

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Salaat: Rituals and Meanings

Az-Zahraa Islamic Centre

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I. Introductory Remarks

1. We are in the Process of Becoming

Based on the teaching of the Holy Quran and the Blessed Infallibles (Ma'somin) (peace be upon them) and sound philosophical proofs, scholars of the Islamic Irfan believe that human soul is shaped through knowledge and deed. Thus, we are not born in a final and complete spiritual state, but rather, we are in a process of becoming without being finalized. This is what Mulla Sadra refers to as the origin of the soul being from body but its survival being in the form of spirit. Therefore, we should be cognizant of how we form ourselves, as the Holy Quran say,

فَلْيَنْظُرِ الْإِنْسَانُ إِلَى طَعَامِهِ (80:24 عيس)

(Let the human reflect on the food he eats)

What we believe and do is the food that nourishes our souls.

2. Two Categories of Islamic Duties:

That is why Islamic worship and rites and rituals fall within two general and intertwined categories: rituals of the heart such as belief and faith, *ridh* (الرضا), pure intention (الإخلاص), trust (التوكل), and others; and rituals of the body such as *salaat* (الصلاة), fasting (الصيام), pilgrimage to Mecca (الحج), and others. As mentioned, these two categories are closely intertwined with each other. This is why for every act of worship – *ebaadat* – such as *salaat*, it is critical to have the right intention - *niyyat* (نِيَّة) - and proper understanding of the meanings of that ritual.

3. On this Discussion

In what follows, we seek to understand why we are ordained by Allah (s.w.t.) to perform *salaat* as an act of worship, and what the deeper meanings of the constituting components of this worship are. One should be aware our discussion is very selective and that we do not have sufficient time to cover all aspects of the subject. We should also keep in mind that this is an Irfanic discussion of the multi-layered meanings of the rituals of *salaat*, whose various outward components are properly formulated in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

II. The Purpose of Islamic Rituals

1. Human Beings and Metamorphosis into Animals

Left to themselves without any intervention between them and their natures, human beings will sink into bodily and material pleasures and veils of darkness because of their immediacy and tangibility for them and being used to them from infancy. If this descent into the darkness of self gratification and material pleasure is not interfered with, human beings will gradually lose their human disposition and potentials and fall from the status of humanity into the bewilderedness of the valley of animality. In the language of the Holy Quran, this metamorphosis is called *Mas-kh* (مَسْخ).

2. A Quranic Example

Holy Quran mentions that there were some people who transgressed the law of Sabbath, and as a result, they became apes. Here are some verses of the Holy Quran referring to the story:

وَسَأَلَهُمْ عَنِ الْقَرْيَةِ الَّتِي كَانَتْ حَاضِرَةَ الْبَحْرِ إِذْ يَعْدُونَ فِي السَّبْتِ إِذْ تَأْتِيهِمْ حِيتَانُهُمْ يَوْمَ سَبْتِهِمْ شُرْعًا وَيَوْمَ لَا يَسْبِتُونَ لَا تَأْتِيهِمْ كَذَلِكَ نَبْلُوهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ (7:163 الأعراف)

(Ask them concerning the town standing close by the sea. Behold! They transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath; for on the day of their Sabbath their fish did come to them, openly holding up their heads, but on the day they had no Sabbath, they came not: thus did we make a trial of them, for they were given to transgression.)

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ الَّذِينَ اعْتَدَوْا مِنْكُمْ فِي السَّبْتِ فَقُلْنَا لَهُمْ كُونُوا قِرَدَةً خَاسِئِينَ (2:65 البقرة)

(And well ye knew those amongst you who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath: we said to them: "be ye apes, despised and rejected.")

3. **Rituals and Worships (عبادات) as Interferences into the Worldly Routines and Calling to the Unseen**

Given the risk of being carried by the routines of our animalistic and worldly routines into the realms animals, Allah (s.w.t.), our Creator and Lord, has guided us through the light of His revelation how to live in order to be saved from being lost and damned by deviating from the right path of humanity to Him. The human being is the Masterpiece of God's creation. He has done everything necessary to save them from falling to the status of lower creations. Allah (s.w.t.), our Creator and Lord, knows the best how we will stray from the right path and lose our humanity. Thus, He introduced us to divine laws - *sharaia* (شرايع) - through His prophets (a.s.) and commanded us to follow them and practice certain rituals so that we experience true happiness by being attracted to Him and seeking His proximity.

4. **Disturbing the Routine by Repeating Acts of Worships (عبادات)**

In the beginning, one's soul is very flexible, docile, and adaptable. However, as we grow through our experiences, knowledge and actions, and certain kinds of routines are firmly formed in us, we become less and less open to change. The purpose of Islamic worships (عبادات) is to disturb and disrupt those routines which make us more and more attached and bonded to this world, which, in turn, makes it difficult for us to follow the path which leads to Allah (s.w.t). Worshipping during certain periods of time are meant to remove the impacts of worldly and bodily preoccupations on one's heart and soul, disenchant him/her from the bondage of the animalistic desires and ambitions. In other words, the purpose of repeating worships is to prevent our metamorphosis - *Mas-kh* (مسخ) - into beasts and animals. To this point, the holy prophet (s.a.) referred to daily salaah, Friday prayer, and fasting of the month of Ramadhan as covers (مكفرات) for the non-cardinal wrongs and sins committed in between:

رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَانَ يَقُولُ الصَّلَوَاتُ الْخَمْسُ وَالْجُمُعَةُ إِلَى الْجُمُعَةِ وَرَمَضَانُ إِلَى رَمَضَانَ مُكَفِّرَاتٌ مَا بَيْنَهُنَّ مَا اجْتَنَبْتُ الْكَبَائِرُ

(He – peace be upon him and his household - used to say: the five daily prayers, and Friday (prayer) to Friday (prayer), and Ramadhan to Ramadhan, neutralize/compensate what is in between them except for major sins.)

5. **Emancipation through Worship**

Emancipation and liberation from particular forms of bondage and evils always requires particular appropriate forms of practice and movement. One may be enslaved by false promises of this world, wasting his or her life and potentials pursuing unattainable goals while neglecting his or her eternal happiness. Since bondage has many forms, liberation and emancipation also requires different acts. For example, as Prophet Mohammad (s.a.) stated, observance of the rituals of Friday is an act of cleansing from the sins of other days of the week. Every religion of the Abrahamic tradition

recognizes a day of not attending to worldly matters. The reason for the people of the Sabbath not being able to control themselves even for day each week and instead to attend to their material needs, was their bondage to and enslavement by their desires. The metamorphosis had become total and complete.

Let us see what Friday (جمعة) stands for. Friday (جمعة) is the day of togetherness after six days of separation and preoccupation with temporal beings. A Muslim is supposed to enjoy focusing and thinking on Allah (s.w.t.) and how to get closer to Him. Thus, if one is not so devoted to Allah (s.w.t.) to be with Him all the time, he/she at least devotes one day of his/her week to Him. Five times of daily prayers are also designed such that we turn away from daily routines toward Allah with a certain interval and frequency. Fasting of the month of Ramadhan also has a similar emancipatory effect.

6. Five Times of Daily Prayers

In addition to what was said above regarding the frequency of the daily prayers, it is said that human beings become attracted and attached to the world through their five senses. Thus, five times of praying have been established to neutralize the negative impacts of these senses on the soul. Allah (s.w.t.) reminds us that:

وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ طَرَفَيْ النَّهَارِ وَزُلْفًا مِّنَ اللَّيْلِ إِنَّ الْحَسَنَاتِ يُذْهِبْنَ السَّيِّئَاتِ ذَلِكَ ذِكْرَى لِلذَّاكِرِينَ
(هود 11:114)

(And keep up prayer in the two parts of (beginning and end; across) the day and in the first hours of the night; surely good deeds take away evil deeds this is a reminder to the mindful.)

7. The Purpose of Performing Salaat is to Remember Allah (s.w.t.)

As one gets attached to the world and its objects, he/she neglects and forgets Allah. If this becomes a firm routine, the individual will lose the chance of emancipation and salvation because he/she does not know Allah (s.w.t.), and as a result, does not love Him, and does not strive towards Him. Thus, salaat is necessary and *wajib* in order to remember Allah (s.w.t.), as He (s.w.t.) says:

إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدْنِي وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي (20:14 طه)

("Verily! I am Allâh! Lâ ilâha illa Ana (none has the right to be worshipped but I), so worship Me, and perform AsSalât (Aqimi-as-Salât) for My Remembrance).

It is through remembrance of Allah (s.w.t.) that one may be saved. And we know that remembrance is always after forgetfulness; regarding Adam (a.s.), Allah (s.w.t.) says

وَلَقَدْ عَاهَدْنَا إِلَىٰ آدَمَ مِن قَبْلُ فَنَسِيَ وَلَمْ نَجِدْ لَهُ عَزْمًا (20:115 طه)

(We had already, beforehand, taken the covenant of Adam, but he forgot: and we found on his part no firm resolve).

8. Remembrance as A Prelude to Presence

Life is a journey towards Allah (s.w.t.); this journey, in its linear form, ends when one stands in the presence of Allah (s.w.t.). As such, salaat is looking forward to being in the presence Allah (s.w.t.), and getting prepared and qualified for that presence. It can even be said that a perfect remembrance (ذکر) is presence - *hodhur* (حضور) - itself. Thus, Allah (s.w.t.) says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقْرَبُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَنْتُمْ سُكَارَىٰ (4:43 النساء)

(O ye who believe! draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken)

In other words, during a true salaat, one is in the presence of Allah (s.w.t.), and in His presence one should not act as a forgetful person who is drunken by what he has taken in from anything besides Allah (s.w.t.).