

Transcript: Practices, A life of prayer

A person living the life of Islam lives and breathes the awareness of God – their whole life is full of *taqwa*. This sense of *taqwa* is promoted and maintained through the regular rhythm of formal prayer or *salat* [Q. 2:2-4].¹ During his audience with God, Muhammad was instructed that Muslims should pray formally five times a day according to the passage of the sun – which set a pattern that can be followed no matter where on the face of the earth the Muslim might be [Hadith].² Even without a clock, people know the times for prayer by observing the sun. Many mosques now publish prayer timetables as times change from week to week according to the seasons of the year. As the sun rises and sets at different times in different places, a prayer timetable must be worked out for each location.

The five times are:

Salat al-Fajr before sunrise

Salat al-Zuhr a little after the sun has passed its midpoint

Salat al-'Asr in the late afternoon when the shadows lengthen

Salat al-Maghrib directly after sunset

Salat al-'Isha at night-time.

Shaykh Bahmanpour says:

Taqwa is when you put your faith into practice, and it's not only faith: any good idea, any good intention, when you put it into practice, it is *taqwa*. And that's why the Qur'an says at the very outset, that this Book is guidance for the *mutaqim*, those who want to put good intention into practice. It involves a concept of fear, fear of God. Of course we should not fear God because he is the one who is providing everything for us. But it probably means that we should have concerns about him in every action, whether what we are going to do would please the one who has given us the opportunity of life; and in a sense we are going to be held responsible and accountable to him. So *taqwa* is

¹ Q. 2:2-4 This is the Book; in it is sure guidance, without doubt, to those who fear God; who believe in the unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them, and who believe in what was sent down to you, and sent down before your time, and [in their hearts] have the assurance of the Hereafter.

² It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh), "I passed by Moses, who asked me, "What has God enjoined on your followers?" I replied, "He has enjoined fifty prayers on them". Moses said, "Go back to your Lord [and appeal for a reduction], for your followers will not be able to bear it. [So I went back to God and requested a reduction] and God reduced it to half. When I passed by Moses again and informed him about it, he said. "Go back to your Lord as your followers will not be able to bear it." So I returned to God and requested a further reduction and half of it was reduced. I again passed by Moses and he said to me, "Return to your Lord for your followers will not be able to bear it". So I returned to God and he said, "These are five prayers and they are all [equal to] fifty [in reward] for my word does not change". I returned to Moses and he told me to go back once again. I replied, "Now I feel shy of asking my Lord again".

when before every action you put that sort of concern into your practice and take it into account.

During each *salat*, Muslims are brought back into the correct relationship with God; human beings were created for the worship of God above all else. It keeps up their awareness of God (*taqwa*). It reminds them of key messages of guidance from the Qur'an. It provides an opportunity to acknowledge any sin they might have fallen into. It is a conduit through which they receive and experience the forgiveness of God. It is like a river of mercy in which the Muslim is purified. It binds people together as a community of believers and gives the opportunity for seeking the blessings of God. It reminds Muslims of their debt of gratitude to Muhammad, whose example they follow, and of being part of the prophetic chain traced back through Abraham. Finally, it brings people to acknowledge the awesome presence of God, where the only human response is to prostrate: to lay one's forehead on the floor in humility, submission, love and gratitude.

To remind people that it's time to pray, the *adhan* is called so that everyone can hear. This is the haunting and atmospheric call with which many people will be familiar - made traditionally from the tall tower or *minaret* on a mosque (though increasingly nowadays from strategically mounted loud speakers).

The text of the *adhan* in English

God is most great
I bear witness that there is no god but God
I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God
Hurry to prayer
Hurry to success
God is most great
There is no god but God

Salat can be performed alone or together with others. Fulfilling the duty as part of a congregation does have additional blessings and benefits, being an occasion for communal meeting and support.

The *Salat al-Jum'a* on Fridays is celebrated collectively, with everyone gathering at main mosques. It replaces the normal prayer in the middle of the day but the prayer is shortened so that an address or *khutba* can be given by a *khatib* or learned person. Friday is not a day of rest in Muslim societies and people go back to work after prayers.

Muhammad said that the whole world is a mosque and this spirit still survives in the fact that any place can be used for prayer – as long as it is clean [Q. 2:115, 2:177].³

³ Q. 2:115 To God belong the East and the West. Wherever you turn, there is the face of God. For God is All-pervading, All-knowing.

The prayer mat is sometimes used to transform a space into a clean surface for prayer. However, mosques are usually carpeted and shoes removed to maintain their cleanliness.

There is no sense of rank in a mosque. Everyone is equal. Worshippers assemble in rows, shoulder to shoulder, with each row being completed from the front before the next row is begun.

The Ka'ba in Makka is the earthly focus for all *salat*. Wherever Muslims are in the world, they turn towards it in prayer. This direction is called in Arabic *qibla*. In a purpose-built mosque, one wall always faces towards Makka and the worshippers face it as they pray [Q. 2:144].⁴

Prayer is led by an imam, usually a man. This is not because women are considered inferior –all Muslims are equal in relation to God regardless of gender. This is partly out of modesty as during prayer, the leader must prostrate with the forehead on the floor and partly in recognition of the fact that religious leaders were also sometimes military commanders. In some schools of Islam, however, women lead groups of women and children in prayer.

Preparation for *Salat*

Just as the place of prayer must be clean, so must the worshipper – both physically and ritually. Physically, the body in general must be cleaned if necessary by, for example, showering or bathing. Ritual cleansing is achieved by washing or *wudu* – of the hands, face (mouth, nose, ears), head, arms and feet, although the precise manner varies between the different schools of Islam. There are washing facilities in the mosque for this purpose. This is symbolic in the sense that it involves cleansing the parts of the body that we use as part of our working lives, and thus breaking off to spend time with God. We might also use these parts to commit sin and so the washing gives us a chance to think of those things for which we need to ask God's forgiveness.

For the Sunni, *wudu* begins by washing the hands three times under running water. The mouth and nose are rinsed out three times. The face is washed using wet hands. Then the forearms are washed; first the right and then the left. In Sunni practice, wet hands are passed over the whole head, three times and then the ears are cleaned with a finger; again first the right and then the left. Finally the feet are washed; note as always: right then left and three times. Care is taken to ensure that the tap is turned off to avoid wasting water.

⁴ Q. 2:144 We see the turning of your face to heaven. Now shall we turn you to a Qibla [direction] that will please you? Turn then your face towards the Sacred Mosque. Wherever you are, turn your faces towards it. And those to whom scripture was given know well that it is the truth from their Lord. Nor is God unmindful of what they do.

The Shi'a begin the actual *wudu* by washing the face. The threefold washing of hands, mouth and nose is recommended but not obligatory. Notice that in Shi'a practice, the arms are washed in a downwards direction from the elbow to the wrist and carefully wiped outside and inside. A wet hand is passed over the hair from the top of the head to the forelock. For the Shi'a, the feet need not be washed, they need to be kept clean all the time and just wiped before the prayers. That means that for the Shi'a, the *wudu* is more a symbolic practice of wishing to cleanse the limbs from sin before every prayer, rather than an actual washing practice.

In a mosque, there should be a separate women's entrance and washing facilities where possible. Where these cannot be provided, as in some smaller mosques, women may not be able to attend. Women and men pray as one single congregation in the mosque, but in separate areas. This is common in other religions and is not on account of any sense of the inequality of the sexes, but to prevent any immodesty or distractions.

In traditional societies, women usually look after children and the elderly, and so are free to pray at home instead of joining the congregation for Friday Prayer in the mosque. However they are both allowed and encouraged to do so, in order that they may hear the teaching and feel part of the community at prayer. Some mosques now have a broadcast system so that women and the housebound can hear at home what is happening in the mosque.

The form of the *salat*

The *salat* begins with a declaration of the Muslim's intention to pray. Each compulsory (or *fard*) *salat* is made up of a number of cycles of prayer or *rak'at*.

The number of these varies depending on the time of day.

- before sunrise -2 cycles
- a little after the sun has passed its midpoint – 4 cycles
- in the late afternoon – 4 cycles
- directly after sunset – 3 cycles
- at night-time – 4 cycles

Each *rak'a* comprises recitation of the Qur'an, bodily postures and prayers, said aloud or silently. The sequence is:

1. Raising of the hands in a gesture of submission and withdrawal from the world, accompanied by the words *Allahu akbar* (God is most great).
2. Recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an
3. Recitation of a selection of verses from the Qur'an
4. Bowing from the waist to acknowledge the guidance of God in the Qur'an, the worshipper saying in Arabic, 'All glory be to my Lord, the Greatest' (three times)
5. Standing in silent prayer in praise of God

6. The first prostration with the forehead and palms of the hands placed on the floor in submission to God during which the worshipper says 'All glory to my Lord, the Highest' (three times). To prostrate with the head, hands, knees and feet on the floor before God is the ultimate sign of humility and submission before Almighty God. By thus lowering oneself, one is raised high by the grace of God.
7. Sitting back on the feet
8. A second prostration of praise and glorifying God
9. Returning to a standing position

Surat al-Fatiha reads as follows:

*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
Praise be to God, the Lord of Creation,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
Master of the Day of Judgement.
You alone do we worship and to you alone we pray for help.
Guide us to the Straight Path,
The path of those whom you have favoured,
Not of those who have incurred your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.*

At the end of the prescribed number of *rak'at*, the Muslim recites the two-part *shahada*, and calls for God's blessings upon Muhammad and his family and Abraham and his family.

At the end, worshippers greet their immediate neighbours with *al-Salamu alaykum* (Peace be with you) and this is extended to the angels and the whole of creation. Many Muslims follow the example of the Prophet (the Sunna) and make additional prayers before and after the compulsory *rak'at*.

The verses recited from the Qur'an are always in Arabic and must be spoken from memory and not read from a book. Every Muslim is required to have memorised some verses of Qur'an in order to be able to pray. The more one has in one's memory, then the wider the selection that can be made. Even those who do not understand Arabic will have memorised the prayers of *salat* and some verses of the Qur'an. New Muslims are encouraged to attend congregational prayer where the imam recites on behalf of all.

The performance of *salat* is obligatory and should not be abandoned, even if physical movement is limited. Someone who needs to remain seated for *salat* can indicate prostration by moving their upper body; someone who needs to lie down can move an arm; ultimately even the movement of an eyelid will suffice, with the right intention.

Congregational *salat* is led by an imam, who is not a specially ordained person. Anyone who is pious and knowledgeable enough can act as an imam. However,

mosques do appoint approved individuals to lead prayer and sometimes this person is paid and will conduct ceremonies such as weddings and lead the special prayers for funerals, at the time of an eclipse, and at festivals or 'Ids, and sometimes when rain is needed.

Although there is a prescribed standard format for daily prayer in the form of the *salat*, it would be a mistake to think that that is all there is to prayer in Islam. Far from it. In addition to the *salat*, there are two other forms of prayer through which Muslims seek to foster their personal relationship with God. They are *du'a* and *dhikr*.

Du'a are prayers in which the believer talks to God, in any language and using their own words or written prayers. They relate to all the activities of our lives and can be said, for example, before going to work, eating or going on a journey [Q. 33:41-42].⁵

Dhikr is the prayer of the heart in which the emphasis is placed on giving thanks to God and patiently accepting the will of God in all things [Q. 6:18].⁶ A typical example would be in the frequent repetition of phrases such as *Al-hamdu li'llah*, (All praise/thanks be to God), so that they pass beyond consciousness and become part of the very core of human life.

Salat should be performed with a humble heart, reflection and contemplation. The Prophet said, "Two simple units of prayer with contemplation are better than standing the whole night in prayer".

⁵ Q. 33:41-42 O you who believe! Remember God abundantly, and glorify him morning and evening.

⁶ Q. 6:18 And God is the All-dominant over his servants, and he is the All-wise, the All-aware.