

Ablution: Its Effects and Secrets

MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI

International Institute for Islamic Studies, Qum, Iran

One of the tasks of all prophets (a) in general and of the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) in particular was to purify people. Regarding this, *surah* 62, *ayah* 2 reads,

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ
الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

It is He who sent to the unlettered [people] an apostle from among themselves, to recite to them His signs, to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error.

This fact has also been referred to in three other *ayāt* of the Glorious Qur'an. Among these tasks, purification holds an important position and indeed it is the summation of the whole mission of the Noble Prophet (s). He has the ability to purify other people because he is already purified, as *surah* 33, *ayah* 33 explains,

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

Indeed Allah desires to repel all impurity from you,
O People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification.

It should be mentioned that the Infallibles (a) were pure due to their own actions; and God then made them thoroughly and completely purified. One should do one's best to become pure; and then God purifies one completely because complete purification cannot be achieved without divine assistance.

Hence, in the Glorious Qur'an, a distinction has been made between *mutahhar* (the one who has been purified [by God]) and *mutatahhir* (the one who seeks purification through his actions). Some people have also been described in the Glorious Qur'an as those seeking purity (*tazakkā*) and some people as those who are purified (*muzakkā*).

In the same way, some individuals seek closeness (*taqarrub*) to God and there are some who are brought near (*muqarrab*) to Him (swt).

Therefore, one should make the utmost efforts to become purified as much as one is able to do so. As a metaphor, a man who wants to visit a king approaches as close as he can by himself, however, eventually he reaches a point at which he cannot make any more progress, and the king himself has to take him in.

In any case, the mission of the Noble Prophet (s) is to purify people. However, he (s) is not able to do so unless people themselves desire this.

According to many exegetes of the Glorious Qur'an, *ayah* 108 of *surah Tawbah* has been revealed regarding the Qubā mosque in Medina. This *ayah* reads,

لَمَسْجِدٍ أُسِّسَ عَلَى التَّقْوَىٰ مِنْ أَوَّلِ يَوْمٍ أَحَقُّ أَنْ تَقُومَ فِيهِ فِيهِ رِجَالٌ يُحِبُّونَ
أَنْ يَتَطَهَّرُوا وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُطَهَّرِينَ

A mosque founded on God-wariness from the [very] first day is worthier that you stand in it [for prayer]. Therein are men who love to keep pure, and Allah loves those who keep pure.

This description of the Qubā mosque is in direct contrast to the Dirār mosque, which was built in Medina by the hypocrites in order for them to create problems for the Muslim community.

According to this *ayah*, there are some righteous people who intend to be purified and God loves those who, although not yet pure, are seeking to be purified. So, those with bad qualities and bad moral characters fall into the category of those whom God loves as long as they earnestly desire and seek to remove them and attain purification. Thus, the Noble Prophet (s) is commanded to say his prayer in a mosque where there are those who want to be purified, not in a mosque where nobody has such an intention.

Along the same lines, *surah* 87, *ayah* 14 reads,

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى

Felicitous is he who purifies himself.

Man tazakkā means the one who seeks purity. One of the ways to reach this goal is to give alms (*zakāt*) because when one gives one's money and property for the sake of God one removes love of worldly affairs from oneself, which is the major source of corruption and pollution. Imam Sajjad (a) has indicated this in the following phrase,

حب الدنيا راس كل خطيئه¹

The main cause for every sin and mistake is loving this world.

The Significance of *Wuḍū'* in the Process of Purification

In any case, all Prophets (a) have been sent by God to humankind in order to help them in the process of purification. Prayer is the best means of attaining such a precious goal and after this comes *zakāt*. Prayer and giving alms have been mentioned jointly in numerous *ayāt* of the Glorious Qur'an. Seeking purity through prayer alone and without giving alms is impossible and vice versa; rather, both of them together are necessary. In order for us to attain purity through prayer, God has ordered us to do some physical actions which bring about some experience of purity. The best example of these actions is ablution (*wuḍū'*).

In reference to this, *surah 5, ayah 6* reads,

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَاغْسِلُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ وَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ إِلَى الْكَعْبَيْنِ وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ جُنُبًا فَاطَّهَّرُوا وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَىٰ أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُمْ مِنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِوُجُوهِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ مِنْهُ مَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيَجْعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ حَرَجٍ وَلَكِنْ يُرِيدُ لِيُطَهَّرَكُمْ وَلِيُتِمَّ نِعْمَتَهُ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

O you who have faith! When you stand up for prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe a part of your heads and your feet, up to the ankles. If you are *junub*, purify yourselves. But if you are sick, or on a journey, or any of you has come from the toilet, or you have touched women, and you

¹ Kulayni, *Al-Kafi*, (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1388 A.H.) vol.2, 131, no. 11.

cannot find water, then make *tayammum* with clean ground and wipe a part of your faces and your hands with it. Allah does not desire to put you to hardship, but He desires to purify you, and to complete His blessing upon you so that you may give thanks.

According to this *ayah*, purification is the main goal of making *wuḍū'* and *tayammum* (dry ablution). It is a mistake to assume that in the *ayah* purity refers to physical purity through washing some parts of the body since such a thing does not occur in *tayammum*. It is a preliminary condition to make the areas on which *wuḍū'* will be performed clean before starting *wuḍū'*, which then gives us spiritual purity. *Tayammum* also has the same function.

The phrase 'and to complete His blessing upon you' in the above *ayah* refers to a very subtle point. The blessings of God are completed by purity. Thus, *wuḍū'* has been designed by God in such a way that one can experience some form of purity while one is not still a completely pure person. As long as one keeps one's *wuḍū'*, one possess a manifestation of purity. This is a great blessing from God because through an easy action like *wuḍū'* one may attain a kind of purity, albeit partially. It is difficult for ordinary people to distinguish between being in a state of *wuḍū'* or not. However, those whose inner vision is opened are able to realise how different they are when in the state of ablution.

The Light of *Wuḍū'*

It is said that one of the students of Ayatullah Ansari Hamadani once had a vision and saw some spiritual light. He asked his master about this special light which was not comparable to any other lights, asking whether it was the light of God. His teacher replied in the negative because the light of God cannot be seen. He told the student that it was the light of his *wuḍū'* that he had seen. Therefore, the light of *wuḍū'* is so great that it cannot be compared to any physical light. Many people may not be able to witness such a light, yet they should not reject the reality of such a light since this fact has been confirmed in several narrations by the Noble Prophet (s) and his purified progeny. One of the Infallibles (a) has been quoted as saying,

الوضوء على الوضوء نور على نور²

Wuḍū' upon *wuḍū'* is light upon light.

Status of Water Used for *Wuḍū'*

Interestingly, the water used for making ablution is blessed. Although it is initially normal water, when it is used for *wuḍū'* it receives a different reality. This water turns into drops of light and this light is then put onto the relevant parts of one's body when one makes ablution. According to the history of early Islam, being aware of the blessings contained in the water used for *wuḍū'*, Muslims used to catch the water dripping from the face and hands of the Noble Prophet (s) while he was making *wuḍū'*. It has been reported that they did not allow a single drop of that water to be wasted. In their practical books of religious laws, Muslim jurists have issued a decree to the effect that it is disapproved (*makruh*) to wipe off the remaining drops of water on one's face and hands after making ablution. These drops are rays of light and one is recommended to keep these rays of light on one's body. Since water in itself is not the main factor for the appearance of this light, the same is true about *tayammum*, because what is important is what God has placed into this action. So, it can be performed with water, soil, dust and so on.

According to a passage in *Misbāh al-Shari'ah*, Imam al-Ṣādiq (a) is reported to have said,

إذا اردت الطهارة و الوضوء فتقدم الى الماء تقدمك الى رحمه الله فان الله
تعالى قد جعل الماء مفتاح قريته و مناجاته و دليلا الى بساط خدمته و كما
ان رحمته تطهر ذنوب العباد فكذلك النجاسات الظاهرة يطهرها الماء لا
غير قال الله تعالى و هو الذى ارسل الرياح بشرا بين يدي رحمته و انزلنا من
السماء ماء طهورا³ و قال تعالى و جعلنا من الماء كل شىء حيا افلا
يؤمنون⁴ فكما احيا به كل شىء من نعيم الدنيا كذلك بفضله و رحمته جعل

² Shaykh Hurr al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, (Qom: Mu'assasah Al al-Bayt LiIhya' al-Turath, 1409 A.H.) vol. 1, 377, no. 8. Shaykh Hurr cites this hadith from *Man Lā Yahduruh al-Faqih* where the name of the Infallible to whom this hadith belongs has not been mentioned, but in 'Awāli al-La'ali, vol. 2, p. 170, this hadith has been attributed to the Prophet (s).

³ (25: 48).

⁴ (21: 30).

حياه القلوب بالطاعات و تفكر في صفاء الماء و رفته و طهره و بركته و لطيف امتزاجه بكل شيء و استعمله في تطهير الاعضاء التي امرك الله بتطهيرها و تعبدك بادائها في فرائضه و سننه فان تحت كل واحده منها فوائد كثيره فاذا استعملتها بالحرمه انفجرت لك عيون فوائده عن قريب ثم عاشر خلق الله كامتزاج الماء بالاشياء يودي كل شيء حقه و لا يتغيره عن معناه معبرا لقول الرسول مثل المومن المخلص كمثل الماء⁵

When you intend to make *wudu'*, go towards the water as if you were going towards the mercy of God, since God has put this water as a key for people to get close to Him and talk to Him and has made it as a guide which takes people where they can serve Him. In the same way that one's sins can only be removed by divine mercy, physical impurities (*nijasat*) can only be removed by water. God says, 'And it is He who sends the winds as harbingers of His mercy, and We send down from the sky purifying water', and He also says, 'And We made every living thing out of water. Will they not then have faith?' In the same way that all blessings in this world have been given life by God through water, He has also made, by virtue of His mercy and grace, the life of the hearts dependant on acts of obedience. And think about the clarity and tenderness and purity and blessing of water and the fact that it is flexible to the extent that it can be put into any container. Thus, use this water in order to purify those parts of your body that God has commanded you to purify and use in His obligations and traditions, each of which has lots of benefits. If you use those parts with respect, soon the fountains of blessings and benefits will gush forth. Live with Allah's creatures like water which gives everything its right while it still remains as water, as the Noble

⁵ *Misbāh al-Shari'ah*, (Tehran: Anjoman-e Hikmat va Falsafeh, 1360 A.H.S.) 43, verse 10. This is a valuable book attributed to Imam Sadiq (a), which has been accepted by Shi'ite scholars as a reliable source due to the profound content and ideas it contains, even though the chain of narratives is not completely authentic.

Prophet (s) said, 'The example of a believer is the example of water.'

As *surah* 21, *ayah* 30 describes, everything on this planet (and perhaps on all planets) that has life depends on water. Interestingly, just as our physical lives depend on water, our spiritual lives are connected to water as well.

According to the above-mentioned narration, water can be regarded as a symbol for living with other people. If water is poured in a dish, glass, jar, pot or anything else, it takes on the shape of its container but remains as water. A believer should be the same. If one finds oneself in a shop, office, school, bus, mosque, bank or anywhere else, facing good and bad circumstances, Muslim or non-Muslim people, one should remain a believer.

The Merits of *Wuḍū'* as Mentioned in a Prophetic Narration

Once two people went to the Noble Prophet (s) after morning prayer when he used to sit in the mosque, answering peoples' questions. He asked them, 'Do you want me to tell what your questions are?' 'Yes,' they replied. 'It would bring us more certainty.' The Prophet said, 'One of you has a question about *wuḍū'* and its significance and the question of the other is about pilgrimage (*hajj and 'umrah*).' Then regarding *wuḍū'* he said,

فاعلم انك اذا ضربت يدك في الماء و قلت بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
تناثرت الذنوب التي اكتسبتها يداك فاذا غسلت وجهك تناثرت الذنوب
التي اكتسبتها عيناك بنظرهما و فوك بلفظه فاذا غسلت ذراعيك تناثرت
الذنوب عن يمينك و عن شمالك فاذا مسحت راسك و قدمك تناثرت
الذنوب التي مشيت اليها على قدميك فهذا لك في وضوك فاذا قمت الى
الصلوه و توجهت و قرأت ام الكتاب و ما تيسر لك من السور ثم ركعت
فاتممت ركوعها و سجودها و تشهدت و سلمت غفر لك كل ذنب فيما
بينك و بين الصلوه التي قدمتها الى الصلوه الموخره فهذا لك في
صلاتك⁶

⁶ Shaykh Hurr al-'Amili, *ibid.*, 393, no. 12.

When you put your hand in water and you say in the name of Allah the Beneficent, the merciful, the sins that you have committed by your hands will fall away. When you wash your face, the sins that you have committed by your eyes through [sinful looking] and by your mouth through talking will fall away. When you wash your hands, then the sins will fall away from your right and left. When you do ritual wiping (*mash*) on your head and feet, the sins that you have walked towards will fall away. These are only the merits of your *wuḍū'*. When you stand up for prayer, facing the *qibla*, and recite *surah al-Hamd* and after that whatever other *surah* which is possible for you and then complete your *ruku'* and prostration and *tashabbud* and *salam*, then, whatever sins you committed between the previous prayer and the prayer you performed it later will be forgiven. And these are the merits of your prayer.

However, even with all these virtues of *wuḍū'*, there is still a problem, since we become polluted again after being purified through making ablution because we have not changed our nature. Thus, we are like a clean child who makes themselves dirty again after a few minutes and as long as the child keeps this habit, the child will remain nice and clean only for a few minutes at a time. *Wuḍū'* and prayer can make us pure, and this purity can potentially remain forever. However, this purity does not remain because we do something wrong. This is the reason why we have to purify ourselves again and again.

Therefore, the purity of *wuḍū'* and *tayammun* should be appreciated. One has to regard *wuḍū'* as a great opportunity. *Wuḍū'* in itself is an act of worship by which God completes His blessings.⁷ Therefore, every time one is going to make ablution, one should perform it with due respect towards this *wuḍū'*.

In a contemplative narration, the Noble Prophet (s) said,

⁷ Cf. *surah 5, ayah 3*, where Imamate has also been described as the completion of Allah's blessings. The similarity between *wuḍū'* and Imamate may lie in the fact that the philosophy of both is purification.

يعشر الله عزوجل امتي يوما القيامه بين الامم غرا محجلين من آثار الوضوء⁸

On the Day of Judgment, Allah (swt) will resurrect my nation among other nations while their faces are white and they are bright and this merit is one of the effects of their *wudū'*.

Furthermore, it is recommended for a person who is making ablution to say while washing his face:

اللهم بيض وجهي يوم تسود فيه الوجوه و لا تسود وجهي يوم تبيض فيه
الوجوه⁹

O Allah! Please make my face shining and bright on the day when faces may become dark and do not make my face dark on the day when there are shining faces.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there are two kinds of faces visible on the Day of Judgment. Describing these two, *surah* 80, *ayāt* 38-42 read,

وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ مُّسْفِرَةٌ ضَاحِكَةٌ مُّسْتَبْشِرَةٌ وَ وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَلَيْهَا غَبَرَةٌ تَرْهَقُهَا قَتَرَةٌ
أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرَةُ الْفَجْرَةُ

That day some faces will be bright, laughing and joyous. And some faces on that day will be covered with dust, overcast with gloom. It is they who are the faithless, the vicious.

Wudū' as Described on the Night of the *Mi'raj*

The significance of *wudū'* may also be perceived from the narrations concerning the night journey of the Noble Prophet (s) to the heavens (known as the *Mi'raj*). In one part of His conversation to the Noble Prophet (s), God instructed him about how to make ablution and enumerated some of its merits:

قال ربي عزوجل يا محمد مد يدك فيتلقاك ماء يسيل من ساق العرش
الايمن فتلقته باليمن فمن اجل ذلك صار اول الوضوء اليمنى ثم قال يا

⁸ Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Wafa', 1403 A.H.) vol. 77, 237, no. 11.

⁹ Shaykh Hurr al-'Amili, *ibid.*, 402, no. 1.

محمد خذ ذلك الماء فاغسل به وجهك و علمه غسل الوجه فانك تريد ان
تنظر الى عظمتى و انت طاهر واغسل ذراعيك اليمين و اليسار و علمه
ذلك فانك تريد ان تتلقى بيديك كلامى و امسح بفضل ما فى يديك من
الماء راسك و رجليك الى كعبيك و علمه المسح براسه و رجله و قال انى
اريد ان امسح راسك و ابارك عليك فاما المسح على رجليك فانى اريد ان
اوطئك موطننا لم يطاه احد من قبلك و لا يطاه احد غيرك فهذا عله
الوضوء¹⁰

God told me, Oh Muhammad! Stretch your hand. Some water will come from the right side of My throne. So I received the water with my right hand. Therefore, in *wudū'*, the right hand is washed before the left hand. Then God said, Oh Muhammad! Take this water and wash your face since you want to look at my magnificence while you are pure. Then Allah Himself taught him how to wash his face. Then God said, Wash your right and left forearms since you want to take my words through your forearms. Then Allah Himself taught him how to wash his forearms. Then God said, With the remaining drops of water on your hands, wipe your head and your feet up to the ankles. Then Allah Himself taught him how to do that. And then God said, I want to touch your head and bless you. As for wiping your feet, it is because I want you to be able to put your feet on a place where no one else has ever, and will never, put their feet and this is the wisdom behind *wudū'*.

Thus, we can realise that *wudū'* is full of lessons and secrets, many of which can be understood through studying narrations, although there are still many more that we do not yet understand.

Sources

'Amili, Muhammad Hurr. *Wasā'il al-Shi'a*. Qom: Mu'assisat Āl al-bayt li Ihyā' al-Turāth. 1409 A.H.

¹⁰ Saduq, *Ilal al-Sharā'i'*, (Iraq, Najaf: al-Maktabat al-Hiydariyyah, 1966) vol. 2, 314, no. 1.

Imam Sadiq. *Misbāh al-Shari‘ah*. Tehran: Anjoman-e Hikmat wa Falsafeh, A.H.S. 1360.

Kulayni, Muhammad ibn Ya‘qub. *Al-Kāfi*. Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1388 A.H.

Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir. *Bihār al-Anwār*. Beirut: Mu’assisat al-Wafā. 1403 A.H.

Saduq, Muhammad ibn Ali Babawayh. *‘Ilal al-Sharā’i’*. Iraq, Najaf: al-Maktabat al-Hiydariyyah. 1966.

