

Ramadan... Worldly abstinence, spiritual sustenance!

WHAT IS RAMADAN?

Ramadan is the holiest month in the Islamic Lunar calendar. It is a time of spiritual and social rejuvenation and bonding for believers globally, through the ritual of fasting. Although perceived to be somewhat austere, fasting on the other hand is looked upon by Muslims as one of the pinnacles of their devotion and love for God. The month of Ramadan thus facilitates as a personal retreat for believers, who are encouraged to better themselves spiritually, physically and socially.

Ramadan varies between 29 and 30 days each year, due to the Islamic calendar which follows a lunar cycle. Consequently, the Islamic calendar moves back 10 days every year and thus Ramadan starts on a different Gregorian date each year.

Ramadan serves as a positive physical challenge each year. Throughout a Muslim's lifetime, Ramadan will fall both during winter months, when the days are short, and summer months, when the days are long and the fast is more difficult. Accordingly, it is a test of devotion, in which physical endurance mirrors the inner spiritual state, which a believer constantly strives to improve.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Ramadan gains its significance from the momentous Islamic events which took place in it. Although historically many great and decisive encounters took place during this blessed month, it is most appreciated as the time of the final communication between God and humans. In this month, Allah (The One God) revealed the Qur'an (the final Holy Scripture) through the

angel Gabriel to the last Prophet, Muhammad. It is believed that this revelation was the final link in the chain of divine communication, which includes the Commandments of Moses, the Psalms of David, the Scrolls of Abraham and the Gospel of Jesus.

RAMADAN ACTIVITY

The Islamic fast contains dichotomous inner and outer dimensions. Muslims usually wake up before dawn to take a small meal called "suhoor". From then on, they abstain from eating, drinking and sensual pleasures during the daylight hours. At sunset, they break their fast at "iftar", usually a big meal taken with family and friends. At the same time, inward activity consists of exerting more effort in worship, praying, contemplation, helping others, giving charity and reciting the Qur'an. Also, many Muslims attend the mosque at night, to engage in special Ramadan night prayers called the "taraweeh".

RAMADAN'S ESSENCE- CULTIVATING A GOD CENTERED LIFE

Allah asserts to believers in the Qur'an, that fasting cultivates God consciousness;

"O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those who came before you, that you may attain God consciousness" (2:183).

Ramadan is actually a time of increased activity wherein the believer, now lightened of the burdens of constant eating and drinking, should be more willing to strive and struggle for Allah. Thus, although Muslims abstain

from eating, drinking and intimate relations with their spouse during the daylight hours, this freed up time is spent on contemplation and utilized to increase their faith by actively increasing in worship.

In this way, perceiving Ramadan as a time of heightened activity challenges the misconception about fasting being an excuse to go into a state of semi-hibernation. All in all, it is an opportunity for spiritual as well as physical purification.

WHO FASTS?

Every adult Muslim should fast the month of Ramadan. In Islam, an adult is a person who has reached the age of puberty. However, God in His infinite wisdom has exempted some people from fasting, either permanently or temporarily.

Those who are insane, mentally handicapped, permanently ill or take regular medication are permanently exempt from fasting. Those who are temporarily exempt from fasting should make up the missed days once they fall out of the category which includes, a person whose sickness may be prolonged or become worse due to fasting, women who are pregnant or are nursing, women who are having their menstrual period or who are experiencing post-partum bleeding (as the combination of blood loss and fasting could damage their health) and people who are traveling.

Children who have not yet reached puberty are not required to fast. However, they are usually encouraged as it is good for them to practice, and for this reason many Muslim children do start fasting from age seven or nine.

THE BENEFITS

Spiritual

Fasting is a complete purification and a means to developing the consciousness of Allah's presence. It allows a believer to draw closer to their Lord, as God opens the doors of Mercy during this month. Furthermore, the physical discipline heightens an inner discipline whereby a person can become in control of their base and primitive, hunger, thirst and sexual desires.

In this increasingly materialistic world, Ramadan enables a believer to aspire to more lofty and intangible goals. In this way they will learn to become less attached to this worldly life and cultivate for what's to come. A crucial factor in developing this awareness is appreciating the bounties one has and learning the true meaning of contentment and gratification. No longer does the self covet more, rather it learns to appreciate blessings. This is not only a mental appreciation but the believer physically feels for the poor and needy, by experiencing to some degree what they feel.

Naturally, this makes one become more benevolent and generous. Charity –an Islamically obligatory act- thus reaches a heightened new level, whereby the joy is of the donor precedes that of the recipient.

Physiological

The physiological effect of fasting includes lowering of blood sugar, lowering of cholesterol and lowering of the systolic blood pressure. In fact, Ramadan fasting would be an ideal recommendation for the treatment of mild to moderate, stable, non-insulin diabetes, obesity, and essential hypertension. Ramadan can be the ideal detox for individuals in a society whose bodies accumulate harmful toxins, with no chance of excretion.

Psychological

Most notable and novel are the psychological effects of fasting. As a result of the significantly altered milieu, a believer experiences

peace and tranquility. Those fasting are encouraged to display a selfless attitude, practice forgiveness and focus on making themselves better people. Thus, personal hostility and hate is at a minimum, transgressions decrease and Muslims take advice from the Prophet who said, "If one slanders you or aggresses against you, just say 'I am fasting'"

Such conduct and attitude would be very hard to maintain in an individualistic era, in which personal whims, desires and rights are paramount. Ramadan gives the believer a taste of the alternative which they are encouraged to pursue throughout the year.

THE END OF RAMADAN

The conclusion of the month of Ramadan is celebrated with a festival called "Eid al-Fitr", meaning the "feast of the fast-breaking". It takes place on the first day of the month that follows Ramadan. Eid encapsulates and promotes the Islamic values of family, cohesion, community, optimism and service to God alone. It is a very colourful and joyous day for children and adults alike. Eid is a time in which Muslims globally celebrate the monumental achievements of Ramadan and look with a communal hope and vision towards the future.

This is all marked with a special prayer in which the whole community comes together in various mosques and parks, and together thank God for His mercy, blessing and compassion and ask Him to be all reunited in Paradise. In the true Islamic spirit, the unfortunate are not forgotten, rather, those who can afford it provide a special charity for the poor and needy so that they can also join in the celebration. The day is filled with family gatherings and feasts, community festivals, new clothes and gifts.

NON-MUSLIMS AND RAMADAN

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims will most likely have reduced lunch breaks as they will not be eating or drinking during

the day. The break will probably be used to perform the daily prayers and other acts of worship. Muslims may even take some time off work during the last days of Ramadan to focus on their heightened spiritual duties before Ramadan ends. Muslims would definitely want to take at least one day off at the end of Ramadan so that they can celebrate the Eid day, with their family members and perform the community prayers.

Employers, co-workers and teachers can help by understanding the significance of Ramadan and by showing a willingness to make minor allowances for its physical demands. Awareness and appreciation is the key. Special consideration can be given to such things as requests for vacation time, the need for flexible early morning or evening work schedules and lighter homework assignments.

Furthermore, hospital workers should be aware that injections, transfusions and oral medications might break the fast. Patients should be given the opportunity to decide whether or not their condition exempts them from fasting and consulted thoroughly before any procedure.

It is also very important that Muslim workers and students be given time to attend Eid prayers at the end of Ramadan. Eid is as important to Muslims as Christmas and Yom Kippur are to Christians and Jews. A small token such as a card (there are Eid cards available from Muslim bookstores) or baked goods given to a Muslim co-workers during Eid ul-Fitr would also be greatly appreciated. Anything that does not contain alcohol or bacon.

BE A PART OF THE CELEBRATION!

Muslim usually dote on their visitors and take their hospitality very seriously. Non-Muslims are encouraged to take advantage of this and where one is able, to visit Muslim neighbors, mosques, community centers and public festivals. Muslims would love the opportunity to share with their fellow Australians the joy they feel, as well as the kilojoules!