

Sawm



Fasting from the point of view of a Sunni Muslim

I converted to Islam in my late 20's and fasting was something entirely alien to me. Of course I had met people who were fasting and they looked fine but I didn't know what it felt like. I had never actually realised that Muslims were also not allowed to drink water; I remember thinking about how frequently I actually drink and wondering whether I would be able to manage. Nonetheless, I thought it was something worth trying and towards the end of Ramadan 2 years before I converted I got up at the right time (4am); ate as much as possible (as was the vague advice given by the person I had asked about it) and then went back to bed after starting the fast with a very full tummy and a very dry mouth! Within about 30 minutes of fasting I was panicking, worrying that I needed a drink and I realised there would be no way I could do it until 7pm that day and I broke my fast immediately with some water at about 6am. What could have gone wrong?

Well, to begin with, it is not good advice to say to eat as much as possible. A little is enough. The Prophet pbuH instructed to leave your stomachs with 1/3 food, 1/3 water and 1/3 air. The point is to understand that your body can take fasting and understand that gluttony is bad for it. But the other and more important thing that went wrong was a more essential lack of a particular virtue; patience. Patience is not just about waiting and being ok with it. That plays a practical part but patience is also about having faith that everything will be ok. The Qur'an tells us that Allah wants 'ease for you not hardship'. He would not instruct fasting upon people unless it was something that was fully possible to do. If you keep that trust in your heart, you don't just 'manage' the fast; you literally fly. The Prophet Muhammad pbuH said 'fasting is like your shield'. It really feels like that. When you are fasting you rarely feel hunger, the physicality of it comes and goes in waves and every wave passes as quickly as it comes. What remains is a sense of clarity and stillness, your belief is with you and the most important thing to you. The small stuff which might normally bother you is just small stuff because you are close to Allah.

I first fasted as a Muslim the full month of Ramadan. I must confess that my patience was not at its best at that point and the first three days I found very difficult. I laid down as much as I could and would just think about the end of the day. This is, perhaps understandable for a first time faster. When I look back at those days I feel like it was a cleansing process; the fasting was helping to clean my heart of the filth that had accumulated over the years and it hurt. But when I emerged from those 3 days there was a shine to me that apparently radiated out that hadn't been there before the process had been an important one and fasting is an excellent way to polish the heart which aligns you more with what Allah hopes for you.

I now don't only fast in Ramadan. I try to fast frequently throughout the year. The Prophet Muhammad pbuH used to fast Monday and Thursday and would instruct his companions

that the best fast was the fast of Dawud which is to fast every other day continuously. When you are fasting not in Ramadan it is an act of worship that has the beauty of being invisible. It is something that is just between you and Allah in fact the Prophet pbuH instructed people who were fasting to oil their face so people would not guess that they were fasting. I love the fact that it is a secret between you and Allah because secrets exist between lovers and that is as the relationship should be.

Now I have a family I enjoy bringing my daughter up to fast during Ramadan. We all enjoy the festive atmosphere of waking up very early in the morning in the dark and having breakfast. We speak more gently to each other, we do activities with more thought and less speed and we break fast together and enjoy a nice meal every evening. It is a really beautiful time. At the end of Ramadan we celebrate Eid and it is a lovely time where your feel uplifted and refreshed but also slightly sad that Ramadan has finished.

Task: Read the account of Sawm

All: Explain why Muslims fast

Most: How can fasting improve a person?

Some: Why might a non- Muslim try a day of fasting?

Extension: Which other virtues do you think could be stimulated by fasting. Write each down and give an explanation.