

Ramadhan: A Time for Fasting, Prayer, & Unity



THE HISTORY OF FASTING AND WHY MUSLIMS FAST NOW

Fasting has existed as a religious practice for thousands of years. It has been discussed in almost all holy texts: The Upanishads of Hinduism, the Bible, the Torah, and of course the Quran. Each religion has interpreted the rules of fasting to meet the spiritual needs of its members. Hindus fast during religious festivals to become pure, Christians during Lent to remember the suffering of Jesus, or Jews on Yom Kippur to atone for sins. Regardless of the type or purpose of fasting, religions have prescribed it as a form of spiritual cleansing. An individual, by voluntarily denying hunger and thirst, rejects the materialistic pull of this transient world; thereby focusing on the spirit. Additionally fasting brings together a community of believers and strengthens the bonds of brotherhood. In Islam fasting is obligatory during the **Holy month of Ramadhan**. Muslims all over the world fast from dawn to dusk and spend the month reviving their spirit and connecting with God.

The purpose of fasting in Islam is to promote spiritual health and healing. We are constantly bombarded with situations, ideas, and pressures that tempt us to stray from the path of piety. In Ramadhan, by not satisfying the physical needs of our body, we provide food for our soul. We nourish our soul by controlling our baser instincts, by spending time in prayer and through the contemplation of God. It becomes a form of detoxification for our spirit, as we cast off the sins and pollution that have accumulated in the past year and work towards maintaining that mindset. The act of fasting also serves to increase God-

consciousness and awareness of every decision we make. As a result, one becomes close to God and the relationship between the believer and God is deepened. Fasting allows a Muslim to revitalize their faith and move closer to their creator through inner reflection.

The month of Ramadhan also serves a social purpose by bridging the gaps in a community and enhancing the relationship between believers. One never feels as connected and close to a fellow Muslim as during Ramadhan. Breaking the fast with others at the local mosque is a wonderful opportunity to build trust and camaraderie. However, the social aspect of Ramadhan goes beyond sharing meals and prayers. It is a time for those of us who have been blessed by God to relate to those who are not as lucky. Feeling the pangs of hunger and thirst, allows us to establish rapport with people who may not always have a meal waiting for them at the end of the day. Fasting facilitates charity and compassion and compels believers to share their good fortune with those less fortunate.

Ultimately fasting during Ramadhan is a vehicle for believers to enhance their faith and come closer to God through fasting. Each moment a believer spends denying himself food and water, he is nurturing his soul and strengthening his resolve against daily temptations. Fasting is a blessing from God in that it allows us to combine worship in all forms; prayer, thinking of God, and charity. In doing so not only do we cleanse our bodies and spirits, but also our souls.

What is the Purpose of Ramadhan?

Ramadhan, as many people know, is a month of fasting and the remembrance of God. However, this is not just a month of abstaining from food and drink.

During Ramadhan one must refrain from eating, drinking, physical needs, cursing, impure thoughts and actions, as well as a variety of other distractions. Fasting helps a person purify their mind and body and teach them self discipline. It is also the best time to try to cut bad habits and really cleanse the soul. The focus on discipline is especially important since a person fasting must hold back their tongue and every part of their body from engaging in any sinful action.

One is even exhorted to control ones ears from hearing any gossip or other obscene language. However, this is easier said than done. On a daily basis, Muslims are bombarded with sinful temptations and the same holds true during Ramadhan. This truth gives new meaning to the term discipline. Muslims also use this time to strengthen family and community bonds by participating in the "Suhur", or the morning pre-dawn meal, and "Iftar", the meal in which the fast is broken, with each other – as a community.

Every Muslim is considered a brother and sister to one another, and each are equal to each other. Community has a special place in Islam and this is highlighted during Ramadhan. Equality is doubly emphasized in the month of Ramadhan, in that each Muslim participates in fasting whether they are rich or poor, Arab, whether they are one race or another, and they all come together to eat from the same plate, at the same time, in the same place (the mosque).

Of course, Ramadhan is a time of celebration, not difficulty. As such, certain obvious exemptions are made, the young, the elderly, and sick are exempted from fasting - and anyone else who otherwise can't fast for whatever reason.

Ramadhan is also the best time for a Muslim to strengthen their ties with God. Ramadhan is the month where a Muslim fully commits his and her body and mind in self discipline, the remembrance of God, and the spiritual cleansing of their soul.

Islamic Information Center
529 14th St. Suite 1292
Washington DC 20045
www.islamicinformationcenter.org



Ramadhan is a Spiritual Journey to God

In Islam, the spiritual, social, economic, and psychological benefits of fasting are interrelated, each affecting the other. Rituals that regulate the Muslims' social and individual life and bring them closer to God. A combination of fast, prayers, and meditation may be the very best dose for any psychological or spiritual ills from which one may be suffering. In Islam, God is the cure for any maladies.

During the month of Ramadhan, Muslims learn to curb their desires and check them against transgression, extravagance, and yielding to the lower desires. Fasting fosters a strong will, teaches patience and self-discipline, the ability to bear hardship and tolerate hunger and thirst. In short, it brings about a clear victory over one's base desires and impulses.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad, May God Bless Him, says:

"One who, while fasting, neither guards his tongue from telling lies nor refrains from doing bad deeds does not respect his fast, and does this, even though God does not approve of mere abstention from food. ... When you fast, you should not speak ill of anybody, nor should you be boisterous or noisy. If anybody speaks ill of you or tries to pick a quarrel with you, do not respond to him in the same manner; rather, simply tell him that you are fasting."

Islam teaches that fasting is actually one of the signs of God's mercy, and it is never meant to put a hardship on anybody. God does not gain any benefit from putting hardship on anyone; on the contrary, He always tries to pave the way of happiness for those who follow Him in this life and the Hereafter. Sometimes He even "pushes" them to do what is good for them, as is the case with the month of Ramadhan. As this Holy month returns every year, Muslims are taught to begin the month with a variety of prayers, such as this one:

"Oh Lord! The month of Ramadhan has arrived, and You have required us to fast during it and revealed the Qur'an as guidance to people and a clear distinction of the guidance and the right criteria. Oh Lord! Help us observe its fast; accept it from us; receive our fast from and safeguard the same for us in an ease from You and good health; surely You can do everything."