

15 Ways to Make the Most of Ramadan

"Whoever fasts the month of Ramadan, recognises its boundaries and safeguards that which he should safeguard will have his previous sins expiated." (Ibn Hibban)

Allah Most High says, "O you who believe, fasting has been ordained upon you as it was ordained upon those before you so that you become god-fearing" (Qur'an 2:183). We ascertain from this verse that the wisdom behind the fast is attainment of taqwa, which essentially means to refrain from anything that will tarnish one's relationship with Allah in any way or form.

Unfortunately, Ramadan has become a ritual for many of us, empty of true spirit and essence, and we end up leaving the month of Ramadan the same way we entered it. Hence, it is necessary that we work towards making this Ramadan different to previous Ramadans and achieve the quality of taqwa, making us better Muslims and adherents to the Shari'a. Below are fifteen ways we can employ to gain maximum benefit from Ramadan. Some of them may seem obvious and simple, but more than often, the very basics are our biggest weaknesses.

1. Remove the distractions

If we look at the lives of the pious predecessors and see how they spent Ramadan, we will realise that they used to leave all preoccupations to solely focus themselves on worshipping Allah and exerting themselves in this holy month, to the extent that they would even stop the noble act of imparting Islamic knowledge.

Hence, it is evident how important it is for us to cut out the television, radio, internet, lengthy conversations over the phone, newspapers and magazines, even though their content may be of a lawful nature. All these things, amongst others, only serve to distract us from our goal in Ramadan and burn away precious time that can never be recovered. Talking beyond necessity and needless socialising with friends and colleagues should be avoided too. This is going to be the first step towards making the most of Ramadan and will definitely help the other pieces of the jigsaw come into place.

2. Educate yourself about Ramadan

Learn the legal rulings of Ramadan and the fast (i.e. the obligations of fasting, that which invalidates the fast or renders it makruh (reprehensible) etc.), to ensure that one does not do anything contrary to the teachings of the Shari'a, a situation that can easily be avoided by educating oneself properly beforehand. Likewise, read books detailing the virtues of Ramadan and performing various good deeds therein. Insha-Allah, this will help one understand and appreciate the message of Ramadan and encourage one to work acts of righteousness throughout the month.

3. Kicking out the bad old habits

With the dawn of Ramadan, the atmosphere almost instantly becomes vibrant with the colour of iman (faith) and good deeds, and a Muslim finds himself surrounded by things to aid his journey towards Allah the Almighty.

This is the perfect time to kick out those bad habits, which have probably hindered a person's spiritual progress during the previous eleven months. Ramadan brings one's defects to the surface and forces a person to admit to weaknesses hitherto unnoticed. Every man is his own best judge; use this opportunity to say goodbye to everything that undermines your Muslim character, such as foul language, backbiting, listening to music, smoking, looking at that which Allah has forbidden, and other detrimental sins. Be honest to yourself and face up to these habits with courage and determination, all the time seeking assistance from Allah against falling into the snares of Satan and the enticement of the lower desires after the month of Ramadan has passed.

The core lesson of Ramadan is purity and control of one's desires, and this is what we have to aim for in this holy month. The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Whoever does not abandon false utterances and practicing upon them [while fasting], Allah cares not that the person abandons his food and drink" (Bukhari). In another narration, he (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "If someone swears at you or behaves in an ignorant manner with you, say, 'I am fasting, I am fasting'" (Ibn Khuzaima, Ibn Hibban).

4. Salah

It is much easier for a person to excel in worship during Ramadan, so make full use of this spirit and ensure you perform salah in the masjid with the imam's takbir and likewise, perform all the sunan and nawafil prayers with each salah. Thirty days of constancy upon this will, insha-Allah, enable one to maintain this even after the passing of the month.

Women while performing their salah at home should be mindful of salah times and should ensure they perform their salah at the correct time, and not let anything preoccupy them from this obligation. It has been noticed that some women become engrossed in preparing food for iftar and id celebrations, losing track of time and thus delaying salah; this should be rectified. Furthermore, if there has previously been a deficiency in performing salah, resolve now to amend this.

5. Recitation of the Qur'an

Ramadan has a unique relationship with the Qur'an, which no other time of the year can parallel. Allah says in the Qur'an, "The month of Ramadan is that wherein the Qur'an was revealed" (Qur'an 2:185). Every year, the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) would revise the Qur'an with Jibril (alayhis salaam) during the month of Ramadan.

In light of this, every Muslim should make an effort to increase the recitation of the Qur'an during the holy month and make at least one complete recitation in Ramadan. At

the same time, we should make use of this time to seriously contemplate our relationship with the Qur'an and reflect over how much we recite the Qur'an out of Ramadan. Are we in a habit of reciting daily or is it a case of the Qur'an gathering dust from one Ramadan to the next? What effort have we made to ensure our pronunciation of the Qur'an is correct? How zealous are we to understand the meanings of the Qur'an, and learn what the Qur'an commands and prohibits?

6. Charity

Fasting throughout the day naturally makes a person feel compassion and mercy towards the poor and destitute, and encourages one to spend generously on the less fortunate. We also learn that the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) was extremely generous in the month of Ramadan (Bukhari, Muslim). In another narration, the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said that the best charity is in the month of Ramadan (Tirmidhi). Thus, spend in the path of Allah throughout the month of Ramadan and seek to spend in different avenues of good (zakah, sadaqa, sponsoring an orphan, building a masjid, general charity, providing iftar etc.), expecting reward only from Allah.

7. Earn the reward of more than one fast

Yes, one can earn the reward of more than one fast and it is really quite simple. Zayd bin Khalid Juhani (radhiallahu anhu) narrates that the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Whoever feeds a fasting person will receive the same reward as him without the reward of the fasting person being decreased at all" (Tirmidhi). Furthermore, this reward is not only for providing a full meal; the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Whoever feeds a fasting person therein (i.e. Ramadan), it will be a means of forgiveness for his sins, freedom from the Hellfire and he will receive the same reward without his (i.e. the fasting person's) reward being decreased at all." The Companions (radhiallahu anhum) said, "Not all of us have the means to feed a fasting person." The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Allah grants this reward to one who gives the fasting person a date, a drink of water or a sip of milk" (Ibn Khuzaima). Thus, endeavour to provide whatever you can to those who are fasting, be it a single date, and Allah, out of His infinite and limitless treasures, will grant you their reward too.

8. Supplications at the time of iftar

As the fast approaches its end, it also reaches its pinnacle and Allah's special mercy is directed towards His servants who lift their hands in supplication unto Him, humbling themselves and expressing their utter indigence towards their Creator and Master. The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said that there are three people whose supplication is not rejected; one of them is the fasting person when he breaks his fast (Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah and others).

Many people do not appreciate these invaluable moments and waste them in futile talk, gossip and other useless pursuits. The servant who takes the saying of the Messenger of

Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) into consideration will ensure that he turns to Allah in supplication before the time of iftar and will not let such an opportune moment go in vain.

9. Tarawih and Qiyam al-Layl

The tarawih prayers need no introduction to any Muslim, and we all see how the masjids are brimming with people as the Qur'an is melodiously recited; alhamdulillah. However, more than often, our perception of the tarawih prayers is tainted and instead of viewing it as a great act of worship, we consider it a burden. It is not uncommon to hear complaints at the conclusion of the tarawih prayers over how extremely tiring and lengthy the prayers were, and within a week or so into Ramadan, people have already started comparing which masjid has the quickest tarawih prayers.

The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Whoever stands (in the night prayer) during Ramadan with faith and expecting reward, all his previous sins will be forgiven" (Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi). It is this "expecting reward" we must keep in mind, so that our tarawih prayers are a means of forgiveness from Allah, as mentioned by the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam).

And it does not end with the tarawih prayers. Wake up a little early before the pre-dawn meal and perform at least two rak'ats of prayer (qiyam al-layl or tahajjud), placing your needs before Allah Most High and seeking forgiveness from Him.

10. Pre-dawn meal (suhur)

Partaking of the pre-dawn meal is not only a means of providing much-needed strength and energy throughout the the day, but it is also a source of immense reward and blessings. The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Partake of the pre-dawn meal, because there is blessing in the pre-dawn meal" (Bukhari, Muslim). In another narration, he (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Verily, Allah and His angels confer blessings on those who partake of the pre-dawn meal."

Laziness should not be shown in this regard by eating before going to sleep at night without making the intention of waking up for the pre-dawn meal. Worse still is to do so and sleep through fajr prayers. Furthermore, just as it is a sunna to eat dates for iftar, it is also a sunna to eat dates in the pre-dawn meal. The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "How excellent are dates as the pre-dawn meal of the believer" (Abu Dawud, Ibn Hibban).

11. Miswak

The miswak (or siwak) is a strongly emphasised sunna of the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam), even more so during the month of Ramadan. Amir bin Rabi'a (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) says, "I saw the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) on countless occasions using the siwak whilst he was fasting" (Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud).

However, this is one of the sunnas often neglected in Ramadan. One should revive this forgotten sunna and likewise, use this perfect season to learn the other beloved sunnas of the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) and follow his complete example.

12. I'tikaf

Whosoever has the opportunity to engage in this great act of worship during the last ten days of Ramadan should do so, for the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) performed i'tikaf of the last ten days of Ramadan until his demise (Bukhari, Muslim). In a narration reported by Ibn Majah, the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said that the person performing i'tikaf receives the reward of the actions he cannot perform due to being secluded in the masjid (such as performing janaza prayers and visiting the ill). It is also a way of ensuring one attains Laylatul Qadr, a night better than a thousand months, which the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) ordered to be sought in the odd nights of the last ten days. Those who cannot perform i'tikaf should at least endeavour to spend as much time as possible in the masjid, or even attend to the needs of and serve those who perform this act of worship.

13. Serving others

Although we must exert ourselves fully in the month of Ramadan, this does not mean that we retire from our responsibilities towards others, especially our parents, families and those in need. In fact, fulfilling these rights in this month will be a means of greater reward from Allah, as it is said, "Through serving others you will find Allah." The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "On the Day of Judgment, Allah will say, 'O son of Adam! I was ill but you did not visit me.' He [i.e. the servant] will say, 'How could I have visited you when you are the Lord of the Worlds?' He will reply, 'Did you not know that such-and-such servant of mine was ill, but you did not visit him? Did you not know that had you visited him, you would have found me with him?'" (Muslim)

14. Supplications and Dhikr

The doors of mercy are opened in the month of Ramadan, the doors of Hellfire are closed and the devils are chained (Muslim), and Allah accepts supplications in this month (Tabrani). Thus, supplicate unto Allah Most High with humility and conviction of acceptance, because supplication is a powerful weapon in the hands of the believer. Ask Him for His pleasure and entry into Paradise, security from His wrath and Hellfire, for every good in this life and the Hereafter, and for Him to keep you firm and steadfast on the teachings of Islam. Moreover, do not forget to keep a share in your supplications for your Muslim brothers and sisters across the globe and the deceased of the umma of the Prophet (sallallahu alayhi wasallam). Along with supplications, keep yourself occupied with the remembrance of Allah Most High, in particular la ilaha illallah, istighfar (seeking forgiveness) and other forms of dhikr mentioned in the hadiths. In this manner, every second of Ramadan will be appreciated by Allah and become a means of proximity with Him.

15. The spirit of Ramadan in the home

Just as it is a duty upon a Muslim to work upon correcting his or her own relationship with Allah, it is important to ensure that the fruits of Ramadan blossom within the home too. One cannot become so absorbed in one's own worship without paying attention to what happens within the four walls of one's home. Thus, parents have an extra responsibility of encouraging their children to recite the Qur'an and worship Allah in this blessed month, and of training them to fast from a young age. The Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alayhi wasallam) said, "Verily, each of you is a shepherd, and each of you will be questioned [on the Day of Judgment] regarding his sheep" (Bukhari, Muslim).

May Allah enable us all to earn His pleasure and forgiveness, reap the benefits of Ramadan and make that change in our lives we so need. Amin.