

Fasting: Zakat of the Body

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Imam Ali (AS):

"For everything that you own there is Zakat, and Zakat of your body is fasting." . (Nahjul-Balagha, Saying 135)

The Holy Month of Ramadan is received with great religious fervor in the Islamic world. Religious and social traditions during Ramadan have remained unchanged, linking Muslims of today with their ancestors.

The date of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hejira, vary due to the lunar calendar, falling approximately 11 days earlier each year. The first sighting of the crescent moon announces the beginning of the fast.

When the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) first left Mecca for Medina, he fasted for three days. Subsequently a revelation from God established the obligation to fast a certain number of days, and thus this determined the month of Ramadan. "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint." "... whoever of you is present in the month (of Ramadan) he shall fast therein ..." (Chapter 2, Verse 183 and 185).

The fasting requires total abstinence from food, drink and tobacco, and is one of the five pillars of Islam. Every Muslim must fast from dawn to dusk. Exemption are made for certain people, for example the sick, those on long journeys and nursing and pregnant women, who shall fast the number of days missed at a later date. The elderly and children below the age of puberty are exempted, although many families encourage their children at the age of seven or eight to fast for a few hours each day to train them in the discipline.

Ramadan is not only a month of "moral abstinence," but it also has the social virtue of creating new bonds of understanding between different classes of people. The fast practiced by the rich and the poor alike reminds the more fortunate of the pangs of hunger that the poor suffer.

Fasting, charity, patience and compassion.

Islam stresses equality; the poor and the rich, men and women are equal as devotees in the sight of God. God has chosen the month of Ramadan to be the opportunity for Muslims to seek forgiveness for their past sins. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said that "... whoever fasts during the month of Ramadan with sincere faith and hoping only reward from God Almighty will have his past sins forgiven."

The tenth day of Ramadan commemorates the death of the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) first wife, Khadija (SA); the seventeenth day marks the decisive victory of the Muslims over the unbelievers at Badr in AH 2 (Al-Hejira Calendar, or AD 624); and the nineteenth is the day of the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) conquest of Mecca in AH 8.

On one of the last ten days of Ramadan (on an odd numbered day) is Lailat Al-Qadr, the "Night of Grandeur." At this time, the prayers of the sincere Muslims are certain to be answered. Lailat Al-Qadr, the very heart of Islam, is a very blessed night when the angels descend and, "Peace it is, till the rising of the dawn." (Sura XCVII) According to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad used to spend the last ten days of the month in the mosque at Medina. The Qur'an, the final revelation of God, was revealed on Lailat-Al-Qader. "O people, a blessed month is drawing near with one night better than 1,000 months." (97:3)

During Ramadan, apart from obligatory prayers, Muslims are encouraged to do voluntary prayers, to recite and understand the entire Qur'an, to do charity and, if able, to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and retire to the mosque for spiritual contemplation during the last ten days of the month.

The holy month of Ramadan enjoys a special importance in the Islamic calendar. As the Holy Prophet (SAW) said: "It is Allah's Own month." It is the chief of all months and the most glorious one. As we already know, 'Fasting' is one of the important pillars of Islam and it is the very month of Ramadan during which fasting has been made obligatory for all adults and sane Muslims. By fasting during Ramadan, a Muslim besides discharging an obligation imposed upon him by Allah, becomes entitled to great reward in the Hereafter. On the other hand, any lapse in the matter amounts to a great sin.

Fasting is an article of worship, the knowledge about the performance or otherwise whereof rests only with Allah and the person concerned. Hence, it is Allah alone who will reward that person for it, on the Day of Judgment.

The blessings of Ramadan are not limited to fasting alone, because the performance of all sorts of worship and good deeds during this month is also a source of great Divine favor. The revelation of the Holy Qur'an commenced during this very month and it is therefore the duty of every Muslim to read and try to understand the meaning of the Holy Qur'an and thereby gain an insight into the Divine secrets enshrined therein. It brings peace and illumination to the mind and imparts purity to the soul.

Ramadan is the month of fasting, intensive prayer, sacrifice and Divine worship. Throughout this month, a devout Muslim fasts during the day in the true sense of the word, that is, he not only denies himself food and water, but also exercises strict control over his tongue, eyes, ears,

thoughts and deeds and does everything possible to seek the pleasure of Allah, as explained by the Holy Prophet (SAW).

Devout supplications to Allah and repentance of one's sins during Ramadan are the sources of Divine blessings and mercy. Some nights, among the last ten nights of Ramadan, are called the 'Nights of Glory' (Layali al-Qadr). Muslims keep awake during these nights and offer special prayers. Even among these nights, the 23rd enjoys excellence over all the others. It is accompanied by great blessings, and he usually grants the supplications made to Allah during this night.

Fasting is abstention and elevation

It is because the fast has a higher degree than all other acts of worship that it is called "fast" (sawm). Allah elevated it by denying that it is like any other act of worship. We will try to list as concisely as possible, the various benefits the fasts would confer upon Muslims.

1. The most important consideration in undertaking a fast, as in any act of devotion, is to seek nearness to God, and seek His pleasure and Forgiveness. This itself generates a spirit of piety in man.
2. Creating the conditions of hunger and thirst for oneself, simply in obedience to the Divine order, measures the faith of man in God and helps strengthen it by putting it to a severe test.
3. Fasting enhances through creation of artificial non-availability, the value of the bounties of God which man often takes for granted. This inculcates in man a spirit of gratitude and consequent devotion to God. Nothing else can bring home to a man the worth of God's bounties than a glass of water and a square meal after a day long fast. This also reminds man that the real joy in enjoying God's bounties lies in moderation and restraint and not in over indulging.
4. Fasting makes us deeply conscious of the pangs of hunger and discomfort suffered by the less fortunate among our brethren. They have to put up with difficult conditions all through their lives. It thus kindles in man a spirit of sacrifice leading to change towards his suffering brethren.
5. Fasting gives man an unfailing training in endurance, a spirit of acceptance. This could well prepare him to put up with the unchangeable situations in life in the same spirit of resignation as cultivated during the fasts.
6. Fasting develops a spirit of patience in man, with the realization that the days of fasting, though seemingly unending, do have a successful and happy end. Thus is life. All bitter

situations pass, and come to an end.

7. Fasting is meant to conquer anger and develop self-control in man. The vigorous effort required to put up with hunger and thirst can well be extended to conquer other infirmities of human character that lead man into error and sin.

8. Fasting mellows a man and enhances his character, giving a jolt to the human instincts of pride, haughtiness, jealousy and ambition. Fasting softens his character, and clears his heart and mind of many negative emotions.

9. Fasting exposes the weakness of man in the event of his being deprived of two basic bounties of God; food and drink. It infuses into him a spirit of weakness and submission, generating humility and prayer in an otherwise arrogant being.

10. Fasting breathes the spirit of forgiveness in man towards others, as he seeks God's forgiveness through fasts and prayers.

11. Fasting gives lessons in punctuality. Man has to adhere to a strict schedule of time in the observance of the fast.

12. Fasting could affect the economy of the individual as he is less wasteful on food and meals.

13. Fasting demands a rigid sense of discipline, mental, spiritual and physical. This forms characteristics which are an essential ingredient to success in life.

14. Fasting creates spiritual reformation in man, infusing him with a spirit of enthusiasm and zest to change and become a better human being in the eyes of God. This is an excellent opportunity, given to believers each year, to change themselves and consequently their destinies.

15. On the physical side, fasting cleanses the human system of the accumulated impurities of uninterrupted eating throughout the year. It prepares the body to face diseases or conditions of scarcity. The rigid abstinence of a fast regulates man's health, sharpens his intellect and enhances the qualities of his heart.

Fasting is thus, a bounty in itself, encompassing within itself many bounties. It instills a spirit of reformation in man, creating a wide awakening in him to fulfill his duties towards God and man, .and towards himself

(Adapted from an article by Marhum Ahmed Sheriff Dewji, published in the Light Magazine)