

sleeping, too, constitute forms of worship. So in the way of Allah: what matters is His command, the whole life must witness to Him.

The month-long regimen of dawn-to-sunset abstinence from food, drink and marital relations, for the sake of Allah alone, internalizes the lesson that one must never touch, acquire or enter that which does not belong to one under the law of God. A person can no more remain a slave to their own self-indulgence as they prepare for the arduous journey on the road to their Lord.

For many it is difficult to see the value of long hours of hunger, thirst and sleeplessness. Productivity losses are difficult to accept in an age that has tried to make gods of gross national product and economic growth. People are created to live a life of total submission to the One God, and this purpose must be paramount in all scales of values. Fasting is crucial to this understanding. It shows that its purpose, like God's guidance through His Prophets and Books and all other rituals of worship, is to train the believer in how they must live totally and unreservedly, at all costs, in submission to God. Obedience, let there be no misunderstanding, is not limited to mere outward conformity with the letter of law. The law must be observed, but evil, in all its forms, must be eschewed. The Prophet (p): **When Ramadan arrives, the gates of Paradise are opened while those of Hell are closed. All the satans are put in chains and a herald cries out. 'O you who seek good come here and those who desire evil desist'.**

Eyes should refrain from seeing evil, ears from hearing evil, hearts from reflecting evil, tongues from speaking evil. The Prophet (p) said: **'One who does not give up speaking false words & acting by them is not required by God that they give up their food & drink.'** He (p) also said: **'Many are the observers of fast who gain nothing from their fast but hunger & thirst.'**

As a collective experience Ramadan suffuses the entire life of communities with the spirit of *taqwa*; even the air, it seems, is changed with a new fervour. In Ramadan we can see a beautiful example of how Islam unites the individual and the society under the sovereignty of One Lord alone.

In Ramadan, therefore, the demands of Allah take precedence over all other demands; no part of personality, no aspect of our life remains outside His writ, even aspects as mundane as timings

for eating and going to bed. Thus, will is strengthened, determination is reinforced, spirit of sacrifice is intensified, self-control is heightened.

But, above all, the life in Ramadan revolves, as it must, round the Quran which, as the Word of God, must become the core of all devotional activities. At least one reading of Quran is a required duty during nightly Prayers, after the 'Isha.' But it ought to be extensively recited both within and without ritual prayers. Ramadan is not only the annual celebration of the coming down of the Quran by disciplining every moment of life into surrender of God, it is also the occasion for heart and mind to get absorbed in its words and teachings.

Closely linked to fasting is the nightly prayer. Sleep is deliberately avoided to enter into communion with God's words, to prostrate before Him, and thus to move nearer to Him. It is during the quiet and calm of the night that we can dwell upon God's words, and the truths which might otherwise elude us can be grasped.

No time is like the Ramadan time. For in it lies that night which is 'better than a thousand months', the 'Night of Destiny ... in it the angels and the Spirit descend' (Al-Qadr 97:1-4). It is 'that blessed night in which was made distinct everything 'wise' & 'a warning' & a 'mercy' was sent down which God has always sent for mankind (Al-Dukhan 44:3-6). That is why Fasting is placed in Ramadan.

In this technological age, when the clock has become the only measure of time and every concept of sacredness of time has been erased from human memory, some may find it difficult to visualize how every moment of Ramadan encompasses centuries in it, how it allows us to draw nearer to God at a much faster pace. Acts of virtue during the month are especially rewarded; an obligatory act (*fard*) increases seventy times; a voluntary one (*nafl*) is rewarded like the obligatory. Each of its moments offers immense possibility of great spiritual journeys. As the poet Iqbal said:

***Far though the valley of love may be,  
a long and terrible way,  
The path of a hundred years may be  
traveled at times in a sigh.***

If Ramadan is blessed because the Quran began to come down in this month; it is blessed, too, because the Quran triumphed in this month. The Quran is the al-Furqan (criterion by which to judge

the truth and the falsehood); in Ramadan falls that day which the Quran calls the *Yawmul Furqan*, Day of Criterion, on which the truth and the falsehood were judged, and the Truth triumphed. That was the Day of Badr, when the Prophet, blessings and peace be on him, beseeched God for help and victory thus: 'O God if this group perishes today, you will not be worshipped any more.' This was both a petition and a pledge; an expression of the final goal of all of his strivings, and of what our lives ought to be devoted to. Only an inattentive mind can ignore the significant link between al-Furqan descending in Ramadan and *Yaum al-Furqan* falling in Ramadan.

Thus, to come back to the center: Ramadan reminds us of our mission, the only purpose of our existence as Muslims. It prepares us to discharge that mission; it deepens our consciousness, brings us closer to Quran and the Prophet (p), strengthens our resolve, schools us to *taqwa* and patience.

The end of Ramadan brings *Eid-al-Fitr*, the feast of the breaking of the Fast, which celebrates the revelation of the Quran. The Quran makes it clear: *'that you complete the number, and proclaim the greatness of God for His having guided you, and that you render your thanks'* (2:185). Man's response to the Divine initiative of guidance must be gratitude & extolling Him as the Greatest. That is why constantly on lip is the *tasbih: Allahu Akbar ... walillahil-Hamd*. Even so, the heart still remembers wistfully the trying days & the silent, busy nights when the soul was engulfed in a dawn of light & cries out:

***Stand still, you ever moving sphere of heaven,  
That time may cease, and midnight never come.***

*O You who believe, Fasting has been prescribed for you,  
As it was prescribed for those who came before you,  
That you may shield yourselves from God's Wrath  
A high and lofty goal and fasting was made the path,  
An obligation, rather a mighty pillar of the faith  
To abstain from everything that would cause the fast to break,  
It is a most virtuous act of worship, if you only knew,  
To release yourself from your desires, & become a better you,  
Gone is gluttony and greed,  
replaced with compassion for those in need,  
& a healthy rest given to bodies that all year we overfeed.*

# Golden Hours Ramadan On the Wings of an Angel

Like every year, this glorious month summons Muslims, as individuals & as a corporate body, to an intense & sustained life of Fasting & Prayer, of worship & obedience, of devotion & discipline — all centred on the Quran which was sent down in these very moments in the custody of 'noble & trustworthy' angels. A Call will go forth to every believer to take to prolonged companionship with the Book of God. To a life of redoubled endeavour to become what God desires Muslims to be. Ramadan bids our hearts & minds, our society & polity, to come to

## Goodness

*There's a hidden sweetness  
in the stomach's emptiness.  
We are lutes. No more, no less.*

**FASTING IS THE SOUL'S NOURISHMENT.**

**IT REINS IN LANGUAGE & SEALS ONE'S LIPS.**

**IT TAMES DESIRE &**

**CALMS THE TEMPERAMENT.**

**IT AWAKENS CONSCIOUSNESS.**

Once again, the blessed month of Ramadan is with us; once again, like 'golden hours on the wings of an angel', it descends upon us with its blessed moments. Once again we have a chance to soar. Joyfully & dutifully the Muslims will respond. Every day will be spent in Fasting: from dawn to sunset, for one whole month, not a morsel of food, nor a drop of water, shall pass down the throat; nor will marital relations be indulged in. Each night hours will be devoted to standing in Prayers before God, reciting His words as sent down in the Quran. During the day, too, **reading & acting** upon the Text will be a cherished business.

Fasting, in one form or another, has always been an important & often necessary part of religious life, discipline & experience in every faith. As a means par excellence to come nearer to God, to discipline the self, to develop the strength to overcome the temptations of flesh, it needs no emphasis. Yet Islam turns Fasting, as it does every other act of devotion, into something different and unique, the life-giving centre of life.

**How does it impart new meaning and force to Fasting?** Put simply: by prescribing for it the time of Ramadan. This may sound like making things too simplistic, or trivializing the important. But Ramadan is no trivial event. For it is the month '*in which was sent down the Quran: the Guidance for mankind, with manifest truths of guidance and the Criterion by which to judge the true and the false*' (Al-Baqarah 2:185). It was on a night in Ramadan that the last Divine message began to come down: '*Read in the name of your Lord...*' (Al-Alaq 96:1). That is why you must fast in Ramadan, says the Quran.

Ramadan therefore centres the entire discipline of Fasting on the Quran. The sole purpose is to prepare us for receiving the Divine guidance, for living the Quran, for witnessing the Truth and Justice that it perfects, for striving to make the word of God supreme.

**How is this purpose achieved?** The fruit of Fasting ought to be that rich inner and moral quality which the Quran calls **taqwa**. '*Ordained for you is Fasting so that you might develop taqwa*' (2:183). The most basic condition for being guided by God, too, is taqwa. The significance is plain to see. Fasting, linked to Ramadan in which God's guidance came down, generates a taqwa which becomes directed on the supreme goal of entering the world of the Quran and of living therein, instead of being a spiritual ecstasy to be frittered away in the delights of soul. It becomes the key with which can be unlocked all the doors leading to the blessings which the Quran has to offer; honour, prosperity & freedom from fear & anxiety in this world; success, Paradise & God's good pleasure in the life-to-come. No time for Fasting other than Ramadan could have made taqwa such a potent force.

More importantly, the fulfillment of being guided by the Quran comes about when we strive to discharge the mission it entrusts to us. For, having the Book of God — a weighty word — places on our shoulders a heavy responsibility: to hear is to make it heard, to know is to act, to have is to share, to say shahadah is to do shahadah. This means an unflinching pursuit to create a new self within us, and to create a new world of Quranic ideals outside us.

This is the sole purpose for which a new Ummah was created & charged with the mission of bringing man to God by witnessing to His guidance, '*so that you be witnesses unto mankind & the Messenger be witness unto you*' (Al-Baqarah 2: 143). Otherwise, when the Quran came, the world was not devoid of godly men who fasted, and stood in prayers before God, and wept. Discharging that mission requires immense inner and moral resources like knowledge of and devotion to the Quran, strong faith (*Iman*), resolve and steadfastness (*sabr*). For it is no light task. Few have a full and clear understanding of what it means. Let us pause here and reflect why, otherwise we shall never grasp what the Ramadan Fasting is for and what it achieves.

When in Ramadan the first ray of Divine Revelation reached the Prophet (p) in Hira, its message of *Iqra* (Read) was impregnated with world-

shaking forces; he, therefore, trembled. The second revelation made things clear: 'arise and warn; make the greatness of your Lord the greatest' (Al-Muddaththir 74:2-3); he, then, took up his task with a single-minded dedication, and encountered stiff opposition. For, the call to 'let God be the Greatest' implied that all false claimants — and every claimant is false — to greatness, to unlimited power, authority and lordship over men and things, to obedience, loyalty and servitude from God's creatures be challenged, and dethroned.

This, it is not difficult to see, requires supreme sacrifices in 'giving up' (Hijrah) everything one loves & fighting with all that one possesses for the sake of that love of Allah which must be greater than all else (Al-Baqarah 2:165). A life of Jihad therefore necessarily requires important qualities: knowledge of & devotion to the Quran, deep & strong faith (*Iman*), resolve & steadfastness (*sabr*), total trust (*tawakkul*) and, of course, *taqwa*. Read the Quran & you will find every promise of success here & in the Hereafter conditional upon these qualities. Fasting, combined with the Quran recital in night-prayers, generates these rich resources which Ramadan harnesses to the fulfilment of the Quranic mission.

First, look at taqwa. What is it? Literally it means saving ourselves from harm. In moral life, therefore, taqwa must primarily mean: firstly, accepting that some actions and beliefs are harmful, that is to say, right and wrong do exist, and secondly, having the resolve and will to avoid the wrong and do the right. As a consequence, thirdly, our conduct should reflect this consciousness and resolve, if we are not to be hypocritical.

To have the Quranic taqwa, which will entitle us to its guidance, we must know that there are realities and values beyond matter, beyond what we are incapable of perceiving by our physical senses, beyond this world, that people need to be guided to what is right and what is wrong, (*yu'minuna bil-ghayb*). We should also be prepared to submit, willingly, all that we possess — mind, body, wealth — to the truth that we know & believe (*yuqimunas salata wa mimma razaqnahum yunfiqun*).

Every moment in Ramadan engraves these lessons on our hearts. Integrates them in our practice. The most elementary physical needs — food, water and sleep — are readily and joyfully sacrificed. **Hunger and thirst are no more harmful; God's displeasure is. Physical pleasures no more hold any lure; God's rewards do.** The scale of values is turned upside down. The measure of comfort and pain, success and failure is radically changed. Without this change, none is entitled to take up Allah's cause.

To the uninitiated, or an outsider, the devotional regimen of Ramadan may appear harsh and austere, but, in fact, it is eagerly awaited by believers. The sighting of the new moon, the crescent that signals the beginning of Ramadan is met with celebrations and jubilation. Even children — who are not required to fast — look forward to their first experience of Ramadan fasting. The sick, too, remain restless for having been deprived of this blessing. Such jubilation and eagerness, to sacrifice time, wealth, and life in submitting to whatever God asks of us, and a regret and sorrow if prevented from doing so for reasons beyond our control, is highly desirable in the way of God.

These qualities spring from genuine faith in the heart. For a Muslim the fast is primarily a commandment to his person, though its collective aspect is no less important. Little wonder, then, that individuals gladly take on the tribulations of Ramadan as an expression of their faith. Just as the Fast is something special between a person & God which only He can reward, so should we take Jihad to be.

Whatever the physical discomfort, the mortification of flesh is certainly not a desired object in Islam. The gifts of God are there to be enjoyed, but the limits by Him must also be strictly observed — that is another lesson of *taqwa* in Ramadan. As the sun sets, the fast must be broken, and sooner the better. All that became forbidden at His command becomes permissible, again at His command. Similarly eating before dawn is strongly urged, even though the hour is unearthly. For it provides the necessary strength for the rigours of the day ahead. Fasting and praying are obvious acts of worship, but eating, drinking and

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