

## **Ramzaan**

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

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## Introduction

According to the *Hijri* calendar, the ongoing month Ramazan is being observed in the year 1431. This means that 1431 years have elapsed since the Prophet migrated (*Hijrat*) from Mecca to Medina. Thinking about this, it occurred to me that approximately three thousand generations have passed between the Prophet and us! During my childhood days, I had developed the notion that the Prophet was a contemporary of my grandfather; this idea remained etched in my mind for long. This example explains the risk a conditioned mind undertakes as it lets a notion mature and eventually become a part of its conscious thought process. Man therefore, must think every moment. A simple thought, this however highlights the chief aspect of the month of Ramzaan - *to introspect and de-condition ourselves*.

## Historical aspect of fasting

Even though the tradition of fasting was an old one, fasting in the month of Ramdan was made obligatory during the Medinese period. Born in 570 AD, the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelation (*wahy*) in 610 AD at Cave Hira. The Prophet used to retreat to this Cave occasionally (during the period of fasting as per the then Quraysh practice) to reflect and contemplate in solitude but he did not remain there all the time. In fact he did not stay in Cave Hira for the first forty years of his life. Unconsciously, to my mind it seemed that before Prophethood, he used to spend all his time in the cave. This however was not the case. Prior to receiving Prophethood, he did business and for the purpose travelled from Mecca to Syria. So he did not remain in Hira continuously. He spent time in the Cave only during the month of Ramzaan.

According to a verse in the Quran,

**Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you  
(2:183)**

The above verse indicates that fasting was prescribed even for people before the Prophet Muhammad; prior to his Prophethood, Prophet Muhammad used to retreat to Cave Hira during the month of Ramadan. Sufis think that the Prophet did this to undertake *muraqaba* or meditation. But this is wrong: this retreat marked the period of contemplation, not meditation. In effect, the Prophet spent the period of Ramazaan, contemplating thereby saving himself from all distractions.

## The Month of Thinking

Fasting is not the practice of remaining hungry and mysteriously gaining *sawab*. The month of Ramazan is the month of thinking because thinking is the door to wisdom and realisation.

The Arabic word for fasting is *Soum* (abstinence). During the fast, one abstains oneself from routine eating and drinking. It is important to note here that this abstinence is not for the sake of abstinence. I understood the relevance of 'abstinence' through the following tradition of the Prophet,

**He [man] leaves his routine for Me [God] (Bukhari)**

In this Hadith, the Prophet explains why man fasts. The word "Me" above is used in the context of God. Leaving aside his routine, the one who fasts must think about God, worship God and realise His greatness. In other words, God must become the focus of man's attention.

The importance of focussed endeavour can be understood by the following example. India got freedom on August 15, 1947. Many books have been written on the subject. Two writers, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, co-authored a book entitled, *Freedom at Midnight*. In an interview, post the release of their book, they said, "We lived like hermits and we produced *Freedom at Midnight*." In other words, they immersed themselves in understanding the subject and then produced the Book.

The above example elucidates the reason for abstinence during the month of Ramzaan. By doing so, man is able to save himself from all sorts of distraction. Eating and drinking is a symbol of distraction. In every household, people do elaborate arrangements for eating and waste precious time. Fasting is to provide quality time to man so that he can engross himself in *tafakkur* and *tadabbur* by minimising distractions.

Some one once questioned me about the reason for fasting. I told him the reason is to make man think. Contrary to the concept of *muraqaba* which aims at "stopping the thinking process", fasting activates man's thinking.

## The Art of Thinking

Man lives amidst events. It is said that Winston Churchill led a very eventful life; he had been the Prime Minister of Britain during the Second World War. But I think every person's life is eventful. For example, a special programme is organised every year at the Red Fort to mark the Independence Day celebrations. As I put on the radio to listen to the speech, the commentator was describing the scenario at the ground – the hordes of people who gathered, the arrival of the Prime Minister etc. The depiction made me remember the Day of Judgement, which has been described in the tradition as follows

**(On the Day of Judgement) every one will be collected. Then, God will arrive with angels and address all directly. He'll say, "Where are the kings, emperors?"**

**On saying this Prophet's legs shivered, as if he'll fall down (Ibn Kathir)**

The scene at the Red Fort became a reference point and reminded me of the Day of Judgment. This is an example of thinking - it awakens consciousness and activates the mind. It is this process of thinking which must remain activated in man at all times. During the month of Ramzaan, the routine changes and a lot of time to think is therefore made available.

I once met a very wealthy person who used to organise lavish table spreads for each meal at his house. While his house bustled with activity throughout the day, his time was spent giving directions to the housekeepers. Distractions did not spare him any time to reflect and ponder over important issues.

The right approach should therefore be *Simple living, High thinking*. The pre-requisite to high thinking is simple living and the month of Ramzaan is a training to lead such a life. Leading a simple life allows one to find more time to activate one's thinking processes. The world we live in is a mammoth universe of facts. A scientist has written that a man does not discover even one percent of these facts before death overtakes him. Such is the ignorance of man!

Upon meeting new people, I always ask them to share a unique experience or discovery of their life with me. Once I met a person who had been associated with an institution for ten years. I asked him the same question in anticipation of a reply but, he had no answer. This is because people underestimate the importance of thinking. The Prophet Muhammad used to retreat to Cave Hira only to undertake *tafakkur* and *tadabbur*. When fasting became obligatory in the month of Ramzaan, he started doing so

in this month. Therefore, retreat to the Cave Hira was “Ramzaan” of pre-prophetic period whereas the month of Ramzaan became the “Hira” of post-prophetic period. In both periods, stress given on thinking was the same. So those fasting in this month must adopt a two fold approach – prevent themselves from distraction and think about Quran, creation, and life. The training received during this one month may suffice for the year to follow.

### The Reality of Ramzaan

Unfortunately, the present-day Muslims have reduced the importance of the month of Ramzaan by propagating only the Do's, Don'ts and mysterious benefits arising out of adherence to rituals (*fazail* and *masail*). This however is not the reality of this month. The philosophy of the month of Ramzaan is “*Simple living, High thinking.*” According to a Hadith,

**Roza is not meant to merely abandon eating and drinking. Roza is so that you abandon bad, negative talk (*ghibat*) (Bukhari)**

If *fazail* and *masail* had the greatest importance, such a Hadith would not have been there. Let me illustrate this with an example. A Maulana associated with our mission went to a college and met a Professor who asked him about the month of Ramzaan. The Maulana narrated the above Hadith. The Professor was very happy and arranged a lecture for his students so that they learn the real reason of fasting. This happened because this Hadith had addressed his mind. Until then he perceived fasting as an exercise that seeks abstinence from food and water but it was not so. In reality, fasting seeks to ward off negative thoughts from the mind of people. The students were pleased to attend the lecture. Had the Maulana talked in the language of *fazail* and *masail* for the month of Ramzaan, it would not have interested an educated mind.

The month of Ramzaan inculcates moral discipline. The atmosphere during the month of Ramzaan is so spiritual because numerous angels descend to closely watch if man observes the fast with its true spirit. Such a fast makes man the recipient of divine inspiration. The month of Ramzaan is when divine inspiration rains on one who in essence maintains the spirit of fasting. Such a person has kept his container straight so that inspiration may pour in.

Contrarily, those who remain concerned about *fazail* and *masail* have inverted their container and despite fasting throughout the month, they remain bereft of divine inspiration.

## Conclusion

I once met a person who visits Mecca during the month of Ramzaan every year. When I asked him the reason for doing so, he could not justify this practice.

This is not fasting, it is merely an outing. The month of fasting is to inculcate the spirit of piety (*taqwa*) and to connect man to God. But such practices only lead to disconnection between man and God.

Fasting does not mean 'over-eating', rather it means eating less. People eat so much during the month of Ramzaan that they put on additional weight. Such people have not recognised the true essence of the month of fasting.

The month of Ramzaan is not a source of mysterious blessings. Rather it is through contemplation that we discover higher realities and develop spiritually thus receiving inspiration from God every day. This is evident from the following Hadith,

**This blessing is no mysterious thing: it means development in spirituality, realization of God.**

**It is blessing in this sense. If all this does not happen then it is merely eating and drinking**

**(Mishkat)**

The month of Ramzaan therefore is the month of blessings in the sense of arousing *marefat* and not in the sense of *fazail*. May we recognise the true essence of the month of Ramzaan so that it becomes the source of divine inspiration for us!