



IN THE NAME OF ALLAH THE MOST GRACIOUS, THE MOST MERCIFUL

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE MEANING OF “SAWM”

INTRODUCTION

Many Muslims simply associate Ramadan with “fasting”, and many simply relates “fasting” as refraining yourself from food and drinks from sunrise to sunset. Some even fasted but not praying. Some simply fast in the day but are not controlling the tongue or the eyes.

But when truly analyse the meaning of “sawm” (singular) or “siyam” (plural), then we must analyse exactly what we have missed in order to understand what we are required to do in the daylight of Ramadan.

Meaning of “sawm” or “siyam”

Sawm means abstaining from many things every day in Ramadan month *from the dawn (call for Al-Fajr Prayer) to sunset (call for Al-Maghrib Prayer)*, such as food, drink (including water), medication, any acts of evil, any sexual activity, backbiting, harming oneself or others, smoking, intoxication, impure thoughts, etc.

The word sawm literally means “to abstain”. In Surat Maryam, Allah tells that Mary the mother of Jesus said

إِنْسِيًّا الْيَوْمَ أَكَلِمَ فَلَنْ صَوْمًا لِلرَّحْمَنِ نَذَرْتُ إِنِّي

(“I have vowed a fast (sawm) for the sake of the Merciful, so today I shall not speak to anyone.”) (Maryam 19:26)

The meaning is “I have vowed to abstain from speaking to anyone today.”

According to Shari ‘ah, the word sawm means to abstain from all those things that are forbidden during fasting from the break of dawn to the sunset, and to do this with the intention of fasting.

Purpose of Fasting

The Qur'an says what means, (O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those who were before you, in order that you may learn taqwa (piety)) (Al-Baqarah 2:183). Taqwa is a very important spiritual and ethical term of the Qur'an. It is the sum total of all Islamic spirituality and ethics. It is a quality in a believer's life that keeps him/her aware of Allah all the time. A person who has taqwa loves to do good and to avoid evil for the sake of Allah. Taqwa is piety, righteousness and consciousness of Allah. Taqwa requires patience and perseverance. Fasting teaches patience, and with patience one can rise to the high position of taqwa. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said that fasting is a shield. It protects a person from sin and lustful desires. When the disciples of Jesus asked him how to cast the evil spirits away, he is reported to have said, "But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17:21). According to Imam Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 C.E.), fasting produces a semblance of divine quality of samadiyyah (freedom from want) in a human being. Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim (d. 1350 C.E.), viewed fasting as a means of releasing the human spirit from the clutches of desire, thus allowing moderation to prevail in the carnal self. Imam Shah Waliullah Dahlawi (d. 1762 C.E.) viewed fasting as a means of weakening the bestial and reinforcing the angelic elements in human beings. Maulana Mawdudi (d. 1979 C.E.) emphasized that fasting for a full month every year trains a person individually, and the Muslim community as a whole, in piety and self restraint.