

The Wisdom behind the Postures and Phrases of Prayer (part 1 of 2): Can certain positions really bring a person closer to God?



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Prayer is the second pillar of Islam.

“...so let the first thing to which you will invite them be the Oneness of God. If they learn that, tell them that God has enjoined on them, five prayers to be offered in one day and one night.”^[1]

After a person testifies to or affirms their belief in Allah and His messenger Mohammad the next important step is to pray. To pray in the way that has been prescribed for us by God and taught to us by Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him .

Allah, the Exalted, says:

“...glorify the Praises of your Lord, before the rising of the sun and before (its) setting. And during a part of the night (also) glorify His praises ...” (Quran 50:39-40)

Prophet Muhammad said, in his authentic traditions *“Pray as you have seen me pray”*.^[2]

Today we are going to look a little closer at the way we pray and try to understand the significance of the positions we assume and the order in which we assume them. Before we begin it is worth remembering that Islam is a religion that is actually more than a religion. It is a way of life. While for many religion is something practiced on a weekly basis, for Muslims it is a way of life that flows

into every aspect of their being. Islam is concerned with healthy believers; healthy in mind, body and spirituality. The way we pray demonstrates this.

“Verily, the prayer is enjoined on the believers at fixed hours”. (Quran 4:103)

“And I did not create *Jinn* and humankind except to worship Me Alone” (Quran 51:56)

Muslims pray in the early morning before sunrise, in the middle of the day, in the afternoon, at sunset and at night. Muslims pray in obedience to God because they believe God created humankind for no other purpose except to worship Him. Thus the epitome of worship is prayer. God is the most kind and the most merciful so, as we would expect, the benefits embedded in the prayer are for us and us alone. God does not need our prayers but we surely need the benefits we attain from praying. The benefits are spiritual, emotional and physical and the most important is establishing a connection to our Lord, the Most Merciful.

The Arabic word for prayer is *salah* and interestingly it is a word that denotes connection. Prayer is our way of connecting with and maintaining a connection with God. Prayer at fixed times serve as a reminder of why we are here and helps to direct a person's thoughts and actions away from sin and onto the remembrance of God.

Prayer comprises of both physical movement and mental concentration. It includes the posture of standing, deep bowing, kowtowing (touching the forehead on the ground) and sitting. The movements or postures have been compared to other exercise regimes and there is no doubt that five times per day, a Muslim is engaging in a moderate exercise regime that encourages good blood circulation, regular calm controlled breathing and general suppleness. Although not physically over demanding it is a mild form of physical exercise done consistently.

It is important to perfect all of the movements of the prayer, rather than haphazardly rushing through them because each movement has a purpose. From the opening *Takbir* (saying *Allahu Akbar* or God is Great) to begin the prayer the movements and postures are of both physical and spiritual benefit for us. Standing calmly and gathering our thoughts improves posture, balance, and self-awareness, as well as normalising blood pressure and breathing. However, *takbir* also denotes that the prayer has begun and all matters relating to this world are left far behind. A calm meditative state is achieved and a connection is made. In the few minutes it takes to pray, each person stands before God in full submission. We gain peace, tranquility and numerous health benefits a few of which are mentioned below.

Bowing stretches and tones the muscles of the lower back, thighs, legs and calves, and abdomen. The physical benefits of prostration are many; prostration

can help maintain the lymph and skeletal systems and the prostrate, bladder and adrenal glands. The placement of the forehead upon the ground causes an increased blood supply to the brain and has been cited as having a good effect upon memory, vision, hearing, concentration, and other cognitive abilities. As the person praying moves through the positions of prayer, standing, bowing, prostrating and sitting, it assists in general good health by stimulating the large intestine and aiding detoxification and digestion.

The position of prostration, when the forehead touches the ground is exclusively associated with the Islamic form of prayer. It is the apex of a person's prayer and it is mentioned in the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad as the position in which a believer is as close to God as it is possible to be. "The nearest one comes to his Lord is when he is kowtowing."^[1] This is the supreme benefit in the different postures of prayer and it is a mercy from God that so many other physical benefits are also associated with prayer. God asks us to worship Him and then rewards us with countless blessings beyond the supreme benefit of pleasing our Creator.

Over the years many have suggested that the Islamic prayer contains benefits associated with yoga and tai chi however it would be more correct to say that these health regimes incorporate many of the health benefits contained in the prayer. It is logical to think that the One who created us also gave us the means with which to keep ourselves healthy and strong both in belief and physical attributes related to the mind and body.

In the next article we will take a look at the words we use while praying and discover that they too have benefits for the body, mind and spirit. They too not only fulfil our obligation to worship God but they also have by-products designed to make our lives easier and bearable in the good times and in the times of stress and strife.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

^[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

^[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

(part 2 of 2): Perfect the postures and seek aid from your tongue

This is not an article about how to pray or when to pray, this can be found in other places, it is instead a commentary on the power entrenched in the postures

and phrases of the prayer. In the previous article we looked at some of the benefits of the postures imbedded in the prayer. We learned that the obligatory actions benefit us in many ways, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Prayer establishes and reinforces our connection to God; from it we gather numerous blessings and benefits.

Any study of Islamic prayer will explain that there are two forms of prayer. One is ritualistic with formal requirements and manners; certain postures and phrases. This is what Muslims refer to as prayer and our discussion about benefits of the postures, movements and positions began in part 1. The other form is supplication and in its more general sense it represents an open-ended conversation with God. He listens to our entreaties and requests through *dua*(supplication) at any time, in any language. In ritual prayer the postures we make and the words we say are for a specific purpose. They are a means to a specific end.

Prophet Muhammad said that, **“When any one of you stands to pray, he is communicating with his Lord, so let him pay attention to how he speaks to Him.”**[\[1\]](#)

The postures of prayer are symbolic of humankind’s relationship with God. We stand and assert our existence, we bow to show humility and we prostrate in awe of our Creator’s Power and Strength. From this state of complete abasement we acknowledge our complete reliance on and need of God. God however is not in need of our prayers; it is us, the frail human being that is in constant need of His protection and love. Thus the postures of prayer are not a random set of movements. We are about to discover that the phrases of prayer, the words we repeat at least 17 times every day, are also not a random set of sounds and syllables.

Let us begin with the words *Allahu Akbar*. God is the greatest. It is an affirmation that there is none greater and thus none more worthy of worship than God himself. We raise our hands and say *Allahu Akbar* and this signifies the beginning of our audience with Almighty God. We put the world behind us and the prayer has begun, our connection is secure. Throughout the prayer we repeat the phrase, *Allahu Akbar*, God is the greatest, over and over. Each time we move from standing to bowing or standing to prostrating or prostrating to sitting, we say these words, this phrase precisely, because it changes our psychology. It keeps us focused on the awe and reverence of the one before whom we’re praying. It constantly reminds us of the greatness of the Creator and the insignificance of this world.

After beginning the prayer, the believer seeks refuge from Satan and recites the opening chapter of the Quran. This is the chapter that is often referred to as “the Mother of the Book”. At that time the Arabs named anything that concisely

summarised something, as the “mother” of that thing. *Al-Fatihah* or The Opening is the name of the first chapter of Quran. Due to the magnificence of the words in this chapter hundreds of books, articles and essays have been written on it. A believer repeats these words every day, a minimum of 17 times, and the blessings it brings are amazing and it tightens the bond between God and humankind. The chapter *Al-Fatihah* is a cure of all despondency and all melancholia. It is an obligatory part of our audience with God and it confirms our belief in all that Islam entails. Most importantly it acknowledges that there is none worthy of worship except God alone. **“You alone do we worship and from you alone do we seek assistance.” (Quran 1: 5)**

Another small portion of Quran is recited before we begin to move through the postures already discussed. God uses very specific words with very specific meanings and contemplating His words of guidance and reassurance is very much recommended. However, reciting Quran is not allowed as we move into the body of the prayer. The phrases we use in the prayer are to praise God.

The bowing position, known in Arabic as *ruku* is established by bending forward until the back is horizontal, putting one's hands on one's knees, and remaining in that position until one becomes calm. In his book *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*, Islamic scholar Al-Ghazali said, “Bowing and prostration are accompanied by a renewed affirmation of the supreme greatness of God. In bowing you renew your submissiveness and humility, striving to refine your inner feeling through a fresh awareness of your own impotence and insignificance before the might and grandeur of your Lord. To confirm this, ***you seek the aid of your tongue, glorifying your Lord and testifying repeatedly*** to His supreme majesty, both inwardly and outwardly.”

“The closest a person is to His Lord is when he is in prostration.”^[2]

Prayer is a gift from our Creator and Sustainer; it is a gift that allows us to get through each day, each hour, each minute of this worldly life that even at the best of times can be fraught with uncertainty and fear. There is great wisdom in the postures and phrases of prayer.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh AlBukhari*

^[2] *Saheeh Muslim*