

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ramadan and the Spirit of Shukr

Quranic Verses are not included in this article. Refer Accompanying References.

It seems giving thanks for Allah’s bounty has been practiced since the earliest times. From the ancient Greek Thesmophoria to the Roman Cerealia to the more modern practice of Thanksgiving celebrated in North America people have been offering ritual thanks to their various gods in one form or another. All the Biblical Messengers taught their people to be thankful to Allah for His bounties. Then the Qur’an came and made a universal declaration that the bounties of God are meant for entire humankind and, therefore, must not be restricted to a particular nation or a people:

20 All do We aid — these as well as those — out of the bounty of thy Lord, and the bounty of thy Lord is not limited.

كَلَّا نُنَدُّهُ هَوًى لَّا وَ هَوًى لَّا مِنْ عَطَاءِ رَبِّكَ وَمَا كَانَ عَطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا

Of the bounties of thy Lord We bestow freely on all- These as well as those: The bounties of thy Lord are not closed (to anyone). (17:20) [As translated by Yusuf Ali]

Thus, according to the Qur’an, the entire Earth and its resources are a gift from Allah and, therefore, must be treated as sacred. The very opening verse of the Qur’an says: رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ, Surah 1 Verse 1:

“He is the Sustainer of all the worlds”. Therefore, we all must be thankful for this sustenance – always. The month of Ramadan has a special significance in Islam most of all because the Qur’an started to be revealed in this month but also because of its month long abstinence, and the spirit of thanksgiving.

The Qur’an has mentioned three results of fasting in this month:

1) *Taqwaa* or learning self-restraint Surah 2 Verse 183:

183 O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil.^a

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

2) *Takbir* or glorifying Allah because of being guided, and

3) *Shukr* or thanksgiving (2:185). **وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ**

Here we focus on the thanksgiving (or *Shukr*) aspect of Ramadan, its meaning, and benefits. What is the meaning of *Shukr*? Yusuf Ali has translated *Shukr* in verse (2:185) as being grateful. Other translations are: render thanks (Muhammad Asad, Picthall). But none of these translations bring out the true root meaning of *Shukr*. The root meaning of *Shukr* ش ك ر (sh-k-r) is for something to become full and complete and to become available to others. *Shakiratun* means a she-camel, ewe, or she-goat having her udder full (Lane’s Lexicon page 1585, Book I).

In the Qur’anic Verse 152 of Surah 2 the word *Shukr* has been used in opposition to *Kufr* which in its root means to hide:

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكَرْكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لِي وَلَا تَكْفُرُونَا

“So, Remember Me and I will make you eminent and practice *shukr* (thanksgiving) and be not of the rejecters (*kufr*)”.

Shukr of Allah, therefore, is to keep His bounties (*Ni’ma*) open in such a way that everyone is able to derive one’s due benefit from them, and that no one hides them from (and thus denies them to) other

human beings because that would be *Kufr*. Allah says that His bounties are given to see who does *Shukr* and who does *Kufr*, Surah 27 Verse 40:

قَالَ هَذَا مِنْ فَضْلِ رَبِّي لِيَبْلُوَنِي ۗ أَشْكُرَ أَمْ أَكْفُرُ

“He said, this is the bounty. Ni’ma, from my Sustainer, so that he could act to the fullest sense of my faculties, to make *shukr or kufr*” How to do *Shukr* and what benefits accrue from it? Obviously *Shukr* of Allah cannot be done simply by reciting its words on fingers or on the beads of a rosary. It requires human effort. In light of the above root meaning doing *Shukr* of Allah is to work hard ceaselessly and to keep the fruits of that labor open to others. The Qur’an also says that the act of doing (and not reciting the word) *Shukr* develops the self of the person doing the *Shukr* as related in Surah 27 Verse 40:

وَمَنْ شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ
لِنَفْسِهِ ۗ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٌ

“He provides such opportunities to see whether I utilize correctly the might, power, wealth and dignity that He has provided me; or whether I waste them erroneously. It is obvious that any nation that utilizes them correctly and positively will benefit; while that which wastes them will suffer.”

And in Surah 31 Verse 12:

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا لُقْمَانَ الْحِكْمَةَ أَنِ اشْكُرْ
لِلَّهِ ۗ وَمَنْ يَشْكُرْ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ ۗ
وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٌ ﴿١٢﴾

“We had provided Luqman with the illuminating wisdom to ponder over the universe in the light of the Divine Guidance, and thus draw correct conclusions. This was to enable him to be immensely appreciable for *Allah’s* bounties. Appreciation means spending Almighty’s bounties according to the Divine Laws; and the abilities of whoever does so will receive full development. The one who goes against the Divine Laws suffers himself, for it brings no harm to *Allah*. His Laws do not need any outside help to produce results. His system, with its in-built forces, continues producing such wonderful results that it begets involuntary appreciation from all discerning persons.” In other words, it leads to his/her growth and development. for the personality

Since this is not an easy thing to do a definite course must be laid for this purpose. As we know developing our physical abilities requires constant effort and discipline. So it is with developing our human abilities albeit harder. And so it is with developing our self, *Nafs*, only more difficult. Yet developing the self (or *Nafs*) is the most important thing for our success in the Hereafter which is what truly counts in the long run. The Qur’an says that those who develop and nourish their *Nafs* will succeed: Surah 87 Verse 14:

14 He indeed is successful who purifies himself,

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى ﴿١٤﴾

And Surah 91 Verse 9 & 10:

9 He is indeed successful who causes it to grow,

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا ﴿٩﴾

10 And he indeed fails who buries it.^a

وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا ﴿١٠﴾

while those who don’t will fail; as above in Surah 91 Verse 10 on the Day when the Deen is established and on the Day of Accountability or Judgment.

For this purpose, a month-long yearly crash course of abstinence and reflection in Ramadan with clearly defined goals and strictly laid guideline of what to do and what not to do to achieve them has been prescribed by Allah for us so that we may develop and strengthen our self. This yearly commitment to Ramadan involving our conscious effort and hard work ensures the development of our personality and growth. By a month long training and practice involving self-discipline and self-control Islam wants to instill good habits in its followers:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ
 الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ
 قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾
 أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَاتٍ فَمَنْ كَانَ مِنْكُمْ مَرِيضًا
 أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ وَعَلَى
 الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ فِدْيَةٌ طَعَامُ مِسْكِينٍ
 فَمَنْ تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَهُ وَأَنْ
 تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٤﴾
 شَهْرَ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ
 هُدًى لِلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِنَ الْهُدَى
 وَالْفُرْقَانِ فَمَنْ شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ الشَّهْرَ
 فَلْيَصُمْهُ وَمَنْ كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ
 فَعِدَّةٌ مِنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ
 الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ وَلِتُكْمِلُوا
 الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَى مَا هَدَاكُمْ
 وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٨٥﴾

“183-184 Self-control is a prerequisite both for steadfastness and fortitude in the battlefield as well as for establishing a just and equitable socio-economic system. In other words, in case of a conflict between your physical drives and lofty human values, you should uphold the latter. Furthermore, you should habituate yourself to leading a hard and laborious life. For this purpose abstinence or fasting has been made obligatory for you as it was for earlier communities, in order that you may live according to the Divine Laws and protect yourself from the pitfalls of life. Fasting is for a prescribed number of days (as fixation of time itself is an aid to disciplined life). If (during *Ramadan*) any of you is sick or on a journey (and misses some fasts) he must complete the prescribed number by fasting on other days. But if a person is neither sick nor on a journey yet cannot fast except with great hardship and, therefore, cannot make up missed fasts, he should provided food for a person in need in lieu thereof.

It is evident that the condition of the last named category of persons cannot be determined by Law. It is for you yourself to determine if you are unable to fast except with great hardship. If on assessing your own condition you conclude that the odds are even, then it is better for you to fast even if it is (relatively) hard for you, because the purpose which is served by abstinence and fasting cannot be attained by providing food to another, provided you understand the rationale for fasting.

185 Here the question arises as to why the month of *Ramadan* was chosen for this collective (as well as individual) exercise in self-discipline. The answer is that *Ramadan* is the month during which the revelation of the *Quran* began which shows all humanity the clear path leading to its ultimate goal, revealing those permanent values whereby one can distinguish truth from falsehood. The discipline learned through fasting is an annual training to remain in a state of preparedness for the accomplishment of this lofty programme. Hence a person who is at home during this month should fast. If a person is sick or on a journey, he should, as already stated, complete the prescribed number of fasts by fasting on other days (and the concession allowed to a person who cannot fast except with great hardship has been mentioned earlier). *Allah* wants to make things easy for you and does not want to subject you to hardships and difficulties. Mark again that abstinence and fasting is not a mere rite. Its purpose is to enable you to establish on the one hand supremacy of the Divine Laws in the world, in the light of the Guidance given to you (9/33 below) and on the other enable you to nourish your own potentialities:”

33 He it is Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth that He may make it prevail over all religions,^a though the polytheists are averse.

هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَ
دِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ
وَكَوْكَرَهُ الْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

[It is interesting to note that there NO direct reference to Eid-ul-Fitr in the Quran; However some scholars are of the opinion that the last part of Surah 2 Verse 185 asks the Believers to practice thanksgiving, *shukr*, for Allah having blessed us with the Quran in the month of Ramadaan and we are thus required to “That you should exalt the greatness of Allah, *Takbeer*, for having guided you and that you practice *shukr*, or thanksgiving” as described above,

Good habits facilitate good actions. And good actions reinforce good habits. In this way what seems difficult at first becomes relatively easy to practice in daily life throughout the year. The best thanksgiving *shukr* that we can render unto Allah is to keep His bounties and the fruits of one’s labor open to all—without any discrimination whatsoever based on religion, race, ethnicity, etc.

May Allah give us the fortitude to do that.

Additional References on the Subject of *Shukr*:

Surah 17 Verse 20 (Bounties of Allah freely bestowed):

وَمَا كَانَ عَطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا

Surah 27 Verse 40 (Suleiman and Shukr – Ashkur um Afkuru):

أَشْكُرُ أَمْ أَكْفُرُ

Surah 31 Verse 12 (Shukr to Allah benefits the person and not Allah):

وَمَنْ يَشْكُرْ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ

Surah 2 Verse 152 (Remember Allah and make Shukr):

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكُرْكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لِي وَلَا تَكْفُرُونِ

Surah 25 Verse 73 (Putting Quran to the Acid test):

73 And they who, when reminded of the messages of their Lord, fall not down thereat deaf and blind.

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِّرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ لَمْ
يَخْرُجُوا عَلَيْهَا صُمًّا وَعُمْيَانًا ﴿٧٣﴾

Surah 17 Verse 36 (Be sure of what you are saying and doing):

36 And follow not that of which thou hast no knowledge.^a Surely the hearing and the sight and the heart, of all of these it will be asked.

وَلَا تَقْعُتْ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ
السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ
كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا ﴿٣٦﴾