

## **The Five Pillars of Islam**

The basic spiritual practices incumbent on all Muslims are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. A Muslim must do his or her best to fulfill the Five Pillars because they are considered God's commandments.

### *Belief and witness*

The first pillar of Islam is believing and professing the unity of God and of Muhammad as his messenger: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

### *Daily prayers*

The second pillar is the performance of a continual round of prayers. Five times a day, the faithful are to perform ritual ablutions with water (or sand or dirt if necessary), face Mecca, and recite a series of prayers and passages from the Qur'an, bowing and kneeling. Around the world, this joint facing of Mecca for prayer unites all Muslims into a single world family. When the prayers are recited by a congregation, all stand and bow shoulder to shoulder, with no social distinctions. In a mosque, women and men usually pray separately, with the women in rows behind the men, to avoid sexually distracting the men. There may be an imam, or prayer-leader, but no priest stands between the worshiper and God.

On Friday noon, there is usually a special prayer service in the mosque. Remembrance of God is an everyday obligation; such remembrance continually polishes the rust from the heart.

Prayer is thought to strengthen one's belief in God's existence and goodness and to carry this belief into the depths of the heart and every aspect of external life. Praying thus is also expected to purify the heart, develop the mind and the conscience, comfort the soul, encourage the good and suppress the evil in the person, and awaken the innate sense of higher morality and higher aspirations. The words of praise and the bowing express continual gratefulness and surrender to the One.

While mouthing the words and performing the outer actions, one should be concentrating on the inner prayer of the heart. The Prophet reportedly said, "Prayer without the Presence of the Lord in the heart is not prayer at all."

To be aware of God's presence, one should not just be going through the motions, as an obligation five times a day. Ideally, in Muslim spirituality, one should be constantly remembering God inwardly, and one's whole life should become a means of worship. In the Qur'an, Muhammad was instructed: "Say: Truly, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are for Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds."

## *Fasting*

The third pillar is fasting. Frequent fasts are recommended to Muslims, but the only one that is obligatory is the fast during Ramadan, commemorating the first revelations of the Qur'an to Muhammad. For all who are beyond puberty, but not infirm or sick or menstruating or nursing children, a dawn-to-sunset abstention from food, drink, sexual intercourse, and smoking is required for the whole month of Ramadan. Because Muslims use a lunar calendar of 354 days, the month of Ramadan gradually moves through all the seasons. When it falls in the summer, the period of fasting is much longer than in the shortest days of winter. The hardship of abstaining even from drinking water during these long and hot days is an unselfish surrender to God's commandment and an assertion of control over the lower desires. The knowledge that Muslims all over the world are making these sacrifices at the same time builds a special bond between haves and have-nots, helping the haves to experience what it is to be hungry, to share in the condition of the poor. Those who have are encouraged to be especially generous in their almsgiving during Ramadan.

Fasting is expected to allow the body to burn up impurities and provide one with "a Transparent Soul to transcend, a Clear Mind to think and a Light Body to move and act." Many people feel that they are spiritually

more sensitive and physically more healthy during Ramadan fasting, and they look forward eagerly to this period each year. Fasting liberates a person's body from the heaviness of food and it is also a lesson for the soul, teaching it not to allow anything into the mind and heart that would distract one from God. It is believed that control of the body's desires also builds the mastery needed to control the lower emotions, such as anger and jealousy

### *Almsgiving*

The Qur'an links prayer with charity or almsgiving, the fourth pillar. One's prayer is accepted only if one also shares with others. Accordingly, at the end of the year, all Muslims must donate at least two and a half percent of their accumulated wealth to needy Muslims. This provision is designed to help decrease inequalities in wealth and to prevent personal greed. Its literal meaning is "purity," for it purifies the distribution of money, helping to keep it in healthy circulation.

Saudi Arabia devotes fifteen percent of its kingdom's GDP to development and relief projects throughout the world. The Islamic Relief Organization that it funds makes a point of helping people of all religions, without discrimination, where there is great need following disasters. Many stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad teach that one should help others whether or

not they are Muslims. For example, the Prophet's neighbor was Jewish. The Prophet reportedly gave him a gift every day, even though the neighbor daily left garbage at his door. Once the neighbor was sick, and the Prophet visited him. The neighbor asked, "Who are you to help me?" The Prophet replied, "You are my brother. I must help you'

### *The Hajj*

The fifth pillar is *hajj* the pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are physically and financially able to do so are expected to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. It involves a series of symbolic rituals designed to bring the faithful as close as possible to God. Male pilgrims wrap themselves in a special garment of unsewn cloths, rendering them all alike, with no class distinctions. The garment is like a burial shroud, for by dying to their earthly life they can devote all their attention to God.

Pilgrims walk around the ancient Ka'bah seven times, like the continual rotation around the One by the angels and all of creation, to the seventh heaven. Their hearts should be filled only with remembrance of God.

Another sacred site on the pilgrimage is the field of Arafat. It is said to be the place where Adam and Eve were taught that humans are created solely for the worship of God. Here pilgrims pray from noon to sunset

to be forgiven of anything that has separated them from the Beloved.

In addition, pilgrims carry out other symbolic gestures, such as sacrificing an animal and throwing stones at the devil, represented by pillars. The animal sacrifice reminds the *hajjis* of Abraham's willingness to surrender to God that which was most dear to him, his own son, even though in God's mercy a ram was substituted for the sacrifice. Most of the meat is distributed to the needy, a service for which Saudi Arabia has had to develop huge preservation and distribution facilities. *Hajjis* also perform symbolic acts at the holy well of Zam-Zam, the spring that God is said to have provided for Hagar when she and Ismail were left alone in the desert.

*Hajj* draws together Muslims from all corners of the earth for this intense spiritual experience. Because Islam is practiced on every continent, it is truly an international gathering. The crowds are enormous. During the month of the pilgrimage, approximately three million pilgrims converge upon Mecca.