

I'tikaf, The Spiritual Retreat

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Shaykh Saleem Bhimji

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Article

Authors(s):

[Saleem Bhimji](#) [1]

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The beautiful images in this article have been taken from www.rahpouyan.com [6] – it should be noted that these photos are from Iran, a country of over 60,000,000 followers of the Ahlul Bait (prayers be upon all of them).

Thus, the large number of youth and others participating in this great event, something which has only taken form in the last twenty years since the victory of the Islamic revolution, may not be something as seen in other communities around the world – particularly the “West”.

Insha'Allah, may Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) make our communities as large and prosperous as these and may our youth make maximum benefit from this very powerful spiritual retreat.

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: من اعتكف إيماناً واحتساباً غُفِرَ له ما تقدم من ذنبه

The Messenger of Allah (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) has said: “The persons who secludes himself (in the Masjid in I'tikaf) in true faith and hope (for the reward of Allah), all of his previous sins shall be forgiven.” (Kanzul Ummal, Hadith 24007)

One of the greatest traditions of Islam, the spark of which has recently been reignited in the hearts of the youth, is that of I'tikaf. This is a tradition which has been in Islam from the first days of the revelation and is also something known and recognized in other Divine religions sent by Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) and practiced by them – more or less:

وَإِذْ جَعَلْنَا الْبَيْتَ مَثَابَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَمْنًا وَاتَّخِذُوا مِن مَّقَامِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ مُصَلِّينَ ۖ وَعَهْدَنَا إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ أَنَّ طَهَّرَا بَيْتِي
لِلطَّائِفِينَ وَالْعَاكِفِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ

“And when We made the House a pilgrimage for mankind and a (place of) security, and said, ‘Appoint for yourselves a place of prayer on the standing-place of Ibrahim [Maqam-e-Ibrahim].’ And We enjoined Ibrahim and Isma’il saying: ‘Purify My House for those who visit (it) and those who abide (in it) for devotion, those who bow down (and) those who prostrate themselves.’”
(Surat ul-Baqarah 2: 125)

The great Masajid of Islam located in cities such as Makkah, Madinah, Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, Kadhamain, Qum, Isfahan, Mashad and other major Muslim cities have hosted this spiritual retreat for over 1,400 years primarily in the “White Nights” of Rajab – the 13th, 14th and 15th, and more specifically in the month of Ramadhan – that too primarily in the last 10 nights of the blessed month.

Since the life of the transient world keeps us busy for the whole year in studies, work, business, traveling and other such things and causes us to be negligent of the next life, we may sometimes think that these things are the sole purpose in life and thus, we end up forgetting our true goal – Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him). Thus, it is for this reason that I’tikaf is referred to as “The spring of life in a world struck with the drought of negligence of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him).”

It is the negligence of ourselves and our Creator which is given a fresh breath of life in this short three day period of I’tikaf. In addition, we can once again find ourselves and our Lord and return back to Him now (spiritually return back to Him) before we are forced to return back to Him by the separation of the soul from the body in a state of complete negligence of Him.

The period of I’tikaf is the best time to force one’s self to sit and think and reflect on the self and the world around; the period of the I’tikaf is the best time to forget the worries of the transient world and to return to the soul and the Creator of the soul; the period of the I’tikaf is the best time to return back to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) in true repentance for our sins committed through the year and to concentrate on the Words of Allah in the Qur’an, the prayers and supplications used to call upon Him and all of those things which are related to Him and His Sacred Essence.

I’tikaf is not a three day holiday from work or school; it is not a time to sit in the Masjid in complete ignorance of one’s self and his spiritual surroundings; it is not the venue to pass one’s time in idleness. I’tikaf is not the act of sleeping and snoring in the Masjid and killing time...

Truly, I’tikaf is a three day spiritual retreat to build the self; it is the act of leaving one’s personal house to be in the service of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) and to recognize one’s self in Allah’s house (the Masjid) while at the same time, being a guest in the House of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) – eating His food which He has sent and being around His servants which He has guided.

Definition of I’tikaf

The literal definition of the word I’tikaf is to stay in a particular place, however in the definition of the faith

of Islam , this word means to stay in the Masjid for a particular time period in the worship of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) while maintaining certain conditions, which shall be covered later on in this article.

In the state of I'tikaf, a person can stand, sit, sleep, etc... and there is not one particular 'form' that this retreat must be carried out in (unlike the Salat which has a specific form to it). What is important in this period is to obey the commandments of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him), to refrain from the things which He has prohibited (both in life in general and in this three day sojourn) and to be in the service of Him.

Conditions of I'tikaf

There are a few conditions for the person who wishes to partake in the Divine blessing of I'tikaf:

Intelligence ('Aql)

Thus, the person must not be mentally unstable;

True Faith (Iman)

Thus, although a Non-Muslim can perform the I'tikaf and it may be correct from the point of view of the outer actions, however to earn the Divine Reward, he or she must be a true believer;

Intention (Niyyat)

I'tikaf must be performed for the purpose of seeking closeness to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) and not to show off or due to societal or family or peer pressure;

Fasting (Sawm) During I'tikaf

The person who is not able to fast, for whatever reason, is deprived from the Divine grace of being able to perform I'tikaf. He or she may still gain a reward from Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) for having the intention to perform this act of worship, however cannot directly participate in this act as will be mentioned.

Therefore, if a person is a traveler or one who is not able to fast due to some danger to his life, he cannot partake in I'tikaf. However, if the traveler who wants to perform the I'tikaf makes an oath that he will fast for three days on a trip, then he can perform the I'tikaf even though his Salat may be prayed as that of a traveler. In addition, if one needs to perform any sort of fasting whether it be obligatory, recommended, a penitence for a missed fast, on behalf of someone else, etc... then one's I'tikaf will be correct with the performance of this type of fast.

Permission

One must have the permission of the person whom he needs to gain permission from to carry out this act (guardian, husband, etc...) to ensure the correctness of the I'tikaf.

Place: One must stay inside the Masjid for the entire period for his I'tikaf to be correct (the rules of this will be explained in more detail later...)

Time Period (Length) of the I'tikaf

The person performing I'tikaf must stay in this state for a minimum of three complete days from sunrise of the first day until the sunset of the third day (for example if he starts I'tikaf on Monday at Fajr time, he must complete it until Thursday at Maghrib time). The first two days of I'tikaf are recommended and if a person wishes, he may leave after this period and end his I'tikaf, however if he completes two full days of I'tikaf in the Masjid (until the Maghrib of the second day), then it becomes obligatory upon him to continue his fast on the third day and to stay in the Masjid for the remaining period of his I'tikaf – meaning till the time of Maghrib of the third day.

Similarly, if a person goes into I'tikaf for 5 days, the 6th day becomes obligatory; and if he goes into I'tikaf for 8 days then the 9th day becomes obligatory and so on...

Thus, I'tikaf is for 3 full days and 2 nights which are in between these days and this period must be maintained. In this ruling, just as that of the daily Salat, the meaning of three complete days means three periods of Fajr to Maghrib.

Time of I'tikaf

Anytime in which fasting is permissible is an opportune time for I'tikaf and the state of I'tikaf does not have a specific time related to it. Of course the “White Days” which are the 13th, 14th and 15th of the lunar month and the last ten days of the Month of Ramadhan are the best times for this spiritual exercise. Therefore, one cannot make I'tikaf on the day of 'Eid since it is forbidden to fast on that day and similarly, he cannot start I'tikaf two days before 'Eid.

It has been mentioned that the Prophet of Islam (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) used to perform I'tikaf in the Month of Ramadhan in the first 10 days (three days), the second 10 days (three days) and then in the last ten days (three days) as well.

Permission of the Guardian

As mentioned previously in passing, I'tikaf performed without the permission of his guardian or any person whose rights would be taken away if the person was to go in a state of I'tikaf is not correct. Thus,

it is for this reason that the wife must also take her husband's permission if her I'tikaf would infringe on marital rights with his wife. Similarly, if one's parents are not happy or are concerned for their son or daughter and do not permit him to make I'tikaf, then the child is not permitted to go forth for this (recommended) act of worship.

The Intention (Niyyah) for I'tikaf

The intention for I'tikaf is of three main types. The most common form is the recommended I'tikaf, however it can also become obligatory (wajib) if a person makes an oath or promise to Allah is for the fulfillment of something (and in that oath he had promised Allah is that he would perform I'tikaf if his prayer is fulfilled). The third intention which can be made for I'tikaf is that it is being done on behalf of someone else – similar to how people perform Hajj for their deceased relatives or make up missed prayers of parents who have passed away or others. Therefore, it is necessary for the correctness of I'tikaf to specify the intention and the type that one wants to perform.

Time and Place of the Intention of the I'tikaf and the Place of I'tikaf

The intention must be made from the beginning of the time of Fajr on the first day and it is not permissible to delay it until the end of the time of Fajr (just before sunrise), however if just before the rising of the sun of Fajr, one makes his intention, this will still be sufficient. At the time of making intention for I'tikaf, the person must be inside the Masjid in which he/she wishes to perform I'tikaf, however if at the beginning time of Fajr he leaves to redo his Wudhu or for another important task, then he is still able to do his intention (upon returning).

The place of I'tikaf must be the Masjid and therefore, performing I'tikaf in any place other than a Masjid such as a room or hall used for Salat, a Musalla (specific building which is made only for Jam'at Salat and other places like this (which are not proper Masajid) is not correct.

The preferential order of where I'tikaf should be performed is: Masjidul Haram, Masjid an-Nabi (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family), Masjid Kufa and then the Masjid of Basrah – after these, then any other “Central” and “Congregational” Masjid is permissible to perform the I'tikaf in.

By stating this, it clearly means that in places like the traditional Hussainiyah or Imambargah and other places such as this, it is not correct to perform the I'tikaf– this act is limited to the four mentioned Masajid and then the Central Masjid of a city.

Based on this ruling, although the scholars permit I'tikaf in these other buildings (which are not proper Masjid), however the specific rulings of I'tikaf would not hold in other such venues. If one was to perform I'tikaf in any place other than the “Central Masjid” then he would need to do so with the intention that this

act would bring him closer to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) and that he is hoping for a reward in this act (of being done outside of a proper Masjid as per the Islamic legislations).

Therefore, if there are three or four Masjid in one city, since they are not of the four Masjid which I'tikaf can be performed in (with that special intention), the people may use all of them for the program of I'tikaf.

The meaning of the Central or Congregational Masjid is that which a majority of the people frequent (other than this Masjid would be those referred to with names such as the Masjid of the Bazar, the Masjid of a School, the Masjid inside a factory, etc...) and it is not permissible to perform the I'tikaf in these places.

The courtyards and entrances of the Masjid are not considered as a part of the Masjid except in the case that they are recognized and known (by others) to be an actual part of the Masjid. If a person doubts if the place in which he is, is actually a Masjid or not, then according to the rules, he is not permitted to perform I'tikaf there until he ascertains and has certainty that the place where he is truly is a part of the Masjid.

Prohibited Acts During I'tikaf

The prohibited acts during the state of I'tikaf include:

Applying perfume and smelling perfume with the intention of deriving pleasure. This act makes I'tikaf null and void and is also a sin.

Discussions and arguments both in relation to the world and the faith. This means that a person argues with another to prove that he is better or smarter or that he knows more, etc... However, if a person must argue or debate to uphold the truth and destroy falsehood, it is permissible – rather this is the best form of worship and servitude to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) during this noble state.

Buying and selling anything.

Deriving pleasure from the opposite sex in any way – holding hands, hugging, kissing, etc... is completely forbidden in the state of I'tikaf.

If any of these things are performed, one's I'tikaf becomes void and in certain cases a Kaffarah or penitence must be paid out (which will be discussed below).

Note

Seeing as how the person in I'tikaf is also in a state of fasting, all of those things which make the fast void must not be performed which include: eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, masturbation (which is a

sin at all times), ascribing lies to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him), the Noble Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) or the A'immah (prayers be upon all of them), swallowing thick dust (and smoking as an extension), immersing one's head in water (such as in a swimming pool), remaining in a state of ritual impurity until the time of Fajr, and vomiting. If any of these are done, then one must make up the fast in those ways mentioned in the books of Legal Rulings.

In addition, the rights of others who are in the Masjid must also be observed. The respect and honor of the Masjid must be observed and one should try to stay in a state of Wudhu the entire period.

Also, the cleanliness of the Masjid must also be maintained.

Those in this state should also try and keep away from talking about issues of the transient world (talking about anything other than Allah) are some of the things which have been mentioned in the books which highlight the spiritual traits of this state.

Leaving the Masjid During the Period of I'tikaf

It is not permissible to leave the Masjid during the state of I'tikaf except for a reason and necessity which would (a) be a logical and reasonable excuse; (b) be deemed so according to the general population and (c) the religious rules of Islam dictate.

Thus, in the following examples, it would be permitted to leave the Masjid while in the state of I'tikaf: going to a doctor in cases of emergency, going to the bathroom (as these are logical reasons), visiting someone who is very sick and taking part in the burial rites of a person IF the person who has passed away was a close relation to the person performing I'tikaf (which would be a necessity deemed so by the general consensus and population), or to perform a Ghusl(if needed) or to do Wudhu (which are necessities which the religion dictates).

Leaving the Masjid for classes (school) or for study sessions with a study partner or for Tabligh and propagation of the faith and other things such as this is not permissible as they do not fall into any of the three categories mentioned above (since when a person makes the intention to perform I'tikaf he has also taken into consideration that he will not be attending school and has made the necessary arrangements beforehand. Similarly, the one engaged in I'tikaf knows from beforehand that if his 'field of work' is Tabligh, that he would be disconnecting himself from that 'job' for this period).

If a person performs his I'tikaf in a place in which another person was already in I'tikaf (but had left for a brief moment) however he has left his prayer mat or other signs that he was coming back to that spot, then the second person must leave that area, otherwise he would be considered as a usurper of that piece of land where he is performing his I'tikaf. His I'tikaf would be correct if he continues to stay there however he would have committed a sin.

If a person in I'tikaf has a wet dream and needs to perform a Ghusl, however it is not possible to do this

in the Masjid (or its compound), it is obviously obligatory upon him to leave the Masjid and his I'tikaf will be considered null and void. The same rule applies to sisters who are not able to stay inside the Masjid due to their monthly cycle since they are not permitted to stay inside a Masjid, they too must immediately leave the Masjid and for them too, their I'tikaf is null and void.

According to obligatory precaution, if a person leaves the Masjid for a necessity, he must choose the shortest and closest route to leave and return by and it is obligatory that he does not keep himself out of the Masjid for more than the needed time period. It is also obligatory that he does not sit underneath an area which shades him. Rather, according to precaution, it is not permitted for him to sit outside of the Masjid except for cases of necessity.

If the person performing I'tikaf leaves the Masjid in order to complete a necessity upon him, and the time period which he leaves the Masjid for is a very long one such as that people would doubt or not consider him being in a state of I'tikaf, then his I'tikaf would be null and void.

Penitence for Breaking the Rules of the I'tikaf

In some instances, if a person does one of the things which breaks his state of I'tikaf, he must offer a penitence. Some examples of this are mentioned as follows:

If a person has sexual relations during the period of I'tikaf and I'tikaf was wajib for him to perform (due to a promise, oath, etc... which he made), then he must make up the I'tikaf by performing it properly at a later date.

If a person performs one of the other things which makes I'tikaf void and his I'tikaf was obligatory (due to a promise, oath, etc... which he made), then he must finish the time remaining of I'tikaf and redo it later on.

If I'tikaf was not obligatory and if a person does something on the first day of I'tikaf then he must immediately come out of this state, however if it is on the third day then he must finish the period remaining.

If a person performs one of the other things which makes I'tikaf void and his I'tikaf was a recommended one and this happens after the second day, then he must redo the I'tikaf later on, however if it is before the end of the second day, then he has no responsibility on him to redo it.

Frequently Asked Questions on I'tikaf

There is a close relationship to I'tikaf and the ihram for Hajj. As was seen, there are certain things forbidden while in the ihram of Hajj which are also forbidden for the one in the state of I'tikaf. This point should be kept in mind especially in the spiritual aspect of this great act of worship.

The intention for this act should be pronounced verbally just so one is focused on this act and whom he is doing it for. Some scholars have even stated that the intention should be renewed every day.

Although it is discouraged to sleep in a Masjid according to the verdict of the scholars, there are 'exceptions to this rule' – one being in the state of I'tikaf as this itself is an act of worship which has been legislated by Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) to be performed only in a Masjid. To sleep at other times is discouraged.

A person can change his clothes during the period of I'tikaf if the need arises (they become dirty, Najis, etc...) and there is no problem in this, however to take a bath, especially with soap which may be perfumed (done with the intention of clinging to the transient world) must be avoided – except in the case of necessity where one must take a bath.

People can come and visit the Masjid during the period of I'tikaf and there is even no problem if friends or family come to bring the person in I'tikaf food, drink (to break his fast with) or things which they may need and are a dire necessity during this three day period.

Food is usually prepared by the community members or the leaders of the Masjid for those in the state of I'tikaf as the people in I'tikaf are not permitted to leave the Masjid (except for the conditions previously stated). The person who plans to enter this spiritual retreat can also bring things with him when he begins his three day sojourn if he so desires.

In regards to the breaking of the fast and eating before the fast starts, one cannot leave the Masjid to procure this. Therefore, he should have either brought things with him or the Masjid organizers should be so kind so as to provide this to those in the state of worship for this three day period. If there is a kitchen in the Masjid, those in the worship of Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) may use it to make their own food.

The three day period should be spent in contemplation of the faith of Islam, recitation of the Noble Quran and supplications and anything else which can draw a person closer to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him). If a person has missed prayers, he should try and make them up in this special period. If he has a clean slate of prayers, then he should try and recite the recommended prayers. Other than this, all other spiritual acts of nearness to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) should be maintained.

However at the same time, one should not do things which keep him busy with the transient world that he has turned away from for these three days – meaning that reading things which would keep his mind busy with work, school, etc... should be refrained from. In addition, all other things which are commonly used to "kill time" should be completely left for this short three day period.

...and all the praise belongs to Allah (Glory and Greatness be to Him) for the help in the writing and translation of this work, only the mistakes are mine.

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