

# The Spirit of Worship in Islam

## (part 1 of 3): Worship and Prayer



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*Ibadah* (worship) is an Arabic word derived from *abd* (a slave) and it means submission. It portrays that God is your Master and you are His slave, and whatever a slave does in obedience to and for the pleasure of his Master is *Ibadah*. The Islamic concept of *Ibadah* is very wide. If you free your speech from filth, falsehood, malice, and abuse and speak the truth and talk goodly things and do all these only because God has so ordained to do, they constitute *Ibadah*, however secular they may look in semblance. If you obey the law of God in letter and spirit in your commercial and economic affairs and abide by it in your dealings with your parents, relatives, friends, and all those who come in contact with you, verily all these activities of yours are *Ibadah*. If you help the poor and the destitute, give food to the hungry, and serve the ailing and the afflicted persons, and do all this not for any personal gain of yours but only to seek the pleasure of God, they are nothing short of *Ibadah*. Even your economic activities, the activities you undertake to earn your living and to feed your dependants, are *Ibadah* if you remain honest and truthful in them and observe the law of God. In short, all your activities and your entire life are *Ibadah* if they are in accordance with the law of God, and your heart is filled with His awe, and your ultimate objective in undertaking all these activities is to seek the pleasure of God.

Thus, whenever you do good or avoid evil for fear of God, in whatever sphere of life and field of activity, you are discharging your Islamic obligations. This is the true significance of *Ibadah*, namely total submission to the pleasure of Allah; the molding into the patterns of Islam your entire life, leaving out not even the most insignificant part thereof. To help achieve this aim, a set of formal *ibadat*

(acts of worship) has been constituted, which serves as a course of training. These `ibadat are thus the pillars on which the edifice of Islam rests.

*Salah* (Prayer) is the most primary and the most important of these obligations. And what is *salah*? It is the prescribed daily Prayers which consist in repeating and refreshing, five times a day, the belief in which you repose your faith. You get up early in the morning, cleanse yourself and present yourself before your Lord for Prayer. The various poses that you assume during your Prayers are the very embodiment of the spirit of submission; the various recitals remind you of your commitments to your God. You seek His guidance and ask Him again and again to enable you to avoid His wrath and follow His chosen path. You read out from the Book of the Lord and express witness to the truth of the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and also refresh your belief in the Day of Judgment and enliven in your memory the fact that you have to appear before your Lord and give an account of your entire life. This is how your day starts.

Then, after a few hours the *muezzin* (caller to prayer) calls you to Prayer, and you again submit to your God and renew your covenant with Him. You dissociate yourself from your worldly engagements for a few moments and seek audience with God. This once again brings to the fore of your mind your real role in life. After this rededication you revert to your occupations and again present yourself to the Lord after a few hours. This again acts as a reminder to you, and you once more refocus your attention on the stipulations of your faith. When the sun sets and the darkness of the night begins to shroud you, you again submit yourself to God in Prayer so that you may not forget your duties and obligations in the midst of the approaching shadows of the night. And then after a few hours you again appear before your Lord, and this is your last Prayer of the day. Thus before going to bed you once again renew your faith and prostrate before your God. And this is how you complete your day. The frequency and timings of the Prayers never let the object and mission of life be lost sight of in the maze of worldly activities.

It is but easy to understand how the daily Prayers strengthen the foundations of your faith, prepare you for the observance of a life of virtue and obedience to God, and refresh that belief from which spring courage, sincerity, purposefulness, purity of heart, advancement of the soul, and enrichment of morals.

Now see how this is achieved: One performs ablution in the way prescribed by the Prophet. One also says their Prayers according to the instructions of the Prophet. Why do they do so? Simply because they believe in the prophethood of Muhammad and deem it their bounden duty to follow him ungrudgingly. Why do they not intentionally misrecite the Quran? Isn't it so because they regard the Book as the Word of God and deem it a sin to deviate from its letter? In the Prayers they recite many things quietly, and if they do not recite them or make any

deviation from them, there is no one to check them. But they never do so intentionally. Why? Because they believe that God is Ever Watchful and that He listens to all that you recite and is aware of things open and hidden.

### **(part 2 of 3): The Prayer and Fasting**

What makes a Muslim say their Prayers at places where there is no one to ask them to offer them or even to see them offering them? Isn't it so because of their belief that God is ever looking at you? What makes them leave their important business and other occupations and rush towards the mosque for Prayers? What makes them terminate your sweet sleep in the early hours of the morning, to go to the mosque in the heat of the noon, and to leave their evening entertainments for the sake of Prayers? Is it anything other than sense of duty—their realization that they must fulfill your responsibility to the Lord, come what may? And why are they afraid of any mistake in Prayer? Because their heart is filled with the fear of God and they know that they have to appear before Him on the Day of Judgment and give an account of their entire life.

Now look! Can there be a better course of moral and spiritual training than Prayer? It is this training which makes a man a perfect Muslim. It reminds him of his covenant with God, refreshes his faith in Him, and keeps the belief in the Day of Judgment alive and ever present before his mind's eye. It makes him follow the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and trains him in the observance of his duties.

This is indeed a strict training for conforming one's practice to one's ideals. Obviously if a man's consciousness of his duties towards his Creator is so acute that he prizes it above all worldly gains and keeps refreshing it through Prayers, he would certainly not be inviting the displeasure of God that he all along has striven to avoid. He will abide by the law of God in the entire gamut of life in the same way as he follows it in the five Prayers every day. This man can be relied upon in other fields of activity as well, for if the shadows of sin or deceit approach him, he will try to avoid them for fear of the Lord that would be ever present in his heart. And if even after such a vital training a man misbehaves himself in other fields of life and disobeys the law of God, it can only be because of some intrinsic depravity of his self.

Then again, a Muslim should say their Prayers in congregation and especially so the Friday Prayer. This creates among the Muslims a bond of love and mutual understanding. This arouses in them the sense of their collective unity and fosters among them national fraternity. All of them say their Prayers in one congregation and this inculcates in them a deep feeling of brotherhood. Prayers are also a symbol of equality, for the poor and the rich, the low and the high, the rulers and the ruled, the educated and the unlettered, the black and the white all stand in one

row and prostrate before their Lord. Prayers also inculcate in Muslims a strong sense of discipline and obedience to the elected leader. In short, Prayers train them in all those virtues that make possible the development of a rich individual and collective life.

These are a few of the myriad of benefits Muslims derive from the daily Prayers. If we refuse to avail ourselves of them we, and only we, are the losers. If you see that some Muslims shirk the prayers, this can only mean one of two things: Either they do not recognize Prayers as our duty or they recognize them. In the first case, their claim to faith shall be a shameless lie, for if they refuse to take orders from Allah they no longer acknowledge His authority. In the second case, if they recognize Allah's authority and still flout His commands, then they are the most unreliable of creatures that ever trod the earth. For if they can do this to the highest authority in the universe, what guarantee is there that they shall not do the same in their dealings with other human beings? And if duplicity overwhelms a society, what a hell of discord it is bound to become!

## **Fasting**

What the prayers seek to serve five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan (ninth month of the lunar year) does once a year. During this period from dawn to dusk, Muslims eat not a grain of food nor drink a drop of water, no matter how delicious the dish or how hungry or thirsty they feel. What is it that makes them voluntarily undergo such rigors? It is nothing but faith in God and the fear of Him and of the Day of Judgment. Each and every moment during the fast, Muslims suppress their passions and desires, and proclaim by their doing so the supremacy of the Law of God. This consciousness of duty and the spirit of patience that incessant fasting for full one month inculcates in Muslims help them to strengthen their faith. Rigor and discipline during this month bring us face to face with the realities of life, and help them make their life during the rest of the year a life of true subservience to His will.

From yet another point of view, fasting has an immense impact on society, for all Muslims, irrespective of their status, must observe fasting during the same month. This brings to prominence the essential equality of men, and thus goes a long way towards creating in them sentiments of love and brotherhood. During Ramadan evil conceals itself while good comes to the fore, and the whole atmosphere is filled with piety and purity. This discipline has been imposed on Muslims to their own advantage. Those who do not fulfill this cannot be relied upon in the discharge of their duties. But the worst are those who, during this holy month, do not hesitate to eat or drink in public. They are the people who by their conduct show that they care not a trifle for the commands of Allah, in Whom they profess their belief as their Creator and Sustainer. Not only this, they also show that they are not loyal members of the Muslim community; rather, they have

nothing to do with it. It is evident that in so far as obedience to law and regard for a trust reposed in them goes, only the worst could be expected of such hypocrites.

### (part 3 of 3): Zakah and Hajj

#### **Zakah**

The third obligation is *zakah*. Every Muslim whose financial condition is above a certain specified minimum must pay annually 2.5 percent of his or her cash balance to a deserving fellow being. This is the minimum. The more you pay, the greater the reward that God shall bestow on you.

The money that we pay as *zakah* is not something God needs or receives. He is above any want and need. He, in His benign mercy, promises us rewards manifold if we help our brethren. But there is one basic condition for being thus rewarded. And it is this: that when we pay in the name of God, we shall not expect nor demand any worldly gains from the beneficiaries nor aim at making our names as philanthropists.

*Zakah* is as basic to Islam as other forms of worship: *salah* (prayers) and *saum* (fasting). The fundamental importance of *zakah* lies in the fact that it fosters in us the qualities of sacrifice and rids us of selfishness and plutocracy. Islam accepts within its fold only those who are ready to give away in God's way from their hard earned wealth willingly and without any temporal or personal gain. It has nothing to do with misers. A true Muslim will, when the call comes, sacrifice all his belongings in the way of God, for *zakah* has already trained him for such sacrifice.

There are immense gains to the society in the institution of *zakah*. It is the bounden duty of every well-to-do Muslim to help his lowly placed poor brethren. His wealth is not to be spent solely for his own comfort and luxury, as there are rightful claimants on his wealth, and they are the nation's widows and orphans; the poor and the invalid; and those who have ability but lack the means by which they could seek useful employment; those who have the faculties and brilliance but not the money with which they could acquire knowledge and become useful members of the community. He who does not recognize the right on his wealth of such members of his own community is indeed cruel. For there could be no greater cruelty than to fill one's own coffers while thousands die of hunger or suffer the agonies of unemployment. Islam is a sworn enemy of such selfishness, greed, and acquisitiveness. People not ingrained with these morals, devoid of sentiments of universal love, know only to preserve wealth and to add to it by lending it out on interest. Islam's teachings are the very antithesis of this attitude. Here one shares one's wealth with others and helps them stand on their own legs and become productive members of the society.

## Hajj

Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, is the fourth basic act of worship. It is obligatory once in a lifetime only for those who can afford it. When Muslims undertake the pilgrimage, they are required to suppress our passions, refrain from bloodshed, and be pure in word and deed. God promises rewards for our sincerity and submissiveness.

The Hajj is, in a way, the biggest of all acts of worship. This is so because unless people really loved God, then they would never undertake such a long journey, leaving all their near and dear ones behind them. It may seem easy now with the appearance of airplanes and vehicles, but imagine in the past when Muslims had to take a long arduous journey, facing fatigue, hunger and death, often taking more than a year!

This pilgrimage is unlike any other journey. Here, pilgrims' thoughts are concentrated on God, their very beings vibrate with the spirit of intense devotion. When they reach the holy places, they find the atmosphere laden with piety and godliness; they visit places which bear witness to the glory of Islam, and all this leaves an indelible impression on their minds, which they carry to their last breath.

In addition, there are in Hajj, as in any other act of worship, many benefits that Muslims can gain. Mecca is the center towards which the Muslims must converge once a year and discuss topics of common interest. Hajj refreshes in them the faith that all Muslims are equal and deserve the love and sympathy irrespective of their geographical or cultural origin. Thus, Hajj unites Muslims from around the world into one international brotherhood.