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Lesson 26: Islam's Spiritual Program (2)

(B) The Daily Spiritual Training

Islam has also provided its followers with a program for spiritual training on a daily basis. This program is known as sal□t.□Sal□t is not a "prayer" in the sense of talking to God whenever, wherever and however you like. Sal□t is an act of worship which must be done in a prescribed manner. Whenever we use the words "ritual prayer" it refers to sal□t and not to "prayer" in the sense explained above.

In appearance, sal□t is just an act of worship; but with further insight into the philosophy of sal□t, you will realize that it is also a program which trains the Muslims to spiritually strengthen themselves and to become the masters of their own lives rather than be slaves of their desires. It is this aspect of sal□t which has made it the pillar of Islam. The Prophet says: "The sal□t is the pillar of religion."

While describing the effect which sal□t should have on the lives of Muslims, Allah says:

***"Establish the sal□t; surely the sal□t prevents* [*the doer*] *from the indecencies and the forbidden* [*acts*]. *And surely the remembrance of Allah is great."* (*29:45*)**

This verse clearly says that a true sal□t would help the doer in staying away from sins. It is in the light of this verse that the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.) said, "The first deed to be checked [on the Day of Judgment] will be the sal□t: if it is accepted, then other deeds will also be accepted; but if it is rejected, then other deeds will also be rejected." What the Prophet meant was that the sal□t plays a pivotal role in the life of a Muslim: if his sal□t was a true sal□t and had affected his behaviour, then there is a great chance that his other deeds will also be good; but if his sal□t was just a ritual without any impact on his life, then there is a lesser chance that his other deeds would be good.

The five daily prayers, provided done with understanding, will not just be rituals but a program for spiritual upliftment of the Muslim. The sal□t will constantly remind him to keep the purpose of life in focus and work towards it. That is why the Prophet once asked his companions, "If there is a stream outside your house and you wash yourself in it five time every day, then would any dirt remain on your body?"

When the answer was negative, the Prophet said, “Indeed the example of salāt is like that flowing stream — whenever one performs a salāt, the sins between the two prayers are washed away.”[1]

In this lesson, we will look at just three aspects of salāt which can help us in spiritual training.

(i) Wudhu: Reminder of Spiritual Purity

Every Muslim is required to do ritual ablution (*wuzū*) before salāt. Even this simple ablution is a way of reminding us about spiritual purification. When we study the two verses of the Qur'ān about ablutions, we see that there are two planes of purification: physical and spiritual. Although *wudhu* and ghusl (the major ablution) are related to physical purification, there is a more sublime reason underlying these two ablutions — they serve as a reminder to and gateway of spiritual purification.

In the chapter al-Baqarah, after talking about one of the major ablutions, the Qur'an says:

“Surely Allah loves those who oftenly turn to Him,
and He also loves those who cleanse themselves.” (***2:222***)

In another verse, after talking about *wudhu*, the Qur'ān says:

“Allah does not desire to make any impediment for you;
but He desires to cleanse you,
& that He may complete His blessings upon you;
haply you may be grateful.” (***5:6***)

We find two different themes in these verses: First: Allāh loves those who cleanse themselves, and that He desires to cleanse us. Second: He wants to complete His blessings upon us, and that He loves those who oftenly turn towards Him. The first theme is related to the physical cleanliness, while the second theme is related to the spiritual purity.

The words of the first theme are very clear; they refer to cleanliness. But what do the words of the second theme mean? What is the meaning of “oftenly turning to Allah?” Turning to Allah implies that the person had turned away from Allah. What does this mean? These are the questions which I will discuss below.

In the Islamic value system, the human soul is like a light bulb. If the bulb is protected from dust and dirt, it will enlighten the area around it; but if dust and dirt is allowed to accumulate on the bulb, then it will not be able to illuminate the area as much as before. Similarly, the human soul has to be protected from spiritual `dirt' and uncleanliness, otherwise it will not be able to guide the person as rightly as before.

After swearing by the most majestic signs of His creation, Allah says in chapter 91, verses 1-10 that the pure human soul has the ability to understand what is right and what is wrong provided it is purified and uncorrupted. He makes it clear that the soul, just like the body, is capable of becoming spiritually impure

and unclean. Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) has said, “The human soul is a precious jewel; whoever protects it, enhances its (effectiveness), and whosoever degrades it, decreases its (effectiveness).”

The impurities that can corrupt a human soul are collectively known as “sins”. Accumulation of sins can indeed render the human soul spiritually ineffective and, in Qur'anic expression, `seize the heart'. Allah says, ***“Whatever (sins) they have committed has seized their heart.”*** (***83:14***) By committing sins, not only is the soul of a Muslim seized but he also spiritually turns away from Allah. Sins create a distance between God and man.

Can a person rescue his soul from the seizing of the sins? Can a sinner spiritually get closer to God? Yes, indeed, a sinful person can spiritually return to Allah. Returning to Allah means repenting and asking forgiveness for your sins. Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) has explained this phenomenon as follows: “Each believer has a bright soul. When he commits a sin, a dark dot appears on his bright soul. If he repents, the dark dot will disappear. But if he persists in his sins, the darkness will increase until it covers the entire soul—then the person would never return towards goodness.”[2]

Just as our bodies can become impure by the physical things, our souls can become impure by sins. To rid our bodies of the physical dirt, we use water; similarly, to rid our souls of the spiritual impurities, we use *tawbah* (repentance). In short, the human soul is corruptible; it is corrupted by sins; the corrupted soul can be purified by *tawbah*.

After talking about ritual ablutions which are done by water, Allah says that “He loves those who do *tawbah*”. By this He is drawing our attention to the spiritual purification. So with this insight into the Qur'anic verses, whenever a Muslim does the ritual ablution, he also remembers the spiritual purification which is even more important than the physical purification.

(ii) Sal t Helps in Spiritual Training

The five daily prayers have different numbers of cycles known as *rak‘ah*. Each *rak‘ah* consists of the act of standing while reciting two short chapters from the Qur'n, the act of bowing and two prostrations.

The *fajr* (dawn) prayer consists of 2 cycles.
The *zuhr* (noon) prayer consists of 4 cycles.
The *‘asr* (afternoon) prayer consists of 4 cycles.
The *maghrib* (evening) prayer consists of 3 cycles.
The *‘isha* (night) prayer consists of 4 cycles.

One wonders why Islam prescribed a different number of cycles for these prayers? Why could not they be the same for all ritual prayers?

Many people have attempted to explain it in different ways, but I have also looked at this question and came to the conclusion that there is no particular reason for this variety in the number of cycles. It seems

that this difference in the number of cycles was introduced by Islam in order to create a sense of discipline among the Muslims and to create the spirit of absolute obedience to the Divine laws.

A Muslim is someone who voluntarily submits himself to Allah. This is not always easy keeping in mind the trials and tribulations which we are going through. Praying on a daily basis and following the number of cycles prescribed by the shar‘a *without questioning its merit* is a way of instilling in us the spirit of obedience to the laws of Islam. You must pray in the prescribed manner even if you do not understand the merit of some of its rules; you should pray with the thought in your mind that this is how Allah, *subhanahu wa ta`ala*, wants you to pray. This will indeed help you in harnessing the power of desires and emotions within yourself, and help you in getting closer to the purpose of life — to totally submit ourselves to the will of Allah.

(iii) Sajdah: Daily Reminder of the Purpose of Life

Sajdah is the last part in each cycle of sal t; it is the part where you prostrate in such a way that your forehead, both palms, both knees and the big toes of both feet are touching the ground. Sajdah is to be done twice in each cycle: one should go into the first sajdah, then sit upright for a moment, and then go into the second sajdah.

Imam ‘Ali bin Abi T lib (a.s.) was once asked why we have two sajdahs in each cycle of sal t. The reply that the Imam gave shows that sajdah (like many other parts of the ritual prayer) has a symbolic meaning also. He said,

“While you are in the first sajdah, you are saying [to God] `From it [the earth] You have created me.'
While getting up from the first sajdah, you are saying `From it You have taken me out.'
When you go into the second sajdah, you are saying `To it You will return me.'
While getting up from the second sajdah, you are saying, `From it You will take me out again.'”

In this hadith, the holy Imam has actually applied the following verse to the sajdah: ***“From it We have created you, and to it We shall return you, and from it We shall take you out again.”*** **(20:55)**

If you study this hadith carefully, you will realize that:

1. You have been created from the earth. Remembering your origin will not allow you to be arrogant and proud on the basis of race or wealth.

2. Getting up from the first sajdah is like our birth, going down into the second sajdah is like death and getting up from the second sajdah is like resurrection. This symbolic meaning will never let us forget the day of judgment and the life hereafter.

3. It also shows that this worldly life is symbolically nothing more than a few moments that you sit between the two sajdahs.

This insight into the philosophy of sajdah will surely transform your salٰt from a mere ritual to a practical reminder about your origin, the transient nature of this world and your ultimate destination in the hereafter.

* * *

What you have read above are just three examples from the rules related to salٰt which help the Muslims in focusing on the purpose of life and strengthening themselves spiritually. We thank Allah, subhanahu wa ta`ala, for providing such means of spiritual training in the daily rituals of an Islamic life.

This lesson has been written by Sayyid M. Rizvi.
Some sections have been summarized from his *The Ritual* & *Spiritual Purity*.

Question Paper on Lesson 26

Question 1: [20 points]
Fill in the blanks:
(a) Salٰt is a _____ spiritual program.

(b) The Prophet (s.a.w.) said: "Salٰt is the _____ of religion."

(c) Muslims are required to say _____ ritual prayers in a day.

(d) Physical dirt can be cleansed by water; spiritual sins can be washed away by _____ .

(e) The dawn prayer is known as _____ .

(f) The human heart can be 'seized' spiritually by _____ .

(g) There are _____ cycles in maghrib prayer.

(h) All cycles of the daily salٰt have _____ sajdahs.

(i) In the light of Imam 'Ali's saying, the sajdah is a symbolic reflection of verse ___:___ of the Qur'an.

(j) According to the Qur'an, the salٰt prevents the doer from the _____ and the _____ acts.

Question 2: [15 points]
Expain how the salٰt promotes the spirit of obedience in a Muslim.

Question 3: [15 points]
How does sajdah help us in focusing on the purpose of life?

1. Wasٰ'ilu 'sh-Shi'a, vol. 3, p. 7.

2. Al-Usūl al-Kāfi, vol. 2, p. 273.

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