Ramadan Fasting: Four Levels of Spirituality

Muqtedar Khan, University of Delaware
The holy month of Ramadan is once again upon us and those Muslims who are fortunate to witness it are obligated to fast for the entire month, unless, they are old, travelling, ill or unable. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam; the other four are witnessing the Oneness of God, the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him), praying five times a day, partaking in distributive justice by sharing one’s wealth with the needy (Zakat) and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) if one can afford it.

The Quran says that fasting has been commanded to Muslims as it was commanded to all other faith communities prior to them (2:183) in order that believer become God conscious. The purpose of fasting is to make the awareness of God and the relationship between the human self and the divine more acute and more conscious. The experience of fasting is like none other.

I believe that there are four levels of fasting; the fasting of appetites, the fasting of the senses, the fasting of the mind and the fasting of the heart.

Fasting of appetites involves abstaining from intake of solid food, drinking any kind of liquids including water and partaking in sexual activities from dawn to dusk. This ability to control one’s physical desires and wants gives one the will power to moderate one’s behavior and resist temptations that can lead to immoral, irresponsible or illegal conduct. Muslims hope that the discipline learned in Ramadan will hold them in good stead for the rest of the year.

The next level of fasting involves the fasting of the senses. Do not see, do not say, do not hear, and do not touch anything that will break your fast. The most difficult part is to keep one’s loose tongue and curiosity in check.

---

1 Muqtedar Khan, “God is Beautiful, and He loves Beauty,” Patheos, August 1, 2012.
By lying, hurting others, smearing people, or just listening to others indulge in such conduct can break one’s fast.

As one learns to control one’s senses, one still needs to deal with the mind that is inundated with information. Fasting of the mind requires one to remain focused on God and to think of nothing else. Such a fast involves constant prayers, remembrance of God (zikr) and reading of sacred texts (Quran).

While this is not mandated by Islamic law, one who seeks this level is afraid that to think of anything else but God would break one’s intellectual fast. It is the love of material things that often makes us forget God. Ramadan is an opportunity to reverse this reality. Rumi says it more beautifully:

*The Jesus of your spirit is inside you now. Ask that one for help, but don’t ask for body-things.*

*Don’t ask Moses for provisions that you can get from Pharaoh. Don’t worry so much about livelihood.*

*Your livelihood will turn out, as it should. Be constantly occupied instead with listening to God.*

The highest level of the fast is the fast of the heart. This is the peak of spirituality. At this level one is deeply in love with God and one aspires and longs for nothing but God. You achieve this through meditation on God, and by emptying your heart of everything but the love and longing for God.

One whose heart is fasting, finds solitude even when in a crowd, finds silence even when there is uproar all around her, finds calm even during a storm. Her heart is content and filled with love, for indeed she is experiencing divine love.

The Persian Poet Hafez captures this state in his inimitable style:

*The subject tonight is Love of God
And for tomorrow night as well,
As a matter of fact
I know of no better topic
For us to discuss
Until we all are united with the Beloved.*

Fasting in the end is a special relationship between the lover and his beloved. The believer fasts for her Lord and nothing else matters. It is neither the promise of forgiveness nor the reward of heaven that motivates except the love of God. The Indian poet Ghalib summed it up beautifully, “who cares for a heaven that promises hoores (virgins) that are millions of years old,” and to that I add; we fast because we want to fasten our souls to our Lord.

*Dr. Muqtedar Khan teaches at the University of Delaware*

---