

Ramadan and Quran

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Excerpt:

In his talk, the Maulana explains that the aim of the month of Ramadan is to create an atmosphere for the believer to concentrate on the message of the Quran by leaving aside the last items of distraction (that is, food and water). Quran being a Book of reminder seeks to engage its reader in a process of reflection so that he can draw guidance and lessons from it.

The Maulana observes that there are two forms of contemplation. One is technical whereby the reader focuses on identifying the technical aspects of the Quran and makes it a subject of debate; such an approach yields nothing. The other form is analytical where the reader reflects upon the verses of the Quran to take guidance from it and has the courage to re-assess and revise the course of his life in accordance with what the Quran seeks of man. The month of Ramadan, he reminds is not to spend time making elaborate arrangements for Sehri and Iftaar. The real aspect is to make it the month of Quran so that a believer can draw maximum guidance from it and embark on a journey of self-correction.

The lesson:

The month of Ramadan seeks to save man from all forms of distraction so that he can devote himself to understanding and reflecting upon the message of the Quran and receive guidance from it. Only if a believer does this with single minded determination and focus will he be able to make the month of Ramadan a month of self correction for himself.

Introduction

Today is the second day of the month of Ramadan, 1433 A.H. Fasting has been ordained in the month of Ramadan as per the following verse of the Quran

The month of Ramadan is the month when the Quran was sent down as guidance for mankind with clear proofs of guidance and the criterion by which to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month, let him fast. (2:185)

The term Furqan in the above verse refers to 'criterion'. This verse describes the significance of the Quran as being the criterion by which a person can distinguish between right and wrong. Because the Quran was revealed in the month of Ramadan, it was made obligatory upon the believers to fast during this month.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is a unique opportunity to concentrate on keeping oneself away from all forms of distraction. By abstaining from food and water, a believer relinquishes the last item of distraction. He is then able to devote time to reflect and contemplate on the message of the Quran. During the month of Ramadan he receives this training temporarily, so that the rest of the year he is able to effortlessly engage in reflection and contemplation.

Quran was not revealed for mere recitation. As a child, my understanding was limited to knowing that Quran had to be recited during Ramadan. This is what I had learnt from my environment but when I read and understood the message of the Quran, I learnt that Quran has not been revealed for recitation but for contemplation (*tadabbur*).

This is a blessed Book which We sent down to you [Muhammad], for people to ponder over its messages, and for those with understanding to take heed. (38:29)

According to a verse in the Quran

We have revealed a Book to you which is admonition for you. (21:10)

The above verse means that the Book of God is not a mere book in the ordinary sense of the word. It is in fact a reminder.

Man is required reflect upon the verses of the Quran and draw lessons from them. This process of contemplation would pave way for correcting man's behavior and developing his intellect.

Two aspects of contemplation

It is clear that Quran is a book of contemplation. There are two aspects of it:

1. Technical (fanni) Tadabbur
2. Analytical (tazkiri) tadabbur

Many a times, people identify technical aspects and make these a subject of debate. This is not what Quran seeks of its reader. Let me give an example. I met a man who knew Arabic and wanted to understand an aspect from the following verse of the Quran

**What has made them turn away from their direction of prayer which they used to face.
(2:142)**

He said that the *qibla* (the direction which the believers face when praying) of Jews was Aqsa mosque (this is not correct since the *qibla* of Jews was Dome of Rock). But Prophet Abraham had built the Kaaba before the *qibla* of Jews was built. Given this, the *qibla* of Jews should also be Kaaba! These are the kinds of futile debates that people engage in; neither does it increase their piety nor wisdom. People do not realize that debates pertaining to technical aspects can be unending. I am reminded of another instance pertaining to the following verse of the Quran

Seek help through patience and prayer. (2:153)

I was told that patience is a state of mind; it does not have a form. Since in the context of the above verse, *namaz* has been used in the same sense, it follows that *namaz* too is only a state of mind; it does not have a form. This is an absurd debate! It is very important to realize that if man reflects on the technical aspect of the Quran, he will not be able to draw any lesson from it.

The other form of contemplation is analytical. Let me explain with an example. A person came to meet me a few days back. He was born in a Hindu family but raised with a liberal mindset. He had read other religions and during the course of his study when he chanced upon reading the Quran, the following verse held his attention

But for those who repent their ways and make known the truth, I will certainly accept their repentance: I am the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. Those who deny the truth and die as deniers, on them shall be the curse of God and of angels and men altogether.

(2:160-1)

The above verse means that God will accept the repentance of those who repent and correct themselves, as He is Merciful. Contrary to this, those who refuse and remain hell bent on their denial to accept the truth will be cursed forever. Having understood the meaning of this verse through translation, this person started crying. He said that this verse made him realize that if he died in the state he was then, he would incur God's curse. He said that though he inherited a culture by virtue of his birth, he did not agree with it; he wanted to accept truth again and live and die on the truth of God so as to receive salvation on the Day of Judgment. Presented above are examples of the two forms of contemplation and the result it leads to. There is one person who remains engaged in technical debates and his contemplation is of no use to him. The other person on the contrary, is one who takes guidance from Quran and wants to take a new decision for his life. He reads the Quran to seek guidance and has the courage to take a new decision to re-assess and then revise the course of his life.

When I visited America, I got to know about a group known as the Quran Study Circle. Curious to know their method of studying the Quran, I paid them a visit. I was disappointed to find out that these men would collect in mosque and do technical debates on aspects they would derive from multiple commentaries. Throughout their conversations neither was there any mention of God, nor afterlife; all they did was engage in technical conversations.

Reading the Quran

Quran is not read for finding out technical aspects. It must be read to seek guidance. Let me explain this with examples. The first verse in the Quran reads

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the Universe (1:2)

When you reflect deeply on the meaning of the above verse, you would fathom a unique aspect. Muslims often say, '*Alhamdulillah*' but it is important to realize that they use this expression on occasions of material gain: child's admission in a good school, daughter's wedding, or flourishing business. Contrary to this, the Quran uses the expression, *Alhamdulillah* in the context of God! It is an expression of the feelings which naturally arouse in one after discovering God as the Creator, Sustainer and Controller of this entire universe. When man looks at the world around him, he cannot fail to notice God's power and mercy abundantly in evidence everywhere. Wherever he casts his glance, he finds extraordinary order and supervision. Everything has been extraordinarily and astonishingly adapted to man's needs. Realizing the greatness of the Lord, man's heart is compelled to entreat God and he lets out, *Alhamdulillah*! It is not on petty, personal issues but upon contemplating and realizing God as the ultimate benefactor that this expression becomes a natural rendition of man's innermost feelings of gratitude!

Then you move on and read the following verse

This is the book, there is no doubt about it (2:2)

Quran is a book of guidance but it guides only those who are sincere in their search for truth and are anxious to be guided. By reflecting on its meaning and analyzing the message, man is able to discover the Quran as an exceptional Book, one that is devoid of inconsistency and doubt! This discovery transforms the faith of man and takes it to a different level of conviction.

Then, the reader further moves to the following verse

Who believe in the unseen (2:3)

God, angels, paradise and hell cannot be unseen. Faith is the discovery of this truth as an observable fact. For instance, when you look at your mother or father, you know them to be your parents; when you see sun or moon, you know them to be heavenly bodies; when you see ocean and mountains, you know what it is! Such is the level of belief of one who discovers truth. Those who find truth in this way are raised to a heightened level of consciousness and their conviction is unparalleled. When such a person thinks about God, he is overwhelmed by the realization of His blessings; the thought of paradise makes him yearn for it; the thought of hell entreats him to pray to his Lord for forgiveness and mercy and the thought of angels makes him realize the perfect system of control that this world witnesses. According to a Hadith

Zameen ke chappe chappe par malaika maujud hain (Mishkat)

[Angels are present everywhere on earth.]

It means that angels are actively controlling the entire universe. Discovery of these aspects at a conscious level is what constitutes faith. Faith is not a matter of lip service or merely an act of reciting the Kalimah. Faith is a spring of belief that erupts within man as he recognizes and discovers the truth.

I was reading a Muslim newspaper yesterday, which was flooded with news items highlighting the victimization of Muslims and how the world is conspiring against them. This newspaper is no exception; this psychology of victimization is preached across all modes of Muslim media. Now, let us read the following verse of the Quran

Surely, with every hardship there is ease (94:5-6)

According to this verse, life consists of both problems and opportunities. This is God's law in the present world. Hence a man has to face difficult conditions in the beginning but if he perseveres with patience, this hardship becomes the stepping stone to new and easy circumstances.

Therefore, instead of focusing on problems, man should strive to discover the scope or opportunities inherent in a situation. This approach reflects leadership and guidance. A leader is one who talks about scope and not difficulties and problems.

We read about the character of Satan in the Quran. When God created man and there existed two more creations – angels and Satan (Iblis). God asked both of them to submit before man. Angels did but Satan did not. In doing so, Satan adopted the politics of opposition, which he later spread throughout history. Reflecting on this incident, you realize that the complaining attitude, which we so often witness amongst the present-day Muslims is actually a result of the satanic politics of opposition. According to the Quran

Satan said, ‘Because You have put me in the wrong...’ (7:16)

Satan had put the blame of his deprivation on God. Do you think God can be responsible for anyone’s deprivation? No! Unfortunately, this is a commonly witnessed behavior. One should rather accept one’s shortcomings and identify one’s areas of development. When you read the Quran with this criterion and judge yourself basis it, reading the Quran will become a process of self-correction. Reading the Quran like this becomes a blessing and the entire month of Ramadan becomes a month of self-correction.

The month of Ramadan

When I was listening to the Quran this morning, I underwent a strange experience! I realized that all other religious books are in narrative style but the Quran is in an assertive style! Reading it arouses shock, unrest and a tempest within. God wants that atleast for a month man should save himself from all forms of distraction and study the Quran, single mindedly. The entire month then would become the month of self-correction whereby he would be able to continuously correct himself and would in the end, emerge a different person.

The month of Ramadan is not to spend time making elaborate arrangements for *Sehri* and *Iftaar*. The real aspect is to make Ramadan, the month of Quran in the sense of contemplation and receiving guidance.

According to a Hadith

Kitne rozedaar aise hain jinhein roze se bhook pyaas ke alawa kuch nahin milta
[How many of those who fast get nothing from it but hunger and thirst!] (Mishkat)

This Hadith means that those who do not receive guidance from the Quran and consider fast to be an act of abstinence (leaving food and water only) have not understood the spirit of fasting. The real purpose of fasting is to allow man time completely free from all forms of distraction so that he can invest it in understanding the message of the Quran.

Message of the Quran

The present-day Muslims have given the impression of being violent and vengeful community, one that would stoop to any level of violence to counter an act of irreverence towards their Prophet. Is this what Islam teaches its adherents? The answer is No. God has been represented in Islam as an All Merciful, and the Prophet has been proclaimed the Prophet of Mercy. It is ironical that in the name of such a magnanimous religion, a certain section of the fundamentalists could not appreciate such sentiments far less promote them. Islam can never incite people to committing murder in the name of religion, simply because someone had written a book or published a cartoon which ruffled their emotions. In the days of the Prophet a large number of such instances took place, but none of the perpetrators were beheaded or protested against for having insulted Islam and its prophet. Those who spoke out against Islam no matter to what lengths they went were not penalised in any way.

The Quran repeatedly stresses the need for patience. Nowhere does it instruct its proponents to be intolerant or react against the disrespectful remarks from others. On the contrary, the Quran says

Do not revile those [beings] whom they invoke instead of God, lest they, in their hostility, revile God out of ignorance. (6:108)

Quran refrains its proponents from responding to the addressee's obduracy with abusive outbursts as this may lead to an atmosphere of ill-wishing which is not conducive for doing dawah work.

As per the verse recorded above (2:185) the purpose of Quran is two-fold: to be a source of general guidance for mankind (*hudal lin naas*) and to act as a criterion for self correction (*furqaan*). In other words, Quran has been revealed to be a source of God-realization for oneself (*marefat*) and for doing dawah work with others. In order to foster a culture of peaceful dialogue between the *dayee* and the *madu*, it is important that an atmosphere promoting peace, tolerance, love and well wishing becomes the order of the day. Ironically, the present-day Muslims media is leaving no stone unturned to incite hatred and vengeance amongst people. Such an approach is highly unislamic as it kills the very foundation of a peaceful and friendly culture thereby eroding the basis for carrying out dawah work.

Similarly, the Quran reads

Those who believe love God most (2:165)

Love refers to ‘strong affection.’ Reading the above verse will make you reflect on whether your feelings of strong affection are directed towards God or someone else – children, business or family. This will make you introspect. If you find that your feelings of affection are tied to someone other than God, it means that you have a formal relation with God. The realization of not having attributed your feelings of love and devotion to your ultimate benefactor will make you restless. If you are strong, you will resolve to correct yourself and the month of Ramadan will become a month of decision making for you.

According to another verse in the Quran believers are ordained to be cautious,

Lest your actions come to nothing without your realizing it. (49:2)

This verse arouses introspection and one engages in self-scrutiny because accountability is not only for committing a planned evil, intentionally. It may well be that one committed an act as a matter of habit or under family or social pressure, which by way of its repercussion was so serious that it would render one’s good deeds to nothing.

According to another verse,

He will abide forever in the Gardens of eternity, through which rivers flow. That is the recompense for those who purify themselves. (20:76)

This is an astonishing verse! According to it, Paradise will neither be had by virtue of being born in a Muslim family, nor by following an elderly and not because the Prophet will stand at the gates of Paradise and usher the community in. None of this will happen! Paradise is for one who purifies himself; this is the only criterion. Purification consists of giving up a life of carelessness and neglect, and adopting a prudent way of living. The aspirant to Paradise abstains from all things that come in the way of Truth. He rids himself of the hindrance of any worldly considerations obstructing his path. If the feelings of false pride and the urge to transgress raise their heads within him, he stifles them and buries them in his innermost self. This realization arouses a spirit of self-correction within man. When one spends a month like this, a new personality would emerge.

Conclusion

Fasting in the month of Ramadan has not been prescribed because staying hungry and thirsty will get one to paradise. The main aim of Ramadan is to spend time reflecting and contemplating over the message of the Quran. The reminding verses in the Quran serve to make man think about creation and our Creator. He who knows us most (even more than us) has sent this Book for our guidance and in every sentence and verse, it aims to address man's nature. But, it guides only those who are sincere in their search for truth, and who are anxious to be guided. According to a verse in the Quran

Successful indeed are the believers; those who are humble in their prayer. (23:1)

Realization of God is not a simple matter. It brings about a revolution in the life of a man. He becomes a worshipper of God and bows down before Him in submission. This would make one realize that *namaz* is not merely discharging of a form; it is an act of the spirit of submission (or *khushu*). Throughout the prayer (*namaz*) the phrase, *Allah-o-Akbar* (God is Great), is repeated several times. Implicit in these words is the idea that the person uttering them is not great.

Their frequent repetition is a lesson in modesty, designed to rid the worshipper of arrogance. The worshipper is being conditioned by *namaz* to surrender himself to his Maker in all humility.

The various postures in the *namaz* (*ruku* and *sajdah*) climax in the act of self-prostration — the ultimate demonstration of submission. Real proof of this submission to God will only become manifest, however, in subsequent dealings with other human beings, in which it is clear that self-glorification has been replaced by glorification of the Almighty, and that feelings of superiority have given away to profound humility.

The *namaz* ends with each worshipper turning his face sideways and uttering these words: “May God’s peace and blessings be upon you. Every day, all around the globe, Muslims perform these rites. It is as if they were saying to their fellow men all over the world: O people, we have no feelings for you but those of peace. Your lives, property and honour — all are safe. It is this spirit with which worshippers are enthused before they return to society. Those who make *namaz* a source of such spiritual awakening for themselves will be successful in developing a revolutionary personality, one that is desired by God. Such a change will be brought about in the thinking of a believer only when he reads the Quran and *namaz* with *tadabbur* (reflection and contemplation).

Unfortunately, present-day Muslims recite the Quran and debate on technical issues; this is a common practice, everywhere. It is for such people that Hazrat Ayesha said

Unhone Quran ko padha par nahin padha (Musnad Ahmad)

[They read the Quran but did not understand it.]

He who picks technical debates from the Quran has not learnt anything from it. He who discovers God-orientedness and self-correction is the one who has received guidance from the Quran.

It is therefore very important to reflect on the significance of the month of Ramadan, why Quran has been bracketed with Ramadan and what the right way of reading the Quran is. When you will spend the month of Ramadan with this thought in mind, you will be able to avail the benefits of Ramadan. You cannot afford ignorance because the Quran says

Every human being is bound to taste death. (3:185)

The fact that we are alive today does not imply that we shall continue to live. And death will completely overturn the whole state of affairs. After death, each one of us shall face eternity because death comes at a point of no-return and then eternity prevails.

I pray that God lets us benefit from the month of Ramadan in the right way and allow us to derive maximum guidance from the Quran.