

## **Ramzaan: the month of fasting**

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## Introduction

From August 2, the month of fasting, Ramzaan will commence in India. Ramzaan is the ninth month of Hijri calendar and during this month, it is obligatory upon believers to observe fast from morning dawn to evening twilight. The Arabic word for fasting is “Sawm” meaning “abstinence.” The act of abstaining of restraining oneself is not a simple thing. It signifies clearing any obstruction in the path of one’s intellectual development. Let me explain this further.

Man is born with the potential to attain salvation. But because he possesses freedom in this world, man becomes conditioned. Fasting seeks to remove this layer of conditioning from the mind so that reality unfolds before man. Water for example, being liquid by nature, is ready to pour out but if one fixes a lid, it will not. Similarly, the truth in nature is ready to unfold itself if our mind is able to de-condition itself. Fasting in actual fact, seeks to remove these obstructions in our mind so that nature is able to manifest itself.

The act of abstaining from food and water is symbolic. In reality, a believer must abstain from everything that is an obstruction in the way of unfolding of his nature. According to a Hadith

**He who does not quit telling falsehood and acting upon it, has not performed the fast.**

*[Jo jhoot bolna aur jhoot par amal karna naa chore uska roza roza nahin, Al Bukhari]*

There are two broad classifications here - one is the *truthful character* which forms a strong personality and another is the *untruthful character*, which builds a weak personality. All truthful deeds are a manifestation of reality. When one symbolically abstains from food and water, one vows to abstain from everything which does not allow one’s nature to unfold. For example, if you are dishonest and twist facts, practice hypocrisy, then you are a weak personality. Such a person will not receive divine inspiration, which is what allows the nature to unfold.

## **Pre-fasting**

According to a Hadith tradition

**The Prophet used to prepare himself for the month of Shabaan (month preceding Ramzaan)**

*[Jab shabaan ka mahina aata tha tab Prophet uske liye kamar kas lete the, Al Bukhari]*

This Hadith tradition relates to a very important principle. It implies that something precedes everything. The month of Shabaan in this case becomes what can be referred to as “*Pre-sawm*.” This is because if the month of Ramzaan were to come as a surprise, then it would have caught one unawares, which would lead to loss of utilising the opportunity to think on right lines and work towards unfolding the realities in nature.

## **Universal importance of Fasting**

According to the Quran

**Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you just as it was prescribed for those before you.[2:183]**

It is inferred from the above verse that fasting must be a very important exercise or else it would not have been made obligatory on all mankind. As I thought more about it, I realised that in leading our daily lives, our lifestyle becomes: “*Eat, Drink and be Merry*.”

During fasting, man is required to abstain from such a lifestyle so that he is able to contemplate that life is beyond eating, drinking and being merry. There is something else in life which ought to become our goal – *to lead a purposeful life, to establish contact with God, to uncover truths of life and to adopt spiritual values*. Abstinence from food and water creates such compulsion that one is forced to think about what else is sought from his existence. Food and water are physical needs of man without which he cannot survive. But unfortunately man’s entire life is spent only on catering to his physical needs. In other words, he continues to feed his physical self without paying any heed to the needs of his intellectual self.

In a year, when man spends eleven months thinking about catering to his physical self, it is this one month of obligatory fasting that makes him think about the requirements of his spiritual self. It is therefore critical to realise that fasting is not ritualistic. There lies a great wisdom in it which has to be understood.

### **Commencement of the month of fasting**

Ruh-hat-e-hilal (or moon sighting) on the last evening of the month of Shabaan, marks the commencement of Ramzaan. According to a Hadith

#### **Believers must see the moon and observe their fast**

In such a case, question arises as to whether seeing the moon is mandatory or can fasting be carried out per the information obtained from the observatory. Given the advances of modern science which have led to accurate calculations and predictions, it is acceptable to fast basis the information received from observatory.

However, seeing the moon has its own importance. When man looks up, he is thrilled to find that God has started a new month for him. Man is a sensate being and such occurrences cater to his sense of feeling. According to a Hadith tradition, when the Prophet saw the new moon, he prayed

#### **May God make this month, a month of peace and spiritual upliftment [Mishkat]**

Such emotions can arise only when one undergoes a sensory experience and sighting of moon becomes one such experience. It arouses spiritual turbulence within those who think and contemplate. Ruh-hat-e-hilal (to view the moon) therefore is an experience. But doing so is not mandatory. The news from observatory is equally valid. This is inferred from the following verse of the Quran, according to which

#### **Whoever of you is present in that month, let him fast [2:185]**

Keeping both the Hadith tradition and Quranic verse in mind, it can be inferred that fasting either by direct viewing of the moon or acting on the news from observatory – is equally valid.

### **Reality of fasting**

The purpose of fasting is to teach man how to lead life in a disciplined way. Let me explain this through an analogy. There are two animals – one is tethered and the other is left free. While the tethered animal will only move within limits defined by its master, the untied animal will wander anywhere. This has been explained in a Hadith tradition as recorded below

**A believer is like a tethered horse. He only goes as far as the tether allows. [Muslim]**

The month of fasting serves the purpose of reminding man to lead his life in a controlled way and in effect learning to control his longings and desires.

### **Fasting is to inculcate taqwa**

According to the Quran

**Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you so that you may guard yourselves against evil [2:183]**

Taqwa means piety or to save oneself. In other words, it is the spirit of saving oneself from unislamic indulgences and limiting oneself to Islamic practices. While fasting, the believer abstains from food and water during day time and eats at night. This act symbolises the limit created by God, which must not be crossed by the believer. In other words, a believer must speak truth and not adopt falsehood, he must work peacefully and not adopt violent means, he must seek reconciliation not warfare and harbour well wishing and not hatred for entire mankind. *Taqwa* therefore is an act of doing one thing and abstaining from another.

### **Spirit of Fasting**

As far as physical aspect of fasting is concerned, it is practised across and all adhere to the principle of eating during the night and abstaining from food and water during daytime. However, the spirit of fasting is found lacking in the present-day Muslims. The conduct of a believer who is fasting should be such that he does not harbour hatred, practice violence or wish ill for fellow human beings.

Yesterday, I met two Muslims who were of the opinion that if someone does something against us, we are bound to hate them. Such a thinking is absolutely opposite to what the Prophet taught. I told them a Hadith

**Do not do what others do to you**

*[Jo dusra kuch kar raha hai, tum bhi wohi mat karo, Tirmidhi]*

The other Hadith can be understood by realising that one is the form of fasting and the other is its spirit. Just like a believer is required to abstain from eating during the day and eat only at night, likewise in his social conduct, he must leave immoral and adopt moral practices.

According to a Hadith tradition, when the Prophet heard two companions who had fasted, were backbiting, he said

**They fasted legitimately but broke their fast illegitimately**

*[In hone jayaz cheez se roza rakha, aur najayaz cheez se iftaar kar liya, Tirmidhi]*

Backbiting is the act of expressing ill-opinion for another person or to give adverse remarks about him without giving any argument or proof. The companions referred to in the Hadith above, had abstained from food and water but were continuing to backbite. In other words, while they were following the form of fasting, they did not live by its spirit.

### **Month of patience**

According to a verse in the Quran

**Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you so that you may guard yourselves against evil [2:183]**

**He [God] desires you to fast the whole month.....so that you may be grateful to Him [2:185]**

According to Hadith tradition,

**Fasting is the month of patience [Mishkat]**

As I thought about the Quranic verses and the Hadith tradition, I realised an important lesson. In referring to Ramzaan as the month of patience, the Prophet had discovered something which was not told in the Quran. Patience is a unique virtue. It allows one to maintain equanimity despite provocative situations.

I will give you a recent example. According to a report in the Times of India, dated July 30, 2011, a South African cricketer, Wayne Parnell recently embraced Islam. This news triggered my thinking process. Because of the violence and extremism perpetrated by the present-day Muslims, media on a regular basis, features news items related to Islam and violence. I wondered why despite such negative propaganda, people are continuing to adopt Islam? Thinking on these lines, made me realise the importance of patience. Muslims have not been able to understand this because they do not practice patience; instead they get provoked by anyone who provokes them. They do not ignore minor acts and as such bigger realities do not unfold before them. Ironically, the present-day Muslims live in hatred and do not know how to think in an unbiased and objective manner.

This, I understood meant that the religion of God is nature's religion. For example, water is a part of nature. If you start doing propaganda against water, people will not quit drinking it. Similarly, despite so much propaganda done in the name of God – from atheism to existentialism and raising of slogans such as “God is a hoax of history” or “opium of mind,” the idea of God could not be separated from the mind of man. In fact, a recent research concluded that it appears that the idea of God instinctively exists in the human brain. Likewise, because the religion of God is interwoven in his nature, man is bound to accept it.

The made me understand how disadvantageous it is to be impatient. Doing so implies that one fails to ignore. In other words, one takes things at their face value and is not able to look at them deeply and insightfully. The month of fasting is to train man to develop his thinking on patient and insightful lines.

### **Month of contemplation**

I discovered another principle from the Hadith mentioned above. I inferred that while fundamental concepts have been told in the Quran, man is free to think beyond and infer facts. For example, as I continued to deliberate over the importance of fasting, I realised that fasting is also a month of contemplation.

I recollected the following Hadith here

**The reward for every good act of a believer is from ten to seven hundred times except of fasting; the reward for it is unlimited [Mishkat]**

*[Insaan ka har amal 10 guna se 700 guna badhta hai, siwaye roze ke jiska ajar behisaab hai]*

The Quran says the same about patience. According to the verse

**Those who persevere patiently will be requited without measure[39:10]**

I combined the above Hadith tradition and Quranic verse and learnt a very important principle. I understood that any act done in the best intention, for the sake of God alone, will commensurate to unlimited reward. The same applies to contemplation. I used to think how man, studying from limited resources can attain unlimited knowledge. Realising this principle, I understood that knowledge together with intent will allow man to identify and recognise newer aspects as he would receive inspiration from God. For instance, if one reads a 100-page book, it does not restrict one's learning to those 100-pages. One can derive countless interpretations through divine inspiration. In other words, one is reading (*mutaala*) and the other is outcome of reading (*hasil-e-mutaala*).

One may study all the books but it will still be limited in the backdrop of the universal facts that abound us. But if man receives divine inspiration, he will be able to identify multiple facts even from his limited study because God-given inspiration will become a source of unveiling unlimited realities. In other words, man will study limited but will develop unlimited wisdom and power of analysis.



The month of fasting is therefore, a month of *taqwa*, of adopting a cautious lifestyle. According to a tradition, Hazrat Umar once asked a companion about *taqwa*? The companion asked Umar, “Have you ever crossed a path which has thorny bushes on both sides?” When Umar replied affirmatively, the Companion questioned him on what he did then. Umar replied, “I rolled my clothes close to my body and passed through cautiously.” The companion responded, “This is *taqwa*!”

The above Hadith explains that like man cautiously crosses a path with thorny bushes, he should remember that the world he lives in is full of distractions – be it his desires, his family commitments, biased ideas and other emotions. *Taqwa* or piety teaches man to live life while abstaining from these distractions just like during fasting despite having all the provisions; he abstains from food and water. This teaches man to apply caution so that he is able to convert the potential opportunities into actual without wasting time and energy.

### **How to inculcate thankfulness?**

According to a Hadith tradition, when the Prophet broke his fast and drank water, he said

**I am thankful to God for having quenched my thirst**

*[Pyaas bujh gay aur ragein tar ho gayein, Mishkat]*

It was because the Prophet was thirsty, that he could thank God such. The emotions of man are governed by the situation he is in. A person, who eats food after long hours of hunger, is bound to let out thanksgiving to God Almighty. Under normal circumstances, if everything is available, very small sentiments of thankfulness may or may not arise. Bigger thanksgiving arises only when man experiences thirst and hunger.

Fasting inculcates patience in man. He practices patience despite hunger and thirst and when such a patient behaviour is invoked, it does not remain limited to a singular aspect of living, it spreads to all aspects of life. Patience is the virtue that saves man from negative reaction.

According to a Hadith,

**Success in intertwined with patience [Musnad Ahmad]**

This Hadith relates to a very practical advice. Even I have observed that if I react emotionally at a provocative statement, my reply is not very powerful. Contrary to this, if I do not react immediately but come back after due thought, am able to respond much more effectively. This principle is applicable in all walks of life. Provocation does not lead to effective response; it only makes the matters worse.

**Aetakaaf [Seclusion]**

This is practised in the final days of fasting so that a believer is able to contemplate in a distraction-free environment. Aetakaf is not a mysterious practice; it is the act of going into seclusion to think about religion and God in a focussed way. Normally, our surroundings are so full of distraction that we are not able to concentrate. Spending time in isolation is the minimum requirement to detach oneself from worldliness and contemplate about realities of life. Such a person is able to think and take the right course for himself. In the words of Hadith tradition

**One who goes into seclusion saves himself from committing sins**

*[Mautakif admi gunahon se apne ko bachata hai, Mishkat]*

**Laila tul Qadr [Night of Destiny]**

According to the Quran,

**It is all peace till the break of dawn [97:5]**

Two things are most important in Islam – monotheism and peace. The ideology of Islam is based on monotheism and its methodology is based on peace. All ideological aspects of Islam are derived – directly or indirectly from monotheism just as all its methodological aspects are derived from peace. So, in ideology, we have to become monotheistic and in practice have to become peace-loving.

May God guide us to the right path!

**Question – Answers**

*Q1: What is remedy to “magic” in Islam? Is it possible to find out who is doing this mischief on us?*

A: People exaggerate the concept of “magic”. It is important to understand that “magic” can never overpower man. There is nothing in this world, which without the will of God may overpower man. People are superstitious and that is why they come under the influence of such practices. Of importance is the person upon whom the “magic” is being performed. If he is a strong thinker, nothing may affect or harm him. Contrarily, those who are superstitious and live in confusion and unclear thinking become vulnerable and are thus affected by it. It is therefore important that man is able to extract himself out of superstition completely. Such occurrences do not take place with the scientific community but occur amongst people who are superstitious.

*Q2: Where in Quran is it mentioned that Eve was created from the ribs of Adam?*

A: This is not written in the Quran. According to Quran, the creation of man and woman has been done with the same substance.

*Q3: God said, “Fasting is for me.” When every act of worship is for Him, why has He said so about fasting only?*

A: It is not only a case of fasting. While fasting here is a point of reference, it can be generalised to any act that may be discharged for the sake of God alone. Doing so will entitle one to unlimited reward. The key aspect here is not fasting but an act performed “for God”.

*Q4: A person who is associated with an Islamic organisation said that the literature of Jamaat-e-Islami is seen as a literature that promotes terrorism and the only literature that promotes Dawah-work is the one published by Al-Risala. Please comment.*

A: All literature published in the Muslim world seeks to establish superiority of Islam as a religion. The concept of superiority leads to extremism and violence and may eventually culminate in the form of suicide bombing. It is more like a chain reaction.

This is therefore not about a particular association but about all Muslim literature except for our publications. This is because Muslims are obsessed with the ideology of superiority of their religion. Our literature only says that Islam is a preserved religion. All religions of the world were neither superior nor inferior; Islam therefore is not superior but only a historically preserved religion.

*Q5: During the month of fasting, there is emphasis on recitation of Quran with no emphasis on understanding. Please comment.*

A: This is not the right practice. According to the Quran

**Quran has been revealed so that people contemplate on its verses.**

The concept of *Khatam-e-Quran* is not in Quran or Hadith. According to a tradition, when someone told Hazrat Ayesha that people “read” Quran, she said that they read but did not read the Quran. In other words, it is not reading alone but reading and understanding the Quran, which is sought from a believer.

*Q6: You said, even by limited reading we can guide ourselves to wisdom. Please elaborate.*

A: Knowledge is limited so even if one reads a lot, it will be limited. For example, Russell studied for 80 years but his books are devoid of many things. However much one may study, one’s knowledge will remain limited. So, reaching unlimited knowledge is impossible without divine inspiration. Someone said to Christ, “*This is beyond man’s capacity.*” Christ replied, “*It is beyond the capacity of man but not beyond the capacity of God.*”

*Q7: What is the age to start fasting? People celebrate it in a big way these days.*

A: Fasting is obligatory for adults but it is a good practice to make the kids fast so that they get in the practice of doing so. Celebration however, is entirely Unislamic.

*Q8: How can I identify if I have a weak personality and make it strong?*

A: In order to identify whether a person has a strong or a weak personality, a person's response to his mistake should be adjudged. If he admits his mistake and confesses that he was wrong, he is a strong personality. Contrarily, if he twists the conversation and tries to patch his mistake up, he is a weak personality. This differentiation brought through from this response is a crucial measure.

*Q9: How can we save ourselves from confusion?*

A: Confusion persists because one harbours biased ideas for one's own people and community. Because of such a mindset, he is not able to admit their mistake even if in reality they are to blame. It is this contradiction which leads to confused thinking. It must be understood that reality is outside of us and if we do not agree with it merely because in some ways it clashes with our beliefs and ideas, we start living in contradiction, which leads to confusion.

*Q10: If someone does wrong to us and we desire to change the behaviour, what should we do? For example, if someone is angry and we talk more, we may make him angrier?*

A: Such situations can be dealt with by following this principle – evaluate basis the result. It is result that is the criterion. If someone is angry and you fight and make him angrier, it is a result-less endeavour. If outcome may be positive, one can try to verbally course correct but anything which may yield a negative result should be completely refrained from.

*Q11: Why do all Muslims celebrate Eid on the same day?*

A: This is not possible because we live in different time-zones. For instance, right now it is day time in India and night in America. This is not a matter of religion but nature.

*Q12: If one is tired of exercising patience for many years without any result, what should one do?*

A: There is no limit to exercising patience – it must be continued. One should forget the past occurrences; there is no need of carrying it in the mind. It is not a question of patience, but of forgetting. I practise this myself – I don't carry it beyond a day, just forget and start afresh.

*Q13: Is being indifferent to things, a positive quality or not?*

A: The important point to note here is the situation which is being referred to because indifference is a relative term. If there is a wrong happening and you have the capacity of rectifying it by speaking, you must do so. But at times, you have to become indifferent. It is therefore situation driven.

*Q14: What has made people fearless of God?*

A: I think the basic reason for man becoming fearless of God is the apparent freedom possessed by him. The man who wrote: “god is dead” was not capture by God and punished. In the present world, man is free to do what he likes. Even in a society, if people do not have the fear of punishment, they may do anything and everything. I met a Singaporean Indian who said that India has such a high crime rate whereas there is no crime in Singapore. When I asked why, he told me that it is because Singapore is very strict. There are strong forms of punishment like mechanical canning, the fear of which serves as a deterrent. As per God’s Plan, man has freedom in this world. He will face punishment in the world hereafter. People therefore must be made to realise that they will be accountable for all their deeds.

*Q15: Why do people stress on form and forget the spirit of worship?*

A: The chief reason for the stress on form rather than spirit is the atmosphere prevalent in mosques and within the community. Most focus on rectifying mistakes committed while worshipping. This approach originated from Fiqh literature and unfortunately all organisations at present are striving to correct the form. All debates in jurisprudence pertain to form alone.

It is only the CPS mission which stresses upon spirit. Unless a drastic turnaround happens, no change can be brought about in this form of thinking. People must understand that Quran does not lay out a form for any act of worship; its focus is spirit. While some forms have come from Hadith traditions, all others are a product of jurisprudence.

According to a Hadith,

**Praying without spirit is not sought by God**

*[Without khushu, namaz is not namaz]*

Let me take another example. Present-day Muslims consider praying at mosque Nabvi in Medina to be much rewarding. However, the following Hadith is clearly contrary to all such beliefs. According to a tradition, a person came to mosque Nabvi and offered his prayer. His prayer perhaps lacked spirit and was merely discharging of a form. When he came to the Prophet, he asked that man to pray again as he did not discharge a spirited act of worship.

This highlights the great responsibility that rests with the present-day Muslim clerics and teachers because they restrict their teaching to only form-based religion. Unless the importance of spirit is inculcated from the starting (*madrassa*), it will not percolate in the society.

I recall here a comment that I received from a reader once. He said to me that my books only talked philosophy and that there were no discussion pertaining to the form based religion. I was shocked to hear that the mind of the present-day Muslims had degenerated to the extent that they considered spirit to be a philosophical concept.

*Q16: What can make dawah work effective?*

A: Dawah work can be effective only if you are a well-wisher of the other person. If you really wish well for the other person, it will make you choose the most suitable course of action. There can be no dawah work without well wishing; a dayee has to be madu-friendly. Just like a mother loves her child and no one needs to tell her what to do, her love tells her what to do. The real thing is that the dayee should have real well-wishing for madu and no one needs to tell him then what course to adopt.