



Achieving Success through Salaat

By Imam Muhammad Magid with Samuel Ross

In our previous article (July/Aug. 2004) we introduced the famous Qur'anic verse "Verily in the remembrance of Allah to hearts find rest" (2:152). In this article we hope to realize its fruits by exploring a potential wellspring of remembrance in our lives: salaat. Allah (subhanahu wa Ta'ala) commands us in the Qur'an "establish prayer for My remembrance" (20:14). Yet unfortunately for many of us, our salaat is not as refreshing as we may like. What can we do to improve the quality of our worship? A good place to begin is with a short self-diagnostic. Take a moment to answer the questions below, reflecting on your own relationship with salaat:

To what extent do you value your salaat? Is it one of the most important activities in your day? Is it one activity among many? Or, is it a burden, that you perform as time permits? To what extent do you believe, as we say in the iqama, that salaat is success? In Surah Al-'Ankabut, Allah declares that "prayer restrains from shameful and evil deeds" (29:45). To what extent is your prayer protecting you from disobedience?

If we found our answers less than ideal to any of the questions above know that it is always possible to improve and that we have encouragement from Allah to this end. Allah states, "Those... who are steadfast in prayer...they are on true guidance from their Lord and it is they who will prosper" (2:3-5). In the remainder of this article we hope to explore some mental and physical aspects of prayer and discuss some ways we might improve them.

One reason many of us may fail to enjoy our prayer is that we are not sufficiently conscious of what it actually means. That is, we fail to internalize before whom we stand when we pray: Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate, the Creator, the Provider, and the Judge.

Consider the following scenario: Suppose a letter arrived in the mail addressed to you from a great dignitary. He or she could be a statesman, an author, a star athlete, etc. Upon opening it you discover that he or she has personally invited you to be a guest of honor at his or her banquet. What would you do by way of preparation? Most of us would fuss about, donning our best wardrobe, anointing ourselves with oils and scents, all the while monitoring the hour, lest we be late. Yet when given the opportunity to stand before the greatest of all, Allah (subhanahu wa Ta'ala), many of us fail to exert a comparable effort, let alone one becoming unto Him! To fully appreciate prayer we must endeavor to prepare ourselves for prayer by first recalling and responding to His attributes, humbling

ourselves before His exalted stature, elating ourselves with His love and beneficence, and criticizing ourselves before His impending judgment. If we do this we can ennoble our prayer from mere physical action to an interaction between the Divine and Man.

In wudu we should similarly try to become mindful of Allah. It is said that the face of Ali (rahmatullahi alayhi) would change color when he performed wudu. When asked why, he explained that it was because he had become aware of before whom he stood. Does our disposition change when we perform wudu? One way we can seek to perform dhikr in wudu is to remember the statement of our blessed Messenger (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam), that when a person performs wudu he or she is purified of a sin. When we rinse our hands, let us watch as the sins we committed rinse off our hands and disappear down the drain. When we wash our mouths, let us feel the foul words we may have uttered flushed away; our eyes, the haram things we may have seen; our ears, the haram things we heard; our heads, the things we thought; our feet, the places we traveled, all the while making repentance to Allah. In this manner, we can complete our wudu feeling not only refreshed but freed from the burdens of our disobedience.

Within prayer there are also several things we can do both physically and mentally to increase our success in salaah. Prior to praying we must select a location free from distractions such as the television, radio, telephone or computer. Next as we utter the takbir, let us absorb its words into our very marrow so that we may not only utter them verbally but feel them physically. Some scholars have stated that it can even be an act of hypocrisy to say "Allahu Akbar" without conviction, for if we truly believed Allah is the greatest we could not be distracted with other matters!

Then, while standing, let us remember the future day upon which we shall again stand before Allah, the Day of Judgment, and harness this awareness to keep us focused. During the recitation of Surah Al Fatiha, we should reflect upon its verses. Prophet Muhammad stated that we only receive reward for that portion of our prayers for which we were are conscious. In prostration let us savor the moment of maximum humility during which we connect with all of creation, for "to Allah [also] prostrates whatever is in heavens and earth" (13:15).

For those of us out of the practice of praying, we should reflect upon our intentions towards prayer. "Why don't I pray?" "Did not Allah bring me life?" "Did He not create me, provide for me, and will He not judge me?" Allah warns in Surah Al-Qalam, that on the Day of Judgment those who did not pray in this life will try in vain to do so. "They shall be called upon to make prostration, but they shall not be able, their eyes will be cast down, ignominy will cover them; seeing that they had been summoned before to bow in adoration, while they were whole, [and had refused]" (68:42-42).

Islam is a way of life. Nothing we can ever do will be performed perfectly. But our frailties mustn't discourage us. Allah promises to take ten steps towards us if we take just one step to Him, so let us try to improve the quality of just one aspect of our worship in every prayer. In the box below you will find a checklist of aspects to work upon. If Shaytan prevents us from improving in the first rakat, then try again in the second. If he succeeds in the second, then try again in the third. Then when we have mastered it, move on to another aspect. Eventually we can insha'Allah be among those praised in the Qur'an, "they prostrate themselves in adoration...they are in the ranks of the righteous" (3:113).

We look forward to incorporating your feedback and questions into our future columns. Please send all correspondence to: foodforthespirit@isna.net. Please also visit us at our website where you can download this and previous columns at: <http://www.isna.net/foodforthespirit>

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Below is a checklist we can use to help us improve the quality of our prayer. Please feel free to cut it out and use it in your home, office, car, etc.:

- Did I concentrate on washing away my sins during wudu?
 - Did I select a peaceful praying environment, free from distractions? (TV/Radio/Telephone/Computer)
 - Did I strive to become conscious of Allah's majesty and beneficence prior to praying?
 - Did I feel the power of the words Allahu Akbar?
 - Did the quality of my prayer improve with each rakat?
 - Do I remember which verses I recited?
 - Do I feel better about myself after salaah than before?
- What can I improve upon for next time?