

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

What is Itikaf?

By Qazi Fazlullah

The word “Itikaf” is used in the Holy Quran in different forms such as “aakifun” or “al aakifeen”. Literally, it means confinement to a specific thing or place, or retreat and seclusion, while technically it means to confine oneself for sometime to a Masjid in order to stay there to worship or at least to withdraw oneself from worldly business.

This practice of seclusion is almost in each religion, and even the Meccans and the idolaters of the Arabian Peninsula used to perform the same practice for a few days annually or periodically.

Prophet Muhammad (SAS) used to perform itikaf even before receiving the message. He was in seclusion in the cave of Hira when he received the message for the first time. While coming back from the city of Ta’if, he again performed this practice as Messenger in that same cave.

The Prophet (SAS) used to fast in Mecca even before the fasting in Ramadan became mandatory.

Upon his migration to Madina, when fasting in Ramadan became mandatory he used to perform itikaf in the last 10 days of Ramadan in the Masjid. In the last year of his life, he did it for 20 days and nights which was considered an indication that he would not live until the next Ramadan.

Itikaf is a type of solitude and meditation to reach a state of mental tranquil and spiritual peace, and to clean, purify and sanctify one’s inner self.

When one becomes secluded and withdrawn from worldly business in a place of worship, he will be thinking of his Creator and will also feel a connection with his Creator, which will result in mental peace.

Performing itikaf is “Sunnah Kifa’I”, which means it was the practice of the Prophet (SAS), and that at least one individual from each community must perform it. Otherwise, on the Day of Judgment the entire community would be held accountable for not performing itikaf. One may perform a nafl type of itikaf in a Masjid for one or two days, or even for an hour according to Imam Shafi, Imam Yusuf, and Imam Muhammad.

Itikaf should be in a Masjid where the five daily prayers are held and prayed, and it is recommended that Friday prayer also be prayed there. However, if Friday prayer is not held at that Masjid, he may travel to another nearby Masjid, but should not waste time outside the Masjid while in itikaf (according to the Hanafi School). Imam Ahmad says it must be in a Masjid where the five daily prayers are performed, and Imam Malik and Imam Shafi allow itikaf in any Masjid.

One who is in itikaf must not go out of Masjid but for a reasonable cause such as using the bathroom if it is outside of the Masjid, or to the kitchen if that is outside as well, as these are unavoidable needs. To travel outside of the Masjid without reasonable cause would break one’s itikaf. According to the Hanafi School, one may make it up next time.

Women may also perform itikaf but in their homes at their specified prayer areas.

For the purpose of itikaf, all Masjids are equal, but if someone gave a pledge to Allah that he will do itikaf in Haram Makki, or Haram Madani, or in Baitul Maqdis, then he is bound to do it where he said.

The prerequisites of itikaf are Islam, sanity, maturity, intention, fasting, to be pure and clean from menses and bleeding after child birth (in the case of women) and from “junabat”, and to be in Masjid (in case of men).

In itikaf, any type of worship of Allah (SWT) is recommended. These include recitation of the Holy Quran, remembrance of Allah, asking for forgiveness, the study of religious literature, and the avoidance of useless talk and useless actions.

The feeling experienced in itikaf cannot be generalized for everyone, since each individual may experience a different feeling. However, in brief, itikaf brings one mental tranquil, a feeling of self-control, and a connection to Allah (SWT).

The Prophet (SAS) said whosoever performs itikaf for one day for the sake of Allah, Allah will put 3 trenches between him and the hellfire, and every trench will have the distance between the heavens and the earth.

May Allah (SWT) guide us and all of humanity to the Straight Path. Ameen