

RAMADAN

A Month of Purification



MAULANA WAHIDUDDIN KHAN

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FOREWORD



Fasting in Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijri calendar, is training in self-purification for a believer. *Saum*, the Arabic word for fasting means abstinence. Abstinence from food and water for a limited period is symbolic training in self-restraint. In this way, the month of Ramadan trains us to live a disciplined life.

Ramadan is a reminder to a sincere person that we are in the world of God, a world which has been created by God, not us. Its owner is God, not us. Here we cannot live according to our will. Here we cannot eat, drink or speak according to our will. Here we have to live in accordance with the will of the Creator. This kind of life is possible only when man apprehends God at the level of realization; when he discovers that in this world there is no place for those who lead a permissive (*beqait*) life. The secret of success in this world of God lies in leading a disciplined (*paband*) life.

Prophet Muhammad said, “There is purification for all things, and purification of the body is fasting.”

(*Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 1745) Just as bathing purifies the body, so does fasting purify the soul. Ramadan is the month of purification of the soul in which man reassesses his life; reviews all his affairs; re-plans his religious and *dawah* life; essentially, purifies his heart and mind to build a new personality within himself.

This is the purification of the self and this is the real aim of Ramadan. One who spends the days and nights of Ramadan in this way is the one who has truly fasted. The true fast is that which is a source of purification of the self or the purification of one's inner personality. Purification of the self is a continuous process in the life of the believer. But in the month of Ramadan, it is possible to perform this process of purification of the self with greater intensity. By purifying one's self for one month in a year, one is able to lead a life of self-discipline in all matters for the rest of the year.

Wahiduddin Khan

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New Delhi, India

SIGNIFICANCE OF RAMADAN



According to Islamic teachings, Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijra calendar, is the month of fasting. The Quran mentions that fasting was a common practice in all the religions: “Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil.” (*The Quran*, 2:183). This shows the universality of the practice of fasting.

The Arabic equivalent of fasting is *saum*. *Saum* means abstinence, which is the spirit of Islamic fasting. In the month of Ramadan, believers abstain from food and drink for a limited period each day, that is, from dawn till sunset.

Saum begins at dawn (*Sehri*) during which people consume food and water and after which they are not to partake of any of this for the rest of the day till the roza breaks at dusk (*Iftaar*). This practice is continued for a month.

Prophet Muhammad once said that one who keeps a fast but does not stop lying or practicing wrong ways then God does not need him to leave his food. (*Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 1689) The term ‘leave’ in this tradition actually refers to the symbolic leaving of wrong practices. Ostensibly, fasting means to abstain from food and drink but, in spirit, it includes abstaining from all kinds of undesirable activities.

Abstaining from food and drink is in fact symbolic abstinence. Ramadan is, in essence, a form of an annual training for living a responsible life. Being of a responsible character means doing what is wanted and refraining from all such deeds as are undesirable.

The month of Ramadan begins from the sighting of the moon. It is reported that when the Prophet of Islam saw the new moon of Ramadan, he said: “O God, make this month for us a month of peace and submission.” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 1397)

This saying of the Prophet is like a pledge and the month of Ramadan begins from the taking of this pledge. According to this, believers are required to live in peace, that is, be of a non-violent character. This is the true spirit of the month of Ramadan.

Fasting is a conscious act, not a mere ritual. It is performed with full consciousness of its implications—the mark of a truly religious person. Sehri is the meal eaten before commencing the fast. The Prophet observed: ‘Sehri is a blessing bestowed on you by God, so you should partake of it.’” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 23142) Eating Sehri before dawn is a reminder that when God gives us a difficult command, (like fasting) He also grants some concessions (sehri) along with it.

In the month of Ramadan, believers are required to study the Quran more and more, in prayer and out of prayer. Then they rediscover the message and teachings of the Quran, and reshape their minds according to Quranic tenets.

Sunset is the time for breaking the fast. As he takes Iftar, he thanks God with the following words of prayer used by the Prophet of Islam: "May the Lord be thanked and praised with Whose help I was able to fast, and now I am breaking the fast with the food and drink that He has provided. May God accept it. He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing." (*Kanzul Ummal*, Hadith No. 18057 and 18058) This prayer expresses the feelings that surge within a believer while breaking his fast.

There is a special prayer, said daily in the month of Ramadan, called *tarawih*. It is observed after the *isha* prayer during the night. Believers establish contact with God through the Quran, which is the Book of God.

The Prophet Muhammad divided the month of Ramadan into three parts. He called the first ten days, "Blessings", the next ten days, "Forgiveness" and the last ten days, "Freedom from hell-fire". (*Shu'abul Iman*, Hadith No. 3336)

From this we can understand that the best days of this world are the last ten days of Ramadan.

SPIRIT OF RAMADAN

The last ten days of the month of Ramadan are the days of *itikaf*, that is, going into seclusion. *Itikaf* means sitting in the mosque for a limited period. It is a practice which saves believers from all kinds of distraction. *Itikaf* is a period of contemplation, introspection, and self-improvement.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is, therefore, a special training in purification of the soul. Fasting makes people conscious about dos and don'ts. Ramadan is a course in spiritual development that prepares one to lead a principled life—not merely during the month of fasting, but, in fact, for the whole year round. In this sense, Ramadan is an annual training period for every believer.

SPIRIT OF RAMADAN



According to Islamic teachings, there are five pillars of Islam. One of these pillars is fasting during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar

calendar. Every pillar of Islam, *iman*, *salat*, *zakat*, *saum* and *hajj* has spirit and not just form. For instance, the spirit of *salat* or prayer is humility. The spirit of *zakat*, almsgiving, is social service. The spirit of *hajj* is unity, and the spirit of fasting is abstinence.

In Arabic, fasting is known as ‘*Saum*’ meaning abstinence. Abstaining from food and drink during the month of Ramadan is aimed to awaken the ‘*sawm spirit*’ of the believer. When he is consumed by hunger and thirst, he sees how weak he really is; he realizes how much he is in need of the succour of God. It is when man experiences this helplessness, *ijz* made manifest during the times when he feels hunger and thirst, that his true self meets God.

When one fasts one discovers God Almighty as the real benefactor. Along with bringing immense pleasure and satisfaction, this experience makes him aware of his duties as God’s humble servant. This feeling leads to caution in life.

Then in the evening, when he eats and drinks, he sees how God has made complete provision

for his needs. His heart is filled with gratitude. He praises God and offers thanks to Him. The temporary deprivation of food and water stresses the importance of these things as divine blessings. It reminds man that all he has is from God, who is the supreme and all-powerful and one day all would be taken away from him.

Man is here for a test. Breaking one's arrogance and stubbornness, fasting makes man realize his helplessness. Man is cut to size. It makes man realize how dependent on God he is. When he prays truly from the heart, connecting him with the Almighty.

One who fasts in all sincerity takes care to cast his entire life in the one consistent mould. In all of his affairs, he applies the constraints laid down by God. He checks himself from abusing others, stays his hand from persecution and halts in his steps towards injustice. As the Prophet said, "Such a man can be likened to a tied-up horse which can go only as far as its rope permits: in that way, he cannot transgress." (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 11335)

RAMADAN AND SELF-PURIFICATION



Ramadan, the month of fasting and self-purification, is a blessed spiritual period for believers, for it is during this month that they do their utmost to awaken and enhance their spirituality and purify themselves.

A tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, "There is purification for all things, and purification of the body is fasting." (*Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 1745) Just as bathing purifies the body, so does fasting purify the soul.

It must be borne in mind that Ramadan entails much more than fasting; it is the fostering of a culture of abstinence aimed at purification of thought, speech and general behaviour and inculcating humility, truth and honesty in oneself.

Ramadan, the month of fasting and self-purification, is a blessed spiritual period for believers as it enhances their spirituality and helps them purify themselves.

Two things make up a human being—the body and the soul. While the material part of a person, the body is indispensable for the performance of mundane tasks, it is his soul which will raise him to higher realities. The mind, or soul, must be preserved in a state of purity. Just as the body requires physical nourishment, so also must the soul be spiritually nourished.

Fasting entails cutting oneself off from the world and turning to God. This turning to God is not in a physical sense, but having one's heart and mind continually directed towards God, whatever bodily activity one may be engaged in.

When a person has elevated himself from the world, God endows him with wisdom, which

emanates from his lips in the form of dua. This helps him to purify himself.

FASTING FOR SELF-DISCIPLINE



Ramadan—the month of fasting, is the month that revelations of the Quran began to be made to the Prophet Muhammad, marking the commencement of Prophethood.

Ramadan is a month of restraint and worship; of caring and thanksgiving; of repentance and piety. The multitude of benefits of Ramadan inspired the Prophet to exclaim: “Welcome to the one who purifies!” (*Kanzul Ummal*, Hadith No. 23692)

Ramadan is a month of spiritual activism when believers endeavour to awaken their spirituality, purify themselves and develop their character.

Fasting is an exercise in self-purification and self-discipline. During the month of Ramadan, the believer abstains in the daytime from food and drink

of his own free will. It is only after sunset that he satisfies his hunger and quenches his thirst.

Fasting helps him develop self-control. By practicing restraint for one month in a year, he is able to lead a life of self-discipline in all matters for the rest of the year. He, therefore, learns to live his life as per the creation plan of God.

God has placed man in this world for the purpose of testing him. Apart from man, there are in the universe innumerable other things, all of which—having no free will of their own—adhere strictly to God's law. God has, however, given man the freedom to choose which path he will tread. Notwithstanding this divine gift of freedom of will, it is still the desire of the Almighty that man should, by his own choice, tread the path of obedience.

It is, therefore, to condition man to follow the path of restraint that the rule of fasting has been laid down. No mere annual ritual, fasting is a lesson in the permanent practice of patience and tolerance throughout one's entire life.

While on a fast, a man may have food and water before him but, despite his hunger and thirst, he exercises self-control. God desires that he should also exercise the same restraint whenever he has the opportunity to display his ego and his arrogance. He must not fall into unjust ways.

If man is to earn God's favour, he must eschew the path forbidden by Him, and set his feet firmly on the path of modesty and humility.

The path followed perforce by the universe has to be adopted by man of his own free will. That is why it is desirable that he should lead a life of self-imposed curbs. This is the only way to seek nearness to God Almighty.

FASTING FOR GRATITUDE AND PENITENCE



The month of fasting is a period of spiritual purification. A time of proximity to the Lord, it is

a special month of training meant to engender all those qualities desirable in Islam. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* has this to say in the chapter on fasting:

“The month of Ramadan in Islam is observed as a period of penitence and total fasting from dawn to dusk. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Volume IV. p. 62)

Penitence, undoubtedly an important part of Islam, so permeates the entire Islamic system that no Islamic act, including fasting, is devoid of this spirit.

While enjoining fasting, in the following verses, the Quran tells us that its special significance in the month of Ramadan is developing gratitude as well as penitence:

“Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourself against evil. ... so that you may glorify Him for His having guided you and so that you may be grateful to Him.” (*The Quran*, 2:183, 185)

It was in the month of Ramadan that the first revelations of the Quranic verses came down to the Prophet. It was a great blessing of God that He revealed this guidance in the form of the Quran so that it might be a true guide for man. That is why this month came to be held as one of developing feelings of gratitude for the believers.

Taqwa or a God-fearing life means a cautious life. Success for man in both worlds lies in his invariably adopting the path of caution in all matters of life. It is *taqwa*, a guarded, disciplined life of penitence that is the goal of fasting.

Fasting, an experience of powerlessness despite the possession of power is an annual exercise in self-discipline. And only that person has fasted, in the true sense of the word, who emerges from the experience not only a grateful and pious devotee of God Almighty but also a human being in complete control of his thoughts, words and deeds.

FASTING FOR TAQWA AND THANKSGIVING



The Quran states: “Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourself against evil. ... so that you may glorify Him for His having guided you and so that you may be grateful to Him.” (*The Quran*, 2:183, 185)

From these verses of the Quran we understand that fasting is training of two things at the same time. One, *taqwa* or righteousness, the other thanksgiving.

Food and drink are two great blessings of God. But in normal circumstances man does not realize it. During fasting when he abstains from these things the whole day and then after sunset when he eats and drinks after experiencing great hunger and thirst, only then he realizes how great these

blessings of God really are. Overwhelmed with this experience, he expresses his gratitude to God from the innermost recesses of his heart. This inculcates the spirit of thanksgiving in a fasting person.

In this way the immediate benefit a fasting person receives is that he is enlisted by angels as a grateful servant of God. The second benefit is that person becomes deserving of receiving further blessings from God Almighty.

According to a tradition of the Prophet, God says: “O people, all of you are hungry except the one whom I feed.” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 2577)

This is indeed a reality because if the food we eat does not grow and be nourished by soil, we humans cannot gain it for consumption by any other means. That is why if a person keeps fasts in the month of Ramadan and is thankful for God’s blessings, he proves himself deserving of receiving the food grown in the soil for the rest of the year

as well. Otherwise, he will be deemed a usurper.

On the other hand, fasting is a training in *taqwa* or living a God-fearing life. *Taqwa* means that man should keep himself away from all those things that God has forbidden in this life and he should do only those things that God has allowed him to do.

While fasting when he is consumed by hunger and thirst, man realizes how weak he really is; he realizes how much he is in need of the succour of God. It is when man experiences this helplessness, *ijz* which is made manifest during the times when man feels hunger and thirst, that his true self meets God. Thus it is the discovery of the real benefactor that brings along with it immense pleasure and satisfaction. This experience makes him aware of his duties as God's humble servant. This feeling leads to caution in life. It makes one God-conscious and live a life of piety, *taqwa*.

Fasting breaks one's arrogance and stubbornness. It makes one realize the reality of life that is his helplessness on *ijz*. Man is cut to size. Realizing one's complete dependence on God, one prays truly from the heart. Such prayers connect him to God Almighty.

Roza is, therefore, an opportunity or the meeting point between man and God. This meeting point is the last stage of helplessness, which makes you realize that God is all-powerful and man is helpless.

FASTING FOR SELF-CONTROL



According to a saying of the Prophet of Islam, one who fasts should never stoop to using abusive language; if someone abuses him, he should simply say 'I am fasting.' (*Sunan Abi Dawud*, Hadith No. 2363)

Islamic fasting, as far as formal practice is concerned, is to abstain from food and drink. But the actual spirit of fasting is self-control that is to refrain from indulging in negative thinking and the use of negative language.

Self-control, far from being a negative or passive action, has great value in human behaviour. Self-control is integral to social ethics. If you live alone on an island, there is no need for any control, as the absence of others leaves you free to do whatever you want to do. However, when you are living in a society, you have to give leeway to others. This is what every person on the road does when he drives a car: he either keeps to the left (or to the right depending upon which country he is in) so that he gives way to other cars and can carry on in his journey without accidents.

Having learnt self-control while fasting one lives by the principle: refrain from actions on more than fifty-per cent occasions, and act only in less than fifty-per cent occasions.

This principle of self-discipline is applicable to the entire life of an individual. It entails giving others the chance to live their lives while living one's own life.

SEHRI: A BLESSED FOOD



The meal taken before dawn during the month of Ramadan is called Sehri. The Prophet asked his companions to eat Sehri saying “Eat sehri because it is a blessing” (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 1923) The Prophet invited a companion to partake of Sehri saying “Come, eat of the blessed food.” (*Sunan Abu Dawud*, Hadith No. 2344) Another companion relates that during the month of fasting, “Once I went to the Prophet before dawn and he was eating Sehri. The Prophet observed: ‘Sehri is a blessing that God has bestowed on you. So do not leave it out.’” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 23142)

Eating the pre-dawn meal is a reminder of the reality that when God gives the command for a difficult task, He at the same time makes arrangements so that there is ease in the performance of that task. We should simply keep absolute trust in God Almighty.

The significance of sehri is to remind a believer of this principle: when God gives a difficult command to man, He at the same time makes arrangements so that there is ease in the performance of that task if one places complete trust in God and perseveres.

The Prophet observed: "A fast should be kept by one who has expressed his intention to do so before dawn." (*Sunan an-Nasa'i*, Hadith No. 2343)

Before commencing the fast we should make the intention (*niyyah*) to keep the fast.

FASTING INCULCATES HUMILITY



The Quran tells us that fasting is prescribed for you so that you may fear God. (*The Quran*, 2:183) What does it mean to fear God, *taqwa*? *Taqwa* or fearing God means that man should acknowledge his helplessness vis-a-vis God's greatness.

When one fasts one realizes one's own helplessness vis-à-vis God's greatness. The truth is that the acknowledgement of one's helplessness is the beginning of *imaan*. Belief in God is, in fact, to discover this boundless greatness of God. And one who discovers this boundless greatness will be overwhelmed with the feeling of helplessness.

Imaan is another name for the realization of God—the realization of the God who is the Creator and Sustainer of the infinite universe, who is controlling the infinite universe with astonishing

power, who is the one who gives us the blessings of food and drink. Those men and women who are aware of this, will feel that all greatness belongs to God and they will come to understand their trial of helplessness.

The feeling of helplessness (*ijz*) that one experiences when one fasts is the greatest motivational force in the life of a person. *Ijz* revolutionizes one's entire personality. It shakes one's whole being and brings about a complete revolution in one's mind.

The feeling of *ijz* one receives when fasting relates to God. But when this feeling of *ijz* is produced in man in the real sense, it finds expression in human relations. One who becomes truly modest before God, finds this same spirit making him modest before human beings. In relation to God, this feeling is called *ijz*, while in relation to man this feeling is called modesty. Fasting, in essence, is a training in humility.

DUA AND FASTING



While giving commands regarding fasting, the Quran makes special mention of dua (remembering God). “When My servants ask you about Me, say that I am near. I respond to the call of one who calls, whenever he calls to Me: let them, then, respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be rightly guided.” (*The Quran*, 2:186)

In this world only that person finds God who surrenders himself to God. And only the words of that person reach God whose spiritual chords are linked with the chord of God. All souls are not blessed with ineffable feelings of nearness to God. This good fortune is destined only for those who possess a fine soul.

Dua is calling to God. It is not just a verbal act. In essence, it is an act of the heart. The more the heart cultivates this capability, the more effectively will *dua* come to the lips.

This shows the relation between fasting and *dua*. Fasting increases the spiritual capability of man's heart and when this capability increases, the *dua* which ensues is more precious than that of a non-fasting situation. Thus, real fasting is that which induces real *dua*.

The purpose of fasting is to produce a feeling of humility through thirst and hunger. Humility comes from a feeling of *inabat* (repentance), which is the spirit of prayer. When *inabat* is produced within oneself, the *dua* which comes out of one's lips, goes straight to the throne of the Almighty.

RAMADAN AND QURAN



The Quran makes special mention of its revelation in the month of Ramadan, while making it obligatory upon the followers: "The month of Ramadan is the month when the Quran was sent down as guidance for mankind with clear proofs of

guidance and the criterion by which to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month, let him fast; but he who is ill or on a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on.” (*The Quran*, 2:185)

The above verse indicates that there is a close link between Ramadan and the Quran. The revelation of the Quran started in 610 A.H. in the month of Ramadan according to the lunar calendar. The first revelation was made to the Prophet of Islam when he was in the cave of Hira, near Makkah and it continued for the next twenty-three years, finally reaching completion in Madinah.

The guidance given in the Quran is the best blessing to mankind from God as it shows man the path to ultimate success. It tells man how to live in this world so as to gain entry into Paradise in the eternal world. Paradise is the goal of man. Fasting is the path to it. The month of Ramadan is the annual reminder of this blessing.

In the month of Ramadan the Quran should be read and understood. The Quran is specially recited in this month. This reading is not only meant as recitation of the words of the Quran but is aimed at delving into the deeper meaning of the Quran and understanding its message. During this time, one finds time to reflect on one's life, one's past and present, and what course to follow in the future.

In the night the Quran is also recited during *tarawih*. This means he must undertake introspection and read the Quran more deeply. In this way the Quran becomes a guiding force in man's life. He earns his livelihood according to its dictates. He bathes in the ocean of its life to cleanse his soul.

The Quran is a reward to His servants from God. And fasting is an acknowledgment of the reward. Through fasting man makes himself worthy of being thankful to God. He obeys the command of God and thus revels in the supremacy of God. Having gone through a month's fasting, he creates an ability in himself to lead a life of piety as ordained in the Quran.

The main purpose of fasting is to go through the Quran with complete focus and dedication. This is a very serious study. So, believers are required to stay away from all other activities and concentrate their minds totally on the study of the Quran so that they are able to discover the deep meaning in the Quran.

MONTH OF CONTEMPLATING ON THE QURAN



Ramadan is a month of contemplation and reflection. The Quran is specially recited during this month so that believers may reflect upon it, understand its deeper meaning and make it a guiding force in their lives. At night the Quran is also recited during the *tarawih* prayers.

The practice of fasting aims at saving a person from distractions. It produces sincerity in him. It

draws a person's attention away from the external world and into the internal world. Hence fasting prepares him for the study of the Quran. And when a person studies the Quran with a well-prepared mind, he can understand the teachings of the Quran in greater depth.

The equivalent of spirituality in the Quran is *rabbaniyah*, that is, a God oriented life or Quranic spirituality. Spirituality (*rabbaniyah*), according to the Quran, is that mental state in which God-oriented thinking can develop in the individual.

Such God-oriented thinking reflects in his overall personality; his behaviour with others becomes God-oriented and his daily life becomes infused with divine hues. Thus Ramadan provides a framework within which devotees may improve themselves. Ramadan thus becomes a month of spiritual activism.

The fasting person repeatedly reads in the Quran that God is the Sustainer, that is, while man is the taker, God is the Giver. Everything that a person receives in this world, right from his existence and the oxygen he inhales to stay alive to the sunlight necessary for his survival, everything is God's gift. Thinking this way, he experiences a tremendous change within. He begins living in society as a giver-member.

By seriously studying and contemplating on the Quran, one discovers its deeper meaning and those principles by which one may develop one's personality and become a positive thinker in the full sense. Then one is able to live a God-oriented life.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF IFTAR



Iftar is an Arabic word, which literally means 'to break'. In the Islamic context, it means to break the fast, to eat and drink in the evening after the daylong

fast. Iftar is like dinner combined with a spiritual experience. It is like a compulsory form of training.

Experiencing hunger in the daytime, one discovers the importance of food and water which give us energy. One discovers that one cannot live without food and water. And, when a person takes food and water in the evening, he is filled with gratitude to God Almighty, who not only created him, but also provided him with all the basic needs.

Fasting is like the life of this world. *Iftar* gives a glimpse of the boundless rewards that await man in the world Hereafter.

The Prophet of Islam and his Companions always used to take simple food at the time of *iftar*. Iftar should be a simple meal and not a lavish affair. Simplicity saves us from distraction and makes us concentrate on the spiritual aspect of fasting.

It is reported that the Prophet of Islam used to say at the time of *iftar*, 'Thirst has been quenched, and hunger is no more, and God willing,

God will bless us with His reward.’ (*Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 2357)

Iftar invokes the spirit of prayer. Feeling pangs of hunger and thirst makes a man feel vulnerable and he turns towards God with renewed zeal. He cries out, ‘O God, I have fulfilled my duty and now I hope You will not deprive me of Your higher blessings.’

When a sincere prayer like this is uttered, God turns His special attention to it, and the rewards are boundless. Man prays in this world and the reward is given in the world Hereafter. Fasting is an exception for which a taste of the reward is given in this world itself. *Iftar* gives a glimpse of the boundless rewards that await man in the Hereafter.

RAMADAN AND DESIRE-MANAGEMENT



In the Chapter *Al-Baqarah* (2:183) of the Quran, believers are enjoined to fast during the month of

Ramadan: “Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil.”

We see that fasting is an exercise aimed at controlling our desires. It is the Art of Desire Management and self-discipline. Every man is filled with desires. One way of leading the life could be by following our whims and doing whatever we feel is correct, be it taking revenge, conducting robbery, indulging in corrupt practices, getting angry, being selfish etc. because all of these are desires. The other way can be leading a life whereby these desires are willfully managed.

God has given us free will and our test is to rightfully use this freedom and thereby control our desires. Thus, the individual who fasts, imposes self-discipline. The one who does not fast, lets his desires loose. In this context, fasting teaches desire-management.

By giving up eating and drinking in the month of

Ramadan, a person tries to train himself for a greater form of fasting, that is, refraining from all kinds of evil habits by managing our desires. Self-discipline, in helping one to evolve as a developed personality, is the key to all kinds of success. It saves man from provocation, anger and unnecessary involvement. It is a master formula by which he can manage all the affairs of his life. In this sense fasting is for personality and intellectual development. It could be best described as learning the art of desire management.

FASTING AND DAWAH ILALLAH



In the Quran, ‘the call to God.’ (41:33) is called *dawah ilallah*. Calling people to God means communicating God’s message—Quran and Islam—to all mankind. The call to God aims at bringing people closer to their Creator and Sustainer, inviting them to adopt the God-oriented life, and warning man of the consequences of the self-oriented life.

Calling people to God is telling them that the only right way of life for them on this earth is to become true believers in God. Primarily, the purpose of *dawah ilallah* is to acquaint man with the creation plan of God.

Calling people to God was the purpose for which Prophet Muhammad was sent as the messenger of God to the whole of humanity: “We have sent you forth as a mercy to all mankind.” (*The Quran*, 21:107).

However, Prophet Muhammad lived in this world for a limited period of time. In his lifetime the Prophet performed this duty directly. Ibn Ishaq, the Prophet’s earliest biographer, said that when the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) came to the Companions and reminded them of their responsibility of *dawah ilallah*, he said: ‘God has sent me to the entire world as a blessing, so you should carry out this responsibility on my behalf. God will show His mercy to you.’ (*Sirat ibn Hisham*, Vol. 4, pp. 268-269)

It is, therefore, incumbent upon the followers of Prophet Muhammad to carry on the work of calling people to God, *dawah ilallah* after him from one generation to the next and, in presenting the preserved message of Islam to people of every age and time till the Last Day.

The Quran is a book of mission. During Ramadan, believers go through the Quran to discover its message. This deep study of the Quran awakens in him the spirit of sharing this message with others. Understanding his responsibility of *dawah ilallah*, he adopts the communication of this message of calling people to God as his mission. Every year, one month is meant to prepare a believer to carry on this divine mission and eleven months to spread the message of the Quran (and Islam) to all mankind.

One who observes fasting to prepare himself for the mission of the Quran and dedicates himself to this *dawah* mission, has been promised unlimited reward by God.

Spreading the message of the Quran is a divine mission. According to the Quran, it is akin to providing support to God as mentioned in this verse" "Believers, be God's helpers." (*The Quran*, 61:14)

That is why the Prophet of Islam informed that fasting is to prepare oneself for the sake of the divine mission. (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 1151) This is the greatest mission, so one who devotes himself will be held deserving for the greatest reward.

ZAKAT FOR DAWAH ILALLAH



The Prophet of Islam has said that the month of Ramadan is the month of philanthropy. (*Sahih Ibn Khuzaimah*, Hadith No. 1887) Fasting makes believers more sensitive about hunger and the needs of others so they engage in more and more charity in this month. As an incentive, the Prophet of Islam said that

philanthropy or charity in the month of Ramadan was rewardable more than in any other month.

Zakat, alms-tax is one of the five basic tenets of Islam. Its payment is obligatory, at the rate of 2.5%, on all wealth that is subject to growth. This amount is given in the name of God and is to be spent on worthy religious causes.

Eight categories of people, eligible to receive *Zakat*, have been specified in the Quran: “Alms are only for: the poor and the destitute, for those who collect *zakat*, for conciliating people’s hearts, for freeing slaves, for those in debt, for spending for God’s cause, and for travellers in need. It is a legal obligation enjoined by God. God is all-knowing and wise.” (*The Quran*, 9:60)

Of the eight categories for the distribution of zakat mentioned in the above Quranic verse, ‘for the cause of God’ is directly related to *dawah ilallah* or calling people to God.

Often ‘for the cause of God’ is related to jihad. *Dawah ilallah* or the call to God and the Quran has been termed as great jihad, *jihad-e-kabir* in the following verse of the Quran: “Do great jihad with the help of it (the Quran)” (*The Quran*, 25:52)

The Egyptian scholar, Rasheed Raza Misri, has noted in his commentary of the Quran entitled *Tafseer Al-Manar* that the words ‘for the cause of God’ are equally applicable to those who strive to spread the word of God. (*Al-Risala English*, June 1984, pp 6-7)

In *Tafseer Al-Manar*, Rasheed Raza Misri explains that the best way to give alms (zakat) ‘for the cause of God’ in the present age, is to contribute to the training of dayees, and to their dispatch to other lands, and to continue to give financial support to them. The highest form of spending zakat ‘for the cause of God’ is, therefore, to strive to spread the word of God (Quran) to mankind and calling people to God (*dawah ilallah*).

In the following verse *dawah ilallah* has been called 'helping God' or Nusrat-e-khuda, "Believers, be God's helpers. (*The Quran*, 61:14) It means to become wholly honest in relation to God and to feel and evince total goodwill towards all one's fellow men.

Muslims are duty-bound as followers of Prophet Muhammad to undertake *dawah ilallah*. Giving *Zakat* for propagation of the message of true religion is an effective way to perform one's duty of *dawah ilallah* assuring God's reward for those who spend their wealth for God's cause:

"Those who spend their wealth for God's cause may be compared to a grain of corn which sprouts into seven ears, with a hundred grains in each ear: for God grants manifold increase to whom He wills; God is infinite and all knowing." (*The Quran*, 2:261)

Fasting prepares a believer for the mission of God. Giving zakat for the sake of God is a way to

fulfil one's responsibility of *dawah ilallah*, in the hope of becoming eligible for this highest reward.

ITIKAF: A SPIRITUAL RETREAT



Fasting means withdrawing from worldly attachments. This reaches a climax during *Itikaf*. *Itikaf* is a very special practice, marking the closure of the blessed month of Ramadan. Observers of this practice are required to stay in a mosque for ten days or less, during the last ten days of Ramadan.

Itikaf means going into seclusion for the purpose of concentration. In the final days of fasting, when a Muslim is more spiritually prepared and more awakened, he goes into seclusion in the environment of a mosque, freeing his mind of the activities of this world. In spiritual terms, it is meditation; in intellectual terms, it is contemplation.

Abu Hurairah reported: "The Prophet used to observe *itikaf* every year (during Ramadan) for

ten days; in the year in which he passed away, he observed itikaf for twenty days.”(*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith No. 2044)

The purpose of itikaf is to engage in *muhasaba*, which means introspection. During this practice, one finds time to reflect on one's life, one's past and present, and what course to follow in the future. The ten-day period of *itikaf* requires a person to undergo overhauling in the spiritual sense.

During Itikaf one distances completely from the world and turns to God, undertakes introspection and reads the Quran more deeply to understand its message. This practice is like taking a spiritual bath by making oneself a more awakened person.

During *itikaf* a Muslim tries to look at himself in the divine mirror. When a person goes into *itikaf* and studies the Quran in seclusion, he discovers the Quran again with reference to the new situations he may be facing. This practice keeps the Muslim

intellectually alive. In this way, *itikaf* enables a Muslim to evaluate his response towards each new situation and update his life accordingly.

Itikaf means increasing one's spiritual experiences on a larger scale. Both Ramadan and *itikaf* are similar, but with a difference. Where fasting during Ramadan is a routine experience, going into *itikaf* makes it an extraordinary experience, ensuring a heightened spiritual preparedness for the moral challenges of life.

If fasting is a spiritual experience, *itikaf* is spiritual retreat, designed to enable the rebuilding of self. Ramadan is meant to foster this spiritual transformation and *itikaf* enhances this process during the period of retreat.

LAILATAL-QADR: NIGHT OF DESTINY



One of the special features of Ramadan is the 'Lailatal-Qadr' or the Night of Destiny. It is the

night on which the Quran was revealed on Prophet Muhammad as mentioned in Chapter 97 of the Quran in these words:

"We sent it [Quran] down on the Night of Destiny. And what will make you comprehend what the Night of Destiny is? The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months; on that night, the angels and the Spirit come down by the permission of their Lord with His decrees for all matters; it is all peace till the break of dawn. (*The Quran*, 97:1-5)

Great importance is attached to Night of Destiny and the Quran calls it 'better than a thousand months.' Flocks of angels descend on the earth on this night, producing a heightened spiritual atmosphere. This enhances the spirituality of the people and adds more value to their worship. These angels carry the commands of God for the coming year. Believers then pray all night, and according to the Quran, praying on this night is

better than praying for a thousand months. This night brings wisdom to the human soul.

This night falls on one of the last ten nights of Ramadan and brings the period of fasting to a close. *'Lailatal-Qadr'* is also termed as the 'Night of Decisions' as God takes decisions for the coming year on this night.

Once Aisha (the wife of the Prophet), asked Prophet Muhammad as to how she should pray if she happened to find Lailatal-Qadr. The Prophet gave this prayer: "O God, You are the Forgiver, You love to forgive Your servants, so You forgive me." (*Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 3850)

The greatest thing to ask God is forgiveness. It is forgiveness which leads one to eternal Paradise. Therefore Prophet Muhammad advised us to seek forgiveness from God Almighty on this night.

RAMADAN A MONTH OF SPIRITUAL TRAINING



Prophet Muhammad called the month of Ramadan a month of patience. (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 20323). The Quran states that fasting during this month has been prescribed so that man may become God-fearing. (2:183) The qualities of patience and piety or God-consciousness (fear of God) are required of us every month of the year. In the month of Ramadan, however, special stress has been laid on this so that these two attributes become an integral part of one's character.

Fasting during Ramadan does not aim at mere abstinence from food and water but is to reinforce the virtue of patience and not to blindly follow one's desires. God has given man a free will to test if he can use his freedom properly. One needs to tie oneself willingly with the rope of God's laws. Thus, one who fasts, imposes self-discipline and

surrenders to the will of God as mentioned in the saying of Prophet Muhammad that a believer is like a tethered horse that moves only as far as its rope allows (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 11335).

Ramadan is a kind of training course. Thoroughly imbued with the qualities of patience and piety during the month of Ramadan, one is able to maintain the same high standard of conduct through the rest of the year.

The rationale behind fasting for a month is made clear by psychological studies. It tells us that for a habit to be inculcated, 30 days are required. It is not an overnight miracle but a lengthy process. The practice becomes a part of the personality only when it is observed every day for at least 30 days and it is only then that it may continue for at least a year. Fasting is a special training where one is being prepared to lead a principled life—not merely during the month of fasting, but, in fact, for the whole year round.

THE NIGHT OF REWARD



In a Hadith, the Prophet of Islam has said: “Every deed in Islam is rewarded from ten to seven hundred times. But God says, ‘Fasting is for me, and I will give unlimited reward to one who fasts.’” (*Sahih Muslim*, Hadith No. 1151)

According to this tradition a believer who keeps fasts ‘for the sake of God’ will be given unlimited reward from God Almighty. Another portion of an authentic Hadith reported by Abu Hurairah and recorded in Musnad Ahmed is as follows:

“During the last night of Ramadan, the sins of all the believers who have been fasting are forgiven. It was asked, ‘O Prophet of God, is this night the one known as the ‘night of power’?’ The Prophet replied, ‘No, but as soon as the deed is done, the reward for the deed is immediately bestowed.’” (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith No. 7917) This night of Ramadan is referred to in other Hadith literature

as the ‘night of reward’. (*Shu’abul Iman* by Al-Bayhaqi, Hadith No. 4271)

According to this Hadith, on the last night of Ramadan is called ‘the night of reward’. Those amongst the followers of the Prophet who have fasted in the true spirit will be rewarded for their deeds, and this will be noted in their records.

We should understand the importance of this night and not lose this great opportunity to earn rewards by spending it in frivolous shopping and entertainment.

The ‘night of reward’ is best utilized in more prayer and supplication, in introspection of the whole month of Ramadan that has just passed and in making fresh resolutions for the new year to come.

In reality, those who have spent the month of Ramadan in its true spirit can never even contemplate that they can spend the last night of Ramadan in frivolous activity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF EID AL-FITR



Eid al-Fitr comes just after the final day of fasting. The word Eid in Arabic means ‘returning at regular intervals’ and refers to the two annual Islamic religious celebrations. The fact that they occur in a regular cycle is important, for it gives a repeated opportunity for renewal, to forgive enemies, and contact people one has not seen for a long time.

Eid al-Fitr is observed with the spirit of thanksgiving all over the Muslim world, by offering prayers to God, and rejoicing on the accomplishment of an act of dedication and submission to the Almighty.

The Muslims pay obeisance to the Lord in congregation—displaying the real spirit of brotherhood, equality and fraternity through congregational prayers and feasts. Eid al-Fitr is celebrated by sharing happiness with the rest of

mankind. It should also not be forgotten that real happiness lies in sharing with others the bounties that God has given us. It is incumbent on us to give alms (*sadaqah fitr*) on this festival. In this sense *Zakat al-Fitr* is specifically related to the month of fasting and is given before the Eid prayer.

According to a Hadith reported by Ibn ‘Abbas: The Prophet made *Zakat al-Fitr* obligatory for the fasting person to keep him from idle talk and indecent conversation and to provide food for the needy. Discharging the duty before the prayer is an accepted *Zakat* while discharging it after the prayer is just *sadaqah* (voluntary charity). (*Sunan Abu Dawud*, Hadith No. 1609)

Zakat al-Fitr perfects the fast of Ramadan and purifies the fast of any indecent act or speech. Every Muslim: young, old, male and female who possesses over and above what is needed as basic food for the duration of one day and night must pay *Zakat al-Fitr* for himself and his dependents and distribute it amongst the poor and needy.

By sharing happiness with one another we can certainly make this world a better place to live. The occasion of this festival provides, above all, a valuable opportunity to extend the hand of friendship to people from other communities and remove misunderstandings often prevalent in society. Muslims should come out of their seclusion and forge friendship, in order that this misunderstanding—which clearly stems from a narrow perception—is effectively brought to an end.

Eid al-Fitr represents the reward of God, which will be granted by God to those who observe one month's fasting. In other words, fasting represents dutiful worldly life and Eid al-Fitr represents the reward that will be given in return by God to man.

According to a tradition, the day of Eid is the day of divine reward. When believers observe their duty in the month of Ramadan in the true spirit, God Almighty declares: “O angels, be witness that

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I have decided to bestow upon them paradise in the world hereafter.” (*Shu’abul Iman*, Hadith No. 3444)

In short, the month of fasting represents the responsibilities of the believers in this world and Eid al-Fitr represents the reward given to them in the world hereafter.

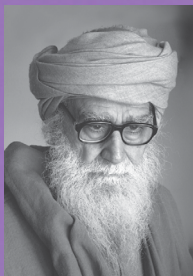
CONCLUSION



The Quran states: “Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil.” (*The Quran*, 2:183) Ramadan is the month of heightened God-consciousness, of attaining piety (*taqwa*). Fasting weakens a man’s dependence on material things and strengthens his spiritual resolve, so that he may enter the higher realms of piety. Fasting by its very nature is an act of abstinence, patience and restraint. It helps a person to attain a state of

mind, which makes him a more sensitive person. High sensitivity inculcates curiosity, seriousness and all other high qualities in a person. The purpose of fasting is, therefore, to inculcate sensitivity in a person so that one is able to understand the profound meaning of the Quran and contemplate on serious issues like *marefah*, *akhirah* and *dawah*. In this sense, Ramadan is a month of restraint and worship; of caring and thanksgiving; of repentance and piety. The multitude of benefits of Ramadan inspired the Prophet to exclaim: “Welcome to the one who purifies!” (*Kanzul Ummal*, Hadith No. 23692)

In the book *Ramadan: A Month of Purification* Maulana Wahiduddin Khan explains that *saum*, the Arabic word for fasting means abstinence. Ramadan entails fostering of a culture of abstinence. Prophet Muhammad said, “There is purification for all things, and purification of the body is fasting.” (*Sunan Ibn Majah*, Hadith No. 1745) Just as bathing purifies the body, so does fasting purify the soul. Fostering a culture of abstinence means cutting oneself off from the world and turning one’s heart and mind continually to God. Then God endows him with wisdom to purify one’s thought, speech and general behaviour. This enables man to reassess his life; review all his affairs; re-plan his religious and dawah life; purify his heart and mind; and builds a new personality within himself. Ramadan is, therefore, the month of self-purification that aims to awaken one’s spirituality and purify oneself. Then, purification of the self becomes a continuous process in the life of the believer.



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) was an Islamic scholar, spiritual leader and peace activist. Having founded *Centre for Peace and Spirituality International*, he was internationally recognized for his contributions to world peace. He authored over 200 books dealing with Islam’s spiritual wisdom, the Prophet’s non-violent approach, religion’s relation with modernity and other contemporary issues. His English translation of the Quran is popular because its language is simple, contemporary and easily understandable.

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