

Ramadan is about abstinence

By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

According to Islamic teachings, Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijra Calendar, is the month of fasting. The Quran mentions that fasting was a common practice in all religions: "Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil" (2:183).

The Arabic equivalent of fasting is called "saum". It means abstinence, which is the spirit of Islamic fasting. In the month of Ramadan, believers abstain from food and drink for a limited period each day, that is, from dawn till sunset. They eat and drink during the night. This practice continues for a month.

Ostensibly, fasting means to abstain from food and drink but, in spirit, it includes abstaining from all kinds of undesirable activities. Staying away from food and drink during the day is symbolic abstinence. Ramadan is, in essence, a form of annual training for living a responsible life. Being of responsible character means doing what is wanted and refraining from all such deeds as are undesirable. Ramadan inculcates this kind of responsible character. The month of Ramadan begins with the sighting of the moon. It is reported that when the Prophet of Islam saw the new moon of Ramadan, he said: "O God, make this month for us a month of peace and submission." This saying of the Prophet is like a pledge and the month of Ramadan begins from the taking of this pledge. According to the pledge, believers are required to live in peace, that is, be non-violent. This is the true spirit of the month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is much more than fasting; it is the fostering of a culture of abstinence aimed at purifying thought, speech and general behaviour. The message of Ramadan is: be selective, differentiate between right and wrong; don't allow your desires to dominate you, but follow principles; abandon all immoral things forever just as you have abandoned food and drink for a month.