

THE WISDOM OF RAMADAN

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In the Name of Allah— the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful.

Introduction - Our purpose in life

The mobile phone is evolving and progressing at a remarkable pace. A decade ago, the phone was used primarily to call and text people. Now, it functions as a TV, a camera, a flashlight, a wallet, a compass, a gaming console, a news channel, and much more. Despite these advancements, the smart phone never forsakes its original purpose. Regardless of what you are using your phone for, the moment a phone call comes in, all other apps and functions on the phone are suspended. It compels you to take the call. Why? Because this is the fundamental, primary purpose of the mobile phone. While the phone has transformed beyond recognition, it has never lost sight of its primary purpose.

In Islam, our situation is akin to that of the smartphone. We are free to indulge and enjoy ourselves, to travel and explore, to earn and accumulate wealth. However, it is essential not to overlook our prime objective and purpose in life:

And we have not created man
and jinns except to worship Me
(51:56). وما خلقت الجن والانس إلا ليعبدون

Our primary objective in life is to worship Allah. If we do everything in life except this, our example would be similar to a smartphone that can perform a thousand tasks for us, but cannot take a call.

The purpose of worship

This leads into our second observation: all acts of worship are performed for the love of Allah Most High, to seek His pleasure, and to attain His forgiveness. However, these acts also cultivate us as better human beings. Whether we partake in ritual prayers, the greater pilgrimage, alms-giving, or fasting, we serve our Creator. But these acts of worship harbour an inner dimension that forges us into better individuals. They make us gentler and more compassionate. As we heed Allah's words, we evolve into more skilled and enlightened beings. Hajj, for instance, eradicates racism and prejudice from our hearts. Zakat, or alms-giving, instils generosity and selflessness in us. The ritual prayer makes us appreciate Allah's blessings and prevents us from arrogance.

This paper aims to delve into this unique concept and identify how fasting can elevate us spiritually and mentally. We fast mainly for the pleasure of Allah. However, such is the magnitude of this act of worship that it equips us with invaluable life skills.

To summarise, the higher objectives of fasting during Ramadan are extensive and multifaceted. However, all these aspects converge on one central point as referenced in the Quran.

O believers! Fasting is prescribed for you—as it was for those before you—so perhaps you will become mindful [of Allah] (*taqwa*). (2:183).

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ
كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَتَّقُونَ

The ultimate purpose of fasting is *taqwa*, or feeling the presence of Allah in your life. Fasting brings multiple benefits; some are physical, some are mental, some are spiritual, and some are communal. In essence, all these benefits return and relate to *taqwa*.

The many Wisdoms of Ramadan

i. *To experience the spiritual state of hunger*

Islam is a religion that addresses poverty and hunger directly. Zakat, one of the pillars of Islam, aims to eradicate hunger. Feeding people is regarded as one of the most rewarding acts within the Islamic faith. The Prophet ﷺ stated that a person cannot be a believer if they are comfortably fed while their neighbour goes hungry.

Meanwhile, the religion also recognises that for those who are affluent and healthy, experiencing hunger can be a spiritual experience that brings immense benefit. It is beneficial to undergo this state occasionally. Consider the following points—

- Hunger leads to Paradise. The Prophet ﷺ said to Lady ‘Ā’ishah - may Allah be well-pleased with her:

‘Persist in knocking on the gates of Paradise.’ She asked: ‘With what?’ He replied: ‘With hunger.’

داومي قرع باب الجنة قالت بماذا؟
قال بالجوع

- Hunger leads to Self-Control. Food is a fundamental impulse. It is one of the hardest urges for a person to control. If one can regulate their food consumption, then controlling other desires should be more accessible. This is why the Prophet ﷺ advised unmarried individuals to fast. It serves as an exercise in teaching restraint. Spiritual masters focus on hunger not to promote anorexic behaviours but rather to instil self-discipline, control, and resilience. It is about mastering one’s carnal self, the *nafs*. Imam al-Qushayri once said, ‘For me, refraining from eating when I am hungry is superior to spending the entire night in prayer.’
- Hunger leads to Gratitude. The Prophet ﷺ was offered immense riches. Yet, he rejected material wealth. He deliberately chose to experience hunger because it fosters a profound sense of gratitude:

The Prophet ﷺ said: 'Indeed the valleys of Mecca in gold were offered to me, but I said: 'No, O Lord! I prefer to remain hungry one day and be satiated the next. The day I experience hunger I will feel feeble in Your presence and I will pray to You. And on the day I am satiated, I will praise and thank You.' (*al-Shifa*, 83)

إني عُرض عليّ أن تجعل لي بطحاء
مكة ذهباً فقلت لا يا رب أجوع يوماً و
أشبع يوماً فأما اليوم الذي أجوع فيه
فأتضرّع إليك وأدعوك وأما اليوم الذي
أشبع فيه فأحمدك وأثنى عليك

During Ramadan, you show to gratitude to Allah the most.

- Hunger is a Test from Allah. The Quran states that trials are a part of life (2:155), and when a person is tested, they usually draw closer to Allah. Thus, the hungrier one is, the closer one draws to their Creator.
- Hunger leads to Wisdom. Sahl ibn 'Abd-Allah once stated, 'When Allah created the world, he linked sin and ignorance with satiation, and knowledge and wisdom with hunger' (*al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*, 74).
- Hunger Helps Ward off Satan. The hungrier you are, the closer you draw to Allah, and the farther you distance yourself from Satan. Yahya ibn Mu'adh noted, "Satan finds no room in the heart of a man who remains hungry and harbours reduced worldly expectations."

ii. *Collectiveness and unity*

Acts that may typically be difficult become more manageable during Ramadan. Outside of this holy month, we continuously eat throughout the day and night. However, during Ramadan, we go without food for up to twenty hours daily. Prayers, which may sometimes feel burdensome,

become easier for Muslims during this blessed time. In addition to the obligatory prayers, Muslims perform nearly six hundred extra *rak'ahs* in the form of *Salat al-Tarawih* in Ramadan. But how is it possible? This is due to Allah's Mercy that descends upon us during Ramadan. One reason for the ease of these acts is the communal spirit that marks the month of Ramadan. This united, collective, and cohesive spirit greatly aids worship.

Allah could have allowed Muslims to observe thirty fasts throughout the year, anytime they wished. Yet, Allah specifically desired for all Muslims to fast together during the month of Ramadan. This encourages mutual assistance and support. Fasting alone can be difficult for some, but the process is made significantly easier when shared with fasting family members, waking for the *suhur* meal simultaneously. The communal performance of *Salat al-Tarawih* also eases its execution. Fasting, although essentially an individual act of worship, becomes communal by nature during Ramadan. Muslims consider Ramadan a time for unity where they share the pre-dawn meal together, pray together, break their fast collectively, and then celebrate Eid al-Fitr together as a community.

This is why the Prophet ﷺ said:

Allah's assistance (lit. Hand) is
with the the majority.

يد الله علي الجماعة

Collectiveness imbues any virtuous act we perform with ease, *barakah* (blessings), and deeper spirituality. This is why the Prophet ﷺ urged us to eat together, pray together, and perform *salah* and hajj together. Such communal actions enrich us with ease and blessings.

One of the most important lessons imparted by Ramadan is the value of unity and collectiveness. This holy month brings us closer together as an Ummah (community). As we grow closer to each other, we simultaneously draw nearer to Allah Most High.

iii. *The antidote to greed*

One of the most apparent lessons of fasting is to stop the evil of greed. Muslims are taught to shun greed in all of its forms and fasting is certainly a great exercise in preventing it. The Prophet ﷺ said: 'If man had a valley of gold, then he would still want a second.'

Ramadan teaches us to distinguish between need and greed. We often believe we require copious amounts of food and luxuries to navigate our daily lives. Yet, for one month, we subsist on minimal resources. Our daytime food consumption diminishes, and we sleep less during Ramadan. Simply put, it brings us to the realisation that, for eleven months, we consume more than we actually require.

In a society driven by consumerism, this message is profoundly significant. Our purchasing habits often reflect greed, whim, vanity, or fashion, rather than actual necessity. Ramadan helps us reverse this trend, illustrating that less is often more. The more we possess, the less we appreciate it; the less we possess, the more we treasure it. An abundance of water in the West diminishes its perceived value. Meanwhile, in poorer nations, every drop of water is cherished.

iv. *Better health*

The Prophet ﷺ said:

Fast, you shall gain health.

صُومُوا تَصِحُّوا

Today, we are in a much better position to understand and appreciate the health benefits that fasting provides to our body. On average, 20% of our daily calorie intake is used for digesting and absorbing the food we consume. When fasting and resting our digestive system, we save this 20% energy, which can then be used to heal and rejuvenate the body. The energy that has been set free is redirected towards detoxification and repair of cells, tissues, and organs, thereby leading to overall improved health. Experts suggest that regular fasting can decrease

the risk of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, and it can bolster the immune system.

While the hadith specifically mentions fasting and its role in better health, the fact is that all forms of worship contribute to improving a Muslim's well-being. Those who have completed the hajj pilgrimage can testify to the physical and spiritual enhancements it brings. *Salah* serves as an ideal daily workout, both for the body and the soul. *Zakat*, although a financial contribution, also improves spiritual health due to the contentment derived from relinquishing miserliness and aiding the less fortunate in society. In sum, a devout Muslim who regularly performs acts of worship automatically enjoys better health, mirroring their spiritual integrity.

v. *The 'Upper Hand'*

The Prophet ﷺ said:

The upper hand is better than the lower hand.

اليد العليا خير من اليد السفلي

This beautiful saying suggests that in Islam, it is always better to give than to receive. Throughout his life, the Prophet ﷺ practiced benevolence. Ramadan serves as a reminder of this principle—we offer iftar to others, we give *zakat al-fitr* (also referred to as *sadaqah al-fitr*) and *Zakat*, we extend our good manners to others, and this makes us happier individuals.

The people of the *dunya*, or worldly life, are often excessive in their consumption, while those of the Hereafter find joy in their provision.

vi. *Appreciation of Favours*

Do we truly appreciate the blessings of Allah that surround us? Frequently, we are ungrateful about the food served to us. So, how can we learn to value these gifts? In essence, they must be momentarily

withdrawn so we can gain a true appreciation for them. By fasting, Muslims learn to value food. The temporary deprivation enables Muslims to comprehend the actual importance of food and water. Moreover, it encourages them to minimise food wastage.

vii. *Genuine Compassion and Empathy for the Less Fortunate*

Fasting is significant because it enables us to experience true hunger, a plight affecting billions worldwide. It serves as a medium through which we can empathise with the poor and needy, stepping into their shoes. Usually, our admiration is directed towards the wealthy, famous, and affluent members of society. However, during Ramadan, we shift this pattern to remember the less fortunate. By doing so, we emulate the example of the Prophet ﷺ, who showed immense love and care for the poor and needy:

- He ﷺ always prayed for them. In fact, he prayed to live, die and be resurrected with them:

“O Allah, let me live as a poor person, let me die as a poor person and resurrect me amongst the poor.”
اللهم أحييني مسكيناً و أميتني مسكيناً و احشُرني في زمرة المساكين

- Allah commanded the Prophet ﷺ never to turn away the poor and those seeking help:

And as for the beggar, do not rebuke him (93:10).
وَأما السائل فلا تنهر

- Though mosques are not really residential, the Prophet ﷺ housed the poor people of Medina next to his own house, namely the *As’hab al-Suffah*, or the People of the Bench. Whenever the Prophet ﷺ was offered food and gifts, they were the first recipients.

viii. *Outside the comfort zone*

For one month in the year, Muslims are asked to step outside their comfort zone and push themselves physically and spiritually. It is a time when Muslims realise the power of their bodies and to appreciate that they are truly stronger than they think. No one has ever achieved greatness in their comfort zone. Success comes when one steps outside it.

viii. *Morality*

Fasting teaches us that if we can go nineteen hours without food and water, why can't we go without swearing and backbiting? The former is crucial to our very survival, whereas the latter is not. Continuing the same type of corrupt behaviour whilst fasting is the most hypocritical thing a Muslim can do. That is why the Prophet ﷺ said that if a person cannot give up loose talk in Ramadan, then Allah does not require him to give up food and water.

x. *Satan or me?*

If we perform acts of evil, then who is to blame? Does this evil stem from ourselves or from the Satan? Ramadan is the ideal time to answer this question. This is because the Prophet ﷺ said:

“When the month of Ramadan إذا جاء رمضان فتحت أبواب الجنة و
begins, the gates of Paradise غلقت أبواب النار و صفت الشياطين
are opened, the gates of Hell
are closed, and the devils are
chained.” (*Sahih Muslim*).

Backbiting, lying, gossiping and hurting others always reduces in Ramadān and the reason is precisely because the devils are chained up during this blessed period. However, if a person still indulges in evil during this blessed month, then it cannot be blamed on the devils,

for they are chained up. It therefore must stem from the individual himself.

xi. *A time to reconnect with the masjid*

Muslims are mentally and spiritually the happiest in the month of Ramadan. In normal circumstances, Muslims frequent the masjid in Ramadan more than any other period in the year. These two facts are related. The very fact we are at our happiest in Ramadan certainly has a correlation with the fact that we spend most of our time in the house of Allah during the same period; for congregational prayers, for *Salat al-Tarawih*, for *ītikaf* and for iftar. The masjid is an anti-*dunya* zone. Most of our worries relate to the worldly life.

xii. *A lesson in patience*

In the Quran, Allah Most High states:

O believers! Seek comfort in patience and prayer. يا ايها الذين امنوا استعينوا بالصبر و الصلاة

Ali al-Qari (d. 1014/1606) suggests that in this context, patience (*ṣabr*) refers to *ṣawm*, or fasting. Thus, the verse can be interpreted as ‘O believers! Seek comfort through fasting and prayer.’

In a famous hadith, the Prophet ﷺ delivered a pre-Ramadan sermon in which he said:

It is the month of patience, and the reward for patience is Paradise. وهو شهر الصبر و الصبر ثوابه الجنة

The verse and the hadith remind us that Ramadan embodies the virtue of patience. We exhibit this quality throughout the day as we await food and drink.

Allah is with the patient. Patience, or *sabr*, is a distinctive quality of the prophets and messengers and a valuable trait to nurture, which is

one of the objectives of Ramadan. However, with the fast-paced nature of today's world, characterised by instant online searches, speedy food deliveries, and same-day product deliveries, patience is becoming a lost art. These conveniences, albeit useful, indirectly erode our capacity for waiting and being patient. It becomes challenging when life situations demand patience. Through fasting for a month each year, Muslims are redeveloping the spiritual attribute of *sabr*.

xiii. *The Antidote to Vanity*

In contrast to other forms of worship, which are visible to others, like performing *salah* or embarking on hajj, fasting, or *sawm* is an inner, hidden form of worship. This renders it one of the most sincere forms of worship, unseen by others. Fasting is a private communion between Allah and a Muslim, involving the least amount of ostentation. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani (d. 852/1449) cites a *mursal* hadith:

“There is no ostentation in fasting”
(*Fath al-bari*)

ليس في الصيام رياء.

While hajj, *salah*, and zakat are visible to others, *sawm* is not. There are no worldly motives behind it. Therefore, Allah proclaims that He alone will reward the one fasting. In a world where people often showcase their actions, possessions, and achievements, the wisdom of Ramadan aims to reverse this trend. Any deed should be performed solely to please Allah, the sole granter of rewards.

