

Ramadan: the month of fasting

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Excerpt:

In his talk, the Maulana explains that Ramadan is the month of heightened God-consciousness and of attaining piety (taqwa). Being an act of patience and restraint, fasting helps man to attain a state of mind, which makes him a more sensitive person. Those who over-eat in order to curb the feeling of hunger and thirst, in reality, kill the spirit of fasting. They neither experience a state of helplessness, nor are they able to develop sensitivity, which is the main purpose of fasting.

He further elaborates that the month of Ramadan seeks to develop our understanding of the meaning of the Quran, which is possible only when Quran is deliberated upon in a single-focussed manner. Explaining some verses of the Quran, he clarifies that God instituted a complete life support system on Earth, necessary to fulfill the survival needs of man. However, there exists no desire support system in this world and as such man's desires remain unfulfilled. This desire support system exists only in paradise and this arrangement is so that man realizes the reality and strives to develop a paradisiacal personality.

The lesson:

Fasting has been prescribed so that believers learn taqwa (piety) and as a result become more sensitive. Those who eat beyond their fills during the month of Ramadan never experience a state of helplessness and as a result lose an opportunity to develop their level of sensitivity. Being sensitive is the only way in which man can reflect carefully and understand the profound meaning of the Quran.

Introduction

Today is 16th day of the month of Ramadan 1433 A.H. The Quran has laid out detailed commandments pertaining to fasting in the month of Ramadan. The following verse signifies the unique relationship between Quran and fasting

The month of Ramadan is the month when the Quran was sent down as clear guidance for mankind with clear proofs of guidance for mankind and the criterion by which to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month, let him fast. (2:185)

According to another verse

Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil. (2:183)

Ramadan is the month of heightened God-consciousness, of attaining piety (*taqwa*). As I deliberated upon the verses above, I realized that *taqwa* actually, refers to sensitivity. Fasting by its very nature is an act of patience and restraint. It helps man to attain a state of mind, which makes him a more sensitive person. In fact, those who indulge in over-eating to curb the feeling of thirst and hunger, actually do not observe the fast as they do not allow the purpose of Ramadan to be met. Let me clarify this with the following Hadith.

When Prophet Muhammad was returning from Ta'if, he was overwhelmed with sorrow at the response he received from the leaders of Ta'if. The people of Ta'if ordered their children to throw stones at Prophet Muhammad to drive him out of the city, causing him to bleed profusely. It was in this state of being wounded, hungry and thirsty, that God sent the Angel of Mountains (*Malikul Jabaal*) to the Prophet. He said that if the Prophet so wished he would cause the two mountains to fall upon the people of Ta'if. The Prophet said, "No." (Ibn Kathir)

According to another tradition, the Prophet Muhammad said that his Lord suggested turning the valley of Mecca into gold for him but he replied, "No, my Lord, but let me have enough to eat and be hungry on alternate days; then when I am hungry I shall make supplication to You and make mention of You, and when I have enough I shall praise and thank You."
(Musnad Ahmad)

From these Hadith, it can be drawn that the feeling of hunger and thirst serve the purpose of inculcating sensitivity within man by making him experience helplessness. This develops piety (*taqwa*) in man. Unless he is sensitive, man cannot seriously deliberate over issues. I read psychology to understand this phenomenon.

In psychology, '*high sensitivity*,' is explained as the ability to process information deeply, to concentrate deeply and be highly conscientious. High sensitivity inculcates curiosity, seriousness and all other high qualities in man.

High sensitivity

Several books have been authored on the topic of high sensitivity. As per my understanding, fasting has been prescribed so that believers undergo the experience of helplessness, develop piety (*taqwa*) and as a result become high on sensitivity.

Such a person is able to realize that he is a creation that is quite different from the rest, possessing faculties of vision, thought and hearing among all others. During the fast, when he experiences helplessness on account of hunger and thirst, man reaches a higher state of sensitivity. In this sensitive state of mind, when man concentrates on understanding the Quran, deeper meanings are realized by him. The author of a book on high sensitivity wrote, '*a person of high sensitivity can grasp a point with greater intensity*.' This statement illustrates the purpose of fasting – to inculcate sensitivity so that man is able to understand the profound meaning of the Quran.

While listening to the Quran yesterday, I underwent a strange experience. The language of the Quran is the same as it was fourteen hundred years ago when it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. In this regard, the Quran is an exceptional book because unlike it, all other books are actually translations. In case of the Quran, however, Angel Gabriel brought the message of God to Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet transferred it to the Companions, who then passed it to *Tabaeen* (Companions of the companions) and so on till it reached us.

Almost fourteen hundred and forty six years have elapsed when Angel Gabriel visited the Prophet Muhammad while he was in Cave *Hira*. He said to the Prophet

Read! In the name of your Lord, who created: created man from a clot. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know. (96)

As I recalled this verse, I felt as if the same words that God instructed Angel Gabriel, that Angel Gabriel passed on to the Prophet Muhammad, that the Prophet transferred to the Companions, *Tabaeen* (Companions of Companions), *Taba tabaieen* (Companions of *Tabaeen*) and succeeding generations were being heard by me! It was a thrilling experience and it seemed as if time and space existed no more and I was listening to the same words that Prophet Muhammad heard from Angel Gabriel!

Taqwa

Let me explain the meaning of *taqwa* through an analogy. A horse with an injured foot walks with extreme care, realizing that the smallest of pebble may be painful. Such sensitivity may be referred to as *taqwa*. In such a state of mind, every word becomes an experience for man and he would be able to learn most from the Quran. For example let us take this verse of the Quran which reads

All Praise is due to God (1:2)

Reflecting on this verse, will make a sensitive believer evaluate if he really praised God or did he indulge in mere lip service.

He would remember the times when he succumbed to ungratefulness and complained; when he harboured negative thoughts for others and did not wish them well. His conscience would make him realize that if he had truly praised his Lord, he would have become a soul devoid of all negative thoughts.

This would turn out to be an overwhelming experience for a believer. Realising that he merely resorted to lip service until then, he would feel the urge to revise his approach and let out a true '*Alhamdulillah*', to celebrate the praise of his creator. In doing so, a new personality would emerge within him who would be full of positive thoughts and gratefulness towards the blessings of his creator.

Let me take another verse of the Quran, according to which

Whatever misfortune befalls you is of your own doing. (42:30)

The above verse expounds that whatever problems befall man are a result of his own doing. A sensitive mind would realize that owing to his unawareness about this principle, he unnecessarily complained about his misfortunes and blamed others for it. The present-day Muslims for example, live in complain against Jews on account of Palestine, against Hindus because of Kashmir and Babri Mosque, and against America because of Iraq. Being sensitive about the Quranic teaching, would make a believer realise that no one else but he alone is responsible for his problems.

The reason why present-day Muslims are devoid of this mindset is because they lack sensitivity. Even during the month of Ramadan, they eat beyond their fills and as such the required sensitivity is never aroused in them. I was once in America and the month of fasting was about to commence. I was asked to address a gathering of people, on Ramadan. During the course of my talk, I said how Muslims overeat during Ramadan, which kills the very aim of fasting. Upon hearing this, several American Muslims who were sitting in the gathering stood up and strongly refuted my claim. Then from among them, a senior Muslim stood up and said that he was elder to all of them and well knew the truth about this statement.

He gave a challenge to those present and said that they should weigh themselves on first day of Ramadan and then weigh on Eid: they would have certainly put on extra weight. All this while, I was thinking about his strange proposition. It had a miraculous effect: no one present, uttered a word after that. This was because they all knew the reality of the elaborate food preparations done during the month of Ramadan.

About Paradise

I was reflecting on the following verse of the Quran

He will admit them into the Garden He has already made known to them. (47:6)

The above verse uses the term *ar rafa* (making it known) and not *akhbara* (informing). Commentators explain it to mean that those who would inhabit paradise have already been informed about it being full of gardens, fruits and palaces etc. But this is not the case. This verse conveys that paradise is for those who in their present lives yearn for it so much that they would start visualizing it. Just like, one would start visualizing something that one is very attached to, for instance one's children.

In other words, only those who while spending their life in this world, become so desirous of paradise that they start visualizing and catching glimpses of it, will be the ones who would inhabit it in afterlife.

Sense of pleasure

God created man and instilled in him a keen sense of pleasure. He is full of desires and yearns for their fulfillment but these desires do not get fulfilled and he dies. This is the case of everyone, be it a king or a pauper. While thinking about this, I remembered the following verse of the Quran

He has given you all that you asked of Him. (14:34)

Therein you shall have all that your souls desire, and therein you shall have all that you ask for (41:31)

The first verse means that God instituted a complete life support system on Earth, necessary to fulfill the survival needs of man. However, there exists no desire support system in this world and as such man's desires remain unfulfilled. My mind started thinking that why then has God made man a pleasure-seeking animal and instilled within him, a sea of desires? In this context, I recalled another verse of the Quran

And We created pairs of all things so that you might reflect. (51:49)

According to this verse, everything has been created in pairs (like male has a female). I realized that the pair of man's desires would be fulfillment, which would come to pass in paradise. In other words, the pair of man's desires is paradise. While man was created with desires in his heart, the desire support system exists only in paradise. This was done so that man would realize, become desirous of paradise and strive to develop a paradisiacal personality.

Such facets of the Quran become clear only when man is able to reflect and ponder over its verses in a state of high sensitivity.

Best of narratives

Chapter Yusuf is an exceptional chapter in the Quran where the events in the life of a single Prophet have been described in detail. This is no other chapter quite like this. It has been referred to in the Quran as

We recount to you the best of narratives (12:3)

I started thinking why the story of Prophet Yusuf has been given such importance in the Quran and learnt a profound lesson. Even those who have written voluminous books on Prophet Yusuf (like '*Yusuf Zulekha*' in Persian, which recounts several other incidents besides what is in the Quran) have also not been able to decipher this lesson.

Prophet Yusuf was born in Syria and owing to a series of occurrences, reached Egypt. The then Egyptian King, though a non-believer, possessed several good qualities. He proposed that Prophet Yusuf assume the charge (under his sovereignty) for the agricultural ministry.

This was a big opportunity since agriculture was the biggest and most important department of the administration. Prophet Yusuf accepted the offer, and it opened dawah opportunities for him on a big scale.

The lesson that God wanted to impart is that there would be many occasions when the rule of the land would be with another party. Even during such times, opportunities would exist in the non political field.

A believer must focus on availing these opportunities without confronting the ruler. Ironically, the present-day Muslims are involved in violence everywhere. At some places, they are involved in armed struggle against the ruler and at other places, they have taken up passive struggle (by means of rebellious and fiery speeches and statements). Even though the Quran had established a clear example by way of Prophet Yusuf's narrative, no one could take the required lesson from it.

We live in the age of democracy today, where government has been reduced to the level of administration. All other departments – education, industry, dawah work – have been separated from administration. It no longer matters whether the ruler is just or not. For example, outside of the administration, there exist independent educational or industrial empires. Likewise, if you want to establish dawah empire in the non-political field in a country, there is no restriction.

Muslim media often reports of the industrial and media empires established by Jews in the United States of America. But they ignore a vital aspect in this report. They fail to learn the lesson that Jews established these empires without confronting with the American administration. In other words, the world of opportunities is so vast that it has become possible to gain complete control of channels like industry and media if only administration is not confronted with. This was not possible in times of kingship, unless the king was humble and considerate. In other words, the possibility which opened up for Prophet Yusuf because of good behavior of the king has opened up today on account of the kind of era we live in.

Unfortunately, the present-day Muslims have failed to learn their lesson and continue to confront. This is because they have failed to understand the deeper meaning of the Quran. Reading the Quran in Ramadan does not mean that it has to be recited and finished. As I child, I used to think the same but later, when I studied more, I realized that the matter is not to finish but to save yourself from distraction and study the Quran with a single focused mind to understand its deeper meaning.

Ramadan comes every year but Muslims waste a lot of time in ensuring elaborate food preparations. I would like to recount an experience that a person shared with me a few days back. He lives in a Muslim neighborhood and was curious to see the sudden surge in number of Muslims in the marketplace. He enquired from a Muslim if there was a specific reason for it. The Muslim told him that it was so because anything done during the month of Ramadan is free from being accounted for. I was shocked to hear this! What the Muslim said was exactly opposite to the kind of behavior that is sought during Ramadan.

In another instance, I came to know of a person who goes to Mecca, Medina to spend the month of Ramadan, every year. When asked what takes him there each year, he replied that he does not have to spend a penny as there are elaborate food arrangements and he can restfully go and spend Ramadan at Mecca-Medina. Muslims fail to understand that by indulging in overeating during Ramadan, they defeat the purpose of fasting as they are not able to develop sensitivity. The purpose of Ramadan is to arouse in a believer reflection so that he can evaluate life spent until then and plan for the life to come. Such thinking is an outcome of the spirit of *taqwa*, which does not develop in an overindulging being.

Learning from the Quran

I used to often think why the Quran is not convened as per its order of revelation. The verses revealed in Medina (later part of Prophethood) are arranged before the verses revealed in Mecca (early part of Prophethood). I once had a visitor who recommended that I should take up the task of arranging the verses in the Quran as per the order of revelation. I told him that such versions of the Quran had already been published and doing so was a senseless act.

According to Hadith traditions, it is established the present order of the Quran is not an accident. It was Angel Gabriel who passed on this order of verses to Prophet Muhammad. To understand better, I started focusing on facts of the situation at the time of revelation.

When the revelation of Quran began, Mecca and entire Arabia was under the influence of polytheism. It was therefore, a case of undertaking a journey from non-belief (or *shirk*) to belief (or *imaan*), which was the essence of Meccan verses. That is, non believers were addressed and believers emerged from among them.

God knew that this order would change in time to come and Muslims would degenerate in the later era. The need of that hour would be to undertake a journey with a degenerated community to make them a regenerated community - one that would have a living faith and for whom Islam would be a matter of rediscovery. In Medina, at that time, Jews were in the position of being a degenerated community (much similar to the present-day Muslims) so the verses revealed in Medina condemn their behavior and patterns.

The order of convening the Quran was to cater to the practical aspect of the world as it would shape in time to come, where Muslims would become a degenerated lot and will be required to undertake the journey from degeneration to re-discovery. But Muslims could not understand the message conveyed by the order of the Quran. Instead of embarking on this journey of re-discovery, Muslims wrongly assumed that they were prepared minds and cast their efforts into futile endeavours.

Conclusion

The month of Ramadan requires a believer to read and reflect upon the Quran. According to a Hadith

Miracles of the Quran would not be over (Mishkat)

Each time I read the Quran, I discover a new aspect but this is possible only when a prepared mind reads the Quran. It is therefore extremely important that Quran is read carefully and deliberated upon to understand its message.

This has to be done throughout Ramadan but the last 10 days is what seeks the maximum concentration in the Quran. The Prophet Muhammad divided the month of fasting into three parts. He called the first ten days ‘blessings’, the next ten days ‘forgiveness’ and the last ten days ‘freedom from Hellfire’. The Prophet also said, ‘The best days of this world are the last ten days of Ramadan.’ Therefore, during the last ten days the Prophet’s family would join him in what they called, ‘the tightening of his belt’ – in its figurative sense – indicating total seriousness of devotion.

Towards the end, I would also like to explain the concept of over-religiosity. There are some people who pay no heed to religion and there are others who follow it in an extreme manner. Both approaches are not helpful. Let me recount an incident from the life of the companions of the Prophet. A group of companions had to undertake a travel during the month of Ramadan. As per the Quran, those who are required to undertake a travel during the month of Ramadan can skip fasts then and observe them later. All except one companion in the said group decided to observe the fast even during the travel. Travelling in those days was an arduous task as the journey used to be on camels and at the time of halting a lot of preparation was required to be undertaken – from clearing the ground, to camping, taking care of animals etc. Those who had not observed the fast, did all the work with energy – ground work, filling water, feeding camels - whereas the one who had observed the fast, lay energy less and could not contribute in any capacity. When the Prophet saw this, he said

Ye koi neki nahin hai ki aap Ramadan mein safar kar rahein hain aur roza rakh len

[It is not a part of piety to fast while traveling.] (Mishkat)

Jinhone roza nahin rakha unka ajr badh gaya

[Those who did not fast have done good] (Mishkat)

Over-religiosity is not prescribed in Islam. However, we find that the present-day Muslims engage in taking precautions (*aehtiyaat*) fervently. For example, it is a common practice among Muslims to stop eating a little before the actual time for *Sehri* (meal consumed early in the morning before the fast begins) and break the fast a little later than the actual time for

Iftaar (the meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan). This is an act of being over-religious and is not prescribed in Islam.

According to a Hadith

Us waqt tak log khair par rahenge jab tak who Iftaar mein jaldi karte rahenge

[The religion would be victorious so long as believers hasten in doing the Iftaar] (Bukhari)

In the above Hadith, to hasten does not indicate breaking the fast before time. It is said to discourage being extra cautious after the prescribed time. It is implied that the community will be saved so long as they discourage over-religiosity (*ghulu*).

I am reminded of another instance from the life of companions of the Prophet. While performing his ablutions, a companion used to put a lot of water in the inside of his eye. As a result, he lost his eyesight. Islam does not subscribe to such extremist behavior.

According to a Hadith, some companions once visited Prophet's home to enquire about his practice of the faith. Hazrat Ayesha told them about Prophet's practice; it is said that the companions felt what the Prophet did was 'less'. They justified it by saying that even the less is justified in his case because he is a Prophet but since they were commoners, they must do much more. Upon his return when the Prophet got to know about this, he strongly disapproved their conclusion. He gathered people in the mosque and told them that he prays at night and sleeps as well; during the year (remaining 11 months besides Ramadan), he observes fasts and does not observe them as well. This he said was his *sunnat* (practice) and whoever did not follow this, was not one of them.

It must therefore be understood that while the entire month of Ramadan is ordained for fasting, over-religiosity in fasting is not Islamic. The real task is not to fast throughout the year but to prepare oneself for doing dawah work. One who observes a fast every single day (in the remainder eleven months besides Ramadan) and keeps praying will not be able to do dawah work. The price of such extremism is loss of opportunity to do dawah work.

The month of Ramadan is for a believer to re-assess, introspect and correct himself. Reading each verse of the Quran with this mindset makes it a source of learning and guidance. The purpose of studying the Quran is to understand and apply it in our lives.

A verse about the Quran reads that it is a

Criterion by which to distinguish right from wrong (2:185)

Quran is read to understand this criterion against which we can evaluate ourselves and judge against any shortfall. This must be undertaken throughout the year and especially during Ramadan.

I pray that God gives us the wisdom to evaluate our lives in the light of Quranic teachings and to plan the future course of action!