

The Five Pillars of Islam by Ishaq Zahid

The 'Five Pillars' of Islam are the foundation of Muslim life:

- Faith or belief in the Oneness of God (Allah) and the finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh);
- Establishment of the daily prayers;
- Concern for and almsgiving to the needy;
- Self-purification through fasting; and
- The pilgrimage to Makkah for those who are able.

Iman or Faith

"There is none worthy of worship except God (Allah) and Muhammad is the messenger of God." This declaration of faith is called the Shahadah, a simple formula that all the faithful pronounce. The significance of this declaration is the belief that the only purpose of life is to serve and obey God, and this is achieved through the teachings and practices of the Last Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh).

Salah or Prayer

Salah is the name for the obligatory prayers that are performed five times a day, and are a direct link between the worshipper and God. There is no hierarchical authority in Islam and there are no priests. Prayers are led by a learned person who knows the Qur'an and is generally chosen by the congregation.

Prayers are said at dawn, mid-day, late-afternoon, sunset and nightfall, and thus determine the rhythm of the entire day. These five prescribed prayers contain verses from the Qur'an, and are said in Arabic, the language of the Revelation. Personal supplications, however, can be offered in one's own language and at any time.

Although it is preferable to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere, such as in fields, offices, factories and universities. Oftentimes visitors to the Muslim world are struck by the centrality of prayers in daily life.

A translation of the Adan or Call to Prayer is:

God is Great.

God is Great.

God is Great.

God is Great.

I testify that there is none worthy of worship except God.

I testify that there is none worthy of worship except God.

I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.

I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.

Come to prayer!

Come to prayer!

Come to success!

Come to success!

God is Great!

God is Great!

There is none worthy of worship except God.

Zakah. The financial obligation upon Muslims.

An important principle of Islam is that everything belongs to God, and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. The word zakah means both "purification" and "growth." Our possessions are purified by setting aside a proportion for those in need and for the society in general. Like the pruning of plants, this cutting back balances and encourages new growth.

Each Muslim calculates his or her own zakah individually. This involves the annual payment of a fortieth of one's capital, excluding such items as primary residence, car and professional tools.

An individual may also give as much as he or she pleases as sadaqa-h, and does so preferably in secret. Although this word can be translated as "voluntary charity" it has a wider meaning.

The Prophet said, "Even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is an act of charity." The Prophet also said: "Charity is a necessity for every Muslim." He was asked: "What if a person has nothing?" The Prophet replied: "He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity." The Companions of the Prophet asked: "What if he is not able to work?" The Prophet said: "He should help the poor and needy." The Companions further asked: "What if he cannot do even that?" The Prophet said: "He should urge others to do good." The Companions said: "What if he lacks that also?" The Prophet said: "He should check himself from doing evil. That is also an act of charity."

Sawm or Fasting

Every year in the month of Ramada-n, all Muslims fast from dawn until sundown--abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations with their spouses.

Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are menstruating, pregnant or nursing, are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year if they are healthy and able. Children begin to fast (and to observe prayers) from puberty, although many start earlier.

Although fasting is beneficial to health, it is mainly a method of self-purification and self-restraint. By cutting oneself from worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person focuses on his or her purpose in life by constantly being aware of the presence of God. God states in the Qur'an: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may learn self-restraint." (Qur'an 2:183)

Hajj or Pilgrimage

The pilgrimage to Makkah (the hajj) is an obligation only for those who are physically and financially able to do so. Nevertheless, over two million people go to Makkah each year from every corner of the globe providing a unique opportunity for those of different nations to meet one another.

The annual hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year (which is lunar, not solar, so that hajj and Ramada-n fall sometimes in summer, sometimes in winter). Pilgrims wear special clothes: simple garments that strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before God.

The rites of the hajj, which are of Abrahamic origin, include going around the Ka'bah seven times, and going seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa as did Hagar (Hajir, Abraham's wife) during her search for water. The pilgrims later stand together on the wide plains of 'Arafat (a large expanse of desert outside Makkah) and join in prayer for God's forgiveness, in what is often thought as a preview of the Day of Judgment.

The close of the hajj is marked by a festival, the 'Id al Adha, which is celebrated with prayers and the exchange of gifts in Muslim communities everywhere. This and the 'Id al Fitr, a festive day celebrating the end of Ramadan, are the two holidays of the Islamic calendar.