

The Spirit of Worship in Islam (part 3 of 3): Zakah and Hajj

Description: The spirit of the Zakah (obligatory charity), and a glimpse of the Hajj.

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Zakah

The third obligation is *zakah*. Every Muslim whose financial condition is above a certain specified minimum must pay annually 2.5 percent of his or her cash balance to a deserving fellow being. This is the minimum. The more you pay, the greater the reward that God shall bestow on you.

The money that we pay as *zakah* is not something God needs or receives. He is above any want and need. He, in His benign mercy, promises us rewards manifold if we help our brethren. But there is one basic condition for being thus rewarded. And it is this: that when we pay in the name of God, we shall not expect nor demand any worldly gains from the beneficiaries nor aim at making our names as philanthropists.

Zakah is as basic to Islam as other forms of worship: *salah* (prayers) and *saum* (fasting). The fundamental importance of *zakah* lies in the fact that it fosters in us the qualities of sacrifice and rids us of selfishness and plutocracy. Islam accepts within its fold only those who are ready to give away in God's way from their hard earned wealth willingly and without any temporal or personal gain. It has nothing to do with misers. A true Muslim will, when the call comes, sacrifice all his belongings in the way of God, for *zakah* has already trained him for such sacrifice.

There are immense gains to the society in the institution of *zakah*. It is the bounden duty of every well-to-do Muslim to help his lowly placed poor brethren. His wealth is not to be spent solely for his own comfort and luxury, as there are rightful claimants on his wealth, and they are the nation's widows and orphans; the poor and the invalid; and those who have ability but lack the means by which they could seek useful employment; those who have the faculties and brilliance but not the money with which they could acquire knowledge and become useful members of the community. He who does not recognize the right on his wealth of such members of his own community is indeed cruel. For there could be no greater cruelty than to fill one's own coffers while thousands die of hunger or suffer the agonies of unemployment. Islam is a sworn enemy of such selfishness, greed, and acquisitiveness. People not ingrained with these morals, devoid of sentiments of universal love, know only to preserve wealth and to add to it by lending it out on interest. Islam's teachings are the very antithesis of this attitude. Here one shares one's wealth with others and helps them stand on their own legs and become productive members of the society.

Hajj

Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, is the fourth basic act of worship. It is obligatory once in a lifetime only for those who can afford it. When Muslims undertake the pilgrimage, they are required to suppress our passions, refrain from bloodshed, and be pure in word and deed. God promises rewards for our sincerity and submissiveness.

The Hajj is, in a way, the biggest of all acts of worship. This is so because unless people really loved God, then they would never undertake such a long journey, leaving all their near and dear ones behind them. It may seem easy now with the appearance of airplanes and vehicles, but imagine in the past when Muslims had to take a long arduous journey, facing fatigue, hunger and death, often taking more than a year!

This pilgrimage is unlike any other journey. Here, pilgrims' thoughts are concentrated on God, their very beings vibrate with the spirit of intense devotion. When they reach the holy places, they find the atmosphere laden with piety and godliness; they visit places which bear witness to the glory of Islam, and all this leaves an indelible impression on their minds, which they carry to their last breath.

In addition, there are in Hajj, as in any other act of worship, many benefits that Muslims can gain. Mecca is the center towards which the Muslims must converge once a year and discuss topics of common interest. Hajj refreshes in them the faith that all Muslims are equal and deserve the love and sympathy irrespective of their geographical or cultural origin. Thus, Hajj unites Muslims from around the world into one international brotherhood.

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