

The Bodily Positions of the Ritual Prayer

by William C. Chittick

Sufism might be described as that dimension of Islamic learning that explains 'why'. Throughout Islamic history, writers who have been recognized as Sufi authorities have explained the rationale behind every sort of teaching found in the Koran and the *Hadith*, teachings that we would classify in such categories as theology, cosmology, history, myth, psychology, law, politics, linguistics and morality. On the basic level of what Muslims are supposed to do - that is, the *shari'at* - Sufis have written voluminously on the significance of ritual and social activity. Classic texts such as Makki's *Qut al-qolub* ('Hearts' food') or Ghazali's *Kimiyā-ye sa'adat* ('The alchemy of felicity') devote a good deal of attention to the significance of the activity mandated by the *shari'at*. Ebno'l-'Arabi - never at a loss for words - devotes 3100 pages of his famous *Fotuhāt al-makkiya* ('The Meccan Openings') to the meaning of the basic ritual activities of Islam: purity, prayer, alms-giving, fasting and hajj. One can even discern a specific genre in Islamic literature, usually written by Sufis, that is commonly called *asrār al-'ebādāt* ('the mysteries of the acts of worship'). If the jurists - the specialists in the *shari'at* - tried to describe every last act that human beings should perform, those who wrote on the 'mysteries' of these same acts wanted to explain their ultimate relevance to human becoming.

The primary Islamic act of worship is of course the *ṣalāt* (Persian *namāz*) or 'ritual prayer'; and perhaps

the most striking characteristic of the *ṣalāt* is that it is intimately bound up with movement of the body. In the modern world people have become accustomed to seeing vast groups of Muslims prostrating themselves on the evening news, but, needless to say, no news commentator has anything but a political interpretation for the meaning of this activity. Few historians or orientalisks have tried to explain the significance of the ritual prayer's bodily dimension. The following remarks may help throw some light on the traditional Islamic understanding of the rationale for the positions that are assumed by the worshiper during the prayer's performance.

The Prophet called *ṣalāt* the 'centerpole' of the religion. In the lists of the 'five pillars' that make up the basic Islamic practices, *ṣalāt* is placed second after the *shahāda*, that is, voicing the statement, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The *shahāda* obligates and validates all other practices. Although in theory it needs to be uttered only once in a lifetime, in practice it is integrated into the ritual prayer. The *ṣalāt* in fact can be called the *shahāda*'s primary embodiment, and this bestows upon it a foundational importance and an inescapable nature. It is the archetypal human act, the ritual *par excellence*, because it incarnates the right human relationship with God. As the centerpole of the religion, it holds up the rest of Islam and expresses most essentially what God wants from human beings. If the *shahāda* is the oral acknowl-

edgment of surrender to God's love and mercy, the *ṣalāt* adds the activity most recommended by God. All else is secondary, as can be seen by the fact that every other mandatory activity depends upon circumstances that do not always obtain. If the Sufis sometimes stress *dhekr* ('remembrance of God') more than *ṣalāt*, this is because the purpose of *ṣalāt* is to actualize *dhekr* (a word by which the Koran sometimes calls *ṣalāt*). In effect, the Sufi *dhekr* is an internal *ṣalāt* that can be performed at any time and in any situation, whereas *ṣalāt* itself can only be performed at certain times and places and in keeping with specific external rules.

Sufi authors who explain the significance of the *ṣalāt* presuppose a thorough grounding in Islamic practice. They address people who perform the *ṣalāt* every day and for whom it has become second nature. But they discuss the meaning of the actual positions and movements of the prayer rather rarely. They devote far more attention to commentating on the various formulae and Koranic verses that are recited. The reason for their relative reticence concerning the bodily positions may be that the body itself assimilates the prayer's wisdom; verbalization is unnecessary. After all, the resurrection takes place in bodily form, and the Koran tells us that each of the body's parts will be questioned about its activities.

The texts approach the meaning of the *ṣalāt* from many directions. Perhaps the best way to gain insight into the prayer's positions is to situate them

within the context of Sufi teachings on the human microcosm. These teachings differentiate between the lower, dark, dense, unconscious and dispersed dimension of the human being, called the 'body', and the higher, luminous, subtle, conscious, and unified dimension, called the 'spirit' (*ruh*). The body is the corporeal image of God, while the spirit is God's breath, blown into the body when God "shaped the clay" of the human being. There is one fundamental spirit (God's breath) and a great number of human bodies, all made in God's image. In each individual, spirit and body meet on an intermediary level - a *barzakh* or 'isthmus' - called the 'soul' (*nafs*).

The soul represents the encounter between the qualities of spirit and body. It is the locus of awareness and personality, but it is neither purely spiritual nor purely corporeal. Within the soul, light comes together with darkness, knowledge with ignorance, unity with multiplicity, remembrance with forgetfulness, life with death, power with weakness, freedom with constraint. Through the soul, spirit and body interact, and this interaction becomes manifest as the changes undergone moment by moment in thought, speech and movement. The goal of human existence in this world is to integrate the lower into the higher, the corporeal into the spiritual, the human into the divine. Hence, a Sufi strives to entrust the body to the soul and the soul to the spirit; but to do this, he or she must establish a firm relationship with the divine center and tie all the dispersed activity of the body and soul back into God. On the theoretical level, this process of integration is often called *tawhīd* (the establishment of unity). Externally, *tawhīd* finds an expression in the orientation of all Muslims towards Mecca when they perform the *ṣalāt*.

The ritual prayer engages people on every level of their existence. Like the human being, the *ṣalāt* has three fundamental dimensions. Its spirit is mindfulness or 'presence of the heart' (*ḥoḍhur-e qalb*). In every prayer the Muslim strives to root the heart firmly in the remembrance of God. The fact that a person performs the prayer is

proof of a minimal mindfulness, just as the fact of human life is proof of the presence of the spirit. But full presence of the heart in prayer is as rare as human self-awareness situated at the level of the divine spirit. Such awareness is the goal of human existence, and it is experienced only by the prophets and the greatest friends of God (*awliyā'*).

The prayer's outermost dimension is the bodily positions and movements, which provide the model for activity integrated into the Real. Each position is accompanied by certain Koranic verses or prophetic formulae that provide the key to its significance. The verses or sayings bridge the gap between the spirit and body of the prayer, between mindfulness and bodily activity. They are like a *barzakh* between the prayer's spirit and body. They are the 'soul' of the prayer, bringing together the luminosity of the prayer's spirit with the corporeality of its form. Hence, the words have an articulated, bodily nature like the gestures, but they are immaterial like the spirit and their ultimate meaning transcends all forms.

Among the many texts that the authorities quote to bring out the significance of the ritual prayer is the prophetic saying, "The ritual prayer is the *me'rāj* of the person of faith" (*aṣ-ṣalāt me'rāj al-mo'men*). The *me'rāj* was the Prophet's 'night journey' whereby he was taken through the heavens into the divine presence. The word means literally 'ladder'. One uses a ladder to climb, but one also comes back down on it. The significance of the *me'rāj* lies not only in the Prophet's ascent, but also in his return to the world. The ascent and descent mark the two main stages of spiritual perfection and are reflected in the *ṣalāt*'s structure.

According to the generally accepted doctrine, the Prophet's *me'rāj* was bodily. Human perfection, in other words, is not confined to the invisible, luminous and spiritual dimension of the being. It also pertains to the visible, dark and corporeal dimension. The fact that human beings have bodies shows that the divine image, in accordance with which they were created, embraces

certain attributes that demand corporeal form, just as the existence of the corporeal universe is necessary for all the 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God to be displayed. The body is an essential component both in the manifestation of God's reality and in the human quest to return to God. And like the soul, it undergoes transformations appropriate to its own level.

The *ṣalāt* has four main positions: standing straight, bowing so that one's back and head are parallel to the ground, prostrating oneself by putting the knees, hands and forehead on the ground and sitting with knees forward and back straight. Each mandatory *ṣalāt* is made up of two, three or four cycles (*rak'at*). One cycle consists of standing, bowing, standing again, prostrating oneself, coming up to a sitting position, prostrating oneself once again, and then coming up to a standing or a sitting position, depending on which cycle is being performed.

In the first part of each cycle the person stands with the hands either at the side or folded across the stomach (depending on one's juridical school). God has commanded people to assume the responsibility of the human state, and they reply by standing before Him as a servant. The meaning of the standing comes out clearly when it is contrasted with the next two positions: bowing (*roku'*) and prostrating oneself (*sojud*). The bowing is an intermediary position (a *barzakh*, as Ebno'l-'Arabi remarks) between standing and prostrating. It is highly significant that the Koran employs the verb 'to prostrate oneself' most often in the story of the angels prostrating themselves before Adam at God's command, and the refusal of Satan to do the same. Prostration before God acknowledges His supreme authority. The person expresses in body and soul utter surrender (*eslām*) to God's command. Satan incarnates the self-willed and obstinate refusal to accept God's guidance. His motto is "I am better than him" (Koran 38: 76). Seeing Adam as less than himself, Satan did not consider him worthy of prostration. The servant who refuses to prostrate himself before God is saying, "I am better than God."

The Ear and the Eye

by Robert Bly

Translated from Rumi's Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi

The ear participates, and helps arrange marriages.

The eye has already made love with the person it sees.

The eye knows pleasure, delight in the body's shape.

The ear makes do with words that talk about all this.

When hearing takes place, character areas change;

but when the soul and body see, inner areas change.

If all you know about fire is what you have heard,

see if the fire will agree to cook you!

Certain energies come only when you burn.

If you long for belief, sit down in the fire!

The ear, if it hears subtly, turns into an eye.

But if sounds do not reach the ear in the chest, nothing happens.

In the standing, the servant shares in a divine attribute, since God is the "Living, the Ever-standing" (Koran 2: 255). But both the bowing and the prostrating are attributes of the servant, not the Lord. These two positions share in signifying submissiveness, humbleness, lowliness and reverential fear (*khodhu'*). Ebno'l-'Arabi points out that through the prostration, the servant seeks his own origin, which is clay, while through the standing he seeks to return to the root of his positive qualities, which is spirit. Clay is made from water and earth and

possesses by right such qualities as lowliness, darkness, density, heaviness, dullness, passivity, ignorance and death. The spirit is the divine breath, one in substance with the angels. Its inherent qualities include elevation, luminosity, subtlety, lightness, brightness, activity, knowledge and life. The standing displays one's spiritual nature, the prostration one's bodily nature and the bowing the intermediate domain of the soul. The three positions taken together express the servanthood of the total human being.

Although the spirit is high and

luminous in relation to the body, it is low and dark in relation to God. Having stood through the spirit, the servant then bows to acknowledge that everything positive in himself derives from God. Bowing shows that the servant rejects the thought, "I am better than Him," because he knows that whatever he possesses was given to him by his Lord. He rejects the claim to independence that the soul is tempted to make when it finds itself irradiated by the spirit's light and imagines that the light belongs to itself. Among the words that are often recited during the bowing is the sentence, "My hearing, my sight, my brain, my bones and my nerves have humbled themselves before Thee." Each of these organs and faculties possesses certain divine qualities that allow the human person to exist, and each will be questioned on the day of resurrection. The bowing indicates that the servant gives up all claim to these qualities by recognizing their rootedness in God.

The prostration, then, marks the point where the servant returns to that which belongs to himself, which is clay. Hence, the Sufi authorities maintain that prostration is the outward sign of one of the highest stages of perfection. It is the servant's recognition and experience of his own nothingness. It is his annihilation (*fanā'*) in the light of God.

The *ṣalāt* ends in a seated position, which expresses stability in an intermediate stage. Here the servant asks God to bless Muhammad, "Thy servant and Thy messenger." The sitting position combines the lowliness of servanthood and body with the elevation of messengerhood and spirit. It is the return from the *me'rāj*, signifying the full actualization of the divine image. It is to subsist in God's attribute after having given up one's own attributes. It illustrates the meaning of the Koranic verse, "All that dwells on the earth is annihilated, and there subsists only the face of your Lord, the possessor of majesty and generosity" (55: 27).

line 9: signifying

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line 10: divine

line 11: attribute

line 12: attributes