

# Tips for a better fasting experience

## Spahic Omer

Fasting during the month of Ramadan - and everything that goes with it - is extraordinary. It is one of the best heavenly gifts to man. No wonder it is one of the pillars of Islam, and also one of the best ways to experience the beauty of submitting one's self to, and worshipping, the only Creator and Master.

However, people experience fasting in different ways. Experiences vary from ecstasy and euphoria, to mere formalism, apathy and exhaustion, with many different conditions in-between.

The following are some ingenious tips that aim to improve our experiences and appreciations of the inexhaustible realm of fasting. The tips are conceptual and reflective. They are deliberately steered away from the pure technical and legalist, or jurisprudential (*fiqh*), matters, which nevertheless are extremely important in their own right.

### **Congratulations, you are a believer!**

Because you fast, you are a true believer. Authentic fasting is such that it cannot accommodate elements of hypocrisy or any form of non-belief or scepticism. The two are simply incompatible. One neutralizes the other. Fasting is the most convincing evidence of faith (*iman*).

That is why when Allah prescribed fasting, He addressed the believers only: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you..." (al-Baqarah, 183).

No other category of people can be affiliated with fasting.

## **Cherish the status and experience**

Therefore, enjoy your heavenly status and take pleasure in experiencing its infinite treasures. You are both encouraged and entitled to do so. Everything from the notions and phenomena of life and death, to the Hereafter and *Jannah* (Paradise), have been created for the sake of faith and worship, and for such as exemplify them in their lives and become of the faithful (believers) and worshippers.

You belong right there as well. You are connected with the highest order of value, meaning and beauty. Unleash your innate spiritual capacities and keep growing and rising steadily. The sky is the limit, Heaven the goal. Let your pure heart and soul, as well as enlightened mind, lead the way.

## **Standing on the shoulders of giants**

The Qur'an says that fasting was decreed upon us "as it was decreed upon those before you" (al-Baqarah, 183).

That is how truth generally is. It operates beyond the precincts of time and space. People - and all the vicissitudes of life - are but its means and instruments. It has neither beginning nor end. It is unconfined. "Most surely this (the revelation given to Muhammad) is in the earlier scriptures, the scriptures of Ibrahim (Abraham) and Musa (Moses)" (al-A'la, 18-19).

This means that fasting is inseparable from the human presence on earth. It is ageless and enduring. It is identifiable with people's humanity and their noble life purpose. It lies at the core of truth. It is of those things that make people exceptional, setting them apart from other species.

Therefore, when you fast bear in mind that you belong to a global and unbounded fraternity. You walk in the footsteps of the best members of the best generations of humankind. You follow those individuals

(the Prophets and their faithful followers) who charted most conspicuously the courses of human history. You stand on the shoulders of giants.

Due to that kind of people, and for them primarily, this world has been conceived and has been created in the first place, and will be sustained until the end. Always remember that you are one of them, or maybe almost there. In any case, just to be invited to join the league is a treat good enough.

Hence, be excited and positively proud. Feel indebted and live responsibly. It's your turn now to leave a mark on life proceedings. Let your exemplary fasting this year be the beginning.

### **Freedom versus inhibition**

Do not be trapped in matter and in the trivial worldly concerns. Fasting is there to liberate you. It is your launch pad.

Fasting, and everything it entails, is not a one-dimensional activity. Rather, it is a process that involves you, your spiritual forte, and the whole spiritual Kingdom. Nor is it confined to the month of Ramadan only. It is the whole life. It is a lifestyle.

*Sawm* or *siyam* (fasting) means "to abstain or refrain from". That connotes that you should stay away from anything that may impede or slow you down on your trailblazing journey.

Refraining from food, drinks and sexual activity from dawn to sunset in Ramadan is just the beginning. It is a warmup exercise for what is to come in spiritual terms. Everything starts with the world of matter and in a brief moment of time, yet it ends up in the highest, most consequential and timeless spiritual domain.

Genuine physical, spiritual, moral and intellectual freedom is all Islam ever wanted. Islam is all about promoting and facilitating that

freedom, and about removing all sorts of impediments that may stand in its way.

Thus, fast and be, as well as feel, free. Detach yourself insofar as possible from matter and body, and aim for the infinitude of spirit. Do not be a slave to your animal desires, ego and foolish ambitions. You are bigger and more important than that.

### **Be happy and keep smiling**

You as Allah's vicegerent on earth, and as His servant, have a million reasons to be happy. A good many of such reasons are condensed in the commandment of fasting and its holy month of Ramadan.

Hence, elate your soul, be happy and keep smiling. Your mood should not be seen and felt only on your face, but also throughout your entire being. In the holy month of giving and caring, bring positive energy into your life and the lives of others. Keep giving. Even your smile is a charitable act, as the Prophet (pbuh) once declared (Jami' al-Tirmidhi).

Anticipate nothing but good, and strongly believe that all things and events - including the COVID-19 pandemic - will work out favourably in the end. The merciful, loving and benevolent Allah is in charge of everything. He runs the show. He is in charge of the world's and humankind's destinies - including yours.

Your optimism and confidence are nothing short of being parts of the Prophet's *Sunnah*. So is your complete behavioural pattern. For that reason, you are special. Allah's forgiveness and His *Jannah* (Paradise) await you, and fasting is a fast track to them. You just need to keep improving and persevere.

### **A crash course in taqwa**

*Taqwa* (God-consciousness, highest level of piety, God-fearing, self-protection against displeasing Allah) is the highest station on the journey of spiritual growth. It is its end. All undertakings of a believer are geared towards that noble goal. It is a certificate of the spiritual fulfilment while in this world, for which the reward in the Hereafter is nothing but *Jannah* (Paradise) (al-Naba', 31).

The Qur'an is explicit that the aim of fasting is "so that you may become righteous and fear God (to have and apply *taqwa*)" (al-Baqarah, 183).

It follows that the month of fasting is a crash course in *taqwa*, considering how important for the believers the latter is. Fasting as an activity and process has been designed to lead to that honourable goal as effectively as possible, and in as short a time as possible.

*Taqwa* is a believer's reason for existence (*raison d'être*). It is impossible for everyone to attain it in one or even a few fasting cycles. However, each and every believer must set himself on course to do it sooner rather than later.

That is the reason why in the above-mentioned verse, Allah did not say "to become the people of *taqwa*, or *muttaqun* (as a status)", but "to develop, have and implement *taqwa*, or *tattaqun* (as a process) - and Allah knows best. A verb, rather than a noun, is used for the purpose. While the former scenario as a person's remarkable status and his second nature is a long-term vision, the latter scenario implies a continuously unfolding process with a series of short-term goals along it.

Each fasting exercise represents a significant stride, or a stage, towards the ultimate objective of *taqwa*. As a result, the success of one's fasting will always be measured against the background of the speed and depth of his progression towards the supreme level of *taqwa*. The faster one's progression, the more valuable one's fasting is, and *vice versa*.

Every fasting person knows himself and the level of his *taqwa* before and after each Ramadan better than anybody else. He, likewise, knows best how productive his fasting is, and whether his fasting is acceptable, and to what extent exactly.

Therefore, be a judge before you are judged. Assess yourself and weigh your deeds - so you still can improve - before you are assessed and your deeds are weighed for you on the Day of Judgment.

Accordingly - as a small digression - Abu Hamid al-Ghazali spoke at length about the inner dimensions of fasting. They are also seen as the secrets of fasting. According to him, there are three grades of fasting, infused with different levels of *taqwa*: ordinary, special and extra-special.

"Ordinary fasting means abstaining from food, drink and sexual satisfaction. Special fasting means keeping one's ears, eyes, tongue, hands and feet - and all other organs - free from sin.

Extra-special fasting means fasting of the heart from unworthy concerns and worldly thoughts, in total disregard of everything but God. This kind of fasting is broken by thinking of worldly matters, except for those conducive to religious ends, since these constitute provision for the Hereafter and are not of this lower world."

### **Declare a war against pretension and artificiality**

Due to the great meaning and importance of fasting and the holy month of Ramadan, some people, having failed to come to the needed terms and grasp the heart of the matter, tend to resort to pretence and artificiality in order to join the crowd and not to be left out.

Such people oscillate between two-facedness (hypocrisy), spiritual destitution and functional sluggishness. They somehow may, or may not, fast. They may also use the rich resources and means of fasting

and Ramadan for a public spectacle of their limited, or make-believe, piety.

Do not be like those despondent and miserable souls, nor fall for their artifices. Beware of their deceits and ploys, for every so often they are in positions to market them aggressively and cunningly.

Unfortunately, those people are disoriented and lost in life. They want attention and fellowship. They are to be pitied, albeit wisely dealt with.

Declare a war against such distressing behavioural models. Study and learn from what you see, for the wise man learns from the mistakes of others; only a fool learns from his own.

In relation to fasting, the conduct of this type of people in general, and that of hypocrites in particular, Jesus had in mind when he said: "And when you fast, don't put on a sad face (be downcast in countenance) like the hypocrites. They distort their faces (go about with changed looks) so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward (only public adulation)" (Matthew, 6:16).

It is those people, furthermore, who are most responsible for the untoward routines associated with fasting, such as gluttony, consumerism, wastefulness, extravagance and pretence. To them, fasting is a cultural expression and "fun", rather than a revolutionary spiritual experience. They are thus most responsible for damaging the reputation of Ramadan and fasting in the eyes of the world.

### **Enhance your communication with Allah**

Fasting is a golden opportunity to enhance our communication with our Creator and Lord. Our intentions, involvement in fasting, prayers, supplications, meditating, reciting and contemplating the Qur'an, and the rest of recommended and voluntary worship acts, are intended exactly for that specific objective.

In Islam, everything is to be inclusive and reciprocal. Everything is about forming a sound relationship with Allah first, in the light of which other relationship types are then formed, like the relationships with people and the natural world.

Consequently, when Allah speaks about fasting, He uses the personal plural pronoun "you", indicating at once the directness, nearness, intimacy and totality. A fasting person does the same in his various fasting-related worship acts. He constantly addresses Allah as "You".

Emblematic of this is the customary supplication for breaking the fast: "O Allah! I fasted for You, and I believe in You, and I put my trust in You, and I break my fast with Your sustenance."

Moreover, the opening chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Fatihah*, which is repeated many times on a daily basis, especially in the daily prayers, contains a verse that is fundamental not only to the chapter itself, but also to the life of each believer: "It is You we worship and You we ask for help" (*al-Fatihah*, 5). *Al-Fatihah* is the best chapter in the Qur'an. It is called the "Mother of the Qur'an".

As a microcosm of a life of piety, fasting, therefore, is a blissful experience generated by a spiritual progression from one "you" (from God to man) to another "You" (from man to God). In fact, nothing in life is exempted from the effects of this powerful joint relationship.

A person's communication with Allah ought to be sincere, meaningful, profound and sensible. It ought to be felt, properly understood, followed up and acted upon.

A person should know that talking (chanting and reciting) too much and too often is not necessarily communication imbued with love, hope, devotion, respect, awe and God-fearing. Communication with anybody, let alone Almighty Allah, cannot be based on premeditated ignorance, heedlessness and indifference.



Communication cannot be one-sided. It must be based on quality, in lieu of quantity, and on substance, in lieu of sheer form and perhaps symbolism.

Communication with Allah is not confined to the province of the mouth and tongue only. In point of fact, the mouth and tongue are least involved.

Communication is chiefly a matter of the heart and soul, with the mouth and tongue playing a minimal role. Communication with Allah is a blend of silent spiritual rhythms, tunes and synchronizations. It is an inaudible upheaval and rapture.

### **Befriend the Qur'an**

As a primary source of communication with Allah, take the Qur'an as your closest friend. It is your best ally on your fasting - and entire existential - journey. With it, impossible is nothing; without it, nothing in heavenly terms is possible. With it, moreover, you and your life are something; without it, you and your life in heavenly terms are nothing.

The Qur'an is an everlasting miracle. It is Allah's final testament to humanity. It is His Holy Speech, and so, the only remaining undeviating connection with Heaven.

The Qur'an was revealed in Ramadan, in the Night of Qadr (decree, power, value, destiny or measures). It was then that the whole Qur'an was revealed to the earthly heaven, and from there, during the same Night of Qadr, it started to be gradually revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). That marked the commencement of a revelation process that lasted about twenty three years.

It is on account of this that Ramadan is called the month of the Qur'an. One of the most recognisable worship activities linked with fasting is reading the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is what only Allah says it is. Thus, the Qur'an is: a guidance, book, clear proofs of guidance, a criterion, judgment between right and wrong, glad tidings, a good advice, reminder, truth, healing for what is in the breasts, a mercy, clarification for all things, a light, inspiration, spirit, enlightenment, and clear insight.

Just like the case of general communication with Allah, befriending and reading the Qur'an during the month of fasting, too, must be beneficial and effective. It is to become a life-defining experience. The process of dealing with the Qur'an starts with reading it, and culminates in living it and transforming it thereby into a miracle, whose operational locus will be the multidimensionality of human life.

### **Avoid pitfalls**

However, a number of pitfalls must be avoided in the process. The Qur'an is not to be read mechanically, unconsciously and unthinkingly. It is not to be rushed through without striving to understand, contemplate, internalize and apply its divine messages as much as possible. One is not to worry about sheer numbers: how many verses, pages, chapters, sections, etc., compromising the specified quality and essence of the Qur'an recitation by doing so.

If all that is done excessively and time after time, such could yet be regarded as an insult to the Qur'an. It can become a sinful activity.

Insisting that people should read the whole Qur'an as many times as possible during every Ramadan, that they should memorize as much of it as possible, and that various competitions and programs be organized for measuring and celebrating the successes of those initiatives - albeit without promoting the true guiding, uplifting, empowering, enlightening and educating spirit of the Qur'an as a transformative cultural and civilizational force - is not a commendable approach.

During those initiatives, ignorance, misguidance, confusion and spiritual lethargy, instead of knowledge, guidance, enlightenment and spiritual dynamism, are promoted and acclaimed. Instead of being inspired and motivated by the Qur'an, many people get turned off and demoralized thereby.

The efforts are turning, step by step, suicidal. In the eras of globalization, internet, agnosticism and doubt, there is rarely anybody who is genuinely interested in a deadening formalism, literal symbolism, spiritual myopia, and a blind as well as irrational following of any kind.

In passing, this is the main reason why modern Muslim youth are increasingly confused and are more and more rebellious concerning the values and teachings of their Islam.

### **Always go for quality**

Hence, use this latest fasting opportunity to build a meaningful and productive rapport with the Qur'an. Do not worry about extents and numbers, just worry about merit, value and application, even if your progress appears to be very slow. Use good translations, commentaries and whatever else is necessary to achieve your target.

Indeed, a little quality and value is much better than a lot of inadequacy and mediocrity. A little excellence goes a long way, whereas a lot of flaws and incompetence can only backfire, sooner or later.

For example, a single page of the Qur'an which is painstakingly read, understood, internalized and implemented as part of a sincere on-going procedure, is better than tens of pages which are recited mechanically and mindlessly, without thinking, nor caring, about their meaning and implications for life and conduct.

This assertion is premised on how much Islam favours knowledge grounded in faith (and faith grounded in knowledge) over not only ignorance, but also illiterate piety, and how much it gives preference to excellence and quality over mediocrity and poor standards.

The Prophet (pbuh) said, for instance: "The virtue of the scholar over the worshiper is like the superiority of the moon over the stars... The scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets" (Sunan Abi Dawud).

You have to remember that whatever the Qur'an and *Sunnah* say about reading and reciting the Qur'an, this holistic outlook is thus implied. Islam never championed spiritual illiteracy, short-sightedness, low standards and incompetence in any field of human endeavours. Islam with everything it stands for is their antithesis.

Hence, be like the companions of the Prophet (pbuh), the best generation of Muslims, who are said to have been thought the Qur'an in stages. The Prophet (pbuh) would teach them merely ten Qur'anic verses (a small portion of the Qur'an) at a time. They would not move on to the next ten verses (a new portion of the Qur'an) unless they learned the first set of verses and were able to implement them in terms of *halal* and *haram*, and in terms of religious injunctions and prohibitions (were able to grasp and implement their actual meanings and lessons).

It was owing to this that the Prophet's mission was so successful. It was owing to this, furthermore, that his companions were regarded as a living form of the Qur'an as a miracle. It is rightly asserted that if the Prophet (pbuh) had not had any miracles other than his companions, "they would have been enough for his prophet-hood."

On a diametrically opposite side stand Khawarij, the earliest Muslim sect with beautiful preaching, but erroneous principles and evil deeds. The Prophet (pbuh) foretold their emergence, describing them as a people who will "recite the Qur'an, but it will not pass beyond their

throats", and "they call to the Book of Allah, but they have nothing to do with it" (Sunan Abi Dawud).

It is thus clear what path you should follow and who should be taken as a role model. Follow specifically those who were "living and walking qur'ans", so to speak. Try to be one yourself.

Besides, needless to say that Islam is a religion of excellence and distinction only, both in faith and deeds. The Qur'an clearly highlights that the sole objective of creation is "to test you (as to) which of you is best in deed (conduct)" (al-Mulk, 2). Here the key word is "best", not "most".

### **Separate the chaff from the wheat**

Finally, there is so much that has been written and said about fasting and the holy month of Ramadan. Unfortunately, some of it is inaccurate, and yet some is plain wrong. There are so many weak and fabricated *hadiths* (the Prophet's traditions) and inept scholars' views in circulation.

Those missteps have been committed sometimes due to ignorance and at other times due to some populist and theatrical tendencies, and sometimes by ignorant persons and at different times by relatively knowledgeable ones for the sake of sentimentalization, promotion and attractive preaching.

It is no wonder that today those views and interpretations easily find their ways into the spheres of what could be described as a Muslim pop(ular) culture, where the tastes and criteria of ordinary people, rather than those of a truly educated and guided elite, dominate. That is done through a wide scope of religious programs, dramatic and showy orations, mediocre religious publications, religious dramas and films, religious songs, etc.

Even though it is hard for everybody, you should try your best to get to the bottom of the problem. Carry out some research. Consult the honest people of knowledge. Be a soldier of truth. There are many excellent scholarly websites dedicated to the subject matter.

Almost everything is at your fingertips. We spend most of our time with our computers and smartphones, often overusing and even abusing them. Let's put them to some good use. There will be no excuses accepted on the Day of Judgment.

This is crucial because everything pertaining to fasting is so authentically important and so truly beautiful that it does not need to be hyperbolized and misrepresented in any way. Authentic fasting is way bigger and way more meaningful than anything people can concoct. It does not need any additional gloss. Nor are any over-the-top means needed for its exposure.

In this manner, the true meaning and spirit of fasting can easily be tainted. If you fall victim to this disagreeable circumstance, regardless of the extent and intensity, fight it off as soon as possible. Do so before it fights, and defeats, you.

When the prevalent untruths and misrepresentations eventually become known to you, some of your religious experiences will inevitably become anticlimactic. They may yet morph into an outright let-down. Disillusionments and frustrations may start surfacing next, creating a fertile ground for hesitations and doubts.

Herein lies another cause of the confusion and scepticism of especially Muslim youth today.

The case is similar to eating junk food. It is tempting and very delicious when eaten. However, in essence, the food is very unhealthy, lacking all the necessary nutrients to keep the body energized and healthy. In the long run, disproportionately consuming it can destroy the body. It is a killer.

Most certainly, spirituality-wise, you are special. So, go for and enjoy only the special things. Make sure nothing stands between you and your God-given rights. Always separate the chaff from the wheat.