

Fast 17: Prayer — Form and Spirit

“Guard the prayers and the most excellent prayer, and stand up truly obedient to Allah.” (2:238)

حَفِظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوَسْطَىٰ وَ
قُومُوا لِلَّهِ قَانِتِينَ ﴿٢٣٨﴾

“O you who believe, bow down and prostrate yourselves and serve your Lord, and do good that you may succeed.” (22:77)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ارْكَعُوا وَاسْجُدُوا وَ
اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَافْعَلُوا الْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

- The Arabic word for prayer is *ṣalāt*, which originally means ‘praying’ or ‘the making of a supplication’. This word was used in this sense before Islam. In the Holy Quran, the word is used both in the technical sense of Divine service as established by Islam, and in the general sense of simply *praying* as in “surely your prayer (*ṣalāt*) is a relief to them” (9:103), i.e., that the prayer of the Holy Prophet for his followers brings comfort to them.
- The “guarding of prayers (*ṣalawāt*, plural of *ṣalāt*)”, mentioned above in 2:238, is not simply the observance of the outward form. It is both the form and the spirit to which attention is drawn in “guarding”. Some think that by “the most excellent prayer” is meant a particular prayer (for example, some say it is the *aṣr* prayer). But it probably means that we must attend to prayer in the most excellent way, both as regards the form and the spirit.
- In the technical sense the word *ṣalāt* is almost always used with one of the derivatives of the word *iqāmah* which means ‘keeping a thing in a right state’. It is this combination in the Quran which is translated as “keeping up prayer”. The *iqāmah* of *ṣalāt* really means the *keeping of the prayer in a right state*, which includes both the proper observance of the outward form and maintaining its true spirit.
- The purification before prayer, the mosque, the fixing of times and finally the settling of the form, are all parts of the outward organization, without which the spirit could not have been kept alive. Hence a form has been fixed for the institution of the Islamic prayer. But the individual has, in addition, the liberty to pray to God in accordance with the desire of his own soul, when and where and as he or she likes. Like the times of prayer, the form was revealed to the Holy Prophet by the Holy Spirit or Gabriel.
- The outward form is not, however, the purpose; it is only a help. Thus in the Holy Quran, the observance of the form of the prayer is said to be meant to free a person

from evil:

“And keep up prayer at the two ends of the day and in the first hours of the night. Surely good deeds take away evil deeds” (11:114).

Only they are said to attain self-development, or success, who are true to the spirit of the prayer:

“Successful indeed are the believers, who are humble in their prayers” (23:1–2).

Mere form without the spirit is condemned in one of the earliest revelations:

“So woe to the praying ones, who are unmindful of (the spirit of) their prayers, who do good to be seen, and refrain from acts of kindness.” (107:4–7)

- The postures of prayer are as follows:
 - Standing (*qiyām*) — in a reverential position, having the feeling that you are standing before the Holy and Majestic Presence.
 - Bowing down (*rukūʿ*) — showing humility while uttering words declaring Divine glory.
 - Prostration (*sajdah*) — a posture of the utmost humility is assumed, while words declaring the Divine glory and Divine greatness are on the lips of the worshipper.
 - Sitting (*qaʿdah*) — saying various words of prayer.
- The different postures are sufficient to inspire the heart of the worshipper with true admiration of God, and to bring before our minds a picture of the great majesty and glory of God, as we stand up, then bow down, then place the forehead on the ground. Different postures of the body have a corresponding effect on the mind, and Islam seeks to make the spiritual experience of the Muslim perfect by making him take one position of reverential humility after another, so that he may pass from one experience to another.
- The law of Islam allows modifications of these postures in certain cases. For instance, when a person is sick, he may say his prayers in a sitting position, or if unable to sit down, he may say them while lying down, without even bowing down and prostration if necessary. On a journey, a person is allowed to say his prayers while riding or travelling in any vehicle. The postures adopted in all such cases must be subject to the requirements of the situation. Even the direction of prayer may not be towards the

Qiblah but in the direction of travel. However, without necessity, one may not make a departure from the form prescribed by the Holy Prophet.

- Corresponding to the different postures of humility which we adopt in saying our prayers, we are commanded to express the praise and glory of God, to mention His great attributes of love, mercy, forgiveness, etc., to confess our own weakness, to pray for Divine help to support us in our weakness and for Divine guidance to lead us aright and make us achieve the goal of our existence. All the words that we use for this are known in Arabic by the one name *dhikr*, which is generally translated as *remembrance*. The whole of prayer is called in the Holy Quran as *dhikr Allāh*, or the remembrance of Allah. The Quran itself is also frequently referred to as *dhikr*. Hence, during prayer, whether it is a portion of the Quran which is recited, or words giving expression to Divine glory and greatness are uttered as taught by the Holy Prophet, all goes by the name of *dhikr*.