

## Transcript: Practices, Fasting during Ramadan

### *Sawm*

Living according to the principles of *salat* and *zakat* calls for self-discipline – this is strengthened through the observance of fasting. *Sawm* requires Muslims to observe a fast during the daylight hours, each day during the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, called Ramadan. This month is particularly sacred to Muslims because it was toward its end in 610CE that the Qur'an was first sent down as guidance for all humanity.

The Qur'an establishes the moon as the measure of time [Q. 10:5]<sup>1</sup> and thus Islam follows the lunar calendar, so that each year is approximately 11 days shorter than a solar year. Each month begins as soon as the new moon is sighted, so this can vary from one area and community to another. As it is based on the lunar cycle, Ramadan moves forward each year when compared to the solar calendar. The number of hours of daylight and the daytime temperature can vary significantly through the seasons. Hence the observance of *sawm* can be more or less demanding according to the time of the year and place on earth.

However, no matter what season it happens to fall in, the fasting during Ramadan is the same. It strictly prohibits Muslims from eating, drinking, smoking or engaging in sexual activities, from before dawn (first light) in the morning until after sunset at night. Ramadan is about obedience to the requirements of God and discipline. So people are not allowed to take it to extremes.

Muslims are not allowed to extend the fast – they must eat after sunset – or to observe it if it would do serious damage to their health. Some categories of people are exempt. If people are seriously ill, too old or too young, they must not fast. Those travelling further than a short distance are exempt. Even so, the elderly often continue observing *sawm* until well into old age. Young children don't want to feel left out and so are gradually introduced by their parents when the time is right. Women do not fast when it could endanger their health e.g., during their periods, pregnancy or whilst breast-feeding. Those who are travelling, suffering temporary illness, and women during their periods make up the missed days at a later date.

Why is fasting so important? For one thing it is commanded by the Qur'an [Q. 2:183-186].<sup>2</sup> But this is not because Islam condemns eating, drinking and sex. Far from it –

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<sup>1</sup> Q. 10:5 It is God who made the sun a radiance and the moon a light, and ordained its phases that you might know the number of years and the calculation [of time]. God did not create all that except as it should be. He clarifies the details of the signs for a people who know.

<sup>2</sup> Q. 2:183-186 O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may fear God. It is for a fixed number of days; but if any of you is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed number [should be made up] from days later. For those for

they are accepted as natural and good. However, they are very powerful drives and in showing that we can control them, we demonstrate that we have the will-power to control other aspects of our lives. But fasting has many other benefits. It strengthens us against any future privations. It prevents us from taking the good things in life for granted and it allows us better to empathise with those poor and unfortunate people in the world for whom deprivation is a permanent experience.

However, the positive effects of the fasting of Ramadan are much more wide-reaching. It is a time when the whole Muslim community is united. Families help one another through the hardest times. It's a time for healing old disputes and looking forward to a better future. People reflect on their actions, facing up to their faults and failings and seeking forgiveness. The overall effect also is to stimulate the individual's awareness of God in their lives and reinforce their sense of living in harmony with God and all creation.

Dr Buaben speaks of fasting as a kind of spiritual stocktaking that teaches a deep sense of self-control and discipline:

Fasting is an institution that has been there since Day One. All major religions have fasting as part of their spiritual growth. So it's something that teaches self-control and empathy with people who have less to depend on, in terms of food and other provisions. So it's almost like a spiritual stocktaking annually, and therefore by going through that, hopefully a person who has fasted will have built-up more spiritual energy for the coming year. It's also a spiritual networking because you are aware that you have more than a billion Muslims around the world, who are also fasting, so it refreshes your own spiritual growth. So it's a very important institution in Islam.

Professor Michot describes fasting during Ramadan as "cleaning up the heart" so that one is reinvigorated to take up again one's responsibilities for the sake of God and the community:

It could be said that Ramadan itself every year is a good opportunity to clean up the heart; or I could say even, to defrost the fridge. And in some way it makes you take some distance in relation to your own life. Why do we have to

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whom it would be a hardship, there is a ransom: the feeding of a poor person. But he who will give more voluntarily, it is better for him. And it is better for you that you fast, if only you knew. The month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was sent down, as a guide to humankind, also clear [signs] for guidance and the criterion [between right and wrong] [is the fasting month]. So whoever amongst you witnesses the month; let him fast it. But whoever is ill or on a journey, let it be the same number of other days - God wants ease for you, He does not want hardship for you - so that you will complete that number of days and glorify Him for having guided you; and so perhaps you will be grateful. When My servants ask you about me, I am indeed close by. I answer the prayer of every person who calls on me, when he calls on me, so let them respond to me, and believe in me: that they may go in the right direction.

eat? Why do we have to drink? Why can't we just carry on fasting and go; die in some way? I have that feeling; why is it important to come back? And then we see the wisdom of the religion which tells us: no, it was an exercise of obedience because the fast is for the Lord. It was an exercise of discipline but it cannot take you away from everyday life, from the responsibilities that you have in the society. It can give you an idea of another form of life, where you will not be so much depending on your body, but at the moment you are still in this life and you will have to carry on facing all the responsibilities that you have vis-à-vis yourself, vis-à-vis your family, vis-à-vis your environment and the society in which you live. So Ramadan cannot take you away from those responsibilities, it can in some way re-enable you to face them better because the fridge has been defrosted.

At sunset the fast is over. At the appointed time, people must break their fast by eating and drinking. This is called *iftar*. If they are at work, they will take time off to eat, drink and pray. Often friends will be invited for a communal meal, or they will gather in mosques. The nights during the month of Ramadan are also important. They are given over to additional prayers and especially the recitation of the Qur'an. The month is divided into three thirds, each devoted to a special theme: mercy, forgiveness and salvation from hell-fire. The Sunnis have the practice during these nights of special congregational prayers, during which one-thirtieth of the Qur'an is recited each night. The Shi'a do this Qur'an recitation in families or other groups, in mosques or elsewhere, and do the prayers individually.

Fasting during Ramadan is obligatory for Muslims, but many fast voluntarily at other times. For example, they may follow the practice of Muhammad who often fasted for three days each month.

Maulana Raza proclaims Ramadan as a "blessed month" marked by community solidarity and the opportunity for intense personal reflection:

The month of Ramadan is entirely blessed with the blessings of God. It is a month of spiritual delight. In that month, we witness enhanced solidarity within the community: praying together, worshipping together, reciting and listening to Qur'an together and in fact eating together at the time of breaking the fast, which is *iftar*. Ramadan also provides us an opportunity during the last ten days of performing *ihdikaf*, which is retreat to the mosque, which is an occasion of intense reflection and devotion and seeking forgiveness and guidance from Almighty God. We have, on the 27<sup>th</sup> night, *Laylat al-Qadr*, The Night of Power, when Muslims celebrate the revelation, the beginning of the revelation of the Holy Book, Qur'an. So it is a great month of spiritual festivities and entertainment.

The end of fasting is a cause for great celebrations. It's the occasion of the Festival of Fast-breaking or *'Id al-Fitr*. Muslims take a day off work or school. Because the date is fixed by the sighting of the new moon and there can be variations in this, employers

might need to be flexible in allowing the holiday. In celebration, everyone takes a shower and puts on clean clothes. They take breakfast after sunrise and assemble in a large mosque or open place for 'Id prayers. They exchange greetings and then there's a special meal and visits are made to friends and relatives (including the graves of relatives). Presents are given, especially to children, and people engage in all manner of sports and games.