

## Fast well to get maximum benefits

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THIS is the time of the year when Muslims around the world indulge themselves in the obligatory fasting.

It is primarily an act of abstaining from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk for the entire holy month of Ramadan. Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (Hijri calendar), is the fourth pillar of Islam.



All of us ought to perform the fast, especially of our minds and hearts, rather than just the stomach.

Fasting also forbids one from useless activities such as idle talk or, worse still, slander and backbiting that could lead to anger, envy, greed and gossip, to name a few.

According to the Prophet: "If one of you is fasting, he should not use obscenity that day nor shout; and if someone speaks abusively or wants to fight with him, he should say: 'Verily I'm fasting, verily I'm fasting.'"

Sexual and lewd activities are also forbidden; so too introducing anything into the bodily orifices, during the period of fast in general. Instead, purity of both thoughts and actions, sincere deeds and sacrifices that would bring one closer to God are deeply encouraged. It should be accompanied by charity, prayers — especially the tarawih—as well as numerous other religious supplications and observances.

The recitation of the Quran is preferred since Ramadan is the month during which the Quran was revealed. It is thus regarded as the most venerated and blessed month for the Muslims.

The Ramadan contains a night called Lailatal-Qadr—the most holy of all nights. Although the exact night of the Lailatal-Qadr is not made known, it is generally thought to be among the last 10 odd nights of Ramadan. Muslims are encouraged to seek out the Lailatal-Qadr, said to be better than a thousand nights.

Despite its very strict observance, those who are ill or travelling over a certain minimal distance are exempted from fasting provided the missing fasting period is substituted with the same number of other days.

It is mentioned in the Quran that God wishes for one's convenience, not hardship, that one may fulfil one's obligations, and to glorify God for his guidance, and to express one's appreciation (Quran, 2:185).

All fast must start with an intention (*niat*) to do so, and indeed it is this *niat* that lightens the act of fasting for its intended period and purpose(s). It is after all, an act of piety and worship.

Interestingly enough, it is the power arising from the *niat* that makes fasting bearable, if not blessed with the feeling of inner peace and calmness. Without the intention, it is that harder, if not impossible, to keep a fast.

In a book by Wayne Dyer, entitled *The Power of Intention* (2004), the author deemed intention not as dogged determination, but rather an inner awareness "that exists in the universe as an invisible force of energy".

To him there are several facets of intention encompassing from creativity to kindness, love, beauty, expansion, abundance and receptivity. It goes beyond the good old cliché of positive thinking or focused on what you want.

He contrasted the idea of intention that is ego-based, namely, an attitude of nothing-is-going-to-stop-me and that nobody can get in my way. Ingrained in it is the notion of "I am what I have", so "I measure my worth on the basis of my stuff", noted Dyer.

Second, "I am what I do," that is, a measure of all of my achievements.

Third, "I am my reputation" and what everybody else thinks of me. In other words, the intention is driven by the ego to: (a) get more stuff, (b) do more, and (c) get people's attention.

These are but superficial intentions that are not connected to the notion of piety, sincerity or God-consciousness. Instead such intentions amount to nothing more than hypocrisy. People who perform the fast on this basis are as good as not fasting because they have failed to subjugate their egos to the higher ideals.

In stark contrast, the Ramadan fasting is often likened to a greater jihad or struggle aimed at orienting oneself to the higher state of selflessness. It is a struggle to bring under control all personal desires and inclinations in order to submit to the higher will, namely, Will of God.

And fasting is especially effective as a means to do this. It is also about the nurturing of a sense of equality among fellow humans, regardless of colour, race or creed by appreciating what a hunger pang means, or being destitute in so far as depriving oneself of any worldly wants.

In this sense, all of us ought to perform the fast, especially of our minds and hearts, rather than just the stomach.

More than anything else, it is both the minds and hearts that determines how genuine our intentions are in all matters that we undertake.

Often, it is the minds and the hearts that inflict so much damage and destruction (sometimes intangible) on others, leading to unnecessary conflict and violence in the war of egos. Lest we start in earnest to "train" ourselves to suppress the insatiable ego-trips, before too long an entire nation is lost. And it goes without saying, all this must begin with the one true niat!

To all Muslim readers, Selamat Berpuasa!

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