

RAMADHAN: Spirituality for the non-Fasting

By Shazia Ahmad

Ramadan is a blessed time of year often characterized by certain specific forms of worship. Fasting, reading Qur'an and performing salah (five times a day prayer) are the main focus of many people's time and energy during this month. However, for most women a portion of Ramadan – or in some cases the month in its entirety – passes by without being able to engage in these acts, due namely to menstruation or postnatal bleeding. Often this leads us to feeling disconnected from the sacredness and specialness of Ramadan, and feeling deprived of that spiritual rejuvenation and increase in faith many believers experience in these days.

In order for us to find a sense of spirituality during this time, we may need to amend our way of thinking about it, and perhaps even the paradigm we construct about worship and spirituality as a whole.

The vast majority of women's lives are structured in such a way that there are intervals of time in which worship is restricted. Firstly, we must understand and appreciate this as part of Allah's creation, which He has fashioned in perfection, order and beauty. He has created us in the best of molds¹, and this includes the varying physical phases we experience. A similar pattern can be found in many aspects of His creation. God grants set phases for such things as in the sun and the moon,² and even assigns certain days for triumph and for failure in the lives of man, as He states in Surat Al-`Imran: "Such days (of varying fortunes) We give to men and men by turns: that Allah may know those who believe and may choose witnesses from among you."³

We are told in the Qur'an that for everything Allah has "appointed a due proportion,"⁴ that "for every matter there is an appointed time given,"⁵ and we can include in this our physiological cycles. Everything is done with a set purpose in a set time; "what has passed you by was not going to befall you, and what has befallen you was not going to pass you by."⁶ Recognizing and believing in this is a righteous action on our part, an action of the heart and mind in confirming that Allah indeed is the One who controls and manages everything in a perfect order, and that His will is always realized in the best time, manner, and place.

It is also important for us to understand that in the times of menstruation or post-natal bleeding, one is not 'dirty' as we may have been taught culturally. While blood itself is considered a material impurity (najas), a menstruating woman or one with post-natal bleeding is considered to be in a state of 'ritual impurity' (hadath). This distinction, which can be found in any basic text of Islamic jurisprudence, is not insignificant. Being in a state of ritual impurity really has no deeper connotation or implication as to a person's worth or standing before Allah. Both men and women are at times in this state, and ritual purity (tahara) and ritual impurity are interesting concepts that are not always connected with what we would normally consider 'filthy' or 'clean.' For example, one can perform tayammum, literally dusting one's hands and face with earth, and then legally be considered in a state of ritual purity.⁷ There is even a hadith in which 'Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) narrates that at a time when she happened to be on her menses, the Prophet ﷺ (peace be upon him) rested his head on her lap in a moment of repose, and even recited from the Qur'an.⁸ If she were truly impure in the ordinary understanding of the word, would our noble Prophet ﷺ have rested on her in such a way?

Being in a state of ritual impurity, therefore, does not necessarily mean one is 'unclean' in the conventional use of the term. Accordingly, the related prohibitions do not necessarily imply that one is forced to be distant from Allah

and the means of getting close to Him. If this premise were true, then all acts of worship and communication with the Divine would have likewise been made prohibited, like saying dhikr (certain formulations of remembrance) with the tongue and making du`a' (supplication). These are very intimate spiritual actions which put a person in direct connection and communication with Allah, yet are allowed for us during this time.⁹

All these things strengthen the idea that the restrictions during menstruation and post-natal bleeding are an expression of Allah's mercy and kindness towards us, more so than as a type of forced estrangement from Him. They can be regarded as a dispensation, to allow us an interim for comfort and rejuvenation while in a state of physical weakness and tiredness. This may also lead us to return to salah, fasting and reading Qur'an with renewed energy, interest and passion.

Another wisdom of these intervals of time and the related prohibitions may be in expanding our understanding of worship, its types, and the means by which we can draw nearer to Allah Most High. It may be that other commendable, but often overlooked, righteous actions are being omitted in our enthusiasm for those that are more commonly performed. Perhaps it is only when the doors are closed on some that we begin to see and appreciate the others. For example, du`a' and salah `ala an-Nabiy (Sending peace and blessings to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) are two of the most virtuous and beautiful types of worship that we often neglect, and they can be performed at any time. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said, "Du`a' is the very essence of worship,"¹⁰ and in many places in the Qur'an, Allah calls upon us to invoke Him in du`a'. "And your Lord says: Pray unto me: and I will hear your prayer"¹¹; "Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret."¹² Sufficient to explain the virtue of salah `ala an-Nabiy is the hadith reported by Ibn Mas`oud (may Allah be pleased with him), that the Prophet ﷺ said, "The nearest people to me on the Day of Rising will be those who have said the most prayers on me."¹³

There is also immense reward in helping and being in the service of other people. This too is a type of worship and means of drawing closer to Allah Most High. If everyone is busy in personalized worship – superogatory prayers and recitation of Qur'an, then who will have time to assist their brother or sister in their needs, help the poor or hungry, and take care of other problems and issues of the community and society?

The Prophet ﷺ said, "Allah is in the service/assistance of [His] servant, as long as the servant aids his brother."¹⁴ He also said, "Whoever feeds a fasting person will have a reward like that of the fasting person, without any reduction in his reward."¹⁵

A deeper lesson we can discern from the time of ritual impurity and the prohibition of salah and fasting can be in changing our perception of dhikr. A sister insightfully commented on this issue:

"Such is the way to teach us, perhaps, that dhikr of Allah is not just praying or fasting, but must be manifested in everything, [in] all parts of our lives. Perhaps we make fasting and prayer a crutch, and expect that it is enough, that that in itself is our dhikr. But it is when it is taken away from us that we have to think about how we are actually remembering Allah along with our everyday actions."¹⁶

A sagacious shaykh (scholar of Islam) once said that a person is inside of salah what they are outside of it; meaning that the state of focus, devotion and humility we all want in our prayer is something we must develop and cultivate outside of it, in the wider arena of our daily lives. Do we simply remember Allah at the times of prayer, and otherwise live in a relative state of ghaflah (heedlessness)? The times when the doors to salah are closed may be when our eyes are opened to our true spiritual state, and give us opportune moments for introspection and reflection.

May Allah help us make the best of Ramadan and use every moment of its blessed days and nights to be in dhikr and worship to Him. May He make it a means of uplifting us spiritually, enlivening our hearts and awakening our hope and desire to draw ever nearer to Him. May He accept our deeds and grant us sincerity and devotion. Ameen.

Here are a few additional suggestions as to what a non-praying/fasting person can do during Ramadan:

If there are iftars being hosted at the masjid, volunteer .

Buy a jug of Zamzam water and pour it into little bottles and distribute them to everyone at the masjid with dates.

Babysit during Taraweeh so that the mothers (and everyone else!) can pray with khushu' and concentration.

Cook iftar for sisters who are expecting, elderly, students away from home, etc. in your community and deliver it to their homes.

Do any deep cleaning, laundry, Eid shopping etc. that needs to be done now, so that you can fully focus on Qur'an/salah/etc when you are fasting. You can also prepare and freeze some food now so that you don't have to cook iftar on other days when you are fasting.

Spend a lot of time in du`a', and memorize the du`a's for different actions (entering the masjid, leaving the home, etc).

Spend time in salah `ala an-Nabiy (Durud), an often overlooked and neglected type of dhikr.

Memorize Allah's names and their meanings.

Do the adhkar (remembrance of Allah) for morning and evening narrated from the Prophet ﷺ.

Remember to seek out Laylat ul-Qadr throughout the month and do not let even one night go by without making du`a'. Laylat ul-Qadr could possibly be on any night in Ramadan, not just on the 27th.

Give sadaqah (even a 50 p every night) in the hope that it could be Laylatul Qadr.

Find out who is sick in your area, visit them.

Look for new converts, those who are newly practicing or people who have lost touch with the community and invite them over for iftar.