

The Fasting of Ramadan: A Time for Thought, Action, and Change!

by Taha Ghayyur.

"Fasting in Ramadan develops in a person the real spirit of social belonging, of unity and brotherhood, and of equality before God. This spirit is the natural product of the fact that when people fast they feel that they are joining the whole Muslim society (which makes up more than one fifth of world's population) in observing the same duty, in the same manner, at the same time, for the same motives, and for the same end. No sociologist or historian can say that there has been at any period of history anything comparable to this powerful institution of Islam: Fasting in the month of Ramadan. People have been crying throughout the ages for acceptable 'belonging', for unity, for brotherhood, for equality, but how echoless their voices have been, and how very little success they have met..." says Hammudah Abdalati, in Islam in Focus.

"What is fasting?" "How does the fasting of Muslims in Ramadan differ from the fasting of other faiths?" "Why should one 'torture' one's body in the first place?" "What do you really gain from fasting in the end?"...These are a few questions that a number of non-Muslim friends and colleagues often ask us, usually out of fascination with this spiritually-uplifting practice of Islamic faith, and at times out of pity and sympathy for us, thinking, why should anyone suffer from hunger and thirst like Muslims? I wouldn't be surprised if many of us shared the same negative perception of Fasting.

It is important to note that Fasting in Arabic is called, "Sawm", which literally means 'to be at rest'. Fasting in the month of Ramadan (the 9th month of the Islamic lunar calendar) is one of the Five Pillars upon which the "house" of Islam is built. During this month, every able-bodied Muslim, is required to fast, everyday from dawn until dusk

12 Reasons To Fast!

1. Fasting is an institution for the improvement of moral and spiritual character of human being. The purpose of the fast is to help develop self-restraint, self-purification, God-consciousness, compassion, the spirit of caring and sharing, the love of humanity and the love of God. Fasting is a universal custom and is advocated by all the religions of the world, with more restrictions in some than in others. The Islamic Fast, as opposed to mere starvation or self-denial, is an act of worship and obedience to God, thanksgiving, forgiveness, spiritual training, and self-examination.

2. Ramadan gives us a break and provides us with a rare opportunity to think about our own selves, our future, and our families. It is a time to give ourselves a mental break and to temporarily forget about the hundreds of worries and stresses we are constantly bombarded with. In hectic times, such as ours, and in places like the West, this valuable time to think about our lives, on individual basis, is a luxury and is desperately needed! It is a unique month of self-analysis, and of taking stock of one's moral and spiritual 'assets and liabilities'.

3. Fasting indoctrinates us in patience, unselfishness, and gratitude. When we fast we feel the pains of deprivation and hunger, and learn how to endure it patiently. The meaning of this powerful experience in a social and humanitarian context is that we are much quicker than anybody else in sympathizing with the oppressed and needy around the world, and responding

to their needs. "It is the month to visit the poor, the sick, and the needy to share their sorrows. It is the month where the food, sustenance and the earnings of a believing Muslim increases and they are blessed," says the Final Prophet of God, Muhammad (peace be upon him), a man who was known for his noble humanitarian causes, for social justice, and for being the first to respond to other's needs, despite the fact that he himself lived a very simple and humble life. It is only during such a trying time as Ramadan that we can reflect on the condition of those in this world who may not be as fortunate as us.

4. Fasting in Ramadan enables us to master the art of mature adaptability and Time-Management. We can easily understand this point when we realize that fasting makes people change the entire course of their daily life. When they make the change, they naturally adapt themselves to a new system and schedule, and move along to satisfy the rules. This, in the long run, develops in them a wise sense of adaptability and self-created power to overcome the unpredictable hardships of life! A person who values constructive adaptability, time-management, and courage will appreciate the effects of Fasting in this respect as well.

5. It cultivates in us the principle of sincere Love, because when we observe Fasting, we do it out of deep love for God. And a person, who loves God, truly is a person who knows what love is and why everyone on this Earth should be loved and treated justly, for the sake of God.

6. Fasting elevates the human spirit and increases our awareness of God. It strengthens our will-power as we learn to rise above our lower desires. The institution of fasting is both unique and a shared experience in human history. From the very beginning of time, humans have struggled to master their physical and psychological selves: their bodies and their emotions. Hunger is one the most powerful urges that we experience. Many, through over- or under-eating or consumption of unhealthy foods, abuse this urge. Thus, when a person purposefully denies something to their own self that it craves, they are elevating their mind above their body, and their reason and will above their carnal passions. "A fasting person empties his stomach of all the material things: to fill his soul with peace and blessings, to fill his heart with love and sympathy, to fill his spirit with piety and Faith, to fill his mind with wisdom and resolution," says H. Abdalati in Islam in Focus. The person who can rule their desires and make them work, as they like, has attained true moral excellence.

7. With the clarity of mind and absence of distractions, also comes a greater focus. As students, the period of fasting, especially early during the day, serves as a tool to focus our minds on our academics. In the month of Ramadan, many Muslims try to avoid watching TV, listening to music, and some other leisure activities, which spares them more time and energy to be spent on more productive activities such as academics, intense study of Islam, voluntary prayers, social and humanitarian causes, and a quality time with the family, to name a few. It is a reminder of our duty to God, our purpose and higher values in life, as God Himself describes the purpose of fasting as follows, "O you who Believe! Fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may develop consciousness of God" (Quran 2:183).

8. Fasting has numerous, scientifically proven, benefits for our physical health and mental well-being. The time, length and nature of the Islamic Fast all contribute to its overall positive effect. One of the medical benefits is a much-needed rest to the digestive system. The reduced food intake during the day allows the body to concentrate on getting rid of harmful dietary toxins accumulated as natural by-products of food digestion throughout the year. The length of the Islamic Fast itself (around 12-14 hours) is in sync with the 'transit time' of food from the mouth to

the colon of the large intestine, ensuring that no stimulus reaches the stomach or digestive system while it remains in homeostasis. Therefore, for the vast majority of healthy individuals fasting poses no medical risks but in fact provides many health benefits, such as: an increase in serum Magnesium, essential for cardio-vascular health and prevention of heart complications; improvement in the quality and depth of sleep; improvement in memory and slower skin aging over time; increased production of growth hormone, etc. Also, as a general note, it has been observed that underfed animals live longer than their heavily fed counterparts and suffer fewer illnesses during their lives.

9. The month of Ramadan provides us with a sort of "Boot camp." It is a month of intense moral training. Since we know that Fasting is a special duty prescribed by God, we learn that any sins may spoil our record of fasting with God, so we go through great lengths making sure we are on our best behavior. Many people who experience fasting in this month, feel the impact that this intense training has on their habits, and realize the power of this transformative tool designed to make us better human beings- the ultimate goal of any spiritual exercise. The entire Ramadan atmosphere provides the driving force for this positive change.

10. It makes us realize the reality of life and death. Fasting makes us realize how dependant our lives are on things that we often take for granted, such as food and water. It makes us think about our dependence on God and God's mercy and justice. Moreover, it reminds us of the life after death, which itself has a great impact on our character and our world-view.

11. Ramadan is a blessed month for a special reason: It is actually the month in which God first revealed His final message and guidance for mankind to our beloved Prophet Muhammad. This message has been perfectly preserved both orally and textually in the form of a Book, called the Qur'an (The Reading/Recital). Therefore, Muslims try to do an intense study of the Quran in this month especially, and evaluate their lives according to the standards and guidance contained in it.

12. After the month of Ramadan is over, Muslims celebrate one of the two most important holidays in the Islamic year: EID-UL-FITR, or the Festival of the Fast Breaking. It is a day to thank God for the blessing and training that He provides us with throughout the month of Ramadan. EID-UL-FITR is marked by praying in a huge congregation at an Islamic center or mosque, and by giving a small donation to the poor in the community. The adults give the donation on behalf of their children as well. Dinner parties, family outings, fairs, carnivals, and great joyous celebrations follow the prayer and charity.

In a nutshell, even though the real purpose of the dynamic institution of Fasting is to discipline our soul and moral behavior, and to develop sympathy for the less fortunate, it is a multi-functional and a comprehensive tool of change in various spheres of our lives, including: social and economic, intellectual and humanitarian, spiritual and physical, private and public, personal and common, inner and outer ---all in one!