeys who failed completely as mothers were themselves denied normal maternal-infant contacts. To quote Harlow, "failure of normal gratification of contact-clinging in infancy may make it impossible for the adult female to show normal contact relationships with her own infant." (6). A popular book by the U.S. Children's Bureau, Department of H.E.W. Infant Care, has an unfortunate negative attitude indicative of the cultural avoidance of closeness. It states: "You may feel some resistance to the idea of such intimacy with an infant who, at first, seems like a stranger. To some mothers it seems better to keep the baby at arm's length, so to speak, by feeding plans which are not so close." (14) This booklet, by the way, is prepared primarily by women.

The ability to learn to love is taken for granted. In an article, "How a Baby Learns to Love," the author points out that only when a baby establishes a strong one-to-one loving relationship with a single adult, usually the mother, only then can that child later, as an adult establish a strong one-to-one loving relationship with a single adult, namely the marriage partner. (2) The lack of the ability to love in institution raised children, who never establish normal loving relationships with others and remain cold human beings, points to the need for intense human contact from birth onwards. Retarded development and lack of attachment to anyone is seen in these children. I think this points out the potential hazard of bottle feeding if carried to the extreme.

The relationship between mother and child is the most basic of all human relationships. It is through our relationships with others that the Holy Qur'an emphasizes our humanness and our relatedness to the world. The institution of Zakat, for instance, is a very concrete example of how we should care for others. Without relationships man is at a loss. He can't know who he is. In fact, what he does has no meaning. A man totally alone is unrelated to everything in this world. How important then in the words of the Holy Qur'an are "*the mystic ties between parent and child*". The infant first experiences the world or relationships in his ability to relate to his mother.

Only later does he begin to establish ties with others.

In the repetition of prayer five times a day just as we remember the ever presence of the Almighty, a mother is reminded every time she nurses her infant and holds him of the great blessing and wonder from Allah Subhanahu wa ta 'ala, of the spiritual gift that she holds in trust. The Nursing mother can watch her infant grow and experience the absolute spiritual wonder of this life which has been put in her care. She can marvel at the perfect yet so small infant in her arms who knew what to do to be fed, who knew how to convey to his mother in the most pleading way through his cries what he wants, who is so absolutely content after he has been nursed, who, in fact, even sings while nursing and smiles when finished, who in all knows how to bring joy and win the heart of his mother so that she will continue to meet his needs as he meets hers, who makes her feel like the most important person in the world by just being able to satisfy the needs of this tiny baby she holds. It is an eloquent statement of the infant's love for his mother which she can't fail to miss and which rewards her for all the work he has created. In fact, she hardly notices the work. For the bottle feeding mother, on the other hand, some of the joy is missing because she can't derive any personal satisfaction. The baby is holding the bottle instead of touching his mother's mouth with his fingers or stroking her neck. He is focussed on the bottle instead of his mother's eyes. And if he sings or smiles while being fed this is all unnoticed since he is in his crib alone. Even his skin has an unpleasant smell which she covers up with lots of powder, particularly after he spits up. And changing his diaper is unpleasant and made far worse as soon as he is given solid food. During the night too, he drags his mother out of bed to warm a bottle in the kitchen instead of letting her settle back under the covers to let him nurse as they both fall quickly back to sleep.

While science still doesn't know how what a woman eats is converted eventually into the milk she gives her infant, a mother knows intuitively that what she does for her infant will nourish him physically and spiritually. By her nursing this child is growing. Each developmental milestone to the doctor is yet another proof of the wonders from the Almighty, which unfold before her every day as she cares for her child. This is part of the spiritual joy of being a mother nursing her baby. Recognizing the incredibly complex, comprehensive, and perfect system that the Almighty has created to nourish both the mother and baby simultaneously so that they each grow in their own way towards the goals that He has set for this relationship.

Is then bottle feeding interchangeable with breast feeding? In my opinion the answer is a definite no. We know already of the tremendous biochemical and nutritional differences of each method of feeding. Human milk is definitely more suited for the human infant. It offers overwhelming physical and emotional advantages to both members of the nursing couple. Should someone care to ask whether the incidence of heart attacks, cancers of various kinds, and mental illnesses differs for those who were nursed instead of bottle fed in infancy we would probably find surprising results. But in the spiritual and emotional spheres I think there are vital differences already apparent to the sincere, careful observer. In the way a mother feels about herself as a mother and in her relationship to her child. She cherishes the child and loves him in a different way. She more readily accepts her role as a mother and in fact, accepts it in a joyful, totally fulfilling way.

In conclusion we as Muslims have first of all an obligation to follow the Holy Qur'an when it instructs women to nurse their babies for two years. The Holy Qur'an is the best guide for mankind. And then as modern science finds out the reasons, fine, all well and good, but let's continue to treat our children as human beings from birth and give them all the benefits of breast feeding as Allah Subhanahu wa ta 'ala has instructed us and all the generations before and after us. Let's not wait for the scientific evidence to come in. We have the Holy Qur'an.

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(Continued on Page — 32)

Continued from "The Emotional and Spiritual"

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