

## **The Days of Mercy** By Arzu Kaya-Uranli

*If the brain and the belly are burning clean with fasting,  
every moment a new song comes out of the fire.*

*The fog clears, and a new energy makes you run up the steps in front of you.*

– Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi

I am so thankful to God, once again, to be able to reach the most uplifting time of the year: Ramadan. We already are in the third day of the sultan of the other 11 months, on the path to learning discipline and perseverance.

Once again, it is a great opportunity make new discoveries. Ramadan, with its own light and mystery, makes us realize the spiritual abundance hidden within ourselves. The holy month, as sanctioned by Allah, awards us fasting to explore and disclose new things deep inside of us – the chance to reflect on life and religion. One of the significant elements of Ramadan is that it takes place during the ninth month of the lunar calendar: A birth of life! And we can be reborn into our inner reality through this special time of the year, renovated and rejuvenated. It can be very transformative, if we fast properly and/or approach it with an open and sincere mindset.

Divided into thirds, the beginning part of Ramadan is a period for mercy, the second part is for forgiveness and the last period is for redemption and renewal, with special prayers dedicated to all three themes. So, right now we are in the days of mercy, and striving for humility in our lives is a great thing to focus on now. Strive to feel more merciful towards ourselves and towards to those who are less fortunate.

This is the time for us to pause and think. Without food and drink for entire day, we can easily realize what we have given up and understand that in partaking in this sacrifice, we can hopefully better see all we have taken for granted. We should use this sacred time to help us to realize again that too many people around the world suffer from senseless conflict and violence. It's our collective mission to pursue justice and peace and to uphold the dignity of every human being. It's time to remember that the color of skin, religion, ethnic background, gender, age, status, traditional or religious attire are not to be used as weapons to oppress or persecute our innate human rights and responsibilities.

The essence of Ramadan is a month of humanist spirituality, hopefully elevating our minds, erasing selfishness from our hearts and enhancing our awareness of others. Every year I'm amazed to find a new angle to see my surroundings through the lens of Ramadan. No doubt, fasting creates a particular state of mind that can be achieved through true effort. It can be the evolution of personal understanding and bring personal revival.

If we fast properly (from food and drink if we are physically able to, and/or from the things that plague our *nafs*), we can detoxify our soul and spirit, thereby purifying ourselves. Then we can restart our eager efforts to make the world a better place.

It isn't easy, and it can tire us out. But, it's the time to wake up. Are we ready?

# **Excellent "Weight Control"**

EVERY YEAR, MORE than 1.5 billion Muslims around the world observe Ramadan fast. For Muslims fasting is a religious obligation (*Sûrat Al-Baqarah, 2:183*), it being the fourth pillar of Islam. Yet fasting is also an excellent "weight control" strategy. The key point is not "weight loss" but rather "weight control". While those who fast admit they lose some weight during Ramadan, few have actually considered its significance as a "weight control" mechanism, nor its value as a "behavior modifier", nor even its merits to "fine tune and tone" the human body and its various systems. All these benefits, as well its spiritual advantages, were understood by the bygone Prophets.

The Muslim fast, as prescribed for those past the age of puberty, is simple. It requires one to abstain from taking any food or liquids at all from dawn until dusk. Between hunger and thirst, most find thirst to be more difficult to cope with, especially on very long and hot days as Ramadan fasts will be in the northern hemisphere. As the fasting month is determined by the lunar calendar, which is 10 or 11 days shorter than the solar calendar, in 36 years every Muslim in both hemispheres will have the opportunity to fast during all four seasons. This ensures equity in terms of both ease and hardships endured for people living in both hemispheres.

## **The Best-Kept "Diet" Secret**

Around the world diet-books fly off store-shelves in record numbers, as diet gurus offer their latest fads for losing weight to a population that is grossly overweight because of over-indulgence. Many of those who have gone on such diets appear on radio and TV talk shows to narrate their personal experiences. The overwhelming opinion seems to be that most diets work for a short time, but as soon as the dieter stops dieting the lost weight reappears; some dieters even exceed their previous weight. In all the shared experiences about such diets, one centuries-old formula is seldom or never mentioned. It is the simple fast that the Prophets of all the major faiths engaged in regularly and enjoined their followers to do. Fasting is not new, yet it seems that, as a possible diet option, it is one of the best-kept secrets and no one seems to have explored its potential.

## **Encouraged to Eat in Moderation**

At the end of the fasting day Muslims are enjoined to eat in moderation and engage in *çibâda*, meditation (*thikr*) and contemplation or thoughtful analysis (*tafakkur*). The emphasis is on small simple meals, yet many ignore this injunction and consume large and elaborate meals. However, Allah's divine scheme is unbeatable: humans are created in such a way that the body itself brings one round to eating smaller meals. Those who eat heavy meals at the end of the day often suffer from constipation and other discomforts. It is interesting to note that at the end of the fast, because of the hunger pangs, one thinks that one will be able to eat much more than one normally does. However, one discovers that this is not so.

This discovery usually comes about after a few days of fasting when a person begins to find she is unable to finish the food in her plate. Often the amount one is able to eat is less than the normal meal one would have consumed in the regular three-meals-a-day routine. This is because as the fasting days increase, the body undergoes a physiological change as the stomach begins to shrink and, however much one may desire to have more at the end of the day, the shrunken stomach limits the amount of food that can be consumed.

It is critical that one takes heed of these body signals and not disregard them by gorging one's self to an extra helping of food or be seduced by the many "varieties" of food some families spend hours preparing. In addition to its being totally contrary to the purpose of fasting, this kind of extensive table spread of food hampers the stomach from achieving its full shrinking potential.

For those who do not gorge and restrict themselves to one simple meal at the end of the fast, are the ones most likely to experience the full benefit of the stomach shrinking which ensures the fasting person will lose some weight by the end of the month. While the "weight loss" is obvious, the inevitable follow-up question is how fasting is a "weight control" tool, a "behavior modifier" or a means of "fine-tuning and toning" one's body?

Most diets fail because they do not bring about a change in the dieter's "physiological" condition, as the month-long fast does. Fasting helps one to alter one's unhealthy over-eating habits and establish a moderate intake of food. If one looks at the example of the Prophet ﷺ, we find even when the month of Ramadan ended, he celebrated Eid with rejoicing and "feasting" – sharing a simple meal with neighbors, relatives and, most important, the needy. He also emphasized the need on this festive day to visit the sick and give charity (*ṣadaqa*). It is important to clarify that "feasting" according to the Prophet's practice was not self-indulgent. For the Prophet ﷺ, "feasting" was an occasion for "sharing" Allah's bounties with others, especially the poor and the needy. For the wealthy who may have food in abundance, it is the "sharing" of Allah's bounties with the poor that is intended by "feasting."

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ deplored over-eating by saying: **Kill not your hearts with excess of eating and drinking.** Over-eating, especially on the day of Eid, (when folks are seduced by the many favorite dishes families prepare for this day) is the quickest way to undo the benefits achieved during Ramadan. The physiological change that facilitates moderate eating is the secret of fasting as a "weight control" mechanism. Although over a period of time the moderate eating habits developed during Ramadan usually get somewhat eroded, the fasting month returns after 11 months to re-establish the good habits. However, it is possible to sustain the physiological change which ensures "weight control" by reinforcing the habit of moderation by also fasting at other times during the year, which the Prophet ﷺ did regularly.

### **Fasting as a Means to Fine-Tune our Bodies**

We often overlook the fact that fasting is Allah's prescription for humans to fine-tune their bodies, especially the digestive system. All body systems or parts need rest. Sleep is one way for some organs to achieve this; the eyes, mind and muscles are obvious examples.

The heart and the digestive system achieve their rest by actively slowing the system or "reversing" the system operation, somewhat similar to a "reverse flush" that is done to clean radiator pipes in a vehicle. Standing on one's head provides a good means of rest for the heart because it reverses the pull of gravity against the normal flow of blood, just as putting down one's arms does when one is painting a ceiling.

For the digestive system, "fasting" offers the best rest. It is a welcome respite from frequent meals, snacks and drinks such as tea or coffee. This "rest" gives the digestive system the opportunity to clean and rejuvenate itself and thereby make it more efficient, just as a farmer leaves a field fallow or uncultivated for a year so that they provide better and more abundant crops the following year.

## **Fasting as a Means of Spiritual Cleansing**

Fasting, as prescribed in Islam, also requires spiritual cleansing, which at the practical level is reflected in modifying behavior to meet higher ideals.

Fasting without worship and contemplation achieves little merit in Islam.

In worship a Muslim can seek Allah's help to become a righteous person who stands up against injustice and oppression.

In contemplation a Muslim can examine the behaviors that undermine efforts to come closer to fellow human beings, namely, family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances and others. Modifying behavior is integral to fasting.

A Muslim's behavior or attitude to others must reflect respect, kindness and justice.

The Prophet ﷺ himself reminds us: **A keeper of the fast who does not abandon lying and evil ways, Allah cares not about his [or her] leaving off eating and drinking.**

Fasting is probably the best way for one to get to feel the pangs of the hungry family, the misery of the homeless person and the suffering of the downtrodden individual.

Creating empathy for the destitute is Islam's way of stirring our conscience to become actively involved in addressing the needs of the most unfortunate and most marginalized in society.

At a higher spiritual level, fasting in Islam is seen as an armor against evil.

Those who are able to renounce lawful satisfaction of desires in obedience to Allah's command are more able to renounce unlawful gratifications.

Just as physical exercise strengthens the body, so mental, spiritual, ethical and moral exercise through fasting builds willpower to conquer physical appetites and abstain from what is wicked and wrong.

The strength built during Ramadan is only the beginning of the journey towards getting closer to God by becoming a better human being through empathy with and concern for one's fellow human beings.

We are reminded of this when our Prophet ﷺ said:  
**If you love your Creator, then love your fellow-beings first.**

May Allah help us all to progress along this journey not only in the month of Ramadan but throughout our lives.

# The Cozy, Comfy Bed Syndrome

DO YOU STRUGGLE to leave your cozy, comfy bed in the middle of the night to make the *tahajjud* prayers? Then here are some tips that can help.

## **A Cost / Benefit Analysis**

It was a simple encounter...but to my soul it served as the kiss of life. And then nothing remained the same...

Beginning to drench oneself in the realization and ecstasy of Allah's blessings and His remembrance, a novice finds that he has to forsake many an ardent interest which actually are an expense to the spirit...giving up music, movies, anger; donning *Hijab*, sporting a beard...hey, you name it.

But once our wills derive strength to express submissiveness to Allah—now even if someone comes and says that they'll grant us all that's in the world for going back and just listening to a single song—then too, *Inshâ'Allah*, I can utterly assert, that it won't make us relapse into all that filth. It's all engendered by a deep humbling sentiment within 'God-consciousness' (*taqwa*).

## **A Work in Progress**

However, some eight, nine years in the brewing, I would say I'm yet not a good Muslim in the least. Yes, life changed indeed, but still an immense lot needs to be set right and for that I know I need to keep repenting to the All-Merciful.

And one thing that makes me the most remorseful is something that is still and continues to be an uphill struggle for me, a task that I have to do daily but yet very grudgingly—may Allah forgive me—that is to leave my cozy, comfy bed in the middle of the night to perform the Night Prayers (*Ṣalât Al-Layl*).

## **My Happiness**

I'm very well acquainted with how simply amazing is the very experience of offering *Ṣalât Al-Layl*. Let me relate it through an example: Once when I was back from Hajj, I used to find myself habitually mesmerized and lost in the thoughts of watching the *Kaḩabah*, performing *Ṭawwâf*, drinking *Zamzam* and so on and so forth.

Although I had left my two very young toddlers behind me—and being back with them was evidently remarkable—but yet the thoughts of pilgrimage used to keep me in a trance. And then I used to offer *Ṣalât Al-Layl* in my house, and used to enjoy the sweet whispers with my Lord so much, and would think that this time is so special that even if I lived to perform a thousand Hajj, I doubt I would be able to reproduce the charm of the immense feeling of love that showers upon my soul at this time of night.

I felt as if all of heaven's inhabitants were celebrating, dancing joyously with my spirits.

## **Comprehending the Stakes**

Yet I wonder, and I wonder hard, why getting up at night takes such a toll on me although, *alḩamdulillâh*, I'm seldom, if ever, of the lazy genus who keeps trying to sneak out some time for rest. I really believe in keeping myself in a struggle, trying to max out on my limited time on this earth, and thus I am also mostly found guilty of not having been able to do as much as could have been possible.

And so almost every night I remind myself:

Our Lord, most Exalted, most High, comes down to the lowest heaven during the last third of each night and announces (reassuringly): Whoever makes *duċâ'*, I shall answer it. Whoever asks (for something *ĥalâl*) I shall grant it; and whoever seeks forgiveness, I shall forgive him. (Bukhâri)

If somebody is to grant a favor onto us, we will not let any time go to waste, lest that fair chance slip through our hands. They can call us at any odd time (or 'even' time, too) and without even giving it a second thought, there we will be, all prim and prepared to receive it.

However, when it is the Lord of all lords calling out to us, what happens then? Either foregoing sleep and abandoning warm beds is too arduous a task for us, or, perhaps we are not aware of Allah's might, not sure whether he can even dispense our affairs just right.

### **Example of the Prophet and His Companions**

Nonetheless, surely every one of us wants to live a pure life. We all wish to purify ourselves and make our lives free of sins and mistakes, as we all would like to meet Allah, our Lord, without sins. So those who observe and enjoy night prayer are the people who work hard on this course of action. It is about these people that Allah says:

**They used to sleep but a little of the night, And in the hours before dawn they would ask for forgiveness.** [Sûrat Al-Thâriyât, 51:17-18]

**Their limbs do forsake their beds of sleep, while they call on their Lord, in fear and hope.** [Sûrat Al-Sajdah, 32: 16]

So standing long in prayer, reading not just the short *Sûrahs* but the longer ones too, is the practice of the pious. They love making their conversations with Allah longer, deeper and more meaningful.

The Companion Ĥuthaifah ibn Al-Yamân said:

**I prayed with the Prophet one night. He started with [Sûrat] Al-Baqarah, so I thought that he would make *rukûċ* after that. Then he started [Sûrat] Al-Nisâ' and recited it. Then he started [Sûrat] Âl ċImrân and recited it. He would recite slowly.** (Muslim)

### **Benefits of Night-Life**

These times in the night can also be spent in *thikr* (remembrance of Allah), *tadabbur* (reflection), as well as meditation and recitation of the Holy Quran. The devout servants, conscious of their sins, will continue to beseech Allah during their prostrations. They will continue to engage in a heart talk with Him. Allah loves to hear from us. So the believers beg Him to keep them away from misfortunes in this world and in the Afterlife. They ask Allah to make them patient and steadfast in their *islam*, overlooking their shortcomings, periods of neglect and laziness.

Apart from securing Allah's pleasure, praying *ġalât Al-Layl* also increases one's livelihood, as well as helps one pass easily through *sakarât al-mawt* (grueling pain a dying person suffers at the time of death) and finds happiness in *Barzakh* (the Spiritual world where the departed souls stay either in happiness or misery, until the Day of Resurrection). It is another great *Sunnah* that keeps one physically fit, drives the Satan away as well as protects one from enemies.

## Confronting the Cozy, Comfy Bed Syndrome

“Well...,” some might be thinking, “even getting up for *Fajr* prayer is not easy for us, so how can we train ourselves for getting up even earlier than that?”

Here’s how: Getting up for *Ṣalât Al-Layl* or getting up for *Fajr*—each takes about the same amount of effort, and by performing *Ṣalât Al-Layl* (even if getting up just thirty or twenty minutes before the time of *Fajr*), one can easily stay up till the time of *Fajr* Prayer and be sure of not having missed the time frame of their *farḍ* Prayer, too.

## Tips for Succeeding with the Night Prayer

Here are some pointers we can give ourselves to better our odds of succeeding in performing *Ṣalât Al-Layl*, and thus to be amongst the recipients of its infinite blessings:

- **Seeking *Ikhlas* (sincerity)**

Allah helps only those who are sincere in their hearts, as our Prophet ﷺ has said: **If you are truthful with Allah, then Allah will deliver to you what you wish for.** (Al-Nasâ’i) So seek *Ikhlas* by resolutely determining within yourself, “I will get up for the Night Prayer and will stand in front of my Lord to gain His vast favors.”

- **Taking a Daytime Nap**

Taking a nap before or after *Thuhr* Prayer will release stress and thus enable one to get up in the night to pray. Some offices in the West have even started this practice of making their workers take a short rest during working hours, for this will help them work with greater efficiency for the remainder of their day.

- **Avoiding Excessive Eating**

Too much food or drink is one of the main reasons that make one lethargic and careless of *Ṣalât Al-Layl*. Surely, less food—which enabling less need for sleep—the two when taken together, are the golden rule of thumb leading to success in instituting the Night Prayer.

- **Shunning Sins**

Even after the alarm goes off, we comfortably remain in our beds, at times not even having heard it! Actually, it may be due to our sins during the day that Allah makes us go into deep sleep; He may not want to see and bless such a person at that celebrated time, unless that person is ready to come to Him begging forgiveness. So staying away from sins will help prevent one from blocking him-/her-self from *Ṣalât Al-Layl* and thus reaping its blessings. Also, the heart should be free from the wrong of excessive worldly interests and from malice towards others.

- **Striving against Ourselves**

The Prophet ﷺ once said:

**When a man from my Ummah gets up to pray at night, striving against his own self to get up and purify himself, there are knots [fixed] on him.**

When he washes his hands in *wuḍû*, one knot is undone. When he washes his face, another knot is undone. When he wipes his head, another knot is undone. When he washes his feet, another knot is undone. Then Allah says to the angels: 'Look at this slave of Mine, he is striving against his own self and asking of Me. Whatever My slave asks of Me shall be his. (Ahmad) And striving against oneself is only possible through a servant's utmost obedience and love for his Lord.

- **Being Mindful of the Virtues of *Salat Al-Layl***

Knowing the rewards and intrinsic worth of performing *Ṣalât Al-Layl* produces the desire to perform it. We should read an article or a book highlighting its prestige, not just once but frequently, so as to keep ourselves keyed up and energized for it. In this regard, parents should also encourage their children. Being in the company of pious people, especially a pious spouse, can also help.

Abû Hurairah reported that Allah's Messenger  $\text{œ}$  said:

May Allah have mercy on a man who wakes up at night, prays, and wakes his wife to pray; and if she refuses, he sprinkles water on her face. And [likewise], may Allah have mercy on a woman who wakes up at night, prays, and wakes her husband to pray; and if he refuses, she sprinkles water on his face. (Abû Dâwûd)

- **Observing the Sunnah Manners of Sleeping**

One should sleep early in accordance with our Prophet's *Sunnah*. This is a very healthy habit as well.

We should perform ablution before sleeping, clean the bed and lie on the right side.

Then we should recite the *Athkâr* (supplications) prescribed in the *Sunnah* before going to bed, such as reciting the last verses of *Sûrat Al-Baqarah*, *Âyat Al-Kursi* and *Sûrat Al-Mulk*. Also recite *Sûrat Al-Falaq*, *Sûrat Al-Nâs* and *Sûrat Al-Ikhlâs*, blow in the palms and wipe as much of the body as possible, starting from the head, face and then the front of the body doing it three times. (Bukhari and Muslim).

- **Rebuking ourselves for not offering *Salat Al-Layl***

Allah has placed abundant spiritual benefits and rewards for the believers in *Ṣalât Al-Layl*.

Let's look within ourselves, contemplating how direly we need Allah's help, and then, rebuke ourselves, if we miss this great opportunity of achieving Allah's pleasure.

At night, the sincere servants, alone with their Lord, plead about their situation, asking Allah of His infinite mercy. It's a sure chance to befriend our Lord, a lofty prize that many dream of but only a blessed few attain. So the next time we find it hard to part with our cozy, comfy beds, we can think of the comfortable beddings in the graves with which performing *Ṣalât Al-Layl* will endow us.

### **My Request of You... and Your Request of Me**

And one more thing: Can I count on the favors of your kindness to remember to pray for forgiveness for me and for all Muslims when you are blessed with such enchanting hours with your Lord? I would love to pray for you too. So, first let's pray for each other that we never find ourselves guilty—neither here, nor in the Hereafter—of having missed such magnificent nightly opportunities.

### **The Bottom Line**

*Alḥamdulillâh* for something even better than a cozy, comfy bed in the wee hours of the night! Let us not miss this time of promised answered *duhâ'* and nearness to Allah.

