

HERMENEUTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE HADITH ON ONE INTESTINE AND SEVEN INTESTINES: AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONSUMPTION IN ISLAM


Muhamad Maimun¹, Helmi², Ahmad Fawaid³

¹Dosen IAI Qomarul Huda Bagu NTB dan Mahasiswa S3 UNUJA Paiton Probolinggo

²Mahasiswa S3 UNUJA Paiton Probolinggo

³Dosen Program Pascasarjana Universitas Nurul Jadid Paiton Probolinggo

Email : ¹abimaimun80@gmail.com ²nawalihelmi@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

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*Corresponding Author :
abimaimun80@gmail.com

This study discusses the phenomenon of Musykil al-Ḥadīth (hadiths that appear contradictory or are difficult to understand textually) concerning the difference in eating patterns between believers and disbelievers, symbolized by the expressions “one intestine” and “seven intestines.” Through a hermeneutical approach grounded in classical Islamic scholarship, this article explains that such wording functions as a metaphor for zuhd (asceticism) and self-restraint. The findings indicate that the essence of this hadith is an injunction toward qana'ah (contentment) and a warning against the harmful effects of greed on both physical and spiritual health.

To uncover the intended meaning of the hadith, this research employs a hermeneutical method by referring to the sharḥ (commentaries) of prominent scholars. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī emphasizes that the expression should not be understood literally (biologically), but rather as a tamsīl (figurative illustration). Imam al-Nawawī explains that the hadith serves as motivation to minimize excessive attachment to worldly pleasures. Meanwhile, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr views the hadith as praise for believers who are able to restrain their worldly desires.

The core of this study concludes that “one intestine” represents the values of zuhd and qana'ah. A believer is expected to take sustenance only as needed, whether in food, clothing, or work. The fundamental principle is “eating to live” in order to maintain strength for worship, rather than “living to eat” to satisfy desire. Contentment (qana'ah) is thus regarded as a key to success for a Muslim.

The research also examines the sociological and health impacts of excessive consumption (greed). Based on the studied materials on consumption ethics, Islam regulates that the stomach should not be filled completely; the ideal division is one-third for food, one-third for drink, and one-third for breathing. Regarding spiritual and physical impacts, excessive satiety, according to Imam al-Shāfi'ī, can harden the heart, diminish intelligence, cause lethargy, and weaken enthusiasm for worship.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the corpus of hadith literature, there are several narrations whose literal wording appears, at first glance, to contradict biological facts or empirical reality. One particularly significant discourse concerns the hadith addressing the dichotomy of consumption patterns between believers and disbelievers, represented through the analogy of the number of intestines. As narrated by Imam al-Bukhārī:

Sulaymān ibn Ḥarb narrated to us; Shu‘bah narrated to us, from ‘Adī ibn Thābit, from Abū Ḥāzim, from Abū Hurayrah, that a man used to eat excessively. After he embraced Islam, he began to eat only a little. This was mentioned to the Prophet ﷺ, whereupon he said: “The believer eats with one intestine, whereas the disbeliever eats with seven intestines.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī)

This phenomenon gives rise to a complex hermeneutical problem within the field of hadith studies. Interpreting the matn (text) of a hadith does not merely require the validation of its isnād—at least to the level of ḥasan—but also necessitates a comprehensive methodological framework capable of capturing the essence of its intended message. The surrounding indications (qarā’in al-aḥwāl) play a decisive role in determining whether a hadith should be understood in a literal-textual sense or a contextual-interpretive one, and whether its message is universal, temporal, or context-specific.

In fulfilling his prophetic and educational mission, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ frequently employed diverse linguistic styles. Alongside direct and explicit expressions (ṣarīḥ), he often used metaphors and figurative language rich in philosophical meaning, known in Arabic literary terminology as majāz. To prevent misinterpretation of such metaphorical texts, classical hadith scholars developed specialized disciplines, among them ‘Ilm Majāz al-Ḥadīth.

From an anatomical perspective, medical science confirms that there is no structural difference in the digestive organs of believers and disbelievers. Consequently, a deeper hermeneutical approach becomes an academic necessity in order to uncover the meaning beyond the literal text (beyond the text) and to avoid intellectual misrepresentation of Islamic teachings.

This study focuses on an in-depth analysis of the hadith concerning the “difference in intestines” through an epistemological framework that distinguishes between literal (ḥaqīqī) and figurative (majāzī) meanings. By examining the sociological, spiritual, and ethical dimensions associated with the narration, this research seeks to construct a harmonious understanding between the sacred text and scientific reality.

METHOD

This study employs a philosophical–contextual hermeneutical methodology, drawing primarily on the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer (philosophical hermeneutics) and Paul Ricoeur (symbolic and critical hermeneutics), integrated with the science of hadith, particularly *asbāb al-wurūd* and classical *sharḥ al-ḥadīth*. In this research, hermeneutics is not understood merely as a method of textual interpretation, but as a philosophical approach that views understanding as a dialogical process involving the text, its context, and the interpreter. Accordingly, the meaning of the hadith is not confined to a purely literal reading, but is construed as an ethical–normative message that remains relevant across time.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Deconstruction of Textual Meaning

The interpretation of the term “*mi’ā*” (intestine) in classical literature cannot be separated from the Arab worldview regarding the relationship between the physical body and one’s inner character. At a deeper level, *mi’ā* is not merely a biological organ responsible for nutrient absorption, but a symbolic container of desire. In Arab-Islamic moral philosophy, the intestine is perceived as a representation of the most fundamental form of *hawā al-nafs* (base desire). When a person is described as eating with “one intestine,” it reflects an integration between physical necessity and spiritual awareness—eating to live. Conversely, “seven intestines” signify a fragmentation of desire, where each channel appears to demand fulfillment without ever reaching satisfaction. While “one intestine” symbolizes focus and the virtue of *qana’ah* (contentment), behaviorally it depicts a person who eats solely to maintain bodily function or physical strength. This metaphor thus conveys a restrained and purposeful consumption pattern rooted in self-discipline.

Furthermore, the deeper interpretation of *mi’ā* extends into psychological dimensions. Ibn Sīnā and his contemporaries maintained that there is a close correlation between a full stomach and diminished intellectual acuity. “One intestine” symbolizes a *mu’taḍilah* (balanced) condition, in which nutritional intake is sufficient to produce healthy blood that supports optimal brain function. In contrast, “seven intestines” metaphorically represent mental cloudiness (brain fog) caused by excessive material intake. This explains why, in classical literature, control of the *mi’ā* is regarded as a gateway to wisdom.

Normatively, this explanation invites us to understand that true health emerges from the simplification of desire. By metaphorically limiting the “capacity of the intestines” through self-restraint, individuals free their energy

for higher pursuits—both intellectual and spiritual.

The Number Seven as a Symbol of Excess

Linguistically, the use of the number seven as a symbol of excess is rooted in ancient Semitic numerological traditions. In Arabic, the number seven is frequently employed to express *mubālaghah* (hyperbole) or the completeness of a particular quality—whether positive or negative. When used in a negative context such as consumption, seven symbolizes the inability to reach satiation. It serves as a metaphor for a “leaking soul”: regardless of how much material enters, it never feels fulfilled, having lost orientation toward *barakah* (divine blessing) and focusing solely on quantity rather than meaning.

This symbolism conveys a normative message of moderation (*wasatiyyah*). Classical literature employs the contrast between one and seven to create a stark dichotomy between ascetic living (*zuhd*) and hedonism. “One intestine” symbolizes energy efficiency and the soul’s liberation from enslavement to material desire. A person who is content with little possesses greater mental space for transcendental reflection. Conversely, “seven intestines” represent a physical prison; when all energy is consumed merely to satisfy digestion, intellectual sharpness and spiritual sensitivity inevitably deteriorate.

Communicatively, this analogy functions as both a medical and ethical warning that transcends time. In today’s consumerist culture, the concept of “seven intestines” is highly relevant in describing human behavior driven by limitless gratification. By understanding *mi’ā* as a symbol of self-control capacity, health is no longer viewed merely as physical freedom from illness, but as a harmonious alignment between consumption and one’s ultimate life purpose. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, firmly emphasizes that the hadith does not intend a literal meaning concerning the number of bodily organs. Rather, it is not limited to eating behavior alone; its core message lies in minimizing worldly desire (*zuhd*) as opposed to expanding worldly indulgence.

Zuhd and Qana’ah as the Identity of the Believer

In Islamic ethical discourse, *zuhd* and *qana’ah* are not merely passive ascetic ideals, but value orientations that shape the fundamental identity of a believer. Academically, these orientations can be understood as psychological and spiritual control mechanisms that counteract the pressures of consumerism and materialism, which often distort human priorities. Imam al-Nawawī emphasizes that the essence of this teaching lies in reducing the heart’s attachment to the transient nature of worldly life. By positioning the world as a means (*wasīlah*) rather than an ultimate end (*ghāyah*), a believer attains emotional stability rooted in divine contentment, thus freeing oneself from

boundless ambition.

This identity transformation manifests concretely through a measured and functional simplicity of lifestyle. From sociological and health perspectives, the principle of “eating for life and worship” reflects heightened awareness of resource efficiency and bodily preservation for spiritual productivity. Rather than promoting excessive material accumulation, this lifestyle focuses on fulfilling essential needs (*kafāf*). By taking only what is sufficient in consumption, clothing, and work, individuals build a natural defense against greed and destructive worldly competition, allowing their energy to be fully directed toward devotion to the Creator.

True success in Islamic epistemology is defined by the integration of divine guidance, sufficient provision, and the gift of *qana’ah*. This quality functions as a form of “worldly paradise,” granting inner tranquility unattainable through material wealth. Psychologically, gratitude and contentment represent the pinnacle of mental well-being, liberating individuals from social pressure and future anxiety. Thus, a believer adorned with *zuhud* and *qana’ah* embodies the freest form of humanity—grounded on earth with high productivity, yet inwardly anchored to enduring transcendental values.

Consumption Ethics and the Harmful Effects of Greed

Within Islamic ethical discourse—harmonized with modern biological and psychological principles—consumption management is not merely a technical matter of nutrition, but a reflection of moral excellence. Scientifically, regulating food intake constitutes a critical form of self-regulation necessary for maintaining bodily homeostasis. The Prophet ﷺ introduced a remarkably precise model of gastric management by dividing digestive capacity into three functional compartments: one-third for solid food, one-third for liquids, and one-third for breathing space. This model prevents excessive intra-abdominal pressure, which clinically can impair diaphragmatic function and disrupt metabolic efficiency, thereby optimizing bodily processes without extreme organ strain.

Greed and Excessive Consumption Patterns

Greed or excessive consumption is viewed as a behavioral anomaly with systemic consequences for human quality of life. Imam al-Shāfi’ī articulates that excessive fullness (*shiba’*) triggers a detrimental chain reaction, beginning with physical heaviness and culminating in cognitive decline. Neurologically, the excessive diversion of blood flow to the digestive system after overeating induces severe drowsiness and diminished intellectual sharpness. This explains why greed is often inversely proportional to intelligence; the brain loses analytical

acuity when the body is trapped in metabolic lethargy caused by forced energy processing.

These adverse effects then transcend biological concerns and evolve into serious spiritual impediments. A hardened heart, persistent lethargy, and weakened discipline collectively reduce one’s capacity for worship and productive engagement. Physical weakness in obedience indicates that nutritional energy is not transformed into righteous action, but instead becomes an obstacle to personal effectiveness. Consequently, moderate consumption ethics in Islam emerge as a comprehensive solution for cultivating individuals who are not only physically healthy, but also intellectually agile and spiritually lucid.

Comparison of Consumption Ethics: Moderation vs. Greed

Aspect of Evaluation	Moderate Eating Pattern (Sunnah)	Gluttony / Excessive Fullness (Shiba‘)
Stomach Management	Balanced division: 1/3 food, 1/3 water, and 1/3 air (breathing space).	Stomach completely filled with no air space, obstructing oxygen circulation.
Physical Condition	Body feels light, energetic, and metabolism functions optimally.	Body becomes heavy, weak, and metabolic processes are overburdened.
Cognitive Sharpness	Clear mind, sustained focus, and ease in absorbing knowledge.	Loss of intelligence (<i>faṭānah</i>) and reduced analytical sharpness.
Mental Health	Heart becomes gentle, receptive to wisdom, and emotionally stable.	Heart becomes hardened, resistant to advice, and empathy diminishes.
Productivity & Worship	Physical agility in obedience and enthusiasm in daily routines.	Causes excessive drowsiness and physical weakness/laziness in worship.
Long-Term Health	Prevents chronic diseases and maintains ideal body weight.	Invites various illnesses and increases the risk of visceral fat accumulation

CONCLUSION

As a comprehensive conclusion to the discourse on consumption ethics in Islam, the hadith parable of “one intestine and seven intestines” constitutes a profoundly epistemological metaphor that delineates the fundamental distinction between self-regulation and greed. From a scientific perspective, the metaphor of “one intestine” attributed to the believer symbolizes systemic

efficiency, wherein modest yet blessed intake is converted into maximal spiritual energy and physical productivity. This reflects a state of preserved homeostasis, in which individuals are no longer driven by uncontrolled biological impulses, but rather by conscious self-regulation oriented toward the pursuit of ultimate spiritual benefit. In this condition, food functions as functional fuel to sustain obedience, not as an object of consumptive desire.

Conversely, the metaphor of “seven intestines,” ascribed to the disbeliever, depicts a condition of existential dissatisfaction or hyper-consumerism that lacks a terminal point. Psychologically, “seven intestines” represent an inner void that individuals attempt to fill through excessive material consumption, yet continually fail to attain genuine fulfillment due to the absence of divine blessing (*barakah*). This greed generates a heavy metabolic burden which, both medically and spiritually, results in dulled moral sensitivity and weakened vitality in worship. When one becomes trapped within the “seven intestines” paradigm, personal potential is consumed entirely by servicing bodily appetite, thereby neglecting intellectual and transcendental capacities.

Therefore, portion control in the Islamic worldview is not merely a physical diet aimed at bodily aesthetics, but rather a holistic architecture of health. By adopting a minimalist yet high-quality consumption pattern, believers preserve cognitive clarity and intuitive sharpness essential for drawing closer to Allah. The synergy between medical discipline (maintaining digestive health) and spiritual discipline (preserving sincerity of the heart) emerges as the key to attaining a “worldly paradise” in the form of inner tranquility, as well as sustained physical strength for lifelong devotion to the Creator.

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