Ramadan, a Blessed Month of Compassion and Mercy

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Fasting is a universal custom and is advocated by all religions of the world, with more restrictions in some than in others. The "Siyam'' should not be interpreted as "fasting" lest it may be misunderstood as mere starvation or as an act of self-denial and asceticism, and therefore, a renunciation of the world. For the purpose of this article, let us call it the "Islamic Fast".

Readers are kindly requested to refer to Q. 2:183-185, where the main fruit of fasting is to achieve Taqwa that essentially means self-restraint. "O ye faithful! fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you so that you may guard against evil". This is also translated by some as "…you may learn self-restraint", or "…you may develop Taqwa (God-consciousness)" (Q.2:183).

Thus, the Islamic fast is for those Muslims, who are preparing to become Muminin (true and firm believers in faith). Faith carries much more weight than belief or doctrine. In this verse, Allah gives an open invitation to us as: "Oh ye faithful!" Although multiple benefits accrue, Muslims in general fast because it is Allah's command and not merely for the physical benefits.

Fasting is the most rigorous of all spiritual disciplines imposed on every adult Muslim man and woman. Fasting frees oneself from egoism, replacing it with an indescribable peace within, which makes the person accept differences in humans. The aim of this spiritual exercise is to enable man to achieve proximity to Allah and obtain His pleasure.

In Islam, fasting is obligatory in the lunar month of Ramadan, a lunar month of 29 or 30 days. During this period there is complete abstinence from food, drink, smoke, marital relationship, and any evil thought, word or deed. The advantage of the lunar month, compared to solar, is that fasting takes place by cyclic rotation under different climatic conditions, during the life span of the individual while residing in the same geographical location.

Fasting gives us an opportunity to fine tune the body, to develop qualities of endurance, and to control anger, sensual desires and a malicious tongue. The fasting person should avoid such actions as might arouse passion in him as well as in others, such as casting lustful eyes at a woman. He should also abstain from thinking carnal thoughts and fantasizing pleasures incompatible with the spiritual regimen.

It is a well-known fact that beasts can be brought under control by keeping them occasionally

hungry and then feeding them at planned intervals. Similarly, man can tame the animal within himself and become its master by fasting for one whole month. One of the objectives is to bring unruly passions under control. The man who can rule his desires and makes them work as he likes, has attained true moral excellence.

Allah puts our faith to a severe test for one month, with strict non-indulgence in physical gratifications, during long hours of a day. If we emerge triumphant in this test, more strength develops in us to refrain from other sins. Our brain then also responds by sending recurrent and frequent signals to us to protect ourselves by rejecting evil immediately.

In fact, this exercise trains us to receive warning signals at all times, whether Ramadan or not, so that we should not see evil, hear evil, utter evil or act evil. Besides abstention from food and drink, the fasting of the pious man is to curb unchaste desires, to fast from looking at the provocative, from hearing the mischievous, and from uttering the obscene. A fasting man is also required to avoid slander and from thinking about inflicting injury to others. He should never find himself in a situation which may expose whatever animal qualities in whatever form he possesses.

The effect of fasting on the human personality is dominant and decisive. It enables man to subdue the strongest worldly urges raging within him and brings a harmonious equilibrium between the temporal (the body) and the spiritual (the soul), both coming together for peaceful co-existence.

Fasting is an institution for the improvement of the moral and spiritual character of man. The purpose of the fast is to help develop self-restraint, self-purification, God-consciousness, compassion, spirit of caring and sharing, and the love of Allah and humanity. The objective of fasting is to develop our personality to a high standard of God-consciousness and maintain that standard throughout life, so that on the Day of Judgment before God, we would already be well-off to a good start, to begin our life in Hereafter.

However, for some Muslims, Ramadan is a burst of Islamic activity in a year-long ocean of un-Islamic behavior. As soon as the fasting program is over, some Muslims throw to the wind whatever good and hard-earned qualities they might have gained as a result of that exercise, and sooner or later return to their vicious habits and practices of their pre-Ramadan days, be they of thoughts, words or deeds.

We ought to remind ourselves that we must not allow the weeds in our garden to stifle the flowers and the fruits. Islam is neither a Sunday religion nor a Ramadan only religion. Ramadan is not meant to be a 30-day fast ending on 'Id with a feast to beat all feasts.

Some of the greatest achievements in Islam were made during Ramadan, e.g. the Battle of

Badr. If the newly converted Muslims had gorged themselves after Iftar parties at nights and had slept in the day, they could not have become victorious at the Battle of Badr, and we, even now, might still have been pagans.

From a moral point of view, during fasting, one becomes more sympathetic and tolerant towards those in needy circumstances. It brings about a better realization of human understanding. In this world of today, with a population explosion, where two-thirds of the world goes to sleep on an empty stomach, the quicker this realization takes place, the sooner the problems would be appreciated and solved. It is only during such time as Ramadan that one can reflect and make an inventory of the importance of the basic moral values affecting oneself and the community.

We should remember that Allah says that fasting has been prescribed for you. It is a divine prescription from Allah Who is the Greatest Physician. It is different from a medical doctor's prescription and hence this prescription should be duly respected and carried out in full. It is also a pre-scription i.e. it was also prescribed for religious communities before the advent of Islam. If a person fasts for temporal motives only e.g. slimming according to a doctor's prescription, he will be far from performing his religious duty or achieving nearness to Allah or obtaining His pleasure. In order to subjugate the body with the sole purpose of developing will power and a dominant personality, it is essential to bring certain forces within the body under control and thus develop will power.

Besides hunger, thirst and carnal desires, we must gain full control of the tongue, mind and the rest of the body. Hence, Muslims call Ramadan a blessed month of compassion and mercy, a month of self-purification and re-dedication, a month of commiseration with the poor and the hungry, who are in the majority among mankind. It is a unique month of self-analysis, of taking stock of one's moral and spiritual assets and liabilities and of examining critically one's spiritual portrait.

Why is it that we fast in the daytime and not, for our own convenience, at nights? This is because the human personality only develops when a person is exposed to maximum social conditions. Hence, Islam puts great stress on family and community life. Islam does not advocate running away from society or becoming a monk or leaving the family to retire in a desert, with all the solitude and the solitary confinement. Personality only develops during encounters with others in a society or community.

To alienate from society is not Da'wah (invitation to Islam). Religion does not become perfect without the world. We must work for the community and also with the community for the common welfare and the good of the Ummah. Islam regards the interest of the society above

the interest of the individual. Service to Allah is rendered through a clean life in the turmoil of this world in the multitudes of society.

Perhaps it would be interesting to consider why fasting was not made compulsory every single day of one's life. Allah gives us a month of compulsory fast and then gives us eleven lunar months to asses the result of this month-long effort. This 11-month grace period is the reason as to why we should not fast every single day of our lives. If we had done so, we would have remained under continuous compulsory restrictions of the Islamic fast throughout the year, and without the complete and unrestricted freedom to do as we like.

Our will power would not have been given a chance to develop a strong personality. Personality grows much more when we are free to do any wrong we would like, but choose not to do it under unrestricted conditions, such as during the eleven months following the Ramadan fast. Both during Ramadan and after, Allah gives us the opportunity to examine our spiritual profile and see where the defect lies. Has some jealousy, hatred, malice, miserliness, tendency to give short measure, cheating and intrigue and unforgiving thoughts and actions been removed in our acquired attributes?

Fasting is an institution by which an individual and by extension a community, may benefit physically and morally. The Islamic fast strengthens the disposition of the individual to obedience of laws and respect for social order. Islam lays stress on submission to Allah and consequently, lays stress on submission to just authority, beginning with example in the home. What are the three components of personality that we put to the acid test in the month-long exercise of fasting? They are (a) our physical cravings, (b) sensory desires, and (c) material longings. If we are successful in overcoming these, we shall pass the first part of our examination, emerging a far better Muslim within ourselves, fully laden with Taqwa (God-consciousness). We see a much better individual unfolding itself from within us, a person that was lying dormant for long. Now the same person in the month of Ramadan, has become the captain, the master of the control room of the self, controlling and at times eliminating certain types of worldly desires. It is easy now for such a person to be "on guard" and reject evil temptations as fast as they come, even challenging and encountering more temptations without any fear of giving in to them.

The purpose of the Islamic Fast is to obey Allah's Command with a view to becoming His vicegerent (Khalifah). It trains all those who volunteer for service to Allah before allowing them to take on the job of His vicegerency and establish Allah's rule on Earth.

There is no guarantee that the fasting person has definitely acquired the laudable achievement of Taqwa or God-consciousness. Some of us, who fast, often wait anxiously for Ramadan to

end so that we could resume our nefarious activities. Sometimes, during the fasting month Satan becomes more active than usual. Allah may use such situations to test a fasting person's Taqwa if and when he makes his evil passion his god.

The English translation of Q.2:183 is usually expressed as "…you may develop taqwa". Note the word "may". There is no guaranty that a fasting person would definitely develop God-consciousness and piety or enough will power that he could guard against evil. In fact, the fasting person cannot develop Taqwa if he continues to backbite, slander, tell lies, harm others, deceive people and show malice, anger and hatred towards fellow beings.

It is easy for any belittler, slanderer, tyrant or businessman who gives short measure or a miser who does not disburse Zakat money, to starve himself during Ramadan days. But, how can such a person develop God-consciousness and divine qualities? Such a person, besides committing sins of commission and omission, may simply be wasting his time by fasting. Shall we spend a month every year, in which we starve and become thirsty, fast and eat, while our condition does not change - our rich remain rich and our poor remain as poor? Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) had warned that poverty may lead to unbelief. This is why a person who steals food while facing starvation is not to be punished according to the Shariah.