

How does Nouman Ali Khan spend his Ramadan? Abu Productive caught up with the inspiring, super-productive Ust. Nouman Ali Khan himself in this exclusive video interview to give us a glimpse into what Ust. Nouman's life is like during Ramadan, and captures his brilliant insights on how we should actually be spending this blessed month.

Bismillah Ar-rahman Ar-raheem. Assalamu Alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatu and welcome to this very special interview with our favorite teacher Ustadh Nouman Ali Khan.

Jazak Allah Khayr for joining us for this interview and I really want to talk to you about how you plan to spend Ramadan, how you plan to prepare for Ramadan as well.

1. What is your definition of the purpose of Ramadan? What should we look out for and try to achieve in Ramadan?

My thoughts on Ramadan are inspired by the only passage in the Qur'an that deals with Ramadan [[Chapter 2, Verse 185](#)]. Allah [swt] did not describe it as a month of fasting nor a month of prayer. **First and foremost, He [swt] described it as a month in which the Qur'an was revealed.**

Moreover, He [swt] described the Qur'an as though it had never been introduced before. Even though it's a Madani surah, which means the Muslims had been receiving the Qur'an through the Prophet [saw] for over a decade, yet Allah [swt] talks about what the Qur'an is, as if for the first time.

That teaches me at least, and I hope other Muslims too, is that you have to renew your relationship with this Book almost as though you never knew it before. You have to come at it anew. It's a month of rejuvenating your experience with the Qur'an so that you can experience it like that first generation was taught to experience it all over again. This month should be a celebration of revelation itself. That's what it should be.

2. Based on that, what would be your most important goal for you personally to achieve in Ramadan?

I study Qur'an throughout the year but I turn it up a few notches in Ramadan. My memorization goes up. I haven't finished memorizing the Qur'an; I'm working on it part-time, slowly but surely. But it goes on an accelerator in the month of Ramadan. I try to catch i'tikaf every year and in i'tikaf I do a lot of review of Qur'an.

For me personally, the act of memorizing Qur'an is not just the act of rote memorization. When you recite the ayat over and over again, it gives you a chance to reflect on the word of Allah [swt], to think about the same thing over and over again, which also gives you opportunities for insights, which I really enjoy.

The other thing I really enjoy doing in Ramadan is the nightly taraweeh prayer but to be honest a lot of times I won't join the entire taraweeh prayer or I'll go to a masjid which actually takes it easier. Some masjid unfortunately, their goal is to finish the recitation of the entire Qur'an and they rush through it. Other masjid in our area take it easy; they don't recite a lot but what they recite they really enjoy reciting.

And this month should not be about quantity, it should be about quality. There is no religious guideline that you have to finish the entire Qur'an – there's no such thing. It wasn't imposed; we imposed this on ourselves. And you find people they pray the 8 rak'ah and there's a mad rush outside of the masjid as if saying "I got it over with, let me get out of here". *Prayer is supposed to be this reflective, spiritual experience where you're enjoying the word of Allah [swt] in every rak'ah and that's really something I hope to restore every year for myself in Ramadan.*

3. You just mentioned balancing your energy levels – trying not to do too much in the first days and leaving energy for the last ten days. Do you structure Ramadan that way, spreading out your energy so that you can maintain momentum throughout the month?

One of my teachers has interesting insights on how you should spend your time in Ramadan and I tend to agree with him. Ramadan is not supposed to be a time where you're not productive at everything else. **You should be as fruitful and as productive at your work as with business and education and everything else. It's not a time for vacation.**

In some Muslim countries, people stay up until Fajr and then pass out until 4pm just in time for iftar then start all over again. They become creatures of the night. That's silly. That's not the point of this month.

As a matter of fact, the nightly prayers are just really a manifestation of tahajjud. **So if you're praying your five prayers but you're not good at tahajjud, this is the month to get into it.** Even the ayah about reciting the Qur'an in a slow, rhythmic tone is an ayah about the night prayer [[Chapter 73, Verse 4](#)]. And taraweeh is supposed to be an exercise for the night prayer. **So even if you don't catch taraweeh but get up for tahajjud, that's even better for you!** We have to shift our mentality about how we make the most use of Ramadan.

The other recommendation I strongly have for people is if you didn't catch taraweeh prayers but you went to pray Isha and a few rak'at at the masjid then you came back for Fajr at the masjid, that's way better for you than staying up until midnight doing taraweeh then barely catching Fajr or not praying Fajr at the masjid. You have to be realistic with yourself: what is a bigger priority?

The Prophet's [saw] instructions are true and we should believe in them. He said if you catch Isha then Fajr at the masjid it's as though you've prayed the entire night. That is his promise. Let's believe in that promise and especially get into that habit in this month. **I personally believe that if you can make a habit out of Fajr and Isha at the masjid, you're going to have a productive life.** Allah [swt] is going to put some barakah in your life throughout your day, throughout your night. A lot of good comes of it. This is the month to get into that habit because you're going to do it anyway. But don't overdo it in a way that you totally can't sustain it afterwards. You want to use this month as an opportunity to instill habits that you can sustain after this month is over.

4. You just touched on the word barakah and I want you just to touch on the link between barakah and productivity. How the barakah of fasting and being spiritual will sustain you. How does that boost your productivity?

It's pretty amazing because fasting is tough. If you try and fast tomorrow it will be hard. You're going to be hazy, you're not going to be able to focus at work, things are going to happen. But what Allah [swt] says about Ramadan is pretty awesome: "yureedu Allahu bikumu alyusr: Allah intends for you ease." It's not a universal statement; it's actually intended within the month of Ramadan. Allah [swt] intends ease for you. **In other words, fasting in the month of Ramadan is actually easier than fasting any other time. And that's something Allah [swt] instilled into this month. It's special.**

So nobody is going to be able to say genuinely that they're having a hard time because of the fasting. You might even find yourself having more energy than you ever had. If you don't find yourself having energy, there are some other causes: overeating at iftar, going to town with suhoor time, you're eating four times the breakfast you normally eat – no wonder you're tipped over half the day because you're dying over how much you ate and the other half you're dying over your starvation. **A balanced diet is a big part of how productive you are.**

A balanced sleep schedule is really important. Some people have messed up sleep schedules in Ramadan; you're not supposed to have a messed up sleep schedule, you're supposed to have a normal sleep schedule. So maintain these things, take care of these things and In sha Allah it's not going to be a problem.

Speaking of the word barakah, the linguistic meaning of the word is of 'increase beyond expectations'. **So the blessing of this month is that you're going to do work as you normally do, but you're going to find it being more result-oriented. It's going to bear more fruit; it's going to be more productive than you will expect it to be.** People are trying to be productive anyway anywhere but the believer in Ramadan is expecting productivity above and beyond his capabilities. There's this divine intervention of layers and layers of productivity over and above your own capability that you enjoy the blessings of, just because you're in this month.

5. People talk about the difficulties that Ramadan is in the summer, it's going to be hot during the day, Isha will be late, Fajr will be early. How do you psychologically overcome that mental challenge that it's going to be difficult or you're not going to be able to do it?

Sometimes we tell ourselves things that we think are rational but they're actually just an excuse. In cognitive psychology, there are your thoughts, your emotions and there is your behavior. And they're almost like three rings that are superimposed onto each other. So when you're thinking a certain way over long periods of time, it actually starts validating your emotions; you don't feel like getting up because your thoughts have now validated your emotions, which have become inflated. And as a result it's now deeply impacted your behavior.

So when you want to reverse this, the first thing you and I have to reverse is our thought process. Allah [swt] made this easy. This is going to be easy. No matter what the temperature is outside, no matter how long the day is, no matter what I think is going to happen or not. I know as a matter of faith, this month is going to be easy. When that happens, your attitude starts changing: your thoughts change, your attitude changes. Once your attitude changes, the behavior becomes easy. People often ask me to give them a tip or something they can practically do to make the

most out of Ramadan. **A lot of times, the behavior part is the last part. It's the thought process behind the behavior that has to be adjusted first. Behavior is easy.**

6. What's your routine like during Ramadan?

A lot of people might know I'm a very public figure, so Ramadan is probably the most private time I have. A lot of the activities I do for the community and public speaking, I cut all that out. I don't travel, I don't speak; I try not to do anything in Ramadan. **Ramadan is more for myself, especially the evenings are more for myself.** If I do do something, it's during the day. I'll teach a course just to feel like I'm still doing something and it'll be limited attendance; instead of doing a program for 1000 or 500 people, it'll be 20 or 30 people. I'll do it in a limited capacity just so that I'm forcing myself to do something beyond just myself.

But I do think Muslims should balance: **the scale should tip more towards what you want to do for yourself to become a better person and instilling better habits in this month.** And if you have other time to do productive activities in your communities and be engaged, that's great. But really this is the month for self-improvement. This is how we should look at it. That's why you have in this passage also first of all its going to be easy, it's a month of celebrating Qur'an and then the passage turns to what you should personally be doing: that is turning to Allah more [\[Chapter 2, Verse 186\]](#).

I ask myself as part of the way I spend any particular day, not necessarily Ramadan, what could I have been doing better. What opportunities did I miss? Did I wake up late? Did I rush through the prayer? Did I have breakfast on time? Did I get enough time to exercise? **If you can create balance in a day, then you can replicate that the rest of your life. To me, a good day actually translates into a good life. And an unproductive day translates into a non-productive life.**

At the end of the day, we recycle our days. A week goes by and it feels like it was just a day because it's all the same over and over again. So if you instill certain habits on a daily basis – and this is the time to do it: shaytan is chained up, everyone around you is motivated, Allah [swt] has given special ease to you and empowered you in ways that you wouldn't be empowered before – it's time to instill good spiritual habits, good personal habits, good eating habits. Eat healthy, don't eat oily stuff for iftar, don't eat greasy stuff for suhoor, cut that stuff down. Get into better shape. Unfortunately, there are some stats that in some countries some Muslims gain the most weight in the month of Ramadan. I can't fathom it!

7. You've heard of the mid-Ramadan slump. How do you overcome that?

I get it too. Everybody gets it. We're human! You get a slump, you're at something and it beats you up. That's when friends come in handy and it's okay, you can accept a slump. **You can have a day or two that are down, we're human beings, not machines. But the point is to pick yourself up.** Recognize that it's a slump and nobody is going to beat you up. You have to learn to beat yourself up. You have to learn to be tough on yourself and get back up on the horse.

Instead of constantly waiting on somebody else to motivate us, we have the capability to be tough on ourselves, we just don't do it. Unfortunately, I feel too many people are obsessed with the idea of the pursuit of happiness. What does it mean? If I just had a lunch and I feel like doing nothing, I'm happy. That's not a high pursuit. It's not like a goal in life. There should be higher pursuits in life! Have some grit, have some toughness. **People that don't aim higher than just happiness, they don't accomplish things in life. Happiness to me is a by-product of actual productivity in life. You're looking for a transformation.**

The other thing I'll say here is about the slump that's really important, is people compare themselves to others: "that guy goes to the masjid everyday" or "this person is doing school, work and they're praying... I'm such a loser". And then your slump gets deeper. **The core problem isn't that they're a winner, the core problem is you're comparing yourself. No two human beings are the same.** You have to compare yourself to "me" [yourself]. I have to compare myself not to anybody else, I have to compare myself to myself from yesterday. Why was yesterday better than today? What went wrong? **And you have to beat yourself at this game. It's a constant journey towards improvement of yourself.** If you can tell yourself I did more today than I did yesterday, I'm doing better than I did yesterday, that's the winner. Not what you're comparing yourself to somebody else with.

And that's an attitude that Muslims should adopt in life. It's actually a Qur'anic concept [[Chapter 18, Verse 24](#)]. Allah [swt] tells us to pray that perhaps my Master will guide me all the way to closer. I'm using "all the way" on purpose; you getting closer, not the closest, not to the end. You, making it *closer* to guidance, is the eventual goal. **If a human being dies pursuing betterment, not perfection, they have led a successful life.**

8. What about the last ten nights? What is the most productive thing you could do in the last ten nights?

Last ten nights of Ramadan to me is ibadah, ibadah, ibadah. Forget the world, just be with God and His Word. Recite as much as you possibly can. Memorize as much as you possibly can. Spend time at the masjid as much as you possibly can. Seek forgiveness from people – that's a spiritual exercise – as much as you possibly can. Forgive others as much as you possibly can. Think in your mind about people you've got a grudge against for years. Make a list, write it out, your hit list. And call those people and make amends with them. And think deeply about who you may have offended, realizing it or not and make amends with them.

This refining yourself is not just about being spiritual and praying more, it's also about fixing your relationships with other people, especially with family. Start with family, work towards close circles then work towards business affiliations – it's a ripple effect: the people closest to you all the way to the people farthest from you.

Too often we talk about how we have to be productive in the community and how we have to do political activism and social activism. That sounds great and I agree with it entirely. But that's out there, there's a lot of stuff that's messed up right here that you're not even looking at. You're not even acknowledging your mum. You're not even being kinder to your dad. When was the last time you gave him a hug? **The last ten nights is about extra reflection on oneself and where their gaps are in life and what they should be doing to improve them.**

Similarly with our non-Muslim neighbors, the last ten nights is a time for you to share this joy of Ramadan with them: give them gifts, share food with them, let them know if they have any questions they are free to ask you. Do you know why specifically I mentioned non-Muslim neighbors? The ayah says (hudan linnas/a guidance for the people), it didn't say (hudan lil muttaqeen) or (hudan lil mu'mineen), that's in the beginning. When He [swt] said Ramadan, He [swt] said "...a guidance for the people...". So this is the time to maybe even share the blessings of this guidance with other people, directly or indirectly. **Just the fact that Muslims are going to be in the presence of other non-Muslims, just their presence may have an impact. That's what the last ten nights are about: kicking it in high gear and ending on a high note, In sha Allah.**

9. What's the biggest positive change any particular Ramadan has brought to your life?

Ramadan has changed my life entirely. The biggest Ramadan I would say was when I was 18 years old. I was in Queens and they had taraweeh. They had somebody come in who would translate everything that was recited ayah by ayah after each four rak'at they prayed. And they would go until 12:30 or 1 in the morning. He would translate it in such a flow because he didn't have a translation in front of him, he was translating off the cuff. And I didn't know any Arabic at the time. I'm listening to this and I forgot that he's talking; I just remembered the Qur'an talking. **For the first time, I felt Qur'an is a conversation between God and humanity. When you're reading a book it's a book, when you're hearing it it's a conversation and originally the Qur'an was heard.** I was so mesmerized by the Qur'an as a conversation. I said I need to learn what you just did at the end of that month and he just said why don't you learn Arabic. Then I started learning Arabic and here we are. It started in a Ramadan.

10. Now for the final question. You had a great month In sha Allah, you've done all the spiritual uplifting, then Ramadan ends and you go through that slump again after Ramadan. How do you overcome it and stay consistent after Ramadan?

To me there is no such thing as a slump after Ramadan. **Ramadan is that high, you should ride that wave. Set goals in Ramadan that you don't finish in Ramadan. Set goals that will take another month to finish, another two months to finish.** For me, memorization goals, I memorize some things in Ramadan but I actually set a goal that I'm going to do these and these surahs but I know they're not going to be done in Ramadan and so it's not going to stop.

The same way like sleeping habits, **I keep emphasizing that a person's life can completely transform based on how they use their time and how they sleep. If they can fix their sleep schedule they can fix a lot about their life.** And that's why "...Indeed, prayer has been decreed upon the believers a decree of specified times..."[[Qur'an, Chapter 4, Verse 103](#)] is important. Pray Isha then go to sleep; don't have a late night, don't watch stuff, you're going to wake up groggy. Your mind is going to be busy even when you're sleeping. You'll wake up exhausted; sleep won't mean anything. You're not going to be productive this way. **The prayer schedule in Islam actually teaches you a pretty productive life.** That's what I would emphasize more than anything else.

The best way to keep up motivation in my experience has been being around people that are motivated and that keep you from going into a slump and you keep them from going into a slump. You kind of become each other's sparring buddies. You keep the guard up and In sha Allah that would be a good way to ride that wave.

Now this is my concluding comment. Ramadan is 30 days. The Qur'an says that fasting used to be less days than this but because the Qur'an came down, as a commemoration of this month, this revelation which came down in one night, so you should celebrate one night: fast one night, the night that it came down. But this revelation is so powerful that Allah [swt] gave us 30 days, which is supposed to be harder than one night but He says He wants ease for you. So first I'll give you more, but I'll make it easy for you!

What is this 30 days supposed to be? If someone joins the military or police academy or the fire department or something, they have training. And that training is rigorous, a month or two months or whatever it is, and then they graduate. Then there's a graduation ceremony and then they hit the real world. Then they are actually going to face a real fire, not a mock fire. Then they're going to be on the battlefield not a mock battlefield.

Ramadan is actually divine training. I'll take shaytan out of the picture, I'll train you how to navigate your life with guidance and as soon as that month is done, now your real test begins. So this is training to propel you for life. Your test didn't get over. The attitude that now we're on a break is like saying the guy that just did all his training... finally it's over. No, no, no, now you start work! Now the work began. Again, this is a mental shift. Now we have to face our true self, shaytan is going to be a qareen who is constantly there making whispers. Now you're ready to face him because you're empowered with revelation.