

Place, Direction and Beginning of Prayer

MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI

International Institute for Islamic Studies, Qum, Iran

Place of prayer

The place where someone says their prayer is of great importance and various conditions pertaining to it have been enumerated in manuals of Islamic law.

The area where we place our forehead for prostration must be ritually clean. The whole place of prayer must also either belong to the person who is saying his/her prayer or, if it belongs to another person, the owner's permission should have already been obtained. A more important permission is the one referred to in a narration from Imam Sadiq (a) in which he reminds us that when we reach the gate of a mosque we should not simply go in without seeking permission. We should remember that we are going to enter the house of Allah (swt), and we need His permission to enter. Now, only those who remember God have such permission, since His houses are built for the remembrance of Him, not for doing business or socialising. Of course, meeting other believers in the mosque and conversing with them is valuable, but only if it is for the sake of remembering God. In their books of practical laws, many scholars have mentioned that one should not give a lecture in the mosque if it disturbs those who want to say their prayers. In the following narration, Imam Sadiq (a) says,

اذا بلغت باب المسجد فاعلم انك قد قصدت باب ملك عظيم لم يطا
بساطه الا المطهرون و لا يوذن لمجالسته الا الصديقون فهب القدوم الى
بساطه هيبه الملك فانك على خطر عظيم ... و اعترف بتقصيرك و
عجزك و انكسارك و فقرك بين يديه فانك قد توجهت للعباده و
الموانسة به و اعرض اسرارك عليه و لتعلم انه لا يخفى عليه اسرار الخلق
اجمعين و علانيتهم و كن كافتقر عباده بين يديه و اخل قلبك عن كل
شاغل يحجبك عن ربك فانه لا يقبل الا الاطهر و الاخلص... فان ذقت
حلاوة مناجاته و لذيد مخاطباته و شربت بكاس رحمته و كراماته من حسن
اقباله عليك و اجابته فقد صلحت لخدمته فادخل فلك الاذن و الامان و
الا فقف وقوف من انقطع عنه الحيل و قصر عنه الامل و قضى عليه
الاجل فاذا علم الله من قلبك صدق الالتجاء اليه نظر اليك بعين الرافعة و
الرحمة و وفقك لما يحب و يرضى فانه كريم يحب الكرامة لعباده
المضطرين اليه المحترقين على بابه لطلب مرضاته قال تعالى: «امن يجب
المضطر اذا دعاه و يكشف السوء».¹

When you reach the door of the mosque, remember that you are going into a house in which no one should place his/her feet except those who are purified, and meeting a great king with whom only the most truthful are permitted to meet. Enter the mosque in awe as if you are going to meet a king while in a state with lots of worries. When you enter the mosque confess your faults and weakness and display humility and poverty before Him. Indeed you have come to worship Him and make friendship with Him. Disclose your secrets to Him even though you are aware that He knows all the hidden and known affairs of all creatures. When you stand before Him, feel that you are the poorest servant of Him

¹ Chapter 27, Verse 62.

[and do not assume that you are better than others; rather, consider yourself the worst person in the mosque and even in the world].¹ Remove from your heart everything that may preoccupy your mind and distract your attention from your Lord since God accepts only those who are very pure and honest. If, by virtue of His friendly attention to you, you tasted the sweetness of communing with Him, the pleasure of conversing with Him, and you drank from the cup of His mercy and grace, then you deserve to serve Him. Thus, enter into the mosque because you are permitted and safe. Otherwise [if you did not feel such a pleasant state] stop at the gate of the mosque like a distressed person who has no solution and hope [since God is the only hope for you and if He rejects you there remains no hope] and for whom death has been ordained.² Then, if God finds your heart truly taking refuge with Him, He will look at you with mercy and kindness and will give you success to do what makes Him pleased. Indeed, He is very generous and He loves to show His generosity to His distressed and hopeless servants who are burning at His courtyard to seek His pleasure. God says, “Is He who answers the call of the distressed [person] when he invokes Him and removes his distress [better or those whom you consider as His partners]?” (Majlisi 1403 A.H., 373-4).

¹ Thus, a person should not consider themselves better than anyone—even those who appear to be corrupt—since no one knows what is going to happen to oneself or to the other people. Those whom we consider as impious may have already repented or may repent in future and end up having a better status than us in the Hereafter.

² i.e. stop and think about your horrible situation so much so that your heart becomes soft and you obtain permission from God to enter His house.

So, according to the above narration, when we reach the door of a mosque we should understand that we are entering the court of a great king, and we should have a feeling of fear of displeasing the king.

At His gate, if God finds us truthful our hearts soft and joyful for prayer, He will welcome us. If we are not honest and our hearts are not soft, we may physically enter the mosque but spiritually we are not present.

Before entering the masjid, we need to confess that we have done wrong and tell God that we are ready to be His good servants. God knows the secrets of all His servants. When we stand in front of Him we need to understand and feel that we are the poorest and worst of His servants. We should purify our hearts and minds, because God only accepts those who are very pure and honest.

Then, if we start tasting the sweetness of talking to God and drinking from His cup of mercy and forgiveness, we have been accepted as His servant and can enter.

However, if we do not start feeling and tasting the joy of talking to Him while we are standing at the gate, then we need to pause and make ourselves realize how terrible our situation is because we are going to enter the house of the Most Merciful when He has not accepted us. We must continue to think about our hopeless and horrible situation until we begin to feel that our heart is becoming soft and thus we are getting permission to enter. When God looks into our hearts and sees that we feel so helpless then He will look at us with His Mercy and will permit us to enter.

God is very generous and loves to show generosity to His servants who are hopeless and have no other place to go. He is generous, but if we feel that we do not need Him and we do not ask Him for more of His mercy He might not give us more. However, if we change our attitude, God will accept us.

God will answer those who really need Him (swt), who are truly hopeless and who are burning at His door in need of help.

It is worth mentioning that if this is supposed to be our condition when simply entering the masjid, then our situation when we are

actually inside the masjid would be much better. Thus, we may be able to begin to imagine what pleasures the holy Prophet (s) and the holy Imams (a) had when they were saying their prayers in absolute mindfulness. Each prayer must receive the same attention as performing Hajj does and must be done in a mindful way.

Imam Sadiq (a) said,

ان طاعة الله عزوجل خدمته في الارض و ليس شيء من خدمته يعدل
الصلوة فمن نادى الملائكة لذكريا و هو قائم يصلي في المحراب.

To obey God Almighty is to serve Him on the earth,
and amongst acts of serving nothing equals prayer.
Hence, the angels called Zachariah as he stood
praying in the sanctuary. ('Amili 1988, 4:39)

It has been narrated that while Prophet Zachariah (a) was standing in his place of worship, angels descended to him and gave him the glad tidings of having a child:

هُنَالِكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ
الدُّعَاءِ فَنَادَتْهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَ هُوَ قَائِمٌ يُصَلِّي فِي الْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ
بِيَحْيَى مُصَدِّقًا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَ سَيِّدًا وَ خَصُورًا وَ نَبِيًّا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

Thereat Zechariah supplicated his Lord. He said, My Lord! Grant me a good offspring from You! Indeed You hear all supplications. Then the angels called out to him, as he stood praying in the sanctuary: Allah gives you the good news of John, as a confirmer of a Word of Allah, eminent and chaste, a Prophet, among the righteous. (Quran 3:38-9)

It is worth noting that lexically speaking, the word محراب [*mibrāb*] stems from the root *h-r-b*. which means fighting and war. The reason

that the place of worship has been called *mibrāb* is that it is a place where one fights against Satan and against his/her tempting soul (*nafs 'ammāra*).

Direction in prayer

Facing towards Ka'ba is amongst the conditions of a prayer in order for it to be valid. This condition helps the person who is praying in several ways, one of which is that it enables him/her to focus and concentrate during the prayer. Furthermore, in congregational prayers, this condition facilitates a sense of unity and common purpose. It gives the Muslim community all over the world a direction for unity, since all Muslims face the same direction in prayer.

The Holy Quran teaches us that God is transcendent and not located in any specific direction:

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

To Allah belong the east and the west: so whichever way you turn, there is the face of Allah! Allah is indeed all-bounteous, all-knowing. (Quran 2:115)

There are some spiritual dimensions to this as well, because the lights of guidance and mercy are distributed from the Ka'ba to the whole world and facing the Ka'ba enables us to receive such spiritual lights. There can be no doubt that the Ka'ba, the house of God, is a precious divine gift. God does not need a place for Himself, but He has provided us with such a blessed place for our benefit.

Describing the Ka'ba, Allah (SWT) says in the Holy Quran:

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِي بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

Indeed the first house to be set up for mankind is the one at Bakkah, blessed and a guidance for all nations.
(Quran 3:96)

According to this verse, this house has been set up for the benefit of mankind. To better appreciate the significance of visiting the House of God, just imagine that God was living on earth and had a house where He would reside. How would you feel towards that house? Surely, you would have very special feelings for that place. You would feel that God was beside you and that you could talk to Him directly and ask Him whatever you wished. Imagining this is correct except that, of course, God is not there in the physical sense. However, you can have this kind of feeling of closeness to God and presence of God next to Ka'ba, since this house really belongs to Him and He has introduced it to us as a place for meeting Him. Of course, God is not physically there and He is not limited to this place. God is there in a spiritual sense and we can better experience and feel being close to Him in this place, compared to any other place.

Adhan and iqamah

Adhan ("call to prayer") and iqamah ("declaration of standing for prayer") have been designed by God. If we reflect on the different parts of adhan and iqamah, we will find the basis of Islamic teachings. First, we say that "God is Most Great." Then we bear witness that there is no God but Allah and testify that our Prophet (s) is the messenger of God. Then we call people to hurry towards prayer, to their salvation, and to the best of actions. Interestingly, a good believer who intends to say their prayer does not confine such blessing to themselves; rather, they invite other people to share the same blessings from God. Again we say, "God is Most Great" and then bear witness to the unity of God for the second time.

These words and sentences of adhan, most of which are common between adhan and iqamah, constitute the core of Islamic teachings.

Therefore, when these are the main doctrines of Islam, whoever confesses to them is obviously included within the sphere of Islam and no one has the right to excommunicate them. Thus, *adhan* is supposed to establish unity between Muslims, as they all believe in, and confess to, its statements. It is unfortunate that nowadays even *adhan* itself has become a source of conflict and disunity amongst Muslims. God has made things very simple for us, but we complicate them.

It should be mentioned that although *adhan* and *iqamah* are not obligatory parts of prayer, reciting them is highly recommended. To differentiate between *adhan* and *iqamah*, it could be said that *adhan* is a public call for prayer and *iqamah* is a call to make final preparations for prayer.

In an authentic narration, Imam Sadiq (a) describes the merits of *adhan* and *iqamah*:

اذا اذنت و اقامت صلى خلفك صفان من الملائكة و ان اقامت اقامه بغير
اذان صلى خلفك صف واحد

When you say *adhan* and *iqamah*, two rows of angels pray behind you; if you recite only *iqamah* without *adhan*, one row of angels say prayers behind you.
(Kulayni 1407AH, 3:303)

According to this narration, simply by reciting *adhan* and *iqamah* one becomes a prayer leader for angels, and under such circumstances it can be hoped that one's prayer will be accepted.

Standing for Prayer

After meeting all necessary conditions for commencing prayer—including correct intention, proper clothing, suitable place, facing

qiblah, and so on—one should stand up for prayer unless there is a problem, the details of which have been described in the books of practical laws. When we stand completely still, it shows that we consider ourselves to be in a serious situation. Standing still like this usually occurs only when there is an important event happening; otherwise, we may sit, walk, or lie down whilst performing minor tasks.

According to some narrations, when we stand for prayer, we should remember that we are standing before God. We should be both hopeful and worried, because we are not aware of our fate and of whether we will be accepted or rejected by God, but we should not be completely hopeless and assume that we will definitely be rejected. We should feel that whatever God has promised His righteous servants may be given to us as well, and whatever threat He has made against evil-doers may also include us. Paying attention to these facts will make us greatly vigilant about our prayer.

Imagine that there is a very good business opportunity that if a person takes it, he will have everything, but if he rejects it, he will have a miserable life. This person will be very careful when he goes for the meeting where the decision is made as to whether he will be given such an opportunity or not. On the one hand, he is very hopeful to get it, but, on the other hand, he is so afraid of losing it. Therefore, he will be very careful about every word he says, because one wrong word could lead to the rejection of his application. He will be careful about all his actions, even about slightest actions like smiling. If possible, he will take some people with him to support him and to remind him of anything that he may forget. Similarly with prayer, we try to hold it in congregation so that if one person forgets some part, others will remind him, and thus the connection with God will be maintained.

Takbirat al-Ihram¹

Every prayer begins with a very beautiful starting point: declaring that God is Most Great. Interestingly, it is recommended to end our prayers with the same formula. Thus, we begin our prayer with one kind of understanding of this formula, and hopefully we end the prayer with a better understanding of it. This is similar to reading the Holy Quran over the course of many years, gradually improving our understanding and implementation of its teachings.

There are some very beautiful recommended supplications to be recited before and after *takbirat al-ihram*. As an example, it is recommended to converse with God before *takbirat al-ihram* with these words:

يا محسن قد اتاك المسيء و قد امرت المحسن ان يتجاوز عن المسيء
و انت المحسن و انا المسيء فبحق محمد و آل محمد صل على محمد
و آل محمد و تجاوز عن قبيح ما تعلم مني

O Beneficent! A wrongdoer has come to you. You have ordered the beneficent to forgive the wrongdoer. Now, You are the Beneficent and I am the wrongdoer, so, by the right of Muhammad and his Household, bless Muhammad and his Household and forgive those bad actions of mine, which You know. (Majlisi 1403 A.H, 81:375).²

¹ Saying Allahu Akbar at the Beginning of Prayer.

² According to the hadith, Imam Ali (a) used to say to his companions that whoever says *iqamah* for prayer and before saying *takbirat al-Ihram*, says the above dua God would say to His angels, "Me angels! Bear witness that I have forgiven him and made those he has wronged, pleased with him." The Arabic text is as follows:

The following formula is also recommended before *takbirat al-ibram*:

وجهت وجهي للذي فطر السماوات و الارض حنيفا مسلما و ما انا من
المشركين ان صلاتي و نسكي و محياي و مماتي لله رب العالمين وحده لا
شريك له و بذلك امرت و انا اول المسلمين

Indeed I have turned my face towards Him who originated the heavens and the earth, as a *hanif* and a Muslim, and I am not one of the polytheists. Indeed my prayer and my worship, my life and my death are for the sake of God, the Lord of all the worlds. He has no partner, and this [creed] I have been commanded [to follow] and I am the first of those who submit [to God]. (Ibn Hayyun 1385 A.H, 1:157)

Thus, we start our prayers by paying attention to the fact that we are poor and humble servants of God, who nevertheless have great ambitions and intend to talk to the King of all the worlds, the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

Etiquette of Beginning the Prayer and Recitation

We must be very alert and careful when we face the *qibla* and begin the prayer, as this is a golden opportunity for us to offer up all our needs and problems, even those of which we are unaware. If we are

كَانَ أَمِيرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ (ع) يُثَوِّلُ لِأَصْحَابِهِ مَنْ أَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَ قَالَ قَبْلَ أَنْ يُكَبِّرَ يَا
مُحْسِنُ قَدْ أَتَاكَ الْمُسِيءُ وَ قَدْ أَمْرَتِ الْمُحْسِنُ أَنْ يَتَخَاوَرَ عَنِ الْمُسِيءِ وَ أَنْتَ الْمُحْسِنُ
وَ أَنَا الْمُسِيءُ فَيَحَقُّ مُحَمَّدٌ وَ آلُ مُحَمَّدٍ صَلَّ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ وَ آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ وَ يَتَخَاوَرُ عَنْ قَبِيحِ مَا
تَعَلَّمَ مِنِّي فَيَقُولُ اللَّهُ مَلَائِكَتِي اشْهَدُوا أَلِيَّ قَدْ عَمَّوْثُ عَنْهُ وَ أَرْضَيْتُ عَنْهُ أَهْلَ بَيْعَاتِهِ .

not polite and respectful when we present ourselves before God, it will become a matter of shame and disgrace for us, because we get the chance to meet the King, but, due to our inattentiveness and impoliteness, we waste this golden opportunity

In a long *hadith*, narrated in *Misbah al-Shari'a*, Imam Sadiq (a) has enumerated several etiquettes for beginning the prayer. He (a) says,

اذا استقبلت القبلة فانس الدنيا و ما فيها و الخلق و ما هم فيه و عاين
بسرک عظمه الله و اذكر وقوفك بين يديه يوم تبلو كل نفس ما اسلفت و
ردوا الى الله مولا هم الحق و قف على قدم الخوف و الرجاء فاذا كبرت
فاستصغر ما بين السماوات العلى و الترى دون كبريائه فان الله تعالى اذا
اطلع على قلب العبد و هو يكبر و فى قلبه عارض عن حقيقه تكبيره قال
يا كاذب اتخدعنى و عزتى و جلالى لاحرمتك حلاوه ذكرى و لاحجبك
عن قربى و المساره بمناجاتى واعلم انه غير محتاج الى خدمتك و هو
غنى عن عبادتك و دعائك و انما دعاك بفضل ليرحمك و يبعدك عن
عقوبته و ينشر عليك من بركات حنانيته و يهديك الى سبيل رضاه و يفتح
عليك باب مغفرته فلو خلق الله عزوجل ضعف ما خلق من العوالم اضعافا
مضاعفه على سرمد الابد لكان عنده سواء كفروا باجمعهم به او وحدوه
فليس له من عباده الخلق الا اظهار الكرم و القدره فاجعل الحياء رداء و
العجز ازارا و ادخل تحت ستر سلطان الله تغنم فوائد ربوبيته مستعينا به و
مستغيثا اليه

When you face the *qibla*, forget the world and all worldly affairs and [forget] people and their condition and see the greatness of God through your internal reality. Remember the day when you stand before Him, when every soul will examine what it has sent in advance and they will be returned to God, their real Master. So stand up [for prayer] while you are in the state of fearing and hope. When you say,

“God is Most Great,” belittle whatever is between high heavens and the earth, except for His Majesty. Indeed, when a servant says *takbirat al-ihram* while his heart is far away from the reality of the *takbir*, God will tell him, “O liar! Are you deceiving Me? By My dignity and glory, I will deprive you of tasting the sweetness of My remembrance and I will not let you get close to Me and I will deprive you of the happiness of conversing with Me.” Know that He is not in need of your service. He does not need your worship or prayer; rather He invited you [to say prayers] by His grace in order to have mercy on you and keep you far from His punishment and open the gate of His blessings to you and guide you toward the path of His pleasure and open for you the gate of His forgiveness. If God had created many times more of what He has created now, it would be equal to Him whether all of them denied Him or testified to His unity. Therefore, He commanded the creatures to worship Him in order to manifest His generosity and power. Thus, try to feel modest and weak [before Him] and go under the protection of God’s sovereignty in order for you to gain lots of benefits from His Lordship while you ask His help and seek His assistance. (Majlisi 1403 A.H, 81:230-1)

According to this narration, during the time of prayer, which lasts only a few minutes, we should cease to think about mundane matters and must wholeheartedly concentrate on prayer. For those few minutes we should forget this world and everything in it. Thus, we have to start prayer while we are not mindful of any worldly affairs. A person who is going to meet the king does not pay any attention to the walls, ceilings, curtains, rugs and whatever else they see on the way, since these are of no significance compared to the king himself.

We should try to understand and see the greatness of God through the reality of our heart rather than through the external realities around us. We should remember that day when we will be in the same position of standing before God for judgment. We should prepare ourselves for that day by focusing on the presentation of our prayer, just as we sometimes work for weeks to prepare an important presentation at work or in class.

When we stand in this position and declare that God is Most Great, we should realize that we are in fact saying that God is greater than anything in existence and is beyond any adequate description. Thus, compared to God, everything else is small and insignificant. We should also realize how everything is small and insignificant *for* God as well.

According to many verses of the Holy Quran, God is All-Knowing; thus, when we say, “God is Most Great,” we should state it wholeheartedly, since God is completely aware of what is going on in our hearts.

Regarding this, the Quran says,

وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَحُولُ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِ

Know that God intervenes between a man and his heart. (Quran 8:24)

If we say “God is Most Great!” but God sees in our heart that we are not being honest, that we just think of pleasing this or that person, that we pay our attention to everything other than God, then, according to the above-mentioned *hadith*, He calls us liars, tells us if we really think we are able to deceive Him when He is able to clearly read our heart.

Thus, if God sees that a person is not honest in their *takbirat al-ibram*, He will deprive them of the joy of prayer. He will prevent them from getting close to Him and will not let them be happy with conversing with Him. Thus, prayer becomes boring for such people. Indeed, the greatest punishment from God is to deprive someone of tasting the sweetness of prayer.

We should understand that God does not need us to pray to Him. The reason He commands us to pray is that we approach Him and then He shows us His mercy. God does not need anything from us. He simply wants to give us His mercy and blessings. It is His favour on us that He calls us to Him to receive mercy and blessings and to keep us away from punishment. He simply wants to show us His Generosity.

Thus, we should be embarrassed of disobeying God who is so merciful and generous to us. We are in absolute need of Him. We should try to enter His Kingdom and be His subjects so that we can gain many benefits from His Lordship.

Bibliography

'Amili, Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Hurr al-. *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*. Qum: Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt, 1988.

Ibn Hayyun, Nu' man b. Muhammad. 1385 A.H. *Da' a'im al-Islam*. Edited by Asif Faydi. 2 vols. Qum: Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt.

Kulayni, Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-. 1407 A.H. *Al-Kafi*. Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah.

Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir. *Bihar al-Anwar*. 3rd. Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1403 A.H.

