

---



---

## **The Inner Meaning of the Islamic Rites: Prayer, Pilgrimage, Fasting, Jihād**

SYED ALI ASHRAF

### **Purification (*tahārah*)**

AS ALLĀH IS BOTH *al-Zāhir* (the Outward, the Manifest) and *al-Bāṭin* (the Inward, the Hidden), He has sanctioned for mankind some formal rites to be performed in order for them to draw nearer to Him. This nearness is achieved when the performer tries to realize the inner significance of these rites while maintaining their external form. In order to perform these rites properly, the first necessary element for Muslims is purification (*tahārah*), which also has an outward form and an inner meaning. Outwardly, one has to wash one's hands up to the wrist three times, rinse one's mouth with water thrown into it with the right hand, sniff water into the nostrils and throw it out thrice, wash the face thrice, wash first the right and then the left arm up to the elbow thrice, wipe the head with the inner surface of the fingers of both hands, put two forefingers in the two eardrums and wipe the backs of the ears with the thumbs; with the back of the fingers of both the hands jointly one has to wipe the back of the neck, and then wash the right and then the left foot up to the ankles thrice.<sup>1</sup>

This outward form of ablution (*wuḍū'*) turns into a form of prayer of forgiveness and mercy when the person performing

the ablution starts praying to God. He prays to God to cleanse him of the sins he has committed with his two hands knowingly or unknowingly, to cleanse him also of the sins committed by his mouth, to fill his nostrils with the sweet scent of paradise, to remove the darkness that has stained his face and to illuminate

it with the light of His Wisdom. He entreats God to place the record book of his action in the right hand as it would be done with the righteous people and not in the left hand as it would be done with the sinners. While washing his right foot, he prays to be led upon the straight path, and while washing the left he entreats to be protected from the promptings of the forces of evil, which try to lead man upon the corrupt path, the path of the destruction of all virtues.

Thus, the purification of the outer limbs is accompanied by an inner purification and an intensive prayer for forgiveness, mercy, and guidance. Those who seek the nearness of God always try to remain pure both outwardly and inwardly. The outer form of purification becomes necessary when man serves nature's call or vomits or when he bleeds. The whole body needs purification after the ejaculation of semen or sexual intercourse. As internal purification accompanies this outer ablution, the prophet Muḥammad has said, "He who makes ablution afresh revives and refreshes his faith." He has also said, "Ablution upon ablution is illumination upon illumination." When a person therefore performs ablution, thinking of all the sins committed by him through his different organs, and goes on praying to God as a penitent asking for His forgiveness and mercy, his sins are forgiven and hands and face are illumined. As repentance precedes illumination, ablution precedes formal prayer. Those who want to draw nearer to God always try to regain outward

purity as soon as that purity has been broken. They also observe all inner impurities within themselves so as to remove them and become spiritually strengthened. This inner significance gives true meaning to the ritual of outward purification.

### **Prayer (*al-ṣalāt*)**

God says in the Quran, “Preserve prayer and especially the middle prayer” (II, 238). The first prayer refers to regular fixed prayers at fixed times having a fixed form. Commentators of the Quran explain the middle prayer as the afternoon prayer, but Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī (Gīlānī), as well as many other Sufis, asserts that this other prayer is the prayer of the *qalb* (heart), which is a spiritual and not a physical organ. It is located, like the physical heart, in the middle of the chest somewhat to the left. The Prophet has said about it, “Verily the *qalb* (heart) of the sons of Adam is between the two fingers of Allāh. He changes it as He wishes.” The two fingers signify, according to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, the two attributes of God signifying His powers of destruction and bounty. Preservation or maintenance of the power of the heart is necessary in order to gain that bounty and save oneself from the wrath of the Almighty.



12. General view of Mecca.



13. Cylindrical Minaret of the Mosque of Moulay Idris, decorated with kufic calligraphy.



#### 14. Jāmi' Mosque, Kuala Lumpur.

That this prayer of the heart is the most real prayer and that if a man neglects it his regular formal prayer becomes only an external show are indicated by another statement of the Prophet: “Prayer without the Presence of the Lord in the heart is not prayer at all.” Regular formal prayer should be an external manifestation of this internal prayer. Regular prayers are prescribed five times a day: morning (*fajr*), midday (*zuhr*), afternoon (*‘aṣr*), evening (*maghrib*), and night (*‘ishā’*). The timings are as follows: morning prayer is said between dawn and sunrise; midday prayer is between midday and the midpoint between midday and sunset; afternoon prayer is between that midpoint and sunset; evening prayer is between sunset and the time when the darkness of the night covers the twilight; night prayer is between the end of twilight and dawn or, according to some schools, midnight. Internal

prayer, or the prayer of the heart, however, has no fixed time. It should, in fact, be continuous and constant. This internal prayer purifies the heart. The Prophet referred to this purification when he said, “There is a piece of flesh inside man’s body. When it is purified, the whole body gets purified; when it is impure, the whole body remains impure. That piece is the heart (*qalb*).” The body suffers from impurity when the *qalb* is impure, because then evil thoughts and desires start controlling the mind and guiding the senses. Thus envy, greed, backbiting, love of worldly power, sensual desires, and such other evils try to become the ruling forces dominating the soul. The mind, as a result, begins to indulge in all kinds of unnecessary thoughts at the time of formal prayer; therefore, true prayer is neglected and destroyed. The formal external prayer becomes nothing more than ostentation.

In order that the formal prayer may become what the Prophet meant when he said “Prayer is *mir’āj* (ascent) for the *mu’min* (faithful),” perfect concentration and constant remembrance of God are necessary. There is no fixed time and place for such a prayer. The whole life of man must become a form of worship. Man must be able to realize the truth of the statement that God has asked each believer to utter in this verse: “Say: O my Lord, my prayers, my sacrifice, my life and my death are for God, the Lord of the worlds who hath no peer” (VI, 162–63). Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī called this internal prayer the prayer of the path (*ṣalāt al-ṭarīqah*) and described it in the following way: “Its mosque is the *qalb*. Its congregation is the conglomeration of all internal forces in man. It recites with spiritual tongue the Names of God’s Unity (*tawhīd*). Its *imām* is a deep spiritual urge in the heart (*al-shawq fi’l-fu’ād*). Its *qiblah* (direction of prayer) is the Unity of Godhead (*aḥadiyyah*). The *qalb* (heart) and *rūḥ*

(spirit) are constantly engaged in this prayer. They neither sleep, nor do they die.”<sup>2</sup> When the *qalb* and the *rūḥ* are thus engaged in constant prayer and supplication (*munājāt*), the formal prescribed prayer becomes a true manifestation of internal realization, a contemplation and a secret call exchanged between God and His servant. That is what is meant by God’s utterance in the following *ḥadīth qudsī*: “I have divided prayer between Me and My servant into two halves, one being due to Me and the other to My servant; and My servant will receive that for which he asks.”<sup>3</sup>

When an individual, therefore, stands before the Lord with bent head and crossed arms, he is a complete slave, helpless and alone. That is why in other rituals it is possible to talk or move, but in prayer one is compelled to annihilate oneself in the presence of the Almighty. He sees the Lord in front of him because the Lord resides in his *qalb*. But if his power of vision is not still so clear, he should pray “as if He sees him.” This is what the Prophet meant in his definition of *iḥsān* (spiritual virtue), which is “to adore God as if thou dost see Him, and if thou dost not see Him, He nevertheless sees thee.” He therefore should imagine God in front of him because, though he may not see Him or become conscious of His Presence, “He is,” as the Prophet has said, “in truth present in the *qiblah* of every one of you.” Each individual’s consciousness depends on his capability and cultivation. That is why God says, “We will impose on each soul only the obligation of which it is capable” (II, 286; VI, 153; VII, 40).

As the person stands before God, he should “lend his hearing” to what God says in reply to his prayer. In a *ḥadīth qudsī*, the Prophet has narrated what God says when a person recites the

*Ṣūrat al-fāṭihah* (the opening chapter of the Quran, which constitutes the principal text of every canonical prayer). The servant says, “In the Name of God the Most Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), the Most Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*),” and God says “My servant mentions Me.” The servant then says, “Praise be to God, the Master of the Universe,” and God says in his turn, “My servant lends Me grace.” The servant then says, “The Compassionate, the Merciful,” and God replies, “My servant praises Me.” The servant says, “The King of the Day of Judgment,” and God says, “My servant glorifies Me and submits himself to Me.” This first half of this chapter so far cited relates exclusively to God and the servant’s invocation of His Attributes. In the next half of the chapter, the servant prays with a complete sense of humility. The servant says, “It is Thee whom we adore, and it is of Thee that we beg for help,” and God says, “This is shared between Me and My servant, and My servant will receive that which he asks.” When the servant says, “Lead us upon the right path, the path of those to whom Thou hast been most gracious, not of those on whom Thy Wrath has descended, nor of those who have gone astray,” God says, “All that comes back to My servant, and My servant will receive that for which he asks.” Thus, the second half of this chapter is related exclusively to man. It is because of this mutual participation between God and man in this chapter, which is considered to be the heart of the Quran, that the canonical prayer is regarded as not having been performed if this chapter is not recited.

The form and the substance of what the praying individual utters thereby draw the individual closer to God. The servant bows down (*rukūʿ*) and glorifies the greatness of God. When he straightens up from bowing, he says “God hears those who

laud Him.” This recitation is a form of announcement to himself and all those who pray behind him, including the angels and jinns, and they reply “Our Lord, praise to Thee.” The former statement is, in reality, enunciated by God through the mouth of His adorer. Thus, the intimate God–man relationship is deepened.

When the adorer then prostates himself and says, “Glory be to my Lord, the Greatest of the Great,” he is in a state of final annihilation. As *imām* of himself when he prays alone, he leads all the forces in his own being to the stage of complete annihilation (*fanāʾ*). As *imām* of the rest of the congregation, he draws the whole congregation toward the same end. When he again stands up, he repeats the same process in order to draw closer and closer to God. After this repetition the adorer sits in the posture of a humble slave and bears witness to his vision of Unity and his consciousness of the prophethood of the Prophet. Thus he sends his prayers and blessings upon the Prophet and his family and descendants. Since the Prophet is mercy to the entire creation (*rahmat<sup>un</sup> liʾlʾ-ālamīn*), to send blessings upon him means receiving in return from God blessings and mercy upon the entire creation.

A distinctive character of prayer is that the adorer must keep his vision, both external and internal, concentrated upon his *qiblah*, which is ultimately none but God Himself. He is forbidden to turn aside because turning prevents the adorer from the contemplation of the Most Beloved.

Contemplation leads to and increases realization, and realization deepens contemplation. This realization of God through prayer varies according to the spiritual capacity (*al-istiʿādah*) of the individual. This variation means that for

each individual there is a particular notion of God and his own relationship with Him. The *Sharī'ah* insists on the limitation of that individual notion and stresses the transcendence of the essence of God. Whatever the individual realizes is true for him at that stage of his spiritual journey, but he must keep in mind that God transcends all such realizations. Therefore, the striving to realize God must be continuous until death. No one should be content with what he realizes through the *qalb*, because the *qalb* goes on changing and realization increases with greater perfection. As prayer is

the means of progress toward God, it is also a means of making us obey God's orders and preventing us from doing that which God has prohibited and forbidden. The more complete the adorer's submission and concentration, the nearer is he to God and hence the more are his external character and conduct under the control of internal dictates. That is why the Quran says, "Prayer prevents transgressions of passions and the grave sin" (XXIX, 4). It is this nearness that made the Prophet say, "The freshness of my eyes is given to me in prayer."



15. "The Ka'bah surrounded by Muslims," Persian Miniature.

This realization and complete submission may not be achieved by most people in prayer, but that does not completely destroy the possibility for human beings to draw

closer to the Lord. The sincerity of man's motives and the submission of the body to the dictates of the *Sharī'ah*, insofar as the form of the prayer is concerned, are primary achievements. Even when the mind wavers, the will tries to control it and bring back concentration and complete submission. Thus, the benefits of realization are not lost. This itself is a step toward complete annihilation.

### **Fasting (*al-ṣawm*)**

Fasting is both external and internal. External compulsory fasting is prescribed for all adult individuals during the lunar month of Ramaḍān. All such individuals must not eat, drink, smoke, or have sexual intercourse during daytime from dawn to sunset. Normal life is permitted from sunset to dawn. By internal fasting is meant the discipline imposed upon one's soul so that the self is restrained from indulging in passions and desires and prevented from engaging itself in evils, such as telling lies, backbiting, envy, jealousy, or pride. Another stage of internal fasting is had when the *muttaqī*, the God-fearing individual, abstains from even permitted things for fear of going beyond limits. The next and the highest stage of this kind of fasting is seen in those devoted adorers of God who see God and nothing else and fast from the presence of everything other than God.

It is to help an individual to proceed in the path of internal fasting that external fasting is prescribed. "Cultivate within yourself," says the Prophet, "the Attributes of God." Not to eat, drink, or engage in sex is to transcend the physical limitations of an individual and imitate the "habits" of God. Bodily passions and desires become thereby weakened. The spirit of man gains strength when he tries to obey God's

orders and to restrain himself from those things that are prohibited by God. Unless he does so, physical abstentions alone cannot be counted as “fasting.” Such restraint constitutes the minimum condition. Those who do not fulfill this minimum condition and indulge in morally evil acts, such as telling lies or backbiting, are the people about whom the Prophet has said, “There are many whose fasting is nothing beyond being hungry and thirsty.” Both external and internal efforts are needed to fast properly. It is not an easy thing, for example, to control anger. In the month of fasting, this particular passion reaches almost beyond control because man becomes irritable. He must therefore keep constant watch over this and such other passions, so that not only are they properly controlled, but also they never gain the chance to control the individual. Otherwise our fasting will be soiled, and instead of acquiring benefits from external fasting we shall start committing sins.

The next stage of fasting is to abstain even from legally permitted things. Even when anger or revenge is justified, the individual restrains his anger and offers kindness instead; and instead of claiming justice, he invokes and showers mercy. Physically he limits his food and drink and sometimes abstains from those kinds of food that tempt him or energize physical passions, just to help his spirit have control over his temptations and passions. This kind of fasting gives man what in modern terminology is called “self-confidence,” which in Sufi terminology will be called *taṭmaʾinn al-qulūb*, a peace that descends on the heart from above, giving the feeling that God has accepted this kind of fasting.

To reach that stage of complete peaceful confidence (*iṭmiʾ nān*) in which the self has surrendered wholly to God,

the last type of fasting is necessary. It is a kind of fasting in which the individual abstains physically, mentally, and spiritually from anything that draws a veil between him and the Lord. God must become his only Beloved, his only goal, his only aim. If anything else absorbs his soul, this kind of fasting is immediately ruined and he has to start afresh to rouse within him the fullness of that craving and the freshness of that joy. It is with reference to this kind of fasting that God says in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, “Fasting is for Me and I shall grant reward for it Myself.”

The two joys of fasting that, according to the Prophet, a person fasting is blessed with—*iftār* (breaking the fast) and the vision of the new moon (of *‘īd* after the month of Ramaḍān)—refer to two other joys, the joy of seeing *jannah* (paradise) after death and the joy of having the vision of God after resurrection.

### **Pilgrimage (*ḥajj*)**

Pilgrimage to Mecca is prescribed for all Muslims who can physically and financially perform it. God has prescribed certain rites that a pilgrim should observe properly. If he does not do so, his pilgrimage is not accepted. The most important and the essential obligatory rites are these: (1) to put on *iḥrām*, which consists of two pieces of unsewn cloth for men and covers all parts of the body except the face, hands, and feet for women; and to observe the rules of *iḥrām*, which are not to have sexual relationship, not to kill animals or insects, and not to remove any hair from the body; (2) to enter the city of Makkat al-Mukarramah (Mecca) and to perform the *ṭawāf al-quḍūm*, that is, to circumambulate the Ka‘bah, the house of God, seven times; (3) to be at *‘Arafāt*,

which is a plain near Mecca, even if it is for a short while, on the ninth day of the lunar month of Dhu'l-ḥijjah; (4) to spend the night at a place near Mecca called Muzdalifah; (5) to throw stones at the three places where Satan tried to tempt the prophet Ismā'īl or Ishmael, the first son of Abraham; (6) to sacrifice an animal at Minā in commemoration of the sacrifice that Abraham decided to make of his son Ismā'īl; (7) to perform *tawāf* again; (8) to drink the water of Zamzam;<sup>4</sup> (9) to perform two *rak'ahs* of prayer at the place known as Maqām Ibrāhīm, the place where Abraham and his son stood and prayed after building the Ka'bah. If numbers (1), (2), (3), and (7) of these rites are performed, then the basic rites are said to have been observed. Even if the other rites are not performed properly, the pilgrimage is said to have been performed. But if the other rites are not observed, the pilgrim is expected to give compensation; otherwise his pilgrimage will remain defective.

Just as in the case of other rites, such as *ṣalāt* and *ṣawm*, in the case of *ḥajj* also the primary condition is purity of intention (*niyyah*). The pilgrim must intend to perform the pilgrimage only and not to indulge in any business transactions or something else. To perform the pilgrimage means to leave all worldly activities aside and proceed to meet the Lord. Purity of intention will be assessed by man himself. If his mind is invaded by worries about the life he has left in the hands of others, he has not been able to purify his intention. When a person puts on the pilgrim's garb (*iḥrām*), leaves his house, and proceeds toward the Ka'bah, he must behave as if he is a dead man having no control over his life and worldly activities. From that time until the *ḥajj* is over, he should concentrate fully on his pilgrimage to the Lord, pray for forgiveness and enlightenment, and devote

himself to *dhikr*, which means nothing other than constant repetition of and concentration upon *Lā ilāha illa' Llāh* (There is no divinity but God). To enter Mecca and to perform *ṭawāf* means to enter the holy place where the first house of God on earth was established and to circumambulate the house that is the reflection of that Divine House in the Seventh Heaven, above and beyond which stands the glorified Throne of God, around which all angels and the entire creation are constantly rotating.



16. The faithful gathering at 'Arafāt during the ceremony of the *ḥajj*.

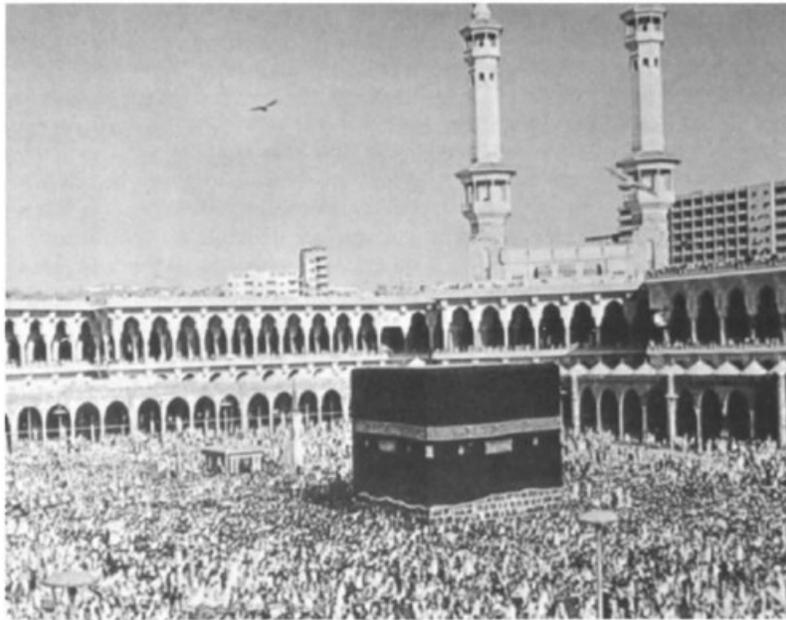


### 17. Pilgrims drinking from the Zamzam.

Through the circumambulation (*tawāf*), the pilgrim participates with the angels and other creatures in their circumambulation of the Divine Throne. Going around the Ka'bah with the purity of intention to meet the Lord can become fully beneficial only if the heart continues to be purified of everything except God. The *qalb* must by now become engaged in the constant remembrance of *ism al-Dhāt*, which is nothing other than the Name *Allāh*. The *qalb* thus becomes purified of everything except God and enjoys both repeating with spiritual tongue and hearing with spiritual ears

this *dhikr* in which, as God has said in the Quran, the entire creation is engaged. The next stage of the *hajj* is that of staying in the field of ‘Arafāt. This is the stage of prayer (*munājāt*). It was in this field that Ādam (Adam) and Ḥawwā’ (Eve) met after their expulsion from heaven, and it was on the Mount of Mercy (*Jabal al-rahmān*) in this plain that their prayer for forgiveness was accepted. It was also in this field that at night God brought out from the back of Ādam all the souls that would come to earth until doomsday and asked them, “Am I not your Lord?” To which each of them answered, “Yes” (VII, 172). This exchange signifies the covenant between man and God to which God refers several times in the Quran—the covenant that man asks God to fulfill. God reminds man and then teaches him to say that his life and activities are all for Him alone and that he has been created only to worship God. To come to ‘Arafāt is to become fully conscious of that covenant and to remember that “He” alone is all in all. All the pilgrims (*hujjāj*) are engaged in prayer. They must pray for forgiveness for every act and thought that separated them from their Lord. In other words, their consciousness of the duality of purpose and action, of the world and for the *ākhirah* (life after death), of society and God, of what made them commit the sin of polytheism (*shirk*) unknowingly must be realized to the full and cast aside, so that they can relive the time of the covenant. Those who can do so become truly purified. They alone know what pleasure is derived from the *dhikr* of *Hū* (He).<sup>5</sup> ‘Arafāt is thus the place for reaching the pinnacle of the consciousness of God. From there the pilgrims proceed to Muzdalifah, where they spend the night in prayer and meditation establishing within themselves the realization achieved at ‘Arafāt. That is why this is the place for the *dhikr* of the Divine Names *al-Ḥayy*, *al-Qayyūm* (the Living, the Self-Sustained). From Muzdalifah

the pilgrims go to Minā to throw stones at Satan and to sacrifice some animal in the Name of God. Satan tried to deceive Abraham and Ishmael, but they realized who he was and threw stones at him. This external action of throwing pebbles at three stone blocks must be accompanied by an inner urge to kill or drive away the satan that is whispering within oneself. If the pilgrim is not conscious of this meaning, his throwing of stones remains an external act without any impact on his being.



18. The Ka'bah, Mecca.



19. The embroidery of the Kiswah, the cloth covering of the Ka'bah, woven by the members of the same guild over the centuries.

The next action of the *hajj* is that of sacrifice. Abraham tried to sacrifice his own son Ishmael. The complete cooperation of his son in this act and the literal interpretation of the dream by Abraham, in which he was asked by God to sacrifice that which was dearest to him, are both acts that are not normal. That human sacrifice is neither desirable nor permissible in religion is proved by the way God ended this trial by substituting a ram in the place of Ishmael and by ordering Abraham to open his eyes and to realize that God had already accepted his sacrifice. Abraham could have interpreted his dream but he did not do so. The sacrifice of the dearest thing, such as one's life, for the cause of God is the final test of man's total surrender. Here both the father and the son were

put to such a test. It was a severe test. Nor did either of them ever dream that God would intervene. Human sacrifice would have been seen as legal had this been allowed to happen. God's intervention legitimized the sacrifice of a life for a life—a ram for the son—but forbade human sacrifice. This act also symbolizes the sacrifice of man's *nafs* (self) before God, seen as the Name *al-Qahhār* (the Victorious), the Name that signifies the total annihilation (*fanā'*) of man. The sacrifice of the animal does not remain an external act, because the pilgrim is consciously or unconsciously involved in glorifying that *al-Qahhār* aspect of God's Attributes. Through this sacrifice a pilgrim is symbolically sacrificing himself and fulfilling the obligation of the covenant on the basis of which God has taught man this verse: "Say, Verily, my prayers, my sacrifice, my life and my death are for God, the Lord of the world who hath no peer." This sacrifice thus spiritually symbolizes the sacrifice of *al-nafs al-muṭma'innah* at the altar of God the *Qahhār*. In the spiritual journey to the Lord, the annihilation or *fanā'* thus achieved is accompanied by the removal of the veil of *kufr*, or unbelief, between the adorer and the well-beloved Lord.

The shaving of the head of the pilgrim or the cutting off of the hair of women symbolizes the next stage of man's spiritual progress—the removal of all stains of human attributes from the essential spirit breathed into the body by God. If one can attain to that stage, he can visualize the beauty of the Lord directly.

The Prophet has said that there are two stations behind the Throne of God—one of belief and the other of unbelief. The former creates a white veil and the other a dark veil between the slave and the Lord. The dark veil is removed when, along

with the physical journey, a pilgrim succeeds in completing his spiritual journey. The other veil is removed when the final circumambulations of the Ka‘bah are performed. If man’s pilgrimage has been completed both externally and internally and his realizations are as depicted above, then he must once again go seven times around the Ka‘bah, feeling this time as if he is going around the Throne of God. He is then entitled by God to enter into the station of nearness to the Almighty, Whose vision he achieves. It is to this achievement of direct vision of the Lord that God refers when He says, “And He made them drink the purest of drinks” (LXXVI, 21). This is symbolized externally by the drinking of the water of the holy well Zamzam after the completion of the circumambulation. When a person attains to this stage of consciousness, all veils are removed and he talks to the Lord without any veil between them.

The final stage of the *ḥajj* is the *ṭawāf al-wadā‘* (circumambulation of farewell) or *ṭawāf al-ṣadr* (circumambulation of the breast) and return to one’s homeland. The pilgrim’s real homeland is, of course, the place of his spiritual origin, about which God has said that He made man in the best of forms and then cast him to the realm of the lowest of the low (XCV, 5). This *ṭawāf* symbolizes man’s detachment from the lowest region and his journey to that region which is the highest of the high, his real homeland.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī describes this aspect of pilgrimage as *Ḥajj al-ṭarīqah* (the pilgrimage in the spiritual path). This is the real significance of the various rites about which God says in the Quran, “Such is the pilgrimage.

Whoever honors the sacred rites of God, for him it is good in the sight of his Lord” (XXII, 30).

### ***Jihād***

Islam is a religion of peace, but it prescribes war as the last resort to ward off the enemy, secure peace, and establish security so that God’s prescribed way of life is maintained and not destroyed. That is why God says in the Quran, “And if God had not replied to one group of people by means of another, the earth would have been filled with chaos” (II, 25). God also has said that *jihād* is to repel all evil forces and destroy or control them. “Those who follow the way of Faith fight in the Way of God and those who follow the way of disbelief fight in the way of the devil. So fight against the helpers of Satan with this conviction. Satan’s crafty schemes are in fact very weak and bound to fail” (IV, 76).

The primary meaning of *jihād* is exertion or use of effort, of which only a particular kind is identified with fighting. Even in this sense of the word, *jihād* means fighting in the Way of God against the forces of evil with life and wealth in order to make God’s Way prevail on the earth and not fighting for any worldly cause. Sincerity and purity of motive and the condition of society must justify such an action. If anyone wants personal fame and glory, he is not a *mujāhid*, a fighter in the Way of God. Someone asked the Prophet, “One man fights for booty, one for the reputation of fighting and one for his quality (of bravery) to be witnessed; which of them is in God’s Way?” The Prophet replied, “The one who fights that God’s Word may have preeminence is following God’s Way.” The sincerity of this motive must also involve the degree of the fighter’s love for God and the Prophet. A

*mujāhid* must love God, His Messenger, and striving in His Way more than his wealth, relations, and his own life. God says in the Quran, “O Prophet, tell them plainly, If your fathers and your sons and your brothers and your wives, and your near and dear ones and the wealth you have acquired and the trade you fear may decline and the homes which delight you—if all these things are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and striving in His Way, then wait until God passes judgment on you for God does not guide the wicked people” (IX, 24). All Muslims must be *mujāhids* because they must resist evil individually and collectively. When the condition of society is such that there is danger of elimination of the faithful, then the faithful must try to resist the spread of evil through fighting with their works or their pen. If that is also not possible, then internally they should resist the evil and not allow it to conquer their hearts. The last alternative is to leave the land of corruption and go to some place where fighting in the Way of God may be carried out. *Jihād*, therefore, is a compulsory function of a Muslim for both internal and external purification, purification of the individual and of society by resisting, fighting, and conquering the forces of evil. The test of this *jihād* lies in the sincerity with which the individual undertakes this task.

*Jihād* compels an individual to test himself through his sincerity and love for God and the Prophet. That love for God and the Prophet means love for the good, for selflessness, for all that God has prescribed and the Prophet has exemplified in order to lead man toward the final goal of mankind. That goal is to fulfill the function of vicegerency of God (*khalīfat Allāh*) on earth and hatred of all evil forces, including oppression, injustice, falsehood, cheating, backbiting, suppression of human freedom, and denial of basic human rights guaranteed

in the Quran. Thus, although external *jihād* is necessary at different times for the purification of society, internal *jihād* is a constant action that must go on within man so that he may distinguish between truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, and right and wrong and kindle within himself the love for the good. Unless he tries to do so, he will probably falter or fail at the time of external *jihād* and be in the category of the “losers” (II, 27).



20. Woven miniature of the Ka'bah.



21. The faithful prostrating before the Ka‘bah.

This internal *jihād* is more difficult and subtle than the external *jihād*. That is why when the companions returned from an early *jihād* the Prophet welcomed them and added

that they had now come from the smaller *jihād* (*al-jihād al-aṣghar*) to the greater *jihād* (*al-jihād al-akbar*). The companions were surprised and inquired what that greater *jihād* could be. The Prophet replied, “*Jihād* with one’s lower self (*nafs*).”

The *nafs* (self) is a difficult object to define. The Quran describes three different stages of *nafs* in man. The lowest and the most corrupt stage is that of *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the evil *nafs*, XII, 53), at which stage man is completely under the control of the evil forces within and outside himself. If man remains at this stage, he is defeated in *jihād*. He becomes himself a slave of evil forces and his self listens to the promptings of the evil jinn. Every individual, said the Prophet, has been given an angel by God to assist him in the right path, and an evil jinn by Satan to mislead him. Although the spirit (*rūḥ*) of man is always pure, it has become almost inactive because of these evil forces, including those forces within the self that are generated by the worldly elements that constitute his body and attract him toward this worldly life. In the case of many human beings, the self has become deaf to the suggestions of the angel, and it deliberately leads man toward the path of spiritual destruction. People of this kind struggle collectively at the social level to prevent the good from prevailing.

When the spirit of man tries to reassert itself and when with the help of God he becomes conscious of his condition, he begins to exert himself spiritually, to carry out *jihād* and to repent; but sometimes he wavers and falls and again recovers. This is the stage of internal *jihād* that is described in the Quran as a stage when the soul is called *al-nafs al-lawwāmah*

(self-reproaching soul, LXXV, 2). This is the stage that may be described as “the pricking of man’s conscience.”

The next stage is attained by the self when, through remembrance of God and invocation (*dhikr Allāh*), man’s spirit (*rūḥ*) starts dominating the soul and he is able to control the evil forces within himself thoroughly. Man achieves complete peace and satisfaction by submitting fully to the will of God. This is the stage of *al-naḥs al-muṭma’innah* (LXXXIX, 27). Man is finally able to win real victory in his *jihād*. It is at this stage of victory that the soul is also described by the Quran as *rāḍiyat<sup>an</sup>-marḍiyyat<sup>an</sup>* (satisfied and satisfying), a stage in which God’s Will and man’s will act in unison. In a *ḥadīth qudsī* this stage has been described as that stage of consciousness when God acts through man’s eyes, ears, hands, and feet and man does whatever God wills. Whatever man wills is also accepted by God because man cannot do anything but good at that stage (LXXIX, 28; XCVIII, 8).

Man must carry on *jihād* both internally and externally—the former to purify himself and control the evil forces and keep a watch over the frontiers of the soul and the latter to stop or prevent aggression and oppression or save the faithful and the Faith from being annihilated by the evil forces in society.

In both cases man’s highest glory is achieved when he becomes a *shahīd* (martyr). In external *jihād*, if a *mujāhid* is killed, he becomes a martyr. In internal *jihād* also, a stage is reached when the spirit and the body become separated and the *naḥs* is made to suffer the pangs of actual death. Man, therefore, becomes a *shahīd*, a martyr, although his state may

remain unknown to others. It is about this death that the Prophet has said, “Die before you die.”

Those who can kill their *nafs* in this manner as well as those who sacrifice the physical self for God reach the status of *shahīd*. These *shuhadā'* (martyrs) are, according to the Quran, forever alive: “Do not regard as dead those who have been slain in the Way of God; they are really alive and are well provided for by their Lord” (III, 169). Their rank is very high in the eyes of God, as is said in the Quran, “Those who believe and have left their homes and striven hard with their wealth and their lives in God’s Way, have the highest rank in the sight of God” (IX, 20). That is why the Prophet said, “By God, Him in Whose Hand is my soul, I wish I could be killed in God’s Way and brought to life, then be killed and brought to life, then be killed and brought to life, then be killed.” This *ḥadīth* indicates that in the field of battle, provided it is a battle in the path of God, a person can become a martyr even if he has not undergone the hardships of an ascetic who kills his *nafs* by surrendering his body and soul to God and by becoming martyred inwardly. Therefore, the fact that through the lesser *jihād* one may achieve the benefits of the greater *jihād* indicates further that it is easy for a person who has won a victory in the greater *jihād* to participate in the lesser *jihād*, because he has already killed his *nafs*. He is already fully prepared to sacrifice his body over and over again for God, if that were possible, because by killing his *nafs*, such a person has, in a sense, already performed the sacrifice of his body. That is why such people and those who are killed on the battlefield for the preservation of the Faith are not dead but have already gained immortal life in paradise.

## Notes

1. There are certain minor differences in various schools of Islamic Law concerning parts of the rite of purification, but the main elements are the same in all schools.
2. ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, *Sirr al-asrār* (Lahore, n.d.) 158.
3. As mentioned earlier, the *ḥadīth qudsī* is a Divine Word uttered by the Prophet but not a part of the Quran. In the *ḥadīth qudsī*, God speaks in the first person through the mouth of the Prophet.
4. Zamzam, the spring near the Ka‘bah whose water gushed forth, according to tradition, at the moment when Hagar, the mother of Ismā‘īl, was looking desperately for water to quench the thirst of her child, symbolizes for Muslims the water of paradise.
5. The supreme invocation referring to God’s Essence and the final syllable of the Name *Allāh*.



---

---

## **The Spiritual Dimension of Prayer**

ALLAHBAKHS K. BROHI

### **The Command to Pray**

TO BEGIN WITH, IT OUGHT TO BE NOTICED by a student of Islam that prayer is a duty prescribed for the believer directly by the command of God. Thus, there is an order to pray and, what is more, to translate literally the commandment of the Quran, there is an order to establish prayer, *aqīm<sup>u</sup> l-ṣalāh*. This commandment is absolutely binding. There are minor exceptions as when one is ill in a manner such that he cannot pray. One is ordered to pray even in war. This sense of obligation to pray is in reference to the formalized and institutionalized ritual prayer, which is to be performed five times a day. Although one can perform this prayer by oneself, the value of the prayer is enhanced if it is performed in congregation in a mosque. The ritual prayer, over and above its direct benefit to the individual, has a social aspect in that it brings one closer to his fellow men and promotes the life of the community by integrating its members into a fraternal feeling of oneness. The community prayer is led by an imam, who is the leader of the prayer. The rest stand in straight rows behind him and follow his commands and the prescribed course of movements necessary for completing the prayer.

## The Canonical Prayers

The meaning of prayer in Islam and its link with the process of spiritualization of the being of man can be best understood if the very first chapter of the Quran, called *Sūrat al-fātiḥah* (literally, “The Opening Chapter”), is properly understood. This is so because that chapter (which has to be recited in every unit or *rak‘ah* and which is a necessary component of the prayer process) sets forth the essence of the prayer, if not the soul of religion itself. The chapter consists of seven verses, which many scholars have treated as the quintessence of the whole of the Quran.

It has rightly been placed as a preface to the sacred Book because, in some sense, these seven oft-repeated verses are none other than what the Quran itself describes as *sab‘<sup>an</sup> min al-mathānī* (seven of the oft-repeated verses) in the following verse: “We have given Thee [i.e. the Prophet] seven of the oft-repeated [verses], and the mighty Quran” (XV, 87). The Prophet is on record as saying that these seven oft-repeated verses are in reference to the *Sūrat al-fātiḥah*, which is as follows:

- (1) Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being,
- (2) the All-Merciful, the All-compassionate,
- (3) the Master of the Day of Doom.
- (4) Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.
- (5) Guide us in the straight path,
- (6) the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,

(7) not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray.

It should be noticed that structurally the content of this opening chapter falls into three parts. The first is acknowledgment of the fact that praise and gratitude are due to Allah, Who is the Lord of the worlds (or universes) and Who is beneficent and compassionate: He is the Master of the Day that comes at the end of time, on which man will meet his Lord and give account of what he has done in his life. In the next phase, man makes a direct address to God and undertakes the commitment to serve Him alone and to ask help from Him alone. In the third and last phase, that help is elaborated in the form of a plea and invocation that the Lord guide the believers on the right path, this being the path (a) of those upon whom He has bestowed His favors and (b) not of those upon whom wrath is brought down nor (c) of those who go astray.

Thus, praise for the merciful Maker, Who is the Judge of man's deeds, and a commitment to serve only Him and to seek only His help finally and inevitably take the form of a supplication by the believer: to be guided to follow the right path so as to win God's favors and to be spared from having to suffer God's wrath, or to follow the path of those who go astray.

Since man's life is in the making, he cannot conceivably know in advance what destiny is in store for him and what his situation is in the scheme of things. He is not directly aware of the purpose for which life is given to him. Islam makes the believer conscious of the existence of God, Who is the sovereign Lord and Master of the universe and of man. God is

worthy of man's praise. Furthermore, God is merciful, and with Him is the final judgment concerning what man has made of his life. The commitment he is called upon to make, in order to acquit himself creditably in the trials that confront him in this life, is to submit steadfastly to the Divine Law by serving God alone (thereby denying submission to any power apart from God) and to seek only His help. The help sought by man is that he be guided to follow the right path, which is a path of those for whom God has shown his favors and not of those on whom His wrath has descended or of those who have gone astray. When this prayer (*Fātiḥah*) is recited in any *rak'ah*, a portion of the Quran is read thereafter, and the belief is that that portion of the Quran which spontaneously wells forth from the interior depth of man's being is in response to the believer's invocation "show me the straight path." It contains God's answer to him and has reference to the guidance that he had asked for. Thus, the Islamic prayer is a means of communion of the human soul with its Creator, Who alone knows what destiny lies ahead for him and how it is to be realized by him in terms of the guidance he receives. Since "God does not directly speak to man except through the prophets" (XLII, 51), the portion of the Quran which is the Word of God recited by man is also God's response to man in the situation in which he finds himself placed in this life. Prayer thus helps man to perfect himself by traversing the path which leads to earning the pleasure of his Creator and avoiding His displeasure. To pray in this sense is inherent in the very nature of man. He needs to pray if only because, quite aside from this Divine Guidance that comes to man, there is no other intimation given to him about how best to conduct himself in life to be able to reach his appointed goal

and to realize his prescribed destiny. The benefit of prayer is alluded to in the Quran, where the prophet Noah says,

Seek pardon of your Lord. Lo! He is ever forgiving.

He will let loose the sky for you in plenteous rain,

and will help you with wealth and sons,

and will assign unto you gardens and

will assign unto you rivers.

What aileth you that ye hope not toward Allāh for dignity

When He created you by (diverse) stages?

(LXXI, 10–14)

These last words undoubtedly speak of the development of man by stages and the various conditions through which he passes, beginning with his prenatal life in the womb of his mother on to his final end, viz., his death on earth. His prayer is linked with his supplication to this Lord to help him to realize these stages of his growth and orderly development consistent with that destiny which is prescribed for him to realize. Similarly, even the functional value of prayer has been set forth in clear-cut terms:

[O Muḥammad] Recite that which hath been inspired in thee of the Scripture, and establish worship [prayer]. Lo! worship preserveth from lewdness and iniquity, but verily remembrance of Allah is more important. And Allah knoweth what ye do. (XXIX, 45)

### **The Remembrance of God**

It should be noticed that recitation of the Quran and the keeping up of prayer or remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Blessed Name *Allāh* converge upon one and the same focal point, that is, the development of man's awareness, which is fostered by meditation upon the revealed Word of God and is fortified by obedience to what God wants him to do. For the believer, the revelation of the Quran is an act which is itself evidence of the Mercy of God, in that it was revealed to man for his benefit and to help him to cope with the problems of life. Continual and constant remembrance of God's Name or recitation of His revealed Word is one sure way of acquiring nearness (*qurb*) to Him. Prayer acts as a constraining influence upon the animal impulses of man and keeps him away from things that are foul, ugly, and unclean.

### **Prayer as Protection**

It would appear that one of the important roles of Islamic prayer is to act as a protection against the defilement and contamination that affect man's life. When a man lives his life with consciousness of his link with the Lord, he acquires an inward disposition to absorb God's Attributes and obtains the capacity to resist evil. If a piece of iron has to be kept for long under water without rusting, the only way to achieve this difficult result is to take it out periodically, oil it, and then place it in the water again. So is it also the case with man. If five times a day he were to remove himself from the corrupting taint of worldly transactions in which he is apt to lose himself and were to make an effort consciously to identify himself with the pursuit of the supreme goal for which he has been created and were to seek persistently from his Creator the help he needs to steer clear of the possibility of deviating from the straight path, which is his appointed

destiny to traverse if he is to be saved, then there can be no doubt that he would succeed in adhering to the path of righteousness.

### **Institutionalized Prayer**

That prayer has been a perennial institution of all prophetic religions is attested to by the Quran over and over again, as, for instance, in relation to the prophet Moses:

And We inspired Moses and his brother, (saying): appoint houses for your people in Egypt and make your houses oratories, and establish worship [prayer] and give good news to the believers. (X, 88)

The Israelites, it will be recalled, were obliged to pray in their houses since they did not enjoy full religious liberty in Egypt and did not have the freedom to establish public places of worship.

That prayer in Islam can also be petitionary is attested to by several verses in the Quran. There man is invited to ask his Lord for the satisfaction of his needs, with the implied assurance that his Lord would certainly accede to his request. More specifically, it has been said that the Prophet's acceptance of alms from those who offer it sincerely, after confessing their faults, would clean and purify them. The Prophet is asked to pray for them:

Take alms of their wealth, wherewith thou mayst purify them and mayst make them grow, and pray for them. Lo! thy prayer is an assuagement for them.

Allah is Hearer, Knower.

Know they not that Allah is He Who accepteth repentance from His bondmen and taketh the alms, and that Allah is He Who is the Relenting, Merciful? (IX, 103-4)

It is further said:

Pray unto Me, and I will hear you. (XL, 60)

And again:

Is not He (best) Who answereth the wronged one when he crieth unto Him and removeth the evil, and hath made you viceroys of the earth? (XXVII, 62)

The ritual prayer in Islam must be performed at fixed times. This helps to build man's conscious dependence upon God. It helps him to so conduct his affairs in life that the possibility of his committing sins is minimized, if not eliminated. In this context it should be noticed that prayer is to be performed even when one is engaged in fighting a war:

When ye have performed the act of worship [prayer], remember Allah, standing, sitting and reclining and when ye are in safety, observe proper worship [prayer]. (IV, 103)

Prayer indeed has been enjoined on the believers at fixed times as a duty, and it can be shortened when one is traveling (IV, 101).

Thus, Muslim prayer, or what has been called in this article the ritual prayer, is a disciplined activity regulated in meticulous detail by the law of Islam. And yet the Quran is quick to warn that prayer, when devoid of its real spirit, is not acceptable:

So woe to those that pray and are heedless of their prayers, to those who make display and refuse charity. (CVII, 4-8)

Prayer as prescribed in Islam is a conscious act: the highest level of perfection in prayer is, as pointed out in a *ḥadīth*: “So pray as if you see God for if you do not see Him, He nevertheless sees you.” In conformity with the demands of religious Law, one must pray in all conditions; but one enhances the efficaciousness of prayer if it is done in a spirit of detachment from the world and its ways. One must pray with serenity and calmness in one’s heart and with singleness of devotion, thoroughness of concentration, and a sense of complete dedication to the Holy of the Holies.

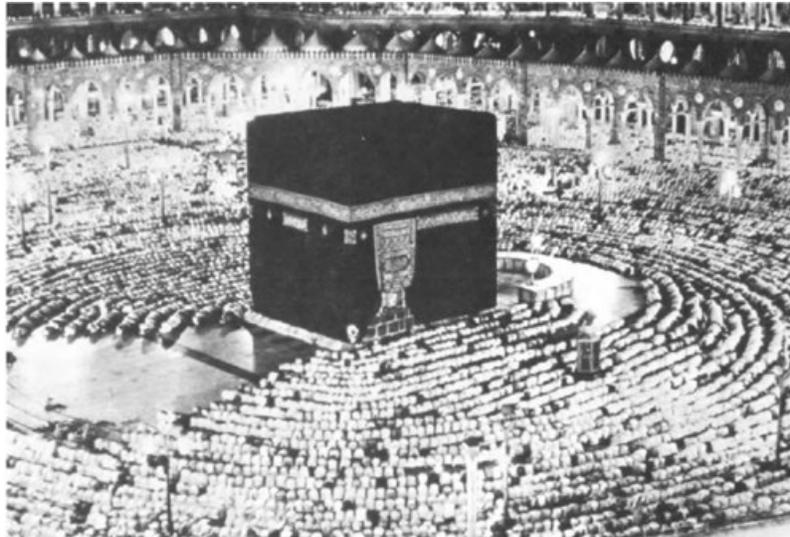
### **Constant Prayer and Invocation**

Apart from obligatory prayers, there are supererogatory prayers (*nawāfil*); indeed, in view of the total thrust of the message of the Quran it could be said that prayerful attitude is as large as life itself and that it is coextensive with its total range and activity. Through prayer we not only obey the Lord who is Lord of the worlds but also are privileged in being beneficiaries of the spiritual influence of His Divine Presence. We are transformed from darkness to illumination in Its light when we say repeatedly in the course of prayer, *Allāh<sup>u</sup> akbar* (“God is most great”). One must pray fervently, ceaselessly, and with full awareness of the Divine Presence. This is the most indispensable means for securing the fullest measure of realization of the spiritual potentialities of one’s life and the surest method of fulfilling the commitment of the slave to serve his Lord and Master.

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, the famous author of the *Mathnawī*, says that a piece of iron when kept for long in fire begins not only to look like fire but also to burn like fire. The soul of man in prayer soaks the substance of his being in the divine ocean of

light and grace and draws nourishment from it. This helps him to obtain the purification of his *nafs* or lower self. Then he traverses the pathway to God. By engaging himself in the prayer of the heart, he lays himself open to the healing influences that emanate from the Holy Spirit. The Quran pertinently points out:

Who have believed and whose hearts have rest in the remembrance of Allah. Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest! (XIII, 28)



## 22. Prayer around the Ka‘bah.

There are many references in the Quran that point out the value of invoking constantly God’s Holy Name: “Say Allah: Then leave them alone, playing their game of plunging” (VI, 92). Constant invocation of the Supreme Name (*Allāh*) or one of His ninety-nine attributive Names brings about peace in the soul of man, a peace that surpasses all understanding. It

deepens one's state of consciousness, enables one to have glimpses of eternal truths, and transforms human consciousness into a transparent medium through which God's light passes to illuminate the interior being of man.

One can refer to some of the relevant verses of the Quran that highlight the Islamic approach to prayer at the level of *ihsān* (literally, beauty or virtue), which is the highest level where effective communion between the believer and his God takes place:

Whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah while doing good, his reward is with his Lord: and there shall no fear come upon them nor shall they grieve. (II, 112; see also IV, 125; XXXI, 22)

In Islam, prayer is basically an attempt on the part of man to turn to God—that is, an attempt to transcend himself in the direction of the highest perfection and most majestic presence, which we attribute, on the authority of the Quran, to God, Who is the Lord and Master of the Universe. In the Quran, there is a reference also to the believers' meeting with the Lord. The highest reward of the believers is that, on the Day of Judgment, their faces will be bright while looking to their Lord. The actual verses are:

That day will faces be resplendent,

Looking toward their Lord;

And that day will other faces be despondent,

Thou wilt know that some great disaster is about to fall on them.

(LXXV, 22–25)

### **Prayer and the Vision of God**

The expression *ilā rabbihā nāzirat<sup>um</sup>*, which means “looking toward or gazing upon their Lord,” tends to underscore the highest reward for the believer, which is comprehensible only in visionary terms. Prayer at its highest level of perfection is an attempt on earth by the believer to behold the Face of the Lord and to derive, however indirect it be, the bliss and the joy that come from such a vision. The ultimate end for the believer is thus to earn the reward of beholding the vision of the Lord. According to the conception of prayer in Islam, the supreme opportunity that life provides is to turn to God consciously and purposively and to contemplate the beauty of His Face and His manifold Attributes. This helps man to secure the transformation of his being and to make it a fit vehicle upon which God’s light and grace may descend. It is true that in the Quran it is said:

The vision (of men) comprehendeth Him (God) not but He comprehendeth all vision. He is subtle, the Aware. (XVI, 104)

But this does not mean anything more than the fact that the limited powers of perception with which man is endowed cannot grasp in its fullness the beauty of the Face of God. Nor again does this mean that man is incapable of having even glimpses of the Face of the Lord. Indeed, there is an assurance in the Quran that wherever man turns, there is the Face of God. The reference to the Lord of the Throne, making the Spirit descend on whomsoever He pleases with His permission, is meant to emphasize the transcendence of God and the fact that the human being cannot, by himself, have access to the life of the Spirit. It points to God’s grace, with which He condescends to favor His servants with intimation of His Presence (see XL, 15). God says: “They apprehend nothing of His knowledge except what He wills” (II, 255–56).

On the last Day of Reckoning there will be faces which will be allowed to behold God's Face. His Messenger has proclaimed to his community that on that day they shall see the Lord as one sees the moon in full moonlight. Those radiant faces that will gaze upon the Lord will perhaps recall that in their earthly careers they were in some sense aware of the beauty of His Face and that when the veil will have been finally lifted, they will not be taken unaware; for of old, God had imparted His spirit to Adam.

The *rūh* (spirit) is the uncreated element lodged in man's being. This enables him to have knowledge of God (*ma'rifah*). Prayer is a process of preparation on earth to enable him to meet his Maker. The life to come is a continuation of this life, provided this life is lived by man earnestly and resolutely in an effort to fulfill the Law that the revealed Word of God has brought to his notice. Considering what has been said above as a preface, the meaning of the following verses becomes clear and gives full scope to the longing of those who pray, who serve and wait for the Lord's gifts to come to them:

We shall show them Our portents on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth. Doth not thy Lord suffice, since He is Witness over all things? How are they still in doubt about the meeting with their Lord? Lo! Is not He surrounding all things? (XLI, 53–54)

### **Prayer as Communion**

Enough has been said in the foregoing to emphasize the cardinal principle of Islamic prayer, namely, that it is man's communion with the Divine. From the time the believer hears the call to prayers coming from a mosque nearby, in response to this invitation to say the prayer and to achieve success

(*falāḥ*), he proceeds to put on ritually clean dress and to perform the prescribed ablution to secure his physical cleanliness. He then declares his intention to pray by standing either by himself or in congregation behind an imam in the Divine Presence in all humility after he has pronounced the *takbīr* (God is most great). He recites the *Sūrat al-fātiḥah*, supplements it with a portion of the Quran, goes into *rukūʿ* by kneeling down, and says, "Praise be to God the most exalted." Then he bows down and prostrates himself by putting his forehead on the ground and says, "Praise be to God the most high." Thereafter he sits in a reverential position to recite prescribed words called *tashahhud* and declares that God is one and Muḥammad is His slave and Messenger. He also invokes peace and prayers upon the Prophet of Islam and also upon the prophet Abraham. He finishes the prayer by saying *as-salām<sup>u</sup> ʿalayk<sup>um</sup> wa raḥmat Allāh* (Peace be upon you and the mercy of God), turning his face to the right and then to the left. He thus ends his prayer by sending the salutation of peace and Mercy of God on all those who have been on either side of him engaged in prayer.

The invocation of God's prayer and peace upon the Prophet of Islam as also upon the prophet Abraham, who is the founder of monotheistic religion, is in the nature of the believer's affirmation of the continuity in the development of universal religion. It is an acknowledgment of man's indebtedness to God for the revelation that He has sent to His prophets, who are His chosen representatives. After all, it is through their intercession that the revealed Word of God has reached man and has enabled him to participate in the grand process of self-purification and self-transformation. Rightly regarded, prayer would appear to be the most important of all the prescribed rituals, if only because it makes concrete that

which is subscribed in the abstract, namely, belief in the world of the unseen. Prayer helps man to realize the existence of the Divine, which in turn enables him to fulfill the Law. In keeping his faith with the Divine he becomes useful to his fellow men and is able to do his labor here below in his capacity as God's vicegerent on earth.

The congregational prayer provides additionally the opportunity to strengthen man's relations with his fellow men and to develop that sense of inner belonging to the community, or to the *ummah*, without which the unity of mankind and, therefore, peace on earth cannot be realized.

The physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of prayer make possible the total absorption of man's being in the Divine and enable God's grace and light to descend in his soul. The moment he says the *takbīr*, *Allāh<sup>u</sup> akbar* (God is most great), he in effect detaches himself from the world and turns in humility to the Divine Being by acknowledging His Uniqueness, His Sovereignty and His Mercy. Muslim prayer is not a part-time activity; it is a continual act of dedication to the end that the Divine Purpose inherent in man's creation is fulfilled.

### **Prayer and the Challenges of Life**

In the Quran there is a reference to the efficaciousness of seeking assistance through patience and prayer:

Seek help in patience and prayer; and truly it is hard save for the humble-minded,

Who know that they will have to meet their Lord, and that unto Him they are returning. (II, 45–46)

In this world, where man is called upon to live, for him to go through ordeals, face trials, or suffer tribulations is not easy. Indeed, it is the lot of all mankind to go through these tests. The Quran seems to point out that one way to cope with the challenge that life on earth poses is through patience and prayer. But patience and prayer are not easy in the face of hardships and troubles; man must be convinced that he is bound to meet his Lord and return to Him. This thought is the keynote of man's relation with his Maker: man has to render account to God of what he has done to keep the Law. He must therefore stay humble and obey the Law.

### **Prayer and Almsgiving**

In addition to prayer, man is ordered also to give *zakāt*, the prescribed contribution to the poor. It is one of the mysteries of the Quran that it has imposed the duty to pray along with the duty to give *zakāt*. It would appear that the efficaciousness of the prayer is very much dependent on what man is freely able to give from his wealth in the Name of God. This is not merely a case of performing charity but of securing his purification, which is suggested by the use of the word *zakāt* (*zakā-yazkī* means "to purify"). It seems as if man is carrying a bone-breaking burden of wealth on his head as he is traveling on his way to God, and he is advised that by giving *zakāt* he would be able to jettison this burden. No wonder that prayer was likened by the Prophet of Islam to the flowing of a river that passes at one's doorstep. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet:

If one of you has a river at his door in which he washes himself five times a day, what do you think of him? Would it leave any dirt on him? The companion said it would not leave any dirt on him as he would be perfectly

clean. The Prophet said, This is an example of five prayers with which Allah washes off all the evils of man.

Both prayer and the giving of *zakāt* are calculated to purify men: it will be recalled that the Prophet was explicitly enjoined to purify the believers (LXII, 2) (*yuzakkīhim*).

### **Inner Prayer**

The holy Quran speaks of the faithful as those who remember Allah standing and sitting and lying on their sides (III, 19). This again shows that prayer is a continuous act; the life of a true believer is a long unending prostration. The ritual prayer is prescribed as an irreducible minimum, but constant remembrance of the Lord, ceaseless invocation of His Holy Name, and recitation of the revealed Word of God as it is contained in the Quran are recommended as man's sure means to reach a higher level of spiritual exaltation. There is no fixed day for rest in Islam, and even on Friday, when there is congregational prayer that is prescribed directly in the Quran, there are indications that after the prayer is over one is to go out of the mosque to seek the bounty of the Lord—that is to say, to do one's work. So there is no such rule as a fixed day for prayer and the rest of the week for business, when there is to be no prayer.

Prayer in Islam affords an opportunity for serene contemplation of the Divine Attributes for the purpose of realizing the Divine Attributes in one's being. Man in turn, as a result of this contemplation, experiences his own humility, his virtual nothingness. This helps him to transcend the mechanical processes involved in his biological life. Muslim prayer helps one to wake up—no wonder there is a significant

addition to the text of the call to morning prayer: “Prayer is better than sleep”!

### **Cosmic Prayer**

Islamic prayer, insofar as it consists in praising the Lord, is in tune with nature: according to the Quran even the seven heavens and the earth are constantly engaged in declaring the Glory of God:

The seven heavens and the earth,

And all beings therein,

Declare His glory;

There is not a thing

But celebrates His praise;

And yet ye understand not

How they declare His glory!

Verily He is Oft-Forbearing,

Most Forgiving!

(XVII, 44)

Not only the seven heavens and the earth but also the birds in their flight are engaged in His praise:

Hast thou not seen that Allah, He it is Whom all who are in the heavens and the earth praise, and the birds in their flight? Of each He knoweth verily the worship and the praise; and Allah is aware of what they do. (XXIV, 41)

Thus, it would appear that the prayer of the believer in Islam is in step with what the world around him is constantly engaged in doing. One way to be in tune with the Infinite is to stay in a prolonged state of prayer and be receptive to the finer forces that descend from above to uplift man to a higher plane of existence.

Finally, and more decisively, there is a reference in the Quran where the prophet Moses received the following revelation:

Lo! I, even I, am Allah. There is no God save Me. So serve Me and establish worship for My remembrance.

Lo! the Hour is surely coming. But I will to keep it hidden, that every soul may be rewarded for that which it striveth (to achieve). (XX, 14, 15)

The Quranic concept of prayer is thus linked with man's struggle with his *nafs* (lower self) and is to be likened to an alchemical process, which transforms it into the angelic state of being and which is a sort of witnessing of a rebirth into the world of the Holy Spirit.