

Lesson 25: Islam's Spiritual Program (1)

1. Introduction

Islam is concerned about the physical wellbeing of its followers as well as the spiritual wellbeing.

Spiritual training is an essential part of our life. While describing the mission of the Prophet of Islam, Allah says:

“He is the one who has raised among the ignorant [Arabs] a messenger from among themselves who [1.] recites to them His revelations, [2.] purifies them, and [3.] teaches them the Book and wisdom.” (62:2)

The second purpose for sending the Prophet is “spiritual purification”. Spiritual purification or training is very strongly linked to the purpose of our creation.

2. Purpose of Creation

Allah is the Creator of human beings and the entire universe. In His capacity as the Creator, only He has the right to define the purpose of creation. He says in the Qur'an:

“...He is the one who has created death and life so that He may test you to see who among you does good deeds.” (67:2)

“And I have not created the jinn and the humans except so that they may serve Me.” (51:56)

When you study these two verses (and many others on this subject), you will realize that according to Allah the purpose of life is: to successfully go through the trials and tribulations in this world in order to achieve salvation in the hereafter. Unlike this worldly life, the life in the hereafter will have no end. The trials and tribulations can also be expressed as follows: to enter into the servitude of Allah by our own will and choice.

In order to understand the concept of trial and tribulation, it is important to understand the human being:

A human being is a very delicate creature. He has a physical aspect as well as a spiritual dimension. Our whole being revolves around two main powers: the soul and the emotions. 1. The soul (*ruh*) or the spirit is the king of our being. The untainted intellect and the pure conscience are various aspects of our spiritual dimension. 2. The emotions and other physical faculties are also integral parts of our being. These emotions and faculties can be broadly classified under 'anger' and 'passion'.

Our entire adult life is an arena of struggle between the soul and the emotions. And herein lies the trial and tribulation of mankind. A Muslim is expected to use the soul to control the emotions. Islam does not promote the complete suppression of emotions and desires; it only wants the Muslims to use their reason to restrain their desires by fulfilling them within the dictates of the Divine laws.

Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib (a.s.) has beautifully described this concept as follows:

Allah has blessed the angels with the power of reasoning but has deprived them of any desires; and He has blessed the animals with natural desires but has deprived them of the power of reasoning; and He has blessed the human beings with both the power of reasoning and also the desires. Therefore, one who restrains his desires by the power of reasoning, he is superior to the angels (who do not have to deal with any desires and emotions). But one who lets his desires control his reason, he is inferior to the animals (who have not been blessed with the power of reasoning).

In conclusion, we can say that the purpose of creation is to live in such a way that our soul, reason and conscience control and restrain our emotions and desires. If we can live such a life, then we have succeeded in the trials and tribulations of this world, and hope for the salvation in the hereafter.

3. Program for Spiritual Training

Islam seeks to train a person in such a way that he can be a balanced human being in the spiritual sense of the world. A morally healthy person is he who can use his reason to restrain his emotions.

Allah did not only send prophets, messengers, divine books and Imams to guide us spiritually, He has also placed certain rituals in the Islamic laws which serve as spiritual programs for Muslims. There are two main programs for spiritual training: 1. An intensive program on an annual basis. 2. A regular program on a daily basis.

(A) The Annual Spiritual Training

Fasting during the month of Ramadhan¹ is the annual spiritual program for strengthening the soul and keeping the desires/emotions within the dictates of Divine laws. Allah has described the purpose of fasting as follows:

O You who believe! Fasting has been prescribed for you as it had been prescribed for the

nations before you — so that you may become God-fearing. (2: 183)

God-fearing means *taqwa*. *Taqwa*, normally translated as “fearing God”, means the mind-set in which a person fears God's displeasure because of the love that he has for God. In other words, *taqwa* is a frame of mind which prevents the person from committing sins that cause God's displeasure with him.

How does fasting in Ramadhan help in acquiring such a mindset of *taqwa*? Fasting is a ritual which begins at dawn and ends at sunset; and during that entire time, a Muslim is expected to refrain from ten things as follows:

1. Food.
2. Drink.
3. Inhaling smoke or dust.
4. Vomiting intentionally.
5. Submerging the head into a body of water.
6. Liquid enema.
7. Sexual intercourse.
8. Masturbation.
9. Staying till dawn in the state of impurity caused by sexual discharge.
10. To ascribe a statement wrongfully to God or His divine representatives.

The above list includes the two strongest desires of a human being: food and sex. By abstaining from them during the daytime for the whole month of Ramadhan, a Muslim is trained to strengthen his willpower and control his desires. By the end of Ramadhan, a Muslim is expected to be a spiritually stronger person than what he was before Ramadhan.

A Muslim who goes through this annual spiritual training is expected to maintain the domination of his soul over his desires and emotions. However, this is not always easy for everyone. The spiritual power is not a static commodity; it has the potential of increasing and decreasing. The more you protect it, the more it will protect you; but if you neglect it, soon the desires will gain control of your life.

Generally, people go through a cycle of spiritual strength and weakness. As the distance in time increases between the Muslim and the month of Ramadhan, the soul starts to lose its strength in the face of material temptations. That is why Allah has legislated the fasting on an annual basis so that we may get the opportunity to re-energize our soul and spirit at least once every year.

One way of maintaining the domination of soul over desires is by fasting after the month of Ramadhan on the days which are highly recommended in our sharī‘a. These days are:

- first and last Thursdays of every lunar month;
- first Wednesday after the 10th of every lunar month;
- 13th, 14th and 15th of each lunar month;
- the entire month of Rajab and Sha`ban;
- 4th to 9th of Shawwal; 25th and 29th of Dhul Qa`dah;
- 1st to 9th of Dhul Hijja; 18th of Dhul Hijja; 24th of Dhul Hijja;
- 1st, 3rd and 7th of Muharram;
- 17th of Rabi al-Awwal; 15th of Jamadi al-Ula; 27th of Rajab.

Fasting on these days (especially the first three in the list) will surely help in maintaining the strength of the spiritual power and will go a long way in keeping the desires under control.

In short, the ritual of fasting is actually a spiritual training to strengthen the soul and control the desires — the very nature of the trial and tribulation faced by us in this life.

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Question Paper on Lesson 25

Question 1: [20 points]

True or False:

- (a) The created beings can define the purpose of their own creation.
- (b) God created us to serve Him by submitting ourselves to His laws voluntarily.
- (c) Islam expects its followers to completely suppress their desires.
- (d) Ramadhān is the first month of the Muslim calendar.
- (e) Spiritual purification was part of the mission of the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.).
- (f) Fasting was prescribed by God for dieting.
- (g) A spiritually balanced person is superior than the angels.
- (h) Imam ‘Ali said that one who lets his desires control his reason is equal to the animals.

(i) Fasting helps us in strengthening our willpower and controlling our desires.

(j) Taqwa is a reflection of man's love for God.

Question 2: [15 points]

Explain the concept of trial and tribulation that we face in this life.

Question 3: [15 points]

How does fasting help one in going through the trials of this life?

1. Ramadhan is the ninth month in the lunar calendar used by the Muslims.

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