

Personal Hygiene

(part 1 of 2): Cleanliness is Half of Faith



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Muslims throughout the world have extremely high standards of personal hygiene, because Islam places great emphasis on both physical and spiritual, cleanliness and purification. While humankind in general usually considers cleanliness to be a pleasing attribute, Islam insists on it. Muslims are required to take care of their personal hygiene by assuring that they are well groomed, and that their bodies, clothing, and surroundings are clean. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, informed his companions and thus all of us, about the importance of cleanliness when he said, **“cleanliness is half of faith.”**^[1] The Quran is more specific and says,

“Truly, God loves those who turn unto Him in repentance and loves those who purify themselves.” (Quran 2:222)

Personal hygiene is desirable at all times but certain aspects of personal hygiene are not only important but also compulsory. According to scholars, cleanliness is of three kinds, purification, or ritual washing in order to perform prayer; keeping the body, clothing, and environment clean; and specifically removing the dirt or grime that collects in the various parts of the body, such as teeth, nostrils, under the nails, in the armpits and around the pubic area.

Ritual Washing

The Arabic word for purity is tahara and it means to be free from filth, both spiritual and physical. Purity is the key to prayer. Spiritual taharah means being free from sin and idolatry and denotes believing in the Oneness of God. It is as important as physical cleanliness. Before a person stands before God in the special connection that is prayer, he must ensure that his heart is free from sin,

arrogance, and hypocrisy. Once this is accomplished, or at least greatly desired, he is able to cleanse himself from physical impurities. This is usually achieved by using water.

“O you who believe! When you intend to offer the prayer, wash your faces and your hands (forearms) up to the elbows, wipe your heads, and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of Janaba (i.e. had a sexual discharge) purify yourself.” (Quran 5:6)

Prior to obligatory or voluntary prayer a person must assure that he is in a state of cleanliness, he does this by performing either *wudu* (often translated as ablution) or *ghusl* (a full bath). *Wudu* rids the body of minor impurities, and *ghusl* cleanses the body of major impurities. *Ghusl* must be performed after sexual intercourse or any sexual activity that releases bodily fluids. *Ghusl* is also performed at the completion of a woman’s menstrual period or post partum bleeding.

Ritually cleansing the body by performing *wudu* includes washing the hands, rinsing the mouth and nose, washing the face, washing the arms up to the elbows, wiping the head (and beard), washing the ears, including behind the ears and washing the feet up to and including the ankle. A person does not have to repeat this ablution for every prayer unless he has broken his *wudu* by one of the following methods; urinating or defecating, breaking wind, eating camel meat, falling asleep while lying down, losing consciousness, directly touching the genital area or becoming sexually excited sufficiently to emit a discharge.

In the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, we are told that on the Day of Judgement those who complete a perfect *wudu* will be identifiable by the light shining from the areas washed in *wudu*.^[2] Prophet Muhammad also taught the believers to perform *wudu* in an environmentally friendly manner. Water was often scarce and he recommended using as little water as necessary to complete the *wudu* correctly. However, on certain occasions it was obligatory to take a full bath (*ghusl*), at which time water touches all parts of the body.

Under certain conditions, ritual purification can be achieved without water. This is called *tayammum*, or dry ablution. If water is not available in sufficient quantities, or if it would be dangerous to use water, for instance if a person was wounded or very ill, clean earth may be used instead. *Tayammum* is performed by striking the hands lightly over clean earth and then passing the palm of each hand on the back of the other, the dust is then blown off and the hands are passed across the face. These actions are performed instead of *wudu* or *ghusl*.

“...But if you are ill or on a journey or any of you comes from answering the call of nature, or you have been in contact with

women (i.e. sexual intercourse) and you find no water, then perform Tayammum with clean earth and rub therewith your faces and hands. God does not want to place you in difficulty, but He wants to purify you, and to complete His Favour on you that you may be thankful.” (Quran 5:6)

Although God expects those who worship Him to be ritually clean, He is Merciful and allows certain concessions. He (God) says in the **Quran (2:286)** that He does not burden a person beyond what he can bear. Thus, tayammum is one of the concessions as is wiping over the socks, headscarves, and turbans.

Islam is a holistic religion that takes into account humankind’s need for a balance between physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Personal hygiene and cleanliness, both physical and spiritual, keeps both the body and mind free from disease. Cleanliness is an important part of the high standards and values that are inherent in Islam.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Muslim.*

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari.*

(part 2 of 2): The Natural Way

Muslims believe that all of humankind is born innately knowing that God is One. It is a natural state of being where one instinctively knows that there is a Creator and our natural way of life is to worship Him and please Him. The Arabic word for this state of being is *fitrah* and linguistically it means causing a thing to exist for the first time, in its most pure and natural condition. Prophet Muhammad said **that every child was born in a state of fitrah, with the correct understanding of God.**^[1]

The respected Islamic scholar and historian At-Tabari described fitrah as the way, or religion of God. The religion of Islam is a holistic way of life. It encompasses emotional, physical, and spiritual well being and takes into account the natural needs of humankind. When we mention the fitrah in relation to personal hygiene, we mean things done to improve overall health and well-being. Some actions are according to the natural way – the way that is pleasing to God and beneficial to humankind.

The traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, include advice about actions that are part of a natural way to maintain personal hygiene. He said that, “**Five things are part of the fitrah: shaving the pubic hair, circumcision, trimming the moustache, plucking the armpit hairs, and cutting the nails**”.[2] This is believed to be the ancient way, the natural way, followed by all of the Prophets, and enjoined on the believers by the laws that they brought.[3] Let us examine each of the five actions of fitrah in relation to cleanliness and personal hygiene.

Shaving the pubic hair

It is obligatory that impurities are completely removed before prayer; therefore, removal of the pubic hair makes it easier to maintain cleanliness. Although plucking was recommended by Prophet Muhammad, the hair may be removed by whatever method is safest and easiest for each individual. The hair that grows around the pubic area is usually very coarse and thick and after using the toilet traces of faeces and urine may be trapped between the hairs or on the skin.

Muslims are encouraged to keep their genital area and underwear as clean as possible. Prophet Muhammad advised the believers to use their left hand to clean themselves thoroughly after using the toilet. If we fail to clean this area properly, our bodies become a breeding ground for diseases including urinary tract infections. In the days of Prophet Muhammad, they used stones or dried clay but now days we have the luxury of toilet paper. However, the use of toilet paper alone is not sufficient. Once all traces of impurity have been removed with the toilet paper, if possible, water must be used to give the area a thorough clean. Muslim homes often have water hoses installed next to the toilet or have water jugs available to facilitate cleanliness.

Circumcision

The majority of Islamic scholars agree that circumcision is obligatory for men providing they do not fear that it may harm them. Circumcision makes it easier to keep the penis clean from traces of urine, dirt, or impurities and it involves cutting the foreskin covering the glans. It does not involve flaying the skin or part of the penis, in fact to do so would be causing deliberate harm and thus be against the teachings of Islam. Female circumcision is not part of the obligatory rites of Islam.

Trimming the moustache

Prophet Muhammad made it clear to his followers that they should trim their moustaches but leave their beards.[4] The scholars have different opinions about

whether the moustache should be shaved off completely however, all agree that it should be trimmed so that the hair does not hang over the lip or get into the mouth. It is important that the area around the mouth is kept clean and so it does not emit a bad smell.

Plucking the armpit hairs

Although plucking would be the best way to remove hair from the armpits, it may not be the most comfortable; therefore, any hair removal method is permissible. Removing the hair from the armpits makes it easier to clean an area of the body where sweat and grime collect. Hair, combined with darkness and moisture is an ideal place for bacteria to grow.

Cutting the nails

Again, the main reason for keeping the nails short is for cleanliness and hygiene. Dirt, grime, and bacteria can easily be trapped under the nails and passed on to other people, especially when preparing food or in a medical environment. Having dirty or long finger and toe nails, is unhealthy and unhygienic.

In order to be sure that his followers were well groomed and clean Prophet Muhammad ordered that the hair be removed from the armpits and pubic area, and that the nails and moustaches be trimmed, at least every forty days.^[5] Personal hygiene is important in Islam. In order to worship God correctly it is necessary to strive to be healthy in both mind and body. Physical cleanliness is important just as spiritual cleanliness is important. Islam has provided us with clear guidelines. Our purpose is to worship God and we are asked to assure that all our actions begin with the intention to please God. Pleasing God is the ultimate goal and God reminds us in Quran that cleanliness is pleasing to Him.

“Truly, God loves those who turn unto Him in repentance and loves those who purify themselves.” (Quran 2:222)

Footnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

^[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

^[3] *AS-Shawkaani, Nayl al-Awtaar, Baab Sunan al-Fitrah*

[4] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[5] *Saheeh Muslim*