

Fasting: a source of spiritual empowerment

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

Sunday, August 21, 2011

Introduction

Today is twentieth day of Ramzaan. The month of Ramzaan during which fasting has been made obligatory does not seek ritualistic abstinence from food and water. The Arabic word for fasting is “Sawm,” meaning “to abstain” or “to halt.” While the abstinence from food and water is symbolic, in reality this month becomes a source of inculcating spirituality and elevating oneself from materialism.

Ramzaan and spirituality

Ramzaan seeks to inculcate virtues like *taqwa* (piety) and *sabr* (patience) in the believers.

Believers’, fasting has been prescribed for you so that you may guard yourselves against evil

[Quran, 2:183]

Fasting is the month of patience [Hadith, Mishkat]

These virtues are different aspects of spirituality. Fasting therefore seeks to inculcate a spiritual personality in man. According to a Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad told his companions, a month before the Ramzaan, that a *blessed* month was about to come their way.

Prophet Muhammad told his companions that in this month the provisions for a believer are increased manifold. (Al Baihaqi)

Now the question that arises is which “provision” does the month of Ramzaan seek to increase? It is widely believed that this Hadith refers to the abundance of food items found in the Muslim households during the month of Ramzaan. Such importance is given to meal arrangements that in Arab countries, large amount of money is donated so that the Muslims in poor countries can be fed (*iftar-us-sayam*.) This however, is a false notion. Let me explain why.

The Arabic term for “provision” in the above verse is *rizq-ul-momin* (provision for a believer). It does not say *rizq-ul-khalq* (provision for man). The interpretation of “provision” therefore will be derived in light of the Arabic term and the requirement of a believer. Who is a believer? A believer (*momin*) is one who discovers God and yearns to inculcate a personality which in the hereafter will allow him entry into paradise. Such a person requires “spiritual” provision (spiritual *rizq*) for upliftment of his spiritual self. Physical provision cannot bring about such upliftment. The verse could have referred to “food” or physical provision in case the term in use was, “*rizq-ul-khalq*”, which would have indicated the requirement of food in man, in general.

How does fasting become a source of spiritual nourishment?

Just as physical nourishment ensures smooth functioning of body organs, spiritual nourishment is required for development of man's mind. Christ said

Man cannot live by bread alone

Man needs a provision beyond the material provision required by his body. Fasting is the source of this spiritual provision. During fasting, man's routine changes – his food habits, including the hours of waking up and sleeping etc. In other words, as man abstains from his basic needs, his life undergoes an upheaval, making Ramzaan a month full of experiences.

A momin (believer) is a spiritually prepared mind and as such extracts spiritual nourishment from every event and experience in his life. For example, the commencement of the month of Ramzaan is marked by sighting of moon on the last date of *Shabaan*. During my younger days, we used to get thrilled at the sight of a new moon. When I started thinking on the significance of moon-sighting, I discovered that the waning and waxing of the moon was in actual fact a great lesson! It taught man that ascent and descent are a part of the law of nature and are bound to occur. Man must therefore strive to maintain balance in life.

The waning stages of the moon impart a crucial lesson. When the moon reaches the stage of being a thread-like crescent, it is still in reality, a full moon. Crescent is visible because sunlight falls only upon that portion of the moon, the remaining surface remaining unlit. This phenomenon teaches man to consider facts beyond their face value. When taken upon face value, moon would seem to be a thread-like crescent but the fact of the matter is that is a huge planetary body. It teaches man to analyse the deeper aspects of occurrences in life so as not to be misled. This is the lesson that becomes clear as you contemplate on the first day of Ramzaan.

During Ramazan, one eats till dawn break (*sehri*) and breaks the fast at dusk. As I came here today, I recollected some events of my life. Once, when we lived in UP, I could not get up to eat *sehri*. I had to then fast without having eaten anything because not eating *sehri* does not exempt a person from fasting. That day, I realised how difficult it was to stay without food and water for even a single day. I thought what will become of me if food is taken away forever. If after death, the angel of death leaves me on a stone mountain where there is no food and water and informs that I will not be inflicted upon with any other misery except that I would get no food and water, what will become of me? Likewise, what if am offered a palace but devoid of food and water?

A single day's experience made me realise the unparalleled significance of food and water. I was filled with thankfulness and gratitude towards God as I realised that at the time of his creation, man did not even know what to pray for. But God, in his bountifulness provided everything that was required for man to stay on Earth.

Once when I was in Delhi, an evening conference was organised by non-Muslims during the month of Ramzaan. I accepted their invitation. During the conference, only water was available as they did not know that I would need food along with water. I therefore broke my fast with water and continued to drink water aplenty. Today, water is available for all to drink but the taste of thirst is realised only when one has experienced unquenchable thirst.

Worship: an act of involvement

Before independence, I once visited the Railway Colony at Gorakhpur. My host was a senior officer (BNWR) in the railways (DTS). A person used to visit his house every day, recite the Quran and leave. Curious, I asked him the reason for this man's visit. I was told that the visitor was a *Hafiz* (one who has committed the Quran to memory) and since they could not keep fasts, they called him to read the Quran each day and at the end of Ramazan, they would pay him some money. The description left me stunned! More than seventy years have elapsed, but his words are still fresh in my mind. If on the contrary, the officer would have prayed to God urging that since he could not observe the fasts, God may accept the reading of Quran from him, he would have invoked God's mercy and beneficence. Instead of being involved himself, he reduced it to an act of paying!

As I recollected this incident, I realised that the real thing is that God wants to see the extent of man's involvement. Even if you are not in a position to observe all fasts and have observed only a few, you may pray to God to accept as many from you! Even if that is not possible, man can pray to God to accept his reading of the Quran.

People do not understand that the acts of worship actually seek wholehearted involvement from man. Hajj for example, is an act of worship. Those with money cannot depute someone on their behalf to perform Hajj. Same applies for dawah work. If one does not do it himself and only pays others to do, he has not discharged his obligation.

God wants to assess the involvement of man. According to the Quran,

God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear (2:286)

If one is not in a position to discharge an act, he would still be capable of doing something else, by way of doing which he may get it noted in the register of angels. In other words, all acts of Islam seek the involvement of man – be it *imaan*, *hajj*, *zakat*, *ramzaan* or *dawah work*.

Spirituality is not a mysterious exercise. It refers to extracting spiritual content from experiences encountered in life. Any experience, howsoever material, can present a spiritual lesson. This process is called *tawassum* (to extract spiritual lessons from life's experiences). If everything in man's life is smooth, his life will be devoid of experiences. According to the Quran,

We have created man into a life of toil and trial (90:4)

Man has been born such because toil and strife make man undergo varied experiences. And, experiences enrich man's learning.

Ramzaan: the month of patience

I was listening to the interview of an artist on radio today. The interviewer asked, '*What makes an artist, a great artist?*' The interviewee replied, 'Patience (*Sabr*).' He gave this answer because in order to achieve great feats man must save himself from all kinds of distractions, kill his emotions in many situations and allow the 'great' artist to emerge. The same question was asked to Newton and he said about himself, '*I have no special sagacity. Only the power of patient thought.*'

Patience can be rightfully called the master-key to achieve excellence in life. Once a person came to the Prophet and asked him, "*O Prophet! Give me a master advice to manage all affairs of my life.*" The Prophet replied, "*Don't be angry.*" (Mishkat). What did the advice actually mean? It meant that the Prophet advised him to exercise patience at the time of provocation. He said so because anger aggravates a provocative situation. No one can get angry while sitting alone. It is sought that man may exercise patience in every situation in life. By dealing with feelings of hunger, thirst and change of routine, fasting seeks to inculcate patience in a believer.

I visited a family in South India which comprised of almost 30 members, leading a peaceful life. Curious, I asked them the secret of harmonious living in a large, joint family. They replied, ‘*The secret is patience!*’

Whether man lives in a large family or in a society, provocative situations are bound to occur. In all such situations, the teaching of Islam is to remain “*patient.*” This is the crux of spiritual empowerment, which seeks to inculcate positive values of life in man. Throughout history, all acts of reaction have occurred because man could not exercise patience. For example, in refraining Adam from approaching the Forbidden Tree, God was testing man’s patience. But man gave in to temptation and ate its fruit. He was cast out of paradise and it was ordained that he would spend a part of his life on Earth before returning to his Creator.

In the next generation of Adam, yet another example of reactionary approach was witnessed. Cain killed his brother Abel, under influence of anger. Quran describes it as the first act of murder but as soon as he realised what he had done, Cain was filled with sorrow and frustration, which as per the human psychology must have lasted through the rest of his life. This was the price he paid for his actions.

And he repented. (5:31)

Once I met a criminal lawyer, who had been practising for the last twenty five years. He told me that a prominent feature of the cases he dealt with was that all the convicts were penitent for their acts. Acting at the spur of the moment, they committed the murder/ killing but in their later lives, they regretted their act. The lesson is that losing patience even for a second ruins the entire life of man.

Provocation-led anger is momentary. Personally, when I get angry, I remain silent and that helps subside my anger. When provoked, it seems that the body is on fire but this is a momentary feeling. If patience is exercised for about thirty seconds, the anger subsides.

Claiming oneself to be without anger is unnatural. The Quran says

Who forgive when they are angry (42:37)

The above verse does not say that the believers did not get angry. Instead, it says that they are able to control their emotions of anger and not allow them to manifest. I will take the example of a shock absorber to explain my point.

Unlike a car, a tractor does not have the shock absorber device. Therefore a tractor ride is much bumpy and tiring as compared to a car ride. Tractor therefore is a vehicle that transmits all the shock to its passengers. A good car on the other hand, is a vehicle that bears the shock on its tyres and does not let it pass to the passengers. While a tractor is an example of impatience, a car is an example of patience.

Patience is whereby you absorb the provocative situation yourself and do not let it pass through. If you seek revenge or, are vindictive, you are following the tractor method. But if in the face of anger, you pacify yourself and control your emotions, you follow the method of a good car which gets the shock but does not pass it to others.

Ramzaan therefore seeks to inculcate a shock absorber attitude in a believer. This is a big blessing from God because all progress in the world - from science to art, family to international life - has just one formula of success, that is, patience and the month of fasting is the month of being trained in patience.

God, being the Creator of man knew what the biggest strength and weakness of man would be. So, He [God] instituted the month of fasting as a course to teach man the master key of all success in life – patience.

I would want to clarify that a wrong notion these days is that one should eat a lot during *Sehri* so that one does not feel hungry through the day. One must eat as per one's routine so that the feelings of hunger and thirst are not lost. Foods that help subside thirst and hunger defeat the purpose of fasting.

Fasting is so that man breaks from the regular routine, experiences hunger and thirst and is able to lead the life as a patient person. Anything which works otherwise serves to undo the scheme of God. Man must lead life in accordance with the Scheme of God and thinking about the Creation Plan so that he moulds himself to get the blessings of God.