

Questions and Answers about the fast in Ramadan for Dummies

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ Bismilllaahir-Rahmaanir-Raheem, “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.”

Written by **Yusef Vanderkimpen**¹

Often non-Muslims ask if we do Ramadan, but Ramadan is the name of the 9th month in the Islamic calendar and seen as the most holy of the Islamic calendar. We fast the hole month of Ramadan as it part of our religion.

“O you who believe fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you so that you can learn Taqwa (guard from evil, or be God-conscious)” – Qur’an 2:183

Why do Muslims fast in the month of Ramadan?

The fasting falls during this month because this is when the holy book that’s followed by Muslims, called the Qur’an, was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ[1]). Following the example of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), Muslims in this month use a prescribed fasting during the day. This fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam. These pillars, or duties, form the basis of how Muslims practice their religion.

The Pillars of Islam are:

Shahada: faith in the Islam religion,

Salaat: pray five times per day facing the direction of Mecca,

Zakaat: give support to the needy,

Sawm: fast during Ramadan,

Hajj: make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one’s lifetime.

From the ferry beginning of time, people have been involved with the great struggle to master their bodies and emotions. The urge to eat is one of the most powerful motivations anyone must face. Many people fail and overeat or consume unhealthy foods. Other substances can be abused by our penchant for

¹ Contact: vanderkimpen@outlook.com / (Valenciennes, France)

pleasure: cigarettes, alcohol or even drugs can pull us down just as easily as too many tubs of our favorite ice cream. Sexual addiction is also another unique problem that can drive people to commit excesses and cause harm to themselves and others.

Islam's cure for all these excesses starts with defining the problem as a spiritual identity crisis. When we forget that God exists and is watching us, when we ignore our fitrah, or inner nature to seek God, when we fail to live according to God's good laws and forget the advice of the prophets, then we can fall prey to any self-destructive impulse. The solution, then, must begin with strengthening the soul and then bringing the body along the instep.

Islam carries with it a fasting component for this reason. We can become better enlightened only when we rise above the flesh and recognize the force of our spirit, our very human will. The Qur'an explains the purpose of fasting in this way: "You who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so you can gain more spiritual awareness." (Qur'an 2:183). Because the Qur'an has given fasting in the month of Ramadan the status of a religious duty whose neglect is sinful, the conscientious person resolves to complete the fasting period. It is through this action that the real transformation takes place.

The focus of our health care system is mainly on the physical health. Very little attention is paid to the mental health, and the spiritual health gets almost no attention. So, when we talk about health benefits of fasting, we should include all three components of our health — the physical, mental and spiritual health.

The fasting in Ramadan entails strengthening of all three aspects of our health. Muslims strive for spiritual purity during the entire month to seek God's pleasure, engage in repentance, charity and good works such as feeding the hungry, helping the needy and so on. The donations to charitable organizations are the highest during the month of Ramadan.

Why each year Ramadan is in another month of the Western calendar?

The month of Ramadan fall each year on an other period of the solar calendar. This is because Islam uses the lunar calendar (based on the cycles of the moon), so it isn't a fixed date in the Western/solar calendar. Observances begin the morning after the crescent moon is visibly sighted, marking the beginning of the new month. Traditionally, people searched for the slight crescent using the naked eye, which has led to the declaration of different starting times for Ramadan, due to weather or geography. In order to have a more consistent start time for Muslims around the world, however, astronomical calculations are now sometimes used. Using science to mark the beginning of the month is controversial, however, and in many parts of the world, Ramadan still does not begin until religious leaders announce that they have personally seen the crescent moon.

Does everyone have to fast?

All Muslims are required to fast the holy month of Ramadan. As already said it is one of the five pillars of the Islam.

However, the sick, pregnant women, wartime soldiers, young children, travelers and anyone else for whom fasting is a health threat (for example, people with diabetes) or slows recovery from illness are not required to fast. Teenagers are also invited to fast, fasting every two days and in the end to fast all month. And those who do not have all their mental abilities are exempt.

How long do Muslims fast?

It is common to have a meal (known as the suhoor) just before dawn and another when the sun has gone down – families and friends will get together for iftar to break their fast. As the month of Ramadan moves in the solar calendar, the time we fast depends the season fall the month of Ramadan and also the latitude. Because when Ramadan falls around December in the northern hemisphere the days are very short, but if it falls around July it can be very long days.

Besides fasting, are there other things you don't do during the month of Ramadan?

Muslims must also refrain from smoking, taking oral medications and engaging in sexual activities, as well as gossip, fighting and lying. Of course, a Muslim must naturally avoid such sins anyway, but sometimes people fall into error if they haven't been reminded of the importance of their actions for a while. Fasting for a month from these vices is the best corrective. If God doesn't accept your fasting, you may not go to heaven no matter what other good deeds you did. There's an incentive for you!

Can anything invalidate a fast?

Yes, including intentionally eating or drinking, intercourse, smoking and menstrual bleeding.

One question most Muslims get asked during Ramadan (alongside the infamous gasp of “not even water?”) is what happens if you eat or drink by mistake? Can you not just take a sneaky swig when no one is looking? Eating or drinking intentionally invalidates your fast, as the purpose of Ramadan is to practice self-restraint and engage in religious acts. However, eating or drinking if it is done through a genuine mistake does not nullify your fast: followers can continue fasting as normal.

Are there any things that are allowed during the month of Ramadan?

It is allowed to cool off when it is hot, either by bathing or by spraying with cold water, to have conjugal intercourse during Ramadan nights, to travel, to taste

baby food if there is nobody else to do it for you, but without swallowing it, to apply perfume or even apply kohl.

Are there any special religious rites during the month of Ramadan?

Since the month of Ramadan is a special month of religiosity, there are special activities in the mosques as supererogatory prayers at night called Tarawih. The tarāwih (Arabic: تراويح) are the daily evening prayers, performed after that of Isha, during the fasting month of Ramadan (from the day before the first day of the month). These supererogatory prayers are performed in pairs of rakaa (ركعة, ritual sequence of prayer), with in all, generally between 111 and 45 rak'a according to traditions. No maximum is also set. Sunnis believe that it is the tradition (sunnah) to try to perform a khatm (complete recitation) of the Qur'an by reciting every thirtieth of the Koran, the Koran being divided into thirty parts (juz, from Arabic: جزء: part, portion). At the end of Ramadan, the imam is said to have recited the entire Qur'an during these prayers.

Also, it is often so that the believers try to read the whole Qur'an during this month.

It is also a month to multiplay dikh -The dhikr (sometimes pronounced zikr, Arabic: ذِكْر [dīkr], evocation; mention, reminder, rhythmic repetition (of the name of God)), designates both the memory of God and the practice which enlivens this memory.

What are the key Ramadan traditions?

Each day's fast is typically broken by eating dates, which follows the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). After this, people will pray Maghrib – the 4th of the five daily prayers – and then sit down to eat.

In many parts of the Middle East, neighborhoods are decorated with traditional lanterns and banners to welcome the holy month. In some countries such as Egypt and Turkey, a musaharati will go down the streets with a drum to wake people up for the predawn meal.

What happens at the end of Ramadan?

For hundreds of years, Muslims have scanned the skies for the first sliver of the new moon that ends the month of Ramadan and begins the Feast of Fast-Breaking (Eid al-Fitr). Traditionally, in some areas that sighting had to be made with the naked eye, after which a religious leader would make an announcement to the faithful. Within the past few years, however, some clerics have sanctioned high-tech methods.

There is also a special alms specific to the month of Ramadan and which must be paid during the month, before the conclusion prayer after the last day of fast for the Feast of Ramadan (Eid al Fitr). Every Muslim, man or woman, must fulfill this alms and the head of the family must pay for all of it. The alms are around 7 euros

per person in the home and it allows the needy to enjoy the feast of the end of month Ramadan.

It is recommended to put on their best clothes, go to prayer (even for women during menstruation), to wish everyone a happy Eid of feast and to give gifts, to visit family, friends and neighbors.

What are some of the lessons learned by participating in the Ramadan fast?

You would be surprised at the variety. The month of Ramadan provides a sort of spiritual and moral boot camp. We know that fasting in Ramadan is a duty from God and that any sins may spoil our records of fasting, so we take great pains to be on our best behavior. The intense modification of our habits is designed to help us avoid such sins throughout the rest of the year.

The Messenger of Allah once remarked, “Whoever doesn’t give up lying and acting on lies during fasting, then Allah has no need of him giving up food and drink.” On another occasion he warned, “There are many people who get nothing from fasting except hunger and thirst.” Clearly, the moral dimension is as important as the physical aspects of fasting.

The Lessons learned during Ramadan are many. We learn what it means to be hungry, so we feel more compassion for the poor. We understand how close we are to leaving the world at any moment and how much we depend on food and drinks. We learn to control our animal urges and passions, and we clear our minds and thoughts for serious remembrance of God. We restrain our anger, and we train our habits toward prayer, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and good behavior. By curtailing sex for the whole day, we force ourselves to train our bodies to obey our will and not to be licentious. There is nothing like the Muslim fast of Ramadan in any other religion for realizing personal reform and self-mastery.

The reward for a successful Ramadan is no less than the forgiveness of all our sins. Imagine wiping the slate clean with God! SO, in addition to all the improvements Ramadan can make in our character and health, we get the slate erased and can start over. With all these benefits derived from the observance of this blessed month, is it any wonder that the fast of Ramadan is the best time of the year for every Muslim?

Footnotes:

صلى الله عليه وسلم = Peace be upon him. It is a custom for Muslims to give honorific blessings each time they say or hear the name of the Prophet Muhammad to send blessing and peace upon him. (‘Alayhiṣ-Ṣalātu was-Salām)

Sources:

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