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Eighteen reasons why a Muslim Fasts

Every year the month of Ramadhan comes and goes; every year we fast, yet without proper appreciation of the potentials of character building that the fasts hold for us. We find ourselves as spiritually backwards after the fast are over as when the month began. In fact our lack of knowledge of the real objectives of fasts often tends to produce an adverse effect in us, for, as is well known, the best of medicines could have ill effects if not taken in accordance with the physician's directives and instructions.

Thus it is, that the fast tends to make many of us irritable and quick tempered (expecting, as we do, VIP treatment from others, especially our subordinates and family members because of our fast) while the fast was in fact meant to mellow us into exhibiting the finer tracts of human character as illustrated by our Imams.

Imam Zaynul Abidin (a) would record the lapses of his servants during the month of Ramadhan, without telling them anything at the time. As the month would draw to its close, he would gather the servants before him and apprise them of their mistakes, for giving them at the same time and beseeching the Lord to forgive him, even as he had forgiven them. The holy Imam, Masoom that he was, only sought by this practical demonstration to draw attention of his followers to the fact that they would be accountable to God for their actions and should they desire His forgiveness, they would have to forgive their subordinates as well. This practical lesson taught by the Imam ought to be rigorously pursued during the month of Ramadhan by the followers of the Imam.

As in this case, so in other spheres of life, our attitude to fasts ought indeed to be radically changed. We ought to welcome fasts as a practical means of reforming ourselves rather than nearly consider them as an inevitable religious bondage, eagerly awaiting to free ourselves there from at the month end to resume our ways of old again.

Besides of course being a means to acquiring the pleasure of God, for which all acts of devotion are basically meant, fasting could be used as a stepping stone to build up the various traits of character in accordance with the clear injunctions of the Qur'an itself that fasts have been prescribed with a view to developing piety in man.

In the hurry and bustle of the present day life, man often finds himself ill-equipped to battle through life's odds if he is not equipped with the proper attitude to face the various problems. While we find ourselves frustrated or look to other directions in such difficulties, we have most unfortunately overlooked the character building force that the fasts provide us every year.

Ramadhan is a month of fasting and prayers for the Muslims. The fast consists of total abstinence from food and drink from dawn to dusk. There is however, a greater significance to fasts than mere abstinence from eating and drinking. The real objective of fasts is to inculcate in man the spirit of abstinence from sins, and cultivation of virtue. Thus the Qur'an declares that the fasts have been prescribed with a view to developing piety in man. How are the many facets of piety sought to be cultivated through fasts? This article tries to list as concisely as possible, the various benefits the fasts would confer upon Muslims.

1. The most important consideration in undertaking a fast, as in any act of devotion, is to seek nearness to God, and seek His pleasure and Forgiveness. This itself generates a spirit of piety in man.
2. Creating the conditions of hunger and thirst for oneself, simply in obedience to the Divine order, measures the faith of man in God and helps strengthen it by putting it to a severe test.
3. Fasting enhances through creation of artificial non-availability, the value of the bounties of God which man often takes for granted. This inculcates in man a spirit of gratitude and consequent devotion to God. Nothing else can bring home to a man the worth of God's bounties than a glass of water and a square meal after a day long fast. This also reminds man that the real joy in enjoying God's bounties lies in moderation and restraint and not in over indulging.
4. Fasting makes us deeply conscious of the pangs of hunger and discomfort suffered by the less fortunate among our brethren. They have to put up with difficult conditions all through their lives. It thus kindles in man a spirit of sacrifice leading to change towards his suffering brethren.
5. Fasting gives man an unflinching training in endurance, a spirit of acceptance. This could well prepare him to put up with the unchangeable situations in life in the same spirit of resignation as cultivated during the fasts.
6. Fasting develops courage, fortitude, and a fighting spirit in man to surmount the heavy odds in life with a cool and tranquil mind. It sharpens his power of concentration to overcome obstacles through a vigorous exercise all throughout the month, leading to a steeling of his will power and resolve, that could help him in challenging situations in life. It is seen that many an undesirable habit which is difficult to give up, is more easily given up during the days of fasting.
7. Fasting teaches man reliance on God, and confidence in Him. Just as the vigorous state of fasting for a whole month is undertaken with His assistance, bitter situations in life could also be surmounted with His help.

8. Fasting develops a spirit of patience in man, with the realization that the days of fasting, though seemingly unending, do have a successful and happy end. Thus is life. All bitter situations pass, and come to an end.
9. Fasting is meant to conquer anger and develop self-control in man. The vigorous effort required to put up with hunger and thirst can well be extended to conquer other infirmities of human character that lead man into error and sin.
10. Fasting inculcates a spirit of tolerance in man to face unpleasant conditions and situations without making his fellow beings the victim of his wrath. Many people, when facing discomfort and deprivation, become irritable and annoyed. This anger is then vented on those around them. Fasting helps a man become more tolerant despite his own discomfort.
11. Fasting mellows a man and enhances his character, giving a jolt to the human instincts of pride, haughtiness, jealousy and ambition. Fasting softens his character, and clears his heart and mind of many negative emotions.
12. Fasting exposes the weakness of man in the event of his being deprived of two basic bounties of God; food and drink. It infuses into him a spirit of weakness and submission, generating humility and prayer in an otherwise arrogant being.
13. Fasting breathes the spirit of forgiveness in man towards others, as he seeks God's forgiveness through fasts and prayers.
14. Fasting gives lessons in punctuality. Man has to adhere to a strict schedule of time in the observance of the fast.
15. Fasting could affect the economy of the individual as he is less wasteful on food and meals.
16. Fasting demands a rigid sense of discipline, mental, spiritual and physical. This forms characteristics which are an essential ingredient to success in life.
17. Fasting creates spiritual reformation in man, infusing him with a spirit of enthusiasm and zest to change and become a better human being in the eyes of God. This is an excellent opportunity, given to believers each year, to change themselves and consequently their destinies.
18. On the physical side, fasting cleanses the human system of the accumulated impurities of uninterrupted eating throughout the year. It prepares the body to face diseases or conditions of scarcity. The rigid abstinence of a fast regulates man's health, sharpens his intellect and enhances the qualities of his heart.

Fasting is thus a bounty in itself, encompassing within itself many bounties. It instills a spirit of reformation in man, creating a wide awakening in him to fulfil his duties towards God and man, and

towards himself.

(Adapted from an article by Marhum Ahmed Sheriff Dewji, published in the Light Magazine)

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