

Fast 21: Heart-felt nature of prayers in Islam

- Another saying of the Holy Prophet about prayer is as follows:

“When anyone of you is praying, he is privately communicating with his Lord”
(Bukhari, hadith 531).

Thus the real object of prayer is to submit heartfelt petitions before God in privacy. This implies praying with full attention of the mind with all its feelings and expressions. Mechanical utterance of prescribed prayers, without any reference to feelings, emotions and thoughts, is thus completely ruled out by Islam as constituting the real prayer.

- Another saying about the spirit of prayer is as follows:

“Whoever performs ablution like this *Wudu* of mine, and then says two *rakats* of prayer **during which no (other) thought enters his mind**, all his past sins are forgiven” (Bukhari, hadith 159).

If a person says his prayers properly, not merely as a mechanical ritual, and does not let his mind drift to any other thought except prayer as stated here, he would never deliberately disobey the Divine commands. So God, out of His boundless mercy, forgives him the sins he committed before he changed the course of his life. There is a common conception that God keeps an account of good and bad deeds of a person, and his good deeds cancel out his bad deeds, and therefore a person who says prayers may still constantly commit sins because his prayers will cancel out his bad deeds and he will be forgiven. This is an idea **entirely against** the Quran and Hadith.

As regards the mention of ablution or *wudu* here, that requirement has an inner significance as well. Of course, there is its value in bodily cleanliness, especially important to observe in a gathering where people are close together. But it is also a reminder that the purpose of prayer is to make the limbs and organs of the human body, which you are washing, clean of committing wrongdoing. As each limb and organ is washed in *wudu*, one should remember that this act of washing expresses the intention of keeping that limb or organ clean from committing any wrongful act, since all acts are done by using hands, feet, mouth, eyes, ears, and of course the head.

- In Study 19, verses of the Quran were quoted to show that the effect of listening to the word of God was so deep as to make the knowledgeable people weep and shed tears. This was the case with the greatest of the Companions of the Holy Prophet. When the Holy Prophet fell ill in his last illness, he gave the instruction: “Tell Abu Bakr to lead the people in prayer.” But his wife Aishah, who was Abu Bakr’s daughter, replied:

“If he stands in your place to lead the prayer, he will weep and would not be able to continue the recitation.” (Bukhari, hadith 712)

It was well-known that when Abu Bakr recited the Quran in prayer, it would make him weep. Before the *Hijrah*, when Muslims lived in Makkah, Abu Bakr had built a mosque in the courtyard of his house, as the persecutors of the Muslims did not allow them to say prayers in public. The passing women and sons of the unbelievers of Makkah used to stop and watch him with wonder, that he was weeping while reciting the Quran (Bukhari, hadith 476).

Regarding Umar, the next senior-most Muslim after Abu Bakr, someone said:

“I heard the sobbing of Umar when I was in the last row of prayer, and he was reciting: ‘I only complain of my grief and sorrow to Allah’ (the Quran, 12:86).” (Bukhari, above hadith 716)

Here Umar was leading the prayer. Abu Bakr and Umar were both very strongly determined people who could stand very firm and not be moved or swayed by anything. Upon the Holy Prophet’s death, Abu Bakr had to be very firm at that moment of unimaginable grief and tell Muslims that his beloved Muhammad had died just as all prophets before him had died. Then he had to stand firm against the rebellions that broke out in Arabia. Umar is well-known for his strong character. Yet in prayer they fell before God crying. This is the prayer which Islam teaches.

Another Companion of the Holy Prophet, by name of Abu Darda, was found by his wife standing in prayer at night and weeping saying: “O Allah, you have made me good-looking in physical form, so make me also good in character and morals.”

- Maulana Muhammad Ali has explained this effect of the Quran by referring to a verse which describes the Quran as a book:

- “... at which do shudder the skins of those who fear their Lord, then their skins and their hearts soften to Allah’s remembrance.” — ch. 39, v. 23

تَقَشَّرُ مِنْهُ جُلُودُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ
جُلُودُهُمْ وَقُلُوبُهُمْ إِلَى ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ

The title of his speech (*khutba*), on 17 February 1950, in which he gave this explanation, was: “Recitation of the Quran and the crying of the Holy Prophet and his Companions”.

He writes that by “skins” here is meant the whole body, and “shuddering” is that the whole body is overcome by the majesty of the Quran. Then the physical body and inner heart of such a person soften in order to absorb the influence of the Quran. This means that he would not use any part of his body, whether eyes, ears, tongue, etc., to do wrongful acts. Unless the heart softens, there will be no effect on the behaviour of a human being. When the heart softens, the eyes shed tears. He adds:

“It is strange that weeping and shedding tears has been associated in the Quran with reading it and listening to it. If you shed tears by being overwhelmed by the majesty of God, or in sympathy for other people, it creates an urge in your heart to do something. The Holy Prophet Muhammad used to ask people to read the Quran to him, even though it had been revealed to him. And on listening to it, he used to cry, in particular at the thought that Muslims after his time will no longer adhere to the teachings of Islam and be held accountable by God.”