

# Steps to Paradise

A step-by-step journey to help you take your Salat to the next level

## Course Transcript

*iqbal  
nasim*

How can I lead a truly God-centred life, full of purpose and meaning?

## THAT'S THE QUESTION I ASKED MYSELF BACK IN 2010...

The soul searching that followed led me to abandon a successful investment banking career and a guaranteed \$1 million compensation package.

**Sounds crazy, right?**

**You're not the only one who thinks so...**

Some of those close to me advised me to stay at least until I received the considerable sum of money... and once received I'd be "set" and could do whatever I wanted.

After all, I had worked very hard over the previous four years to become one of the youngest people in London to make it to the level of Vice President in an investment bank.

And the reason I had entered the field in the first place was almost entirely financial.

**But I felt I had more important things to worry about**

**And I really didn't think time was on my side**

Even though I was only 27, death was always on my mind. We're supposed to be people ready to meet our Lord at any time, right? If my time was up, then what would I say to my Lord about what I'd achieved for His sake and His cause?

So I decided not to let anything get in my way and started seriously exploring my options to do something far more meaningful...

Instead of serving my cause, I wanted to spend whatever time I had left

giving myself completely...

IN SERVICE OF GOD'S CAUSE

GOD RESPONDED!

**He always does...**

In 2011, I took on the role of managing and growing a new and exciting initiative, National Zakat Foundation. It was a fantastic opportunity...

**And what followed was an amazing 10 years**

**A unique institution became firmly established**

My team and I had the honour of serving tens of thousands of *zakat* givers and recipients across the UK, handling some £25 million of *zakat* in the process. Even better, NZF also sprung up in Australia, Canada, Holland and Switzerland.

*(In 2019, for some reason the Queen decided to award me an MBE for services to Tackling Poverty and Community Development).*

**But once again, I felt it was time for a change  
I wanted to leverage what I discovered to be my true passion to continue serving God's  
cause**

The thing I most enjoyed at NZF was learning and educating people about *zakat*, in a way that was inspiring, relatable and practical.

And because *zakat* is almost always mentioned together with *salat* in revelation, I started teaching about *salat* too.

In 2019, while I was still at NZF, I developed and started teaching a course on *salat* called:

## Transform My Prayer

**It was having an amazing impact and so, in 2021,  
I stepped down from my role at NZF to become a full-time educator**

Since then, I've spent most of my time teaching on the topic of prayer, but also developed programmes on revelation - [Club Revelation](https://www.iqbalnasim.com/club-revelation) <https://www.iqbalnasim.com/club-revelation>  
and leadership - [Last Day Leader](https://www.iqbalnasim.com/store). <https://www.iqbalnasim.com/store>

## Course Transcript

This is a full transcript of an earlier version of Transform My Prayer, called Steps to Paradise. This has kindly been prepared by one of the first students of this programme.

Because it represents an earlier version of the course, not everything will align fully with the latest video course to which you have access here. Nonetheless, it should be a useful way for you to review the core concepts and ideas to help you improve the consistency and quality of your prayer.

To register for Transform My Prayer, if you haven't already done so:

<https://www.iqbalnasim.com/transform-my-prayer>

Note from transcriber:

I attended the salah course by Iqbal Nasim and it truly transformed my prayer. As a result, I transcribed the course to help others achieve the same. These printed booklets cost approximately £4 to print. If you would like to contribute to the printing to benefit and help others, please email [islamicnotes@outlook.com](mailto:islamicnotes@outlook.com)

# **Steps to Paradise**

**Step 1**

**Key Principles**

**Step 2-7**

**Preparing for Prayer**

**Step 8-9**

**Beginning the Prayer**

**Step 10-20**

**Standing**

**Step 21-24**

**Bowing and Praise**

**Step 25-31**

**Prostrating**

**Step 32-38**

**Long Sitting**

**Step 39-40**

**Ending**

**Conclusion and Next Step**

## Step 1

We ask Allah to give us guidance, understanding and to inspire us *insha 'Allah* with things which will benefit us in this life and in the next.

# Key Principles

This first step is about some key principles which will hopefully carry you through the rest of this journey. We are going to talk about three things:

1. The objectives - What are we exactly trying to achieve?
2. The framework through which we should think about *salah* in a way that I think is the most helpful is to approach the subject in the right way in the first place.
3. The issue of the process. We are going to go through this journey in order to unlock the various components of the prayer.

## Objectives

- More **consistency**, less irregularity
- More **focus**, less distraction
- More **tranquility**, less agitation

So firstly, in terms of objectives, we are trying to achieve more consistency and less irregularity. We want to be able to pray our five prayers, our *salah*, on time every time. If the lack of consistency is an issue for you, today is the day to make a commitment. When Allah invites you each time a prayer time comes, you have received an invitation from your Lord to stand before Him, to meet and converse with Him.

Today is the day to commit not to rejecting that invitation ever again and not delaying unnecessarily your response to that invitation. Let us achieve *insha 'Allah* a greater degree of consistency. I hope that the process that we will go through and the greater degree of connection and understanding that you achieve with respect to *salah* will help and motivate you towards achieving a higher level of consistency.

Secondly more focus and less distraction. A lot of thoughts come into our minds and hearts while we are standing, bowing, and prostrating in front of Allah. Physically we are there. We might be saying certain words which are meaningful but for some reason distractions get in the way so we want to try and achieve more focus.

Finally, more tranquility and less agitation. You can actually be focused on something but be quite stressed out by it. You can be focused but not be at peace. We want focus as well as tranquility so it is like a calm, confident and consistent approach to our prayer that we are trying to achieve.

We ask Allah to help us with all of these three things. You will feel hopefully all of them emerging for you quite soon even after the first one or two steps. If you start to implement the outcomes and put some time into the learning that is required then *insha 'Allah* you will find that you will achieve more consistency, focus and tranquility.

## Why do so many of us...

miss prayers?

see prayer as a burden?

delay prayers?

communicate badly in prayer?

rush prayers?

lose focus in prayers?

We know that *salah* is obligatory. So, it is important for us to ask ourselves why then do so many of us miss or delay our prayers unnecessarily, rush and lose focus in our prayers? We see prayer as a burden, chore, and a tick box exercise or only as an obligation and not much more. We communicate badly in our prayer. It is important for us to confront this reality and to understand exactly what is going on here. What is the issue precisely? We will cite many things.

Perhaps it might be a lack of understanding. No one really taught me properly, we are busy, we have other things going on and we become forgetful. Yes, all these things are true but I like to also look at this issue from a root cause perspective.

## Root cause analysis

This really comes down to this issue in terms of starting to think about a framework through which we need to understand *salah*. If we understood *salah* properly and critically who we are interacting with, then the things we have just looked at in terms of missing, rushing, or delaying would not happen.

**The question really is:**

Inside and outside your Salat

how REAL is Allah  
to you?

One thing is saying *la ilaha illa Allah*, there is no God but Allah and yes, I am a Muslim. I believe there is a God but the question is:

**How real is Allah to us?** We have to really think about this. There is a lot of work to do outside of prayer also in developing our relationship with Allah. Understanding, appreciating, recognising, and living with Him in our day-to-day interactions, words, intentions, and motivations. If we allow ourselves to really explore our Creator and

understand Him better outside of our *salah* then our *salah* itself would become more meaningful. The more meaningful we can make our prayer, the more that will open up for us in terms of the reality of our relationship with Allah. This word relationship is critically important.

## What message is your Salat sending to your Lord?

Each time the time for prayer comes, we send a message to our Lord. We communicate something. We tell Him something about how we think about Him and what we think about Him. We may miss or delay our prayers, communicate badly, rush, not have the right mindset or the attitude or the approach to the prayer, we lose focus or become distracted.

If all of these things are taking place or some of them, this is saying something to Allah which is a combination of either we are not so interested or we are a bit bored. We have other things to do, we do not really recognise You as much as we say we do. It is quite revealing. The *salah* does not lie. The *salah* tells Allah how much estimation we truly give Him.

So, it is really important for us to understand that this *salah* is a meeting to which we have been invited. The way we interact with our *salah*, the way in which we offer it, approach, and think about it communicates something deep really to Allah about our reality. That is why it is the first thing that we are going to be accounted for. That is why if the *salah* is in order then everything else will fall into place. If we want to know where we stand with Allah, we do not really need to look much beyond the prayer itself.

How should we think about Salat?  
**Salat is a**  
**real, personal, interactive meeting**  
**with a real being,**  
**the Lord of all that exists**  
**to whom we owe everything**  
**and to whom we shall soon return**

This is one way that I like to put it forward. If you think about it in this way, it will *insha'Allah* be helpful for you. It is a real personal interactive meeting. This changes the sense in which we sometimes look at the prayer as an abstract exercise, as a ritual where it is a task to be completed or a job to be done. We are supposed to understand that we are directly addressing Allah and He is responding and listening. This is how we need to understand it.

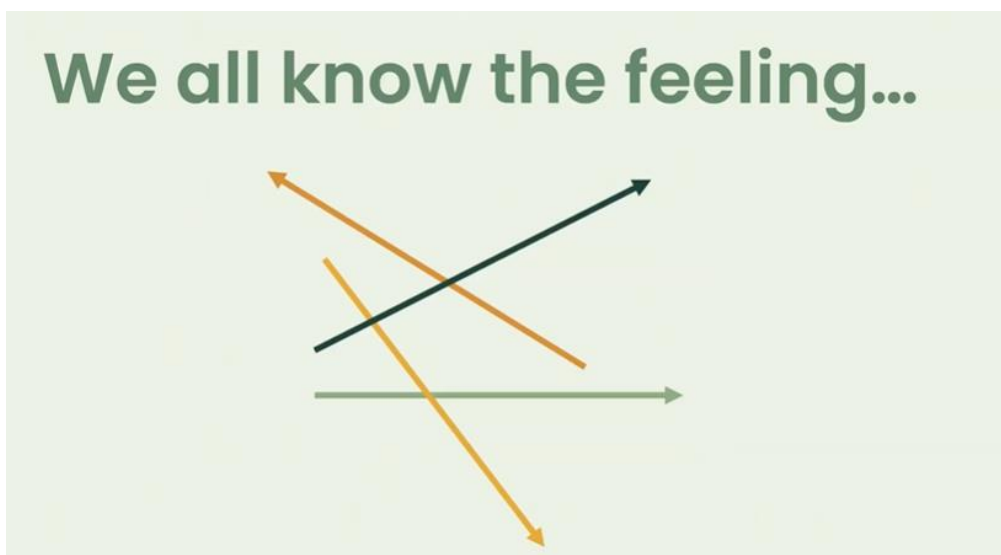
As soon as we can really get into our heart and mind that I am actually before God Himself, the divine presence is before me and I am directly addressing this divine presence then it is a whole different mindset. So, treat it as a real personal interactive meeting with a real being, the Lord of all that exists. Allah is not just an idea. He is true, He is *al-Haqq*. The *Rabbul 'Alamin* the Lord of all that exists, everything around us is under His Mastery, His

creation and governance. He is a real being, the Lord of all that exists to Whom we owe everything and to Whom we shall soon return.

I think these two points are critical. We owe everything to Allah therefore we need to go into our prayer with a sense of humility and gratitude. We will soon return to Him gives us a sense of urgency, proximity, and nearness. This world does not seem so vast now and the hereafter does not seem so small. Rather the hereafter seems vast and this world seems small because we have that sense of perspective. We understand that this meeting with Allah in our *salah* is a small reflection of the ultimate meeting with Him in the hereafter.

If we understand and look at our *salah* in this way, we can remind ourselves that this is what this action is all about. The combination of the words, positions, movements, thoughts, emotions - all of them contribute to this. When we think about it in this way, it reduces the possibility of us skipping these meetings because we can understand that at best it is just rude. At worst it is defiant and a rejection which we do not want. This is why the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* indicated that the *salah* is a distinguishing feature and action between a believer and an unbeliever.

So not only does it reduce the possibility of missing and delaying our prayers unnecessarily but it also increases the likelihood of us thinking about it in more normal real terms. How we are going to make this a real personal interactive meeting with a real being and not just some sort of random exercise of words and movements without meaning.



Within the prayer, we all know this feeling of misalignment where all parts of us are going in all different directions.



The process of improvement comes down to one word which is alignment. So, if you want to look within the prayer itself, what are we trying to do and throughout this whole course what are we going to be trying to do?

## There are FOUR parts of you that are praying

- |           |                 |
|-----------|-----------------|
| 1. Body   | <b>BUT</b>      |
| 2. Tongue | <b>ARE</b>      |
| 3. Mind   | <b>THEY</b>     |
| 4. Heart  | <b>ALIGNED?</b> |

We are going to address four areas:

1. **Body**: the physical position and movement. The symbolism of the different positions and the way in which to move between the positions.
2. **Tongue**: the words. What are the words that we are saying? What do they mean? What do they represent? What are the appropriate ways to say them? What are the appropriate emotions to go along with them?
3. **Mind**
4. **Heart**

What are we thinking about and what are we feeling? The question is: are they aligned? We know from experience often there are times that our body might be in a certain position – standing, prostrating, bowing, and we might be saying certain things. We may vary in our understanding of the meanings of those words. Sometimes we say the words and we might know what they mean if asked but while we are saying them, we are not really connecting with the meaning. We might not know the meaning at all. This is where the mind and the heart come in.

The mind and the heart will respond to the truth of our expression and our movements if we have understood this is a real meeting with a real being. If you think I am speaking and being heard then our mind and heart is likely to be much more present. We are more likely to be thinking about what we are saying, what we are doing, who we are in front of and feeling accordingly the appropriate emotions.



So, the alignment is what we want to try and achieve so this journey is about going from this misaligned situation, where the body is in one direction, words are in another direction, mind is somewhere and heart is somewhere else to this.

We are trying to bring everything together. We are trying to align these things and when that happens then truly something unlocks. It is like those safes where you have the locking mechanisms where you need to turn the dial this way a little bit and then that way a little bit until you get the clicks. Inside the lock all these mechanisms are aligning so when you have the four things in a row then the door can open and you can find the treasure inside. It is very much like that.

When your physical position or movement is truly aligned and understood in the context of the words that you are actually saying and what they mean to you, then you can think and feel about them appropriately. You can express yourself from your heart not just with your tongue then the prayer unlocks. The door opens then truly *salah* becomes the key to paradise that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* described it as otherwise it is a key that just will not fit.

We have to be conscious of that. Not any old prayer will do. Only a certain type of prayer will do and we need to try to strive to a higher level of *salah* so that is what this journey is about. Hopefully this has helped you put the whole thing in context that we want to achieve more focus, consistency, and tranquility. We need to appreciate and understand that it is a real meeting with a real being. It is not just some abstract exercise. Within the prayer we are going to seek to align the various parts of us and what we are doing, saying, thinking, and feeling so that *insha'Allah* the prayer really unlocks for us.

## Step 2

# Preparing for Prayer

## Planning

This is the first of seven sections that is going to address the issue of preparing for prayer. Preparation is clearly an important part of making sure that the actual event of the *salah* happens in the best possible way. In this section, we are going to focus on the idea of planning. So, this very much relates to the scheduling aspect of the prayer. We will address the issues we may face and the barriers we may come across that get in the way of praying on time. It is addressing the regularity and consistency point more than perhaps the quality point at this stage.

But there a couple of key questions we need to ask ourselves:

**Do we fit life around prayer?**

**Or do we fit prayer around life?**

Before we get into the practicalities of planning *salah*, it is really important to address the psychology and thinking process that we have when we consider prayer and everything else in our life. Of course, we know that *salah* is the most important action of our lives. We have said that and we keep on saying that. Reminding ourselves that *salah* is the first action of a believer for which we are accountable. *Salah* is the greatest way to demonstrate our commitment and devotion to our Lord in Whom we have claimed belief and submission.

So when we are asking these questions, what we are really asking ourselves is really who comes first? Does God really come first for us or is it other people? Is it ourselves? Whose priorities matter most? It is telling that most experience the idea that when it comes to prayer as something we are always inserting and fitting into what might

be the normal or the core basis of our lives. When we think about our core responsibilities, we think very much about our work and our family. What we need to do to earn a living and what we need to do to look after those immediately around us. That is typically what forms the bulk of most of our lives then *salah* is inserted along the way.

Now even if we pray regularly, think about it the other way round. Where we ignore everything else as a starting point and say no before even the considerations of earning a living and before work, family, being worried about parents, spouse, and children, that actually *salah* comes first. That is the stake in the ground, milestone, core points and highlights of the day. Everything else fits in around that.

That is really important because as we come to think about big decisions as well as micro decisions, whether or not we are going to start or do a particular activity in the next two hours will depend on fitting that thing around our *salah*. Rather than just prioritising that thing without thinking about prayer and prayer being an afterthought. Similarly, if for example we are planning a trip. We will think first and foremost around our *salah* and how our *salah* be impacted because of this trip.

Sometimes you might even think of the context of an actual job or work. We might have a job offer to work in a particular company or move country. Sometimes it can be really significant decisions. Do we actually think what is the impact and effect on the consistency and the quality of our *salah*?

So really have a think about this and try to move to a scenario, psychology, and mindset where you are really thinking about your *salah* as a priority. As the reason for why you exist to manifest this submission to Allah through this most core activity. Everything else being supplementary and fitting everything else around it. This would be an appropriate psychology to align with the idea that we are going to be accounted for this particular action first and everything else later. Also, the Prophetic advice and guidance that if we get *salah* right then everything else will fall into place.

### Planning the most important meeting

- Scheduling the time
- Being open and transparent
- Considering the practicalities
- Planning together and praying together

What are some of the considerations that we need to bear in mind for the most important meeting that we have?

**Scheduling the time:** This is a very powerful tip. Make sure that *salah* is in your diary, calendar or whatever you use to schedule your day. Most of us now will use something because with so many things going on it is hard to keep track for everything that you are responsible for and all the commitments that you have. So schedule a time. Put it into your diary. When you look at your diary each day, just as you see your meetings, appointments, commitments, phone calls that you need to make or are expecting to receive that you actually see the *salah* in your diary set at specific times when you are going to establish the prayer.

**Being open and transparent:** I am putting this here in the context of praying in social situations where it may not be easy for us to do that. It may not be something that we feel like we can do easily without awkwardness but it is very important for us to be open and transparent. So when you start a new job or in other kinds of situations, you are on a plane or train, you are next to someone who may not understand your time for prayer has come, just be open, transparent, and clear. Share with your colleagues at work or family members who may not for example be up to scratch with their prayers or strangers that you need to depart for a moment to take some time to meet your Lord.

Sometimes we feel shy. We feel an awkwardness about doing this but actually it saves us a lot of hassle later down the line. You cannot constantly hide. This is not something we are supposed to hide away from people. We

do not have to continually shout about it either but when the time comes, we should be confident, transparent, and clear with those around us with what we need to do and why we need to do it. Typically, you will find most people are completely respectful of that so I do think it is an important thing for us to do and as a team of believers. To show a common front when it comes to the importance of *salah* in our lives.

**Considering the practicalities:** You are going on a trip or journey. When planning that journey think about where you are going to pray. Consider the practicalities of where you will be praying and how you will do *wudhu* for example. Just think about those things and make sure you have planned appropriately in advance. This links to the first item because if you have scheduled it in your diary then it will help for you to have considered the practicalities of meetings or the things that you have planned.

**Planning together and praying together:** This point is about togetherness. In your home, plan and pray together. In your workplace, bring the Muslims to pray together. I remember when I was working in the financial services industry many years ago. One of the things that became a great feature and culture of the people in our particular firm was the fact that we had scheduled prayer times. They were in our work calendars. We could plan around them; we could see them and we could turn up together to pray most of the time. If we were not able to make the congregational time it acted as a reminder but the togetherness was really important.

SubhanAllah many years later people would say who used to work with me at that the time that the reason they started praying and they kept being consistent in their prayers was because of that culture and environment that we had in and amongst ourselves. So you can be someone of influence whether you are in your workplace or family. The idea is having these conversations, planning and praying together, especially at home if you have children. Making something of a special occasion that you are going to meet for prayer when those occasions arise. It is a really important aspect of all of this and helps give encouragement to each other.

### Step 3

## Preparing for Prayer

### Initial Mindset

Now what I want us to think about is the initial mindset that we have when the time for prayer comes. The question is:

**When the time for prayer comes**

**What is our initial feeling?**

**What is our initial response?**

I am talking of the particular moment when we realise that the time for *salah* is due. Unfortunately for many people that occurrence does not even happen. The thought does not even take place because they have become so distant from regular and timely prayers that the time window passes by without any consideration for the *salah*.

Of course, that is on the worst end of the scale but *insha 'Allah* for most of us who are committed, we want to improve the consistency and the regularity as well as the quality of our prayers.

We will all have that moment within each of the windows in which the prayers can be offered and it occurs to us that it is time to pray. Now that might be because you have set it in your schedule and the reminder has popped up in your calendar. It might be because someone is calling you or it might be because there is a congregational prayer and the set time has come. Whatever it is when that thought occurs to us and it sort of often interrupts whatever else we are up to, then what is our initial feeling and response?

### Managing our initial mindset

- Relief or burden?
- Happiness or frustration?
- Reverence or contempt?
- Accordingly **do we hasten, delay or miss?**

So here are some possibilities whenever we are thinking of managing our initial mindset.

#### Do we feel relief or burden?

Is it that when the time for the *salah* comes, we feel a sort of sense of relief that thank God we have the opportunity to stand in front of God again or do we feel it is a bit of a burden, that this is a chore, I wish I did not really have to do this.

#### Happiness or frustration?

Is there a friction potentially within our hearts when it comes to having to stand in front of Allah in our *salah* or do we feel this positivity, a happiness almost a privilege of the moment? Think about an invitation that you receive. Sometimes there are moments might even be with relatives, friends, or acquaintances where they invite us to see them. We do not want to say no because we do not want to come across as rude but we are not particularly excited about it either. Sometimes that can be the case and attitude when it comes to our *salah* and responding to this divine invitation. It is important for us to be aware about this within our hearts as to what is going on and why.

#### Reverence or contempt?

Do we feel a sense of respect and awe in front of Allah or is it a contempt? Now contempt you may feel is a strong word to use but it is the opposite. It is this idea that we have not given Allah His true estimation. Allah Himself says in the *Qur'an* in three places that they have not given God His true estimation.

They have not understood the rank, status, superiority, magnitude, vastness, greatness and the majesty of their Lord. We underestimate our Lord. It is because we have forgotten, become heedless or unaware of who He is and who we are in relation to Him – that is why at times we might feel the sense of burden, frustration or contempt as far as *salah* is concerned. The emotions we all want to feel are a sense of relief, happiness, and reverence.

Let's give some examples and then we can talk about how we go about fixing our mindset although the main purpose here is simply for you to be more consciously aware, self-reflective and perhaps even self-critical about how you respond to the idea of prayer in the first place. Depending on the emotion, how we feel, the practical response will be to either:

**Hasten:** meaning we want to get on with the *salah*, we want to do it and we want to be in front of Allah.

**Delay the prayer:** meaning we do not want to necessarily miss it but we regularly delay the prayer which suggests it is not a high priority for us amongst our different commitments if we regularly do so.

Or **we miss it** altogether which is a complete sense of abandonment which obviously is a grave crime in front of Allah not to respond to that divine invitation.

There are different emotions that one can feel:

## Feeling awe

'Ali ibn Abu Talib, whenever time of prayer came, used to shake and his face used to change colour. So he was asked, "What is the matter with you, O Commander of the believers?"

And he would say, "There has come the time of 'trust' which God 'offered to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof' [Chapter 33, The Joint Forces, Verse 72] and I have borne it."

[The Book of the Secrets of Prayer, Imam al-Ghazali]

This is really powerful. This is an example of where in response to the *salah* and the response to the idea of prayer that there is this really significant feeling of awe, smallness and the burden of responsibility. I am not saying that *salah* is a burden but the burden of responsibility that sits upon us. This verse that Ali quotes is from the end of *Surah al-Azhab* where Allah says: We gave the trust or presented the trust to the heavens and the earth and mountains.

What is this trust? The trust is the responsibility that we have because of the fact that we have free will. The mountains, earth, the heavens everything around us pretty much does not function or operate from free will. It operates exactly the way that Allah has decided in line with His will.

As per other verses in the *Qur'an*, they are manifesting an Islam, submission and subservience but without having the opportunity to do otherwise. We have the opportunity as human beings and this is why Ali is saying I have borne this trust and *salah* is the great test of our true commitment. That we have opportunity not to turn up or not to pray well. Or on the other hand to pray well, be consistent and to be keen about our prayer. We have that opportunity and that is the test.

What is contained in this attitude towards *salah* and in this process of prayer is a test that reflects in all other aspects of life. What is our attitude and how we do we really approach this whole relationship with the divine? So in this particular case he felt that burden of responsibility. It gives us an example of how reflective and deep the companions of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* were. The best amongst them.

Here is another example:

## Finding comfort

Abdullah ibn Muhammad reported: My father and I departed to see our father-in-law from the Ansar, visiting him as he was ill. The time for prayer arrived and he said to one of his relatives, "Young lady, bring me water for ablution **that I might pray and find comfort therein.**"

We objected to his statement, but he said, "I heard the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) say, '**Stand, O Bilal, and comfort us with the prayer** (i.e. by calling the Adhan).'"

[Abu Dawud]

Look at how he has expressed himself with regards to the *salah*. One might look at this narration and think maybe he was not enjoying the company of his relatives, it was too much and I need a break! Give me the prayer, let me find my break within the prayer. But the idea is *salah* is always a relief from the worldly interactions and events because as believers, we are in this world but ultimately we know that we belong somewhere else. The *salah* almost transports us to this other place in some way and so it is interesting what happens in the second statement.

Look at how the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* addresses Bilal his companion when he is asking him to call the *adhan*. It is not calling the *adhan* but 'stand and comfort us with prayer'. *Ar-rihna* in the Arabic – *Rihna* – give us *raha*. *Raha* means rest, relaxation, and relief. Do we find that sense of comfort, relief and relaxation in our *salah*?

This is one of the famous narrations where the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is reported to have said:

## Finding delight

The Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "... **my greatest delight** has been placed in the prayer."

[An-Nasa'i]

*Qurrata 'ayn* - literally we would translate it as coolness of the eyes. It is an Arabic phrase. I always think when that phrase comes up of those images you have of people who might be in a spa with two cucumbers on their eyes – the coolness of their eyes. If that is something that you have done before, it will give your eyes relief. It freshens you up. But that kind of sense of relief and freshness, do we get that from the *salah*?

What is really nice about this Prophetic phrase is that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* did not say I find my greatest delight in the prayer. He said my greatest delight has been placed in the prayer. It is as if inherent somewhere in that *salah* is this treasure and you have to enter into it to really find it. It is very easy to pray but not really pray. It is easy to pray but not get much out of it and not to feel that joy, delight, honour of the opportunity.

The next time prayer comes think about how you are actually feeling inside. I think for a lot of us as believers happens by the process of self-reflection, challenging the way that we feel and think about certain things. Questioning ourselves about how we feel. At certain points in time, we might feel we can pray later, I am busy right now, something else is going on. It could be anything. You could be in the middle of watching a movie, football match or cricket. You could be in the middle of a work situation where you are really busy or you have an intense project deadline.

You are busy out and about whatever it might be. There could be all sorts of scenarios as a result owing to our temporary weakness that we actually put off the prayer or we just think we wish it could come another time rather than realising, no actually this comes first. *Salah* comes first because Allah comes first. Allah comes first because our purpose is to know Him, find Him, to be close and connected to Him and that is number one. Everything else really is extra. That is why it is important to start this whole process with a positive mental attitude towards the prayer and towards this opportunity to meet with the Lord of the heavens and earth.

#### Step 4

## Preparing for Prayer

### Wudhu

After we have realised that it is time for prayer then the first thing we need to ask ourselves is do we have our *wudhu*. The key that we are trying to discover here is really about the significance of *wudhu*. Our approach to *wudhu* can reveal much about our overall attitude towards *salah*.

### The key to prayer

The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace), said, "The key to Paradise is prayer, and **the key to prayer is ablution.**"

[at-Tirmidhi]

**But why is it required?**

**How does it unlock prayer?**

The second part often at times is not perhaps as well understood or internalised. Remember when we are saying the key to paradise is through a meaningful prayer not just any old prayer. Similarly for our *wudhu* to unlock prayer in the same way that we want prayer to unlock paradise is that the *wudhu* needs to be of a certain standard. So we need to ask ourselves why exactly is it required and how does it unlock prayer?

The command to be in a state of *wudhu* when the time for *salah* comes is in the *Qur'an* itself.

These are the four key obligatory components of *wudhu*.

- Washing of the face
- Hands up to the elbows
- Wiping the head
- Washing the feet up to the ankles

## The key to prayer

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِذَا قُتِلُوا إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَغَسَلُوا وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَيْدِيَهُمْ إِلَى  
الْمَرَافِقِ وَأَمْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِهِمْ وَأَرْجُلَهُمْ إِلَى الْكَعْبَيْنِ وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ جُنُبًا  
فَأَطْفِئُوا وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَى أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُم مِّنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَنَسْتُمْ  
الْأُنثَى فَلَمْ يُجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِوُجُوهِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ  
يُنْذِرُ مَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيَجْعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ حَرَجٍ وَلَكِنْ يُرِيدُ لِيُطَهِّرَكُمْ وَرِيضَكُمْ  
يُضَمُّ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

You who believe, when you are about to pray, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, wipe your heads, wash your feet up to the ankles and, if you are in a state of major ritual impurity, wash your whole body. If any of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intercourse, and can find no water, then take some clean sand and wipe your face and hands with it. God does not wish to place any burden on you: He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful. [Chapter 5, The Feast, Verse 6]

transform  
my prayer

If for example you are in a situation where there is not much water or perhaps a rush situation, know that these are the obligatory key parts. There are a lot of technical questions about *wudhu*. What applies, what does not apply, can I wipe this? Can I do that? This is not the time or the place for those kinds of technical questions.

At the moment, we are just trying to understand the spirit of *wudhu* and understand where it fits in. But just to emphasise this point, I want to bring your attention to the end of this verse which I find to be really beautiful. Allah addresses some of the concerns or the issues that we have in our minds. He says:

### God does not wish to place any burden on you!

This tells us something about the nature of our Lord. It should also help us to relate to Him in a particular way and to understand His intent is not to burden us. So therefore, let us not see *wudhu* as a burden. Especially at a young age and sometimes later, we find *wudhu* as a hassle. What is the point and we rationalise it in our minds like I am clean so why do I need to wash my face again or my arms or whatever because we are missing the point of exactly what the actual purpose is.

We should remind ourselves about this section of the verse. That God does not wish to place any burden on you. He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you so that you may be thankful. So *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* has instituted the *wudhu* as a way to help us purify ourselves. That does not just refer to external cleanliness, rather it refers to the cleansing or the purification of our inner self as we are about to see and to complete or perfect His blessing upon you so that you may be grateful.

I mean that is amazing. This gives us a sense of, if anything, our attitude towards *wudhu* and then to the *salah* itself should be one of gratitude i.e. the fact that we have been shown and guided to the way in which we should present and purify ourselves actually is a great blessing. It is no ordinary matter. Look at some of these Prophetic narrations with regards to *wudhu* where the Messenger of God *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* said:

## No ordinary matter

'Amr ibn 'Abasah reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "None of you begins the ablution and rinses their mouth and nose but that **the sins of their face, mouth, and nose fall away**.

They do not wash their face as God commanded them but that **the sins of their jaws fall away** with the water. They do not wash their arms up to the elbows but that **the sins of their hands to their fingertips fall away** with the water.

They do not wipe their head but that the **sins of their head to their temples fall away** with the water. They do not wash their feet to their ankles but that **the sins of their feet to their tips fall away** with the water...

... If they stand to pray, thanking, praising, and glorifying God as He deserves and **devoting their heart only to God**, their sins will depart from them like the day they were born from their mother."

[Muslim]

After *wudhu* when they are being purified and stand to pray, thanking, praising and glorifying God as He deserves and devoting their heart only to God. An indication clearly in this narration, the importance of not just standing there but being fully devoted, their sins will depart from them like the day they were born from their mother.

That is the power of true prayer, a true *salah* which is backed up and finds its foundation on a solid well conducted *wudhu*. It is the process of inner purification. It is helpful for us to be mindful when we are standing and performing our *wudhu* of exactly what it is that we should be doing. Then we will be more careful about the way in which we go about the *wudhu* and the attitude that we have. Actually, the humility that we should have when reflecting on our sins, ingratitude, forgetfulness and giving ourselves the opportunity to go through this action which is largely a symbolic one of purifying our inner selves.

In the Hereafter the *wudhu* is correlated with this idea of illumination in this particular *hadith*:

## Effects in the hereafter

Abu Hurairah reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "Verily, **my nation will be called on the Day of Resurrection as brightly radiant from the traces of ablution**. Whoever among you is able to extend their radiance, let them do so." [al-Bukhari, Muslim]

So the idea is a perfect ablution. It does not mean we splish splash everywhere and water goes all over the place. We know that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* advised conservatism in the usage of water. What we take from this is this idea of this illumination, purifying our inner selves and brightening our inner selves that will be shown and reflected in the hereafter by way of light.

Umar ibn al-Khattab reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "Whoever performs ablution in the best manner and says, 'I bear witness there is no god but God alone, without any partners, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger. O God, make me among those who repent and make me among those who purify themselves,' then the eight gates of Paradise will be opened for them and they may enter through whichever gate they wish." [at-Tirmidhi]

Again, a phenomenal narration. One that indicates the great acceptance and the power of a really conscious *wudhu*. One that is really followed with this reconnection of the *shahadatayn* - the two aspects of bearing witness. To the oneness of God and to the Messengership of His final Messenger and servant *Muhammad* son of *Abdullah*, descendent of *Ibrahim*.

Then asking *Allah* to make us amongst those who repent and who purify ourselves – *taharah*. The gates of paradise are creaking open in response to such an action and statements. Just to summarise with some key points:

### Key points

- **Make yourself and your self presentable**
- An act of respect and reverence
- Take a few moments before you begin
- Begin in God's name
- Use water sparingly

**Make yourself and your inner self presentable:** The idea of *wudhu* is partly to cleanse yourself externally but fundamentally it is about presenting your inner self to Allah *Subhanahu wa ta-ala*. Think about any time that you get ready to go and meet anybody or go out of the house, we take care of our appearance. We have a certain sense of self-respect or shame, dignity, self-esteem where we do not consider it appropriate to turn up in front of others in a way where we are dishevelled and not looking after our appearance.

**An act of respect and reverence:** It is through the process of *wudhu* that we are symbolically purifying our inner self so we can stand in front of Allah as cleanly and as presentably as possible. Think about it in this way. I am about to meet the Lord of the Heavens and the Earth. I am about to meet my Creator. I am about to meet the One who has given me everything I have and I am about to meet the One to whom I will soon return.

Let me show my best self to Him. Let me cleanse myself as much as possible before meeting and standing before Him. It is an act of respect and reverence so be conscious of the fact that you are preparing for this meeting.

**Take a few moments before you begin:** Take some time before you begin the prayer and do not just rush in. Before you start the *wudhu* maybe put a little reminder in your bathroom or where it is you are doing your *wudhu*. Perhaps on the mirror or in front of you. You can write something meaningful to remind you to think about what you are about to do. Think about the light on the last day whatever it might be. Something that reminds you about the connection between what you are doing now and how that connects to the prayer and how that will result *insha'Allah* in the hereafter.

**Begin in God's name:** To say *bismillah* is emphasised as an important part of when you begin *wudhu* and generally speaking with lots of things but especially with *wudhu* it is very heavily emphasised to begin in God's name.

**Use water sparingly:** *Alhamdulillah* we are blessed with having an endless water supply in our homes. We turn on the tap and we do not even have to think and water flows. These things desensitise us as it makes us forget how lucky we are to have these things. It is important for us to use water sparingly because it speaks of a certain attitude of not taking things for granted. It is mentioned in one narration that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* advised his companion that be sparing in your use of water even if you are by a running stream.

People often ask can I say *bismillah* and the supplications during or after the *wudhu* in the bathroom. It is fine to say these things when you are in the bathroom if that is where you are doing your *wudhu*. It is separate from the act of relieving yourself. Whilst relieving yourself, you should not take Allah's name but once that activity is done then the bathroom is like any other room in that sense so taking God's name during this process is perfectly acceptable in that situation.

## Step 5

# Preparing for Prayer

## Removing Physical Distractions

One of the things that we need to take care of and think about carefully is removing physical distractions. These can take many forms and what we are trying to do here is think about the things that if we do not pay attention to before the *salah* will end up occupying our attention during the *salah*.

## Removing physical distractions

'Aisha reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "You should not pray if food has been served or if you are resisting the urge to pass urine or stools."  
[Muslim]

So here we are very much thinking of the internal bodily distractions.

This is quite a well-known piece of advice especially the first part that you should not pray if food has been served. Each of the prayers has its window in terms of timing in which you can pray on time. If it is the case that the decision comes up, should we eat first or pray first, the advice of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is that food should be consumed first and then the prayer should be offered.

This will obviously need to be understood in context. It will depend on the specific circumstances in terms of what we should do and how we should do it.

Bear in mind of course the narration or the advice is there so we are not in our prayers in a state where we are thinking about the food we are about to eat. We should be satiated and satisfied to a degree such as that when we pray, we do not have that distraction. One of the things that can take place if you look at the opposite scenario is where we overeat and then try to offer prayer. Then the overeating will actually affect us so we should appreciate the advice here that we are hearing the words of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* who was full of moderation and ate very little.

If you look at the various narrations and what we understand in the way in which the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* consumed food, it was very sparing even when there was plentiful food available. We know food was often not available for long stretches of time. What is being said here is that if the time for food comes and you have the window to pray on time then eat first in moderation and then proceed to the *salah*.

Or if you are resisting the urge to pass urine or stools. Sometimes what happens is we celebrate the fact that we have our *wudhu* when the time for prayer comes. We do not have to do it again but that it is not a great attitude to have. What might happen is we feel slightly the urge to relieve ourselves but, in our minds, we know if we go and do that, we will have to complete our *wudhu* again before we pray so sometimes we can cheat ourselves and say actually I am just going to quickly pray and then I will relieve myself afterwards.

It goes without saying such an attitude will only result in distraction during the prayer itself so there is a certain maturity we should have when it comes to these things to relieve ourselves fully. You are trying to get yourself ready so that you can be completely connected, devoted and concentrating in the act of prayer. So relieving and satiating oneself to the degree that is needed are all important parts of removing the physical distractions.

We move onto a different type of distraction now which are the things that might pass under your eyes that will distract you.

'A'isha reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) prayed in a garment which had designs over it, so he said, "Take it back to Abu Jahm and bring me a plain garment from him, **because its designs have distracted me.**" [Muslim]

'A'isha had a thick curtain and she screened the side of her house with it. The Prophet said to her, "Please remove it from my sight, **for its pictures are coming to my mind in my prayers.**" [al-Bukhari]

Interestingly in these two narrations that are up here, the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is referring to designs or patterns that were distracting him either on his clothing or on curtains in the environment around him. There is an indication from these two narrations that we do not want to have any stimulus around us when we pray that is going to affect, divert and distract us even if they are amongst the things that we normally used to.

Ideally what we can see from these two narrations is the area of prayer should be as simple and clean as possible without too many complications of things getting in the way and distracting us. We can extend from this in a busy household with kids for example, things can end up all over the place. We should take the time to try to make sure the area of prayer is cleaned up in such a way that things are not going to disturb or distract us.

There is also an interesting sort of reflection here on the issue of prayer mats. Often times prayer mats are extremely ornate and specific in their designs so certainly by virtue of looking at these two narrations it would suggest such type of designs are not really ideal. We know that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* as a default would pray on a natural surface. He would pray on the mud or sand depending on what the situation was. They would lay something out to protect him from rocks and stones. Think about keeping the area where you pray natural, clean and simple.

There is another aspect which is in the context of children and noise generally speaking. Starting with the noise part, we want to try and minimise the extent to which we can hear noise. If there are people around us who are speaking loudly then it helps if one is able to get that noise minimised. Of course, if we are in a noisy environment, it does not mean we cannot focus but it does help. It is not an excuse to not to be able to focus in *salah*. There are many things we can think of that we are able to focus on even when there is hustle and bustle going on but if it is something obviously we can attend to, then that would help.

It is important to try and time our prayers especially when we have very young children in such a way that we will not be distracted by the crying, screaming or sometimes the hilarious kinds of things that babies and toddlers especially might do around us whilst we are praying. This is a challenge because there are already difficulties in managing the parental responsibilities in that scenario. But if you are in a situation where you can share the responsibilities with your spouse if a child is being difficult at a certain point in time, then you can alternate your prayers. Ideally of course you should pray together but some of these practicalities can be done so you can try to minimise the extent to which the baby or child is distracting.

When the children are slightly older, you want to try and encourage them to pray with you and slowly they will mature to a situation where they will understand what you are doing and they want to join in. Even in that there is sometimes a distraction. One needs to have a degree of patience and think forward about the fact that engaging with one's children in prayer will help in the long term for them to develop a love and understanding for the *salah*.

It sounds like a simple bit of advice but it is an important one because often things at time do catch our eye in *salah* or we hear things that we could have avoided. It is important to set the scene for ourselves and the physical environment so we can concentrate as much as possible so that we are not distracted.

## Step 6

# Preparing for Prayer

## Removing Mental Distractions

Now we get to the really important part of the process which is how are we going to remove the mental distractions. How are we going to clear our minds and our hearts from the kinds of things that end up typically disturbing us in our prayer?

### Removing mental distractions

- Facing the *Ka'bah*
- Lowering the gaze

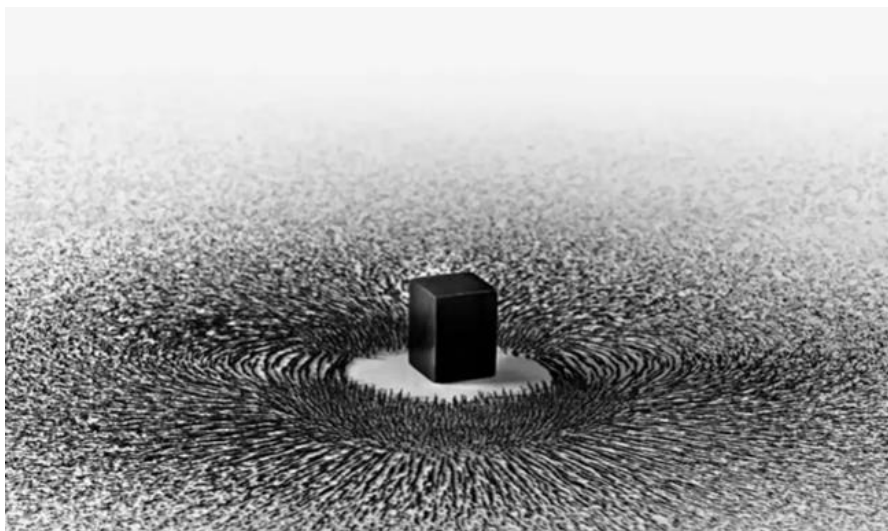
If you look at these initially, you will think what does that have to do with removing mental distractions. What I want to really touch on is the way in which these physical actions or movements done consciously should help us clear our minds from various mental distractions. The point to mention here is that mental distractions are not removed by focusing on the particular things that are getting in our way or into our mind.

We may have project deadlines, upcoming meetings or things that are playing on our mind. It might be some conflict we have had with somebody or various issues that are causing us stress. We cannot think them away directly. What we can do is fill our minds and hearts with other things that we are focused on and then put those mundane thoughts into some sort of perspective or flush them out altogether.

If we are really thinking about what we are doing in our *salah*, then the first thing you should really think about once you cleared your space for prayer is that you are orienteering yourself towards the *Ka'bah*. This should be a conscious action. When we are in environments where we know the *qibla*, direction of prayer, we automatically orient ourselves physically without even sometimes giving a second thought to the *Ka'bah* itself. That is something which we end up losing from the spirit of *salah*.

The *Ka'bah* is a symbol of monotheism, the oneness of *Allah*, of devotion and dedication that we are to have towards *Allah*. It is the sacred house, the house built by Ibrahim *alayhi salam*, *al bayt al-haram* in the *Qur'an*. Ibrahim *alayhi salam* and Ismail his son supplicated to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* while constructing it. Amongst those supplications that they made in addition to the supplication for the coming of Prophet Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was: 'Our Lord, accept from us, you are the All-Hearing, the All Knowing'.

This artwork shows the magnetism of the *Ka'bah*.



Think about the way in which our lives should be revolving around *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*, God Most Perfect, Most High. Think about the way that the angels are encircling the throne of Allah. Thinking of the fact that I am now facing towards the *Ka'bah*. In the words of Ibrahim *alayhi salam* in the *Qur'an* and actually as per the way in which the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would sometimes begin the prayer:

‘That I have directed my face towards the One who originated the heavens and the earth. As a pure monotheist leaning towards *Allah* and I am not of those who associated any partners or anything with *Allah*’.

So make your physical turning towards the *Ka'bah* not just a physical turning but an inward turning of the heart towards *Allah*. If you let your mind cast itself forward to the *Ka'bah* whether or not you have visited the *Ka'bah* before in Makkah, you will be able to visualise it. We understand the scene of the house around which people are revolving. Let us bring that to mind as we stand in front of *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*. We are preparing to enter into this meeting and conversation with *Allah*. Then in doing so, it will start to put things into perspective and to help to flush other considerations out.

As we turn our bodies and we stand facing the *Ka'bah*, the next thing we do is that we lower our gaze. The lowering of the gaze is one of those things that we will do almost automatically without real consideration for the significance of this very subtle eye movement in which you are lowering your eyes. It needs to be thought of in this way.

Am I just lowering my gaze because that is what you do in *salah*? Is it the natural way you do things or am I lowering my gaze as a result of the conscious reflection, understanding and awareness of the magnitude of the One before whom I stand? Is our gaze almost being forced down by our inward reflection and understanding of what we are about to do or is it something we just do habitually?

It is really important to think about that because if the lowering of the gaze in our *salah* is not reflective of an inward humility, submission and a surrender to *Allah* then it does not really stand or count for much. Now I am not saying that we should therefore look left, right and centre. That is something that is completely inappropriate to do in *salah* but think about a conscious lowering of the gaze. When you stand initially at the place of prayer keeping your head up, then lower your gaze reflecting on the majesty of your Lord. Then your head and eyes automatically drop to a degree.

Lowering the gaze is something which applies not only in the context of prayer but also outside and it is significant to think about the connection between the two. The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is reported to have said that the core characteristic of this *ummah* is *haya'a* which is ‘shame.’ Meaning not in a way to be ashamed but the idea of shame meaning in the context of self-awareness that we carry a certain sense of dignity about us and around us. This modesty is a core characteristic of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

In one narration, he was reported to have said that if you do not have modesty, *haya'a*, then just do as you wish. It is almost as if someone who has lost their sense of modesty or shame before others especially before *Allah*, then

what hope is there then if someone has such little consideration for the way they are, act and the consequences of their actions.

We also know that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would lower his gaze as a default. It was a norm even outside of the *salah* as he would walk around. He would keep himself to himself meaning he would mind his business. He would lower his gaze out of humility in front of the people but especially because of his constant awareness of the presence of *Allah*. It is not just in *salah* that he was aware of Allah but he was aware of Allah outside the prayer as well in which it was appropriate to keep his gaze lowered. So we know him to be a dynamic, effective and successful leader. He also had this amazing humility, modesty and shyness.

In English, there is a word - self-effacing, little to no regard for our standing in front of the people, our rank, and our name. That we have that complete humility and we let Allah decide that He is going to give us rank or a good name amongst others but we ourselves have a great shyness and humility. We do not regard ourselves to be much. We have a humility.

This is such an important quality and it is symbolised throughout the *salah* because we are bowing and prostrating. We are showing this humble submission before Allah and it really does start with this lowering of the gaze at the beginning of the prayer.

So really have a think about these first two things. These two actions of simply facing the *Ka'bah* and lowering the gaze which usually happens for most of us completely automatically. Something we give very little thought to. It is important for us to try to make them conscious action. A conscious reorientation of the body and then a conscious lowering of the gaze. Then we can really start to increase our reflection and preparation as we are about to begin the special occasion of *salah*.

## Step 7

# Preparing for Prayer

## Removing Mental Distractions

### Removing mental distractions

- Facing the *Ka'bah*
- Lowering the gaze
- Pausing for thought: the Golden Minute
- The *Iqamah*

The next one is pausing for thought. To introduce the idea of what I call the Golden Minute and the next one is the *Iqamah*. The *Iqamah* literally refers to the statements that establish the prayer – the time for prayer has come.

Let us take the first issue of pausing for thought - the Golden Minute. What I am referring to here is the idea that between the time that we stand in the place for prayer and we have lowered our gaze and the time that we raise our hands to say *Allahu Akbar* is a consideration for how much time is actually elapsing. Normally for most of us,

it is literally just a handful of seconds. We stand in the place of prayer and raise our hands, *Allahu Akbar* and we start. What I am trying to encourage you to do is to take some time just up to a minute to really get yourself into the zone.

Look at this narration of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* that gives a very famous piece of advice:

## Pausing for thought: the Golden Minute

Abu Ayyub reported: A man came to the Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) and he said, "O Messenger of God, teach me something and make it concise." The Prophet said, "When you stand for your prayer, pray as if you are saying farewell. Do not say anything (to people) for which you will have to apologise, and give up any desire to acquire what people have."

[Ibn Majah]

Pray a farewell prayer as if it is the last prayer that you will offer before your soul is taken and you pass onto the realm of the hereafter. Now think about that for a second. If you knew that your next prayer was going to be the last one and after that you would have no more chances whatsoever, what would that prayer be like? Before you begin, would you not pause? Would you not brace yourself? Would you not think and take some time? Without a shadow of a doubt, you would.

In fact, we would be worried to start too soon. All of a sudden, our sense of time will completely change because we feel that urgency. We feel its importance now because the reality of the next life is dawned upon us if we knew for a fact that the next prayer was going to be our last one. It takes time to think about the fact of our mortality that we will soon pass from this world and that we have no guarantees about the next hour or minute or second even. If *Allah* wills, we will continue breathing and functioning but if He does not then we will not.

Having this conscious awareness of our mortality and thinking that this could be my very last prayer helps us to get into the mindset that really makes us commit ourselves fully to this action that we are about to enter into.

Here is a famous statement of one of the early pious *Muslims*, around 200 years after the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*:

## Pausing for thought: the Golden Minute

When Hatim al-Asamm was asked about his prayer, he said, "When it is near the time for prayer, I perform a thorough *Wudhu* and go to where I am going to pray and sit down there until I become fully attentive to what I am about to do.

I then stand up to pray, imagining that the *Ka'bah* is in front of my eyes, the *Sirat* (Bridge over Hellfire) is in front of me, Paradise is to my right, Hellfire is to my left and the Angel of Death is behind me.

I imagine that it is the last prayer I am about to fulfil, I stand in hope and fear and recite the *Takbir* (*Allahu Akbar*) while having full attention [...]

Afterwards, I wonder whether or not my prayer has been accepted!"

He actually sits down which is encouraged because when you sit down you cannot start your prayer from that position. You are almost forced into not starting too soon or not starting too quickly. Wonder whether my prayer has been accepted – out of humility, thinking was this even worthy of being offered to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*.

I find this to be an amazing narration and it is not something that we are saying that everybody must do exactly as this individual. What it does do is give us an indication of the validity and recommendation to really take your time before you begin. To visualise, to be creative in thinking about the hereafter, thinking about your death, putting things into perspective, realising what matters and who matters most, thinking about your blessings and the gratitude to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* for your blessings.

That really encourages you to commit yourself again to the *salah* because *salah* amongst other things is a way of manifesting our gratitude to *Allah*. Thinking about the difficulties that you are facing, but reminding yourself that only Allah can lift those difficulties from you so we can go to our *salah* with a sense of need and dependency.

I really strongly recommend that when you come to the place of prayer to just stand. Take some deep breaths and reflect on all of these things. You will find just automatically as you are doing this, that other kinds of thoughts, whatever has been on your mind will slowly *insha'Allah* start to flush away, and that you are really starting to get into the zone. You are realising that this meeting is about to begin.

Sometimes I give the analogy of the servant or peasant in the field who has been invited by the King of the land to come and visit him in the royal palace. This servant comes dishevelled and dusty from work perhaps and now has cleansed themselves in the courtyard, performed their *wudhu* and has come up to the palace gates and the door is about to open but it is up to them when they want to open that door.

So just imagine yourself. You have that opportunity to meet with royalty directly which is what the *salah* is. You have the ability to meet with the King of all kings and queens directly and you are about to open the gate for this interaction as soon as you raise your hands. So just before you do, brace yourself, really think, take a deep breath, and then go in. It makes a massive difference to the concentration and the quality of the rest of your *salah*.

Then the *Iqamah*. In my experience, many people do not offer or say the *Iqamah* when they are praying at home or on their own which is very important and beneficial to do so.

One narration that will encourage us to do this:

## The *Iqamah*

'Uqbah ibn 'Amir said, "I heard the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) say, "Your Lord is amazed with a shepherd high in the mountains (i.e. with no one else around) who makes the call for prayer and then prays.

God says, "Look at my servant, he calls the *Adhan* and *Iqamah* for prayer and fears me. I have forgiven my servant and admitted him to Paradise.""

[Abu Dawud, An-Nisa'i, ibn Hibban]

Normally the *Adhan* and the *Iqamah* are associated with help and encouragement for people to gather for prayer. Even if there is no one else around, you can think about that in the context of you gathering yourself. You are getting all the various bits of you in order and in position, your mind, body and heart. You are calling yourself to attention and focus. Of course, never underestimating the fact that *Allah* illuminates such occasions of remembrance with the presence of angels. That is also something to be aware and conscious of in some way that when we are calling the *Iqamah* that these statements are witnessed even if not by other people specifically. Look at the words.

## The *Iqamah*

*Allahu Akbar* (x2): God is greater

*Ash-hadu alla ilaha illallah*: I testify that there is no god but God

*Ash-hadu anna Muhammadar-rasulullah*: I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God

*Hayya 'alas-salat, Hayya 'alal-falah*. Come to **prayer**, come to **success**

*Qad qamatis-salat* (x2): The time for prayer has come

*Allahu Akbar* (x2): God is greater

*La ilaha illallah*: There is no god but God

These are the words that we are saying when say the *Iqamah*. We are saying it in Arabic. We need to be conscious and aware of what we are saying. If we can appreciate what we are saying, we will really get ourselves into the zone. We are declaring *Allah's* greatness and His Oneness as a deity worthy of worship. We are reminding ourselves about the status and the Messengership of Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. Then we are saying *Hayya 'alas salah, Hayya 'alā-ifalah*, come to prayer, come to success and then *Qad qamatis-salah*. It is like a big announcement that the time for prayer has come. It really gets us in the zone then *Allahu Akbar* and *la ilaha illAllah*.

We have really reminded ourselves about the things that matter, what we believe and what we have reinforced in our minds – the importance of the status of the *salah*. Then we are ready to raise our hands, say *Allahu Akbar* and fold our hands.

But up until this point, just to summarise, we have gone through a number of different things which will really help us to make sure the quality of our prayer is high.

So lots of it comes down to what we do outside of the prayer. Everything from that initial moment when we know the time for prayer has come or planning the next to be sure we will be regular in our prayers. It occurs to us that the time has come. We think about our mindset and think positively towards it. Do a thorough and mindful *wudhu*, remove physical distractions, lower our gaze, then face the *Ka'bah* consciously. We allow ourselves some time to think, reflect and to say the *Iqamah* with an awareness of the meaning of the words we are uttering and then to begin.

All of this makes a huge difference so I encourage you to check in with yourself against your own practice and see how many of these things you can bring into your own practice in such a way that *insha'Allah* will improve not just your desire for *salah* but the quality of the actual prayer itself.

### Step 8

## Beginning the Prayer

### Raising and Folding the Hands

This is the first major physical movement or gesture that opens the *salah* formally and then it continues in various ways in the prayer itself.

It is important for us to give consideration to what exactly we are doing. Remember the whole point that we are trying to address here is to make everything meaningful. So ask yourself what exactly is the significance of raising the hands?

What does **raising** the hands signify?

What does **folding** the hands signify?

When you actually raise your hands, what is it that you feel? When you fold your hands, what is it that you feel? What do these actions mean to you? For some of us, we have never really given this much thought— we just raise and fold and that is it.

But the idea is to make that a really meaningful gesture. Think about this now. You might even want to do this right now, to raise your hands with your palms facing forward. The palms should not face so much the head and the ears, but the palms should face forward with the hands raised somewhere between above the shoulders somewhere along the line of the ears and the head.

What does raising your hands signify? Sometimes I like to think about the analogy of a situation where there are criminals at work and the police have been called. The police are about to make arrests. What do they say to the criminals first thing from a distance? Hands up. The criminal who is sensible in this situation will raise their hands in almost a similar way to the how we raise our hands at the beginning of *salah*.

Thinking about that is useful because it is this idea of surrender. The criminal is raising their hands in this situation because they are admitting simultaneously that I have done wrong and I have nothing because it is about drop your weapons. So they are raising their hands to symbolise and show that they have nothing and they cannot do anything now because their hands are raised. They are not posing any kind of threat nor are they going to do anything inappropriate.

Of course, it is an analogy so it is not a perfect one but it does help to give an idea or to think about what we are doing. The way I like to think about it is when we are raising our hands in this way before *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*. We are saying, my Lord I have nothing, I surrender completely and I submit myself to You.

There is that idea in ancient cultures of raising the hands in that way to show as a mark of respect and salute almost. This is something which was inherently understood or felt even at the time that this is an appropriate thing to be doing. Perhaps even the *mushrikun* would raise their hands in this way in front of their idols and their gods.

The idea is we are raising our hands in front of *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* in such a way to really manifest this submission and surrender. You cannot feel any of this if the raising of our hands and folding is done fast. If you raise and fold superfast, how are you actually even going to give yourself the time to feel that? There is this idea that one can raise their hands and hold that position for some time. Hold that position, feel the submission that is associated with that gesture before then saying *Allahu Akbar* and folding the hands.

There are various narrations that indicate sometimes that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would say *Allahu Akbar* before, during or after the raising and folding of hands. The two can come together in slightly different ways. It is not necessarily completely and utterly precise how it needs to be. What is important is when we do raise our hands that the physical action signifies something and we do it consciously.

This will really be helped if we practice and internalise the golden minute, visualisation and thinking of what we are about to do then our hands will raise and come up really feeling that submission – now it is time and I am going to enter into the King's palace to meet Him. I go in with my hands raised as a demonstration of respect and

of my submission. Then we fold our hands. Folding the hands in front of somebody is a way to avoid fidgeting and to show a humility and respect.

There is one narration, whose authenticity is disputed but it gives an indication that the folding of the hands is from the manners of Prophethood. Meaning all of the Prophets would stand before their Lord and fold their hands in that way out of respect. These are the kinds of things which it seems we are spending a lot of time on. But these real specifics are extremely important in trying to pick out the subtleties and the symbolism of these actions which we often just do without much thought.

Some raise their hands saying *Allahu Akbar* throughout the *salah* as well which the Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is reported to have done at various stages of the prayer. Sometimes people just literally flap their hands quickly so their hands barely even come up. They flap them up halfway and move on so it is not really a demonstration of anything. It is almost like we are just following the rules. Yes, we have to raise our hands but it is not really a heartfelt demonstration of submission, salute and surrender in front of *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*.

A very practical simple thing for you to think about when you raise your hands and you are about to say *Allahu Akbar*.

- What do you feel?
- Do you feel anything?
- Does that gesture mean anything to you?

Maybe now it is the time to reflect upon it more deeply and to make that gesture a very natural and heartfelt one. Similarly folding the hands is a mark of respect, humility and paying attention to what is about to happen.

## Step 9

# Beginning the Prayer

## Takbiratul-Ihram

Associated with the raising and folding of the hands is then the most commonly uttered phrase of the *salah* which is *Allahu Akbar*. At the beginning of the prayer, this is specifically called the *Takbiratul-Ihram*.

## **Allahu Akbar - God is greater**

### **What is the Takbiratul-Ihram?**

The opening, sacred proclamation of God's greatness

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَمْ يَتَّخِذْ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ شَرِيكٌ فِي الْمَلَكُوتِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ وِئَامٌ مِنَ الدَّلِيلِ  
وَكَبْرَهُ تَكْبِيرًا

*Takbir* simply means to proclaim the greatness of *Allah*. *Ihram* as we know is worn when one goes for *Hajj* or *Umrah*. It is that which makes certain things prohibited i.e. you are in a sacred environment or space which means that certain things that would normally be allowed are now not allowed. So for example, in the *salah*, once we have raised our hands, folded them and said *Allahu Akbar*, we have entered into a state in which the following are not allowed:

- Eating and drinking
- Conversing with other people
- Looking around

These certain things that are normally permitted cease to be permitted. So as per the analogy shared earlier, it is as if now we have actually put our foot into the court of the palace of the King.

We say *Allahu Akbar*, that God is Greater. There is a verse in the *Qur'an* at the end of *Surah al-Isra*:

Say, 'Praise belongs to God, who has no child nor partner in His rule. He is not so weak as to need a protector. **Proclaim His limitless greatness!**' [Chapter 17, The Night Journey, Verse 111]

So *Allahu Akbar* is such a foundational statement of the believer who is expressing their appreciation of who *Allah* truly is. Now what I want you to think about is the way in which you say it. Are we saying this as a statement truly consciously? Are we saying that *Allah* is greater than everything else? It helps and gives us confidence about the fact that we are now entering into this prayer. This is the most important thing for us to be doing because He is the Greatest. He is Greater than everything else so there is nothing else that should be getting in the way.

We are standing proclaiming His Greatness and appreciation for Him. I think it is important to reflect on the manner in which we express this statement and the emotion that we feel.

## Aligning our emotions

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ اللَّهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُهُ زَادَتْهُمْ  
 إِيمَانًا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٢﴾ الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ ﴿٣﴾  
 أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ حَقًّا لَهُمْ دَرَجَاتٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

True believers are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord, who keep up the prayer and give to others out of what We provide for them. Those are the ones who truly believe. They have high standing with their Lord, forgiveness and generous provision.

[Chapter 8, Battle Gains, Verses 2-4]

Look at this particular verse which is extremely powerful and humbling where *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* describes the true believers and how they respond and react when the name of *Allah* is mentioned. Their hearts become like jelly, soft, trembling, shaking when God is mentioned. So simply *Allah's* name being mentioned is enough to affect the believers. This really speaks of a particular kind of relationship.

It is like in a human context. Someone that you love dearly who you have been away from for some time and then in another gathering their name is mentioned. It has an effect and touches a certain chord within you. Your heart starts to stir which is what happens with the believers when *Allah* is mentioned. To be *Muslim* and to submit to God is one level but to be a true believer, it means there is a certain kind of relationship in which when just the name of *Allah* is mentioned, it strikes you deeply.

These verses and others in the *Qur'an* really remind us that there are so many different levels of achievement here. We are not safe just because we call ourselves *Muslims*. There is a real relationship that we are expected to

build and keep developing. The way in which we say *Allahu Akbar*, that *Allah* is Greater is more important than anything and everything else. The way in which we say it will reveal to ourselves and to our Lord the truth of our relationship.

So the question really to ask yourself and for me to ask myself is:

## How truthful are we in prayer?

There are stories of the early *Muslims* who would be nervous to even begin the prayer because they knew they were about to make certain statements which they were not sure whether they had truly internalised.

*SubhanAllah* they were so conscious that I am about to say *Allahu Akbar* but is that really the case? Is God really the Greatest for me in my life and the way I live my life? Is my life really a reflection of *Allahu Akbar* or is it an empty statement that I make just to signify movements within the prayer? In fact, it is the statement that signifies every movement in the prayer apart from *Sami' Allahu liman hamidah*. Do we say *Allahu Akbar* without thinking? It is as if we might as well just say go, go, go, next position, next position.

Each time we say *Allahu Akbar*, say it in a way that you really are taking *Allah's* name. It is almost like a brave thing to do, the fact that you are taking the name of your Lord. You are referring to the ultimate being, the ultimate source, the great entity, the first and the last. He is everything, the most important and we are taking His name as humble, finite, sinful, very limited servants of *Allah*. We are taking His name so let us do so in a way that really manifests that humility and truly feel that yes *Allah*, God, You truly are the Greatest and there is nothing, nothing more important than You. Nothing is like You in any way, shape or form and that You are truly the Greatest.

We start our prayer in that way by raising our hands, saluting our Lord out of respect, showing surrender and submission before our Lord. Then taking His name saying *Allahu Akbar*, *Allah* is the Greatest and folding our hands out of dignity and respect before Him then truly we have begun a meaningful prayer.

### Step 10

## Standing Significance of the Position

Before we proceed with the various words which we say in the standing position, I think it is important for us to reflect on the significance of this position.

As we will do throughout this, we will look at each of the positions and think about the various points of wisdom, learning or the significance from reflection on the particular position. The prayer is in a very particular format. It did not have to be in that format. It could have been entirely prostration, bowing or some other form. It did not have to be necessarily in a standing position in which certain things are said or done.

It is important for us to reflect on each of these positions and to think about what they might mean to help us find more depth in the way in which we stand, bow and prostrate before our Lord.

## Significance of the standing position

- Attention!
- A dignified position
- A natural starting point for a meeting
- Reminds us of the standing in the Hereafter

When we think about the significance of the standing position, one of the first things that comes to mind is the idea of being called to attention.

You have the image of soldiers milling around and then all of a sudden, the sergeant or the leader comes in and there is a call 'attention' and everyone stands upright, solid, ready. There is that respect being shown so there is that idea with the standing position. If you think about the gathering of the believers in any place of prayer for example. The *adhan* is called, people are everywhere then *Iqamah* happens. Everyone is standing ready, *qad qamatis salah* – the time for prayer has come *Allahu Akbar* and everyone is at attention. It is an amazing and beautiful thing.

If you were to do one of those time lapse videos you would see people are bustling and then they gather to stand. They are sort of motionless in that position, move through the cycle of the prayer and then disperse. It is a beautiful moment where the believers come together or even as an individual when standing giving that full attention. With the standing position, you are giving your respect and attention to the One who has called you.

There is something very important to realise that it is a dignified position. *Allah* could have made the *salah* purely prostration. We could have been creatures that crawled around on the earth. *SubhanAllah* do we not just take for granted that we can stand tall and upright? Is it not that standing tall and upright that is part of the dignity of a human being? The way we feel a sense of self-esteem.

*Allah* says 'We have most certainly ennobled the children of Adam' – human beings, *Homo sapiens*. So we have been given this dignity. It is worthy of note that *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* is the One who deserves our prostration. It is only right that our faces should touch the ground in humility before Him Who allows us to stand before Him. There is a certain level of dignity and almost 'respect' afforded particularly because of the station and the certain superiority of the creation of the human being.

There is a certain dignity and privilege to feel that *Allah* is allowing me to stand before Him. This might be quite a subtle reflection and one which we have not given much thought to but I do believe it is worthy of thinking about. *Allah* actually allows us to stand before Him. That is something that we should appreciate and understand to be a real privilege before the King of the Universe.

In a human context, it is a natural starting point for a meeting. Anytime you gather in someone's home or in a work context, then the starting point for an interaction is normally that you are standing, interacting, talking and listening and then you progress to sit down. So it forms a natural starting point for this meeting.

There is a build-up, a progression to the greater closeness and the intimacy of the bowing and especially the prostration position. The fact that there is that build up is significant. It makes the actual moment especially of prostration which is the climax of the cycle of the prayer even more special. It is something that we are working towards not just falling straight into.

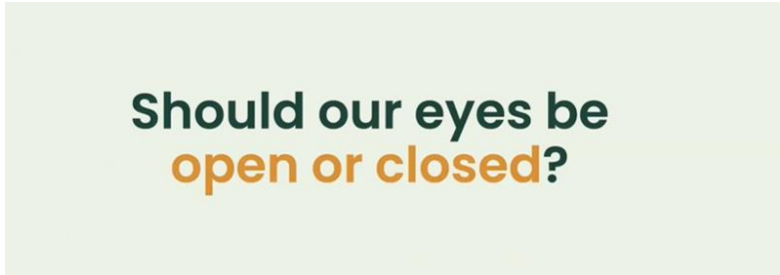
Finally, and perhaps the most significantly in some ways, it reminds us of the standing in the hereafter. One of the most famous phrases used to describe the day of judgement is *Yaum al Qiyamah*. The Day of Standing literally. It is also *Yaum al Hisaab* – the Day of Accounting and there are other names for it. The idea is that we will be standing, waiting to be taken to account and to be questioned about how we led our lives.

Standing in front of *Allah* in our *salah* should remind us of the standing that we will have before Him on the day of judgement. We spoke earlier about the importance and helpfulness of visualising and thinking about these realities of the unseen that we will all face as human beings. So each time before we stand before *Allah* and especially in those moments of reflection before you begin, think about that standing before Him in the hereafter.

Some of the scholars used to say that if you want to make your standing in front of *Allah* easy and more relaxed in the hereafter then give attention to the way you stand before Him right now in this life. The quality of our standing before *Allah* in our *salah* right here and now will impact and effect the standing before Him in the hereafter. There is almost that inverse correlation. The longer we stand before Him now then *insha'Allah* the shorter standing before Him will feel at that time because from what we understand from various Prophetic narrations – is that people will be waiting, sweating, worrying and scared.

If we want to reduce all of that for ourselves in the hereafter and have a situation where even potentially we will be blessed with great rewards from *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* without even having to account for ourselves which *insha'Allah* is going to be the station of some people and hopefully we can be amongst them then we really need to give attention to the way we stand in front of *Allah* right now in our *salah*.

Finally, just one point to reflect on is the question that often comes up:



**Should our eyes be  
open or closed?**

If we are talking about the issue of concentration and focus then often people say is it ok for me to close my eyes? The default recommendation is one's eyes should be kept open unless something happens or takes place. That some stimulus is seen that is disturbing somebody and then one can close one's eyes in such a manner for as long as is required so one is not distracted by that particular thing.

If we do what we did before in preparing the area for prayer properly then this should not be an issue. There is something very helpful or developmental about being able to stand in prayer with one's eyes open and to be concentrated and focused. It makes us relate in a much more direct and real way to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*. It also helps us outside the prayer. When we are outside of the prayer and our eyes are open, interacting and working with others doing whatever we are doing, the idea is that the human being is supposed to always be simultaneously aware of their immediate environment as well as conscious of *Allah* at the same time.

Praying with eyes open almost helps us to develop that. It helps us to make it a more real interaction meaning we do not have to close our eyes to focus on our Lord. We should not have to close our eyes in order to focus and be conscious of our Lord because being conscious of Him with our eyes open is something we are expected to be in a state of as much as possible outside of the prayer anyway.

There is something more real and direct about eyes being open in prayer. We understand this was the practice of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* that his eyes would be open as a default. But if a stimulus comes and something disturbs us particularly that is unexpected then one can close one's eyes as a way to ward off that particular distraction. So in principle eyes open but in context if required one can close one's eyes.

Sometimes closing the eyes can actually have the opposite effect. It can send us off in our minds or somewhere else altogether in terms of our thoughts. We can forget what we are doing or what we are involved in at the time. Of course, if we are sleepy, it might be the time of *Isha* prayer or *Fajr* prayer. If we are sleeping, we are also

closing our eyes, there is that possibility of slightly dozing off a little bit and being in a half dream like state in our *salah* too.

There are those things that need to be thought through as well. It is not the case that closing the eyes is the solution to all problems rather what is the solution to our distraction problems as we have started to talk about and now, we will talk much more about the way in which we talk to *Allah*. The meaning, feeling and understanding of which we talk to Him is the essence or the core way in which we will fix our *salah* from being full of distractions and thoughts that should not be coming into the prayer in the first place.

## Step 11

# Standing

## How to Talk to God

How should we converse with *Allah* in our *salah*? The principles that we are going to cover here should apply to any conversation or speech that we direct towards our Lord. They follow the basic rules of communication that we do appreciate naturally as human beings when we talk with each other but for some reason when it comes to our Lord, we fail to apply even the minimum level of principles or standards that we would apply even when conversing with another. There are three levels of that we need to be aware of.

**Knowing**  
what you are saying

**Understanding**  
what you are saying

**Meaning**  
what you are saying

**By knowing what you are saying** is that we can actually hear our self and make out the sounds that we are uttering. To be conscious of the words that we are articulating or whispering under our breath if it is a silent prayer.

**Understanding what you are saying** refers to knowing the literal meanings and translations of the words that we are saying.

**Meaning what you are saying** so when we express the words, we are saying them in such a way that is really coming from our heart.

Each of these levels builds upon the other. We cannot be conscious of what we are saying if we do not understand what we are saying.

## Knowing what you are saying

- Hear yourself speak

Now this one might seem odd when we talk about knowing what you are saying. You should be able to hear yourself speak. Just stay conscious of the words that you are uttering. Where we are saying things that we have said hundreds, maybe even thousands of times before such as *Allahu Akbar*, *Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil 'Alamin*, rest of *Surah al-Fatihah*, it is actually quite doable to express the words with our tongues. But for our minds and even our attention to be completely elsewhere whilst even saying these things accurately.

I know from experience that it is possible to recite from memory parts of the *Qur'an* completely accurately but with one's mind being elsewhere. That you are not actually focused on what you are saying but because you have memorised it so well, it almost comes out automatically as if very little part of your brain is even involved in the process. What we are talking about is a conscious awareness of the fact that I am speaking and articulating the words in such a way that I can hear.

- Don't be drunk!
- Slow down

I have said here don't be drunk not because I am worried about the fact that you might be actually drunk because of what *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* said in one verse: 'Oh you who believe. Do not come anywhere near the prayer, do not approach the prayer while you are in a state of drunkenness until you know what you are saying'. I put it here as a way to illustrate the point which is where *Allah* in the stages of the prohibition of alcohol at the time of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* addressed the believers.

Until you have an awareness of what you are saying. If a companion came into the prayer and he was literally drunk from alcohol then he could quite possibly express the words but he would not know what he was saying or he might then mumble jumble the words which is even worse.

We may not be in a state of actual drunkenness but we do stand in our prayer sometimes in a way as if we are. Meaning we are just expressing the words and they are sort of mumbled and expressed very fast. We are not really aware of each individual phrase that we are uttering. In order to help us, we need to slow down.

Slowing down is a critical part of every stage of this journey not just because so we can maintain a conscious awareness of what we are saying. So we can help ourselves think about the meanings of the words as well as express them meaningfully. Be aware of what you are saying and hear yourself speak. Do not be in a state where your mind is so far elsewhere that you cannot even make out the words you are saying. Speak clearly and slow down.

## Understanding what you are saying

- Memorise the literal meanings

The next stage is to understand what we are saying. There are no situations we can think of in life where we communicate with another person and express ourselves in a language that we do not understand just from memorised words whose meanings we do not know and then we claim we meant what we said. Or we said that in

a way that was meaningful or respectful. The two do just not go together. This is a major issue. The fact is for years and years we have said things in our prayers that we do not understand.

It has to stop because it comes down to this idea that we are not really taking *Allah* truly seriously. We do not think this is a real communication. If we knew this was a real communication that He was listening, hearing and not only that but He wants to know about how we feel about what we say not just the fact that we can say words that we have memorised. The idea that we are understand what we are saying is critical.

There is no getting away from the fact that we are going to have to memorise the literal meanings of the words. All of the translations of the key phrases that are said will be broken down and explained *insha 'Allah* but stage one is we have to memorise the literal meanings. Take your time to utilise this resource and others to make sure you memorise them. Go from the beginning:

- *Allahu Akbar* - Do I know what that means? Do I understand it?
- Ok fine, next phrase, next phrase, next phrase...
- *Surah al-Fatihah*, the chapters that I recite from the *Qur'an*.
- When I say *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim* - do I know what that means? Do I understand it?
- *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd*
- *Subhana Rabbi al 'ala*
- *Attahiyat* to the end

Do I know what all these phrases mean such that outside of the prayers if someone were to ask me right now what does *Attahiyatu lillahi* mean that instantly I would have an answer? What does *Allahumma salle 'ala Muhammadin wa 'ala' aali Muhammad mean?* I have an answer. *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim* – I have an answer. You need to be able to memorise and test yourself so that you know the meanings of these words.

The next stage is to explore the deeper meanings because each of these phrases has the literal translation but they have more significant layers of meaning. Exploring the deeper meanings is important because it helps when you are going to say them in the prayer to express yourself much more meaningfully with a greater use of your intellect and understanding which what *Allah* wants from us.

## Meaning what you are saying

- **Outside prayer:**
  - Relationship building
  - Consider the implications of the statements of prayer in your own life

This is the idea of tone, expression and connection between our heart, brain and tongue.

Hopefully you will feel from the way that I am speaking right now that I am interested in this subject and that I am keen to get across certain points. I am hoping that you will understand what I feel about certain things. My tone and pace vary, the way I might pause or emphasise certain things will vary because that is part of meaning what you are saying.

If I just express like this (speaks in a low uninterested tone) for the rest of the presentation you would be very disturbed by what I am doing because why am I speaking like this. If I was to express myself monotonously in that way that I have just done, you would think there is something wrong with me. Clearly, I am not interested and I am just parroting it out basically.

This is what we do in our *salah*. We do that (gives example of *Surah al-Fatihah* being recited in monotonous tone quickly). We just mumble the words. Even in a silent prayer, it is possible to whisper and express meaningfully from the heart. This is so important. What kind of *salah* is it if words are not said with meaning and said

mindlessly? It is not a real communication and the whole point of *salah* which is to establish the remembrance and connection with *Allah* is lost so this is critical.

There are a number of different things we need to do. Firstly, outside of the prayer it is about developing and building that relationship with *Allah*. Continue to wonder about *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*, reflect upon His Creation and ponder the verses in the *Qur'an*. Understand what He says, what He does and grow in your appreciation of Him. So when you direct yourselves towards Him and say certain phrases, they actually mean something a lot more. Saying *alhamdulillah*, praise belongs to *Allah* can be said at a million and more different levels depending on how much inside yourself you truly do appreciate *Allah* and you are truly feeling this expression of praise.

Consider the implications of the statements of prayer in your own life. Such as when you say *ihdinas-siratal mustaqim*, guide us on the straight path, when you say *iybaka n'abudu wa iyyaka nasta'in*, You only do we ask for help. When you are saying these things and making various supplications in *salah*, link them and make them personal to you. What does that mean for you? What is the thing that you are struggling with? What is the nature of your commitment and service to *Allah*? What things are you referring to in your mind when you say you need help?

So actually making it personal, not just making it an empty third-party statement is very important.

- Practise saying the translations outside of prayer as expressively as you can

Many people might find this strange but if you cannot communicate with *Allah* in the language that you are most used to communicating in then it is going to be impossible for you to communicate through the Arabic medium in a meaningful way.

So the example of *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*. This phrase means how perfect is my Lord the Majestic or Supreme. Practice saying these translations outside of the prayer as expressively as you can. I should be able to say, 'how perfect is my Lord the Majestic'. When I do that in the language I am most used to communicating in, it settles more in my mind and heart as to what I am saying when I say *Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim*.

But it also gives me an indication of how I say it. How I need to say *Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim* in a way that will actually be meaningful because now I cannot just say *Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim* (said quickly in a monotonous voice) because that would be just how perfect is my Lord the Majestic in monotone which if I say it in that way then you know I am not serious about declaring His perfection. That does not even make any sense. I need to be saying something along the lines of *Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim* (repeats three times in a meaningful way). Then you might have more of a sense that yes this is a meaningful expression.

Saying the translations outside of the prayer as expressively as you can is a very important practice when it comes to thinking about how we are going to express ourselves in the prayer itself.

- In prayer:
  - One phrase at a time
  - Speak in Arabic then think in English
  - Or think in English then speak in Arabic

In the prayer itself, one phrase at a time. Separate and pause between each phrase.

If I am going to say *Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim* then it is worth giving some time to just pause. Let me remind myself what exactly I just said. I say how perfect is my Lord the Majestic. So let that just filter through my mind or think about that first and then say the phrase *Subhana Rabbiyal Adhim* because I thought about what I am

going to say and how I am going to say it. Now eventually, those two will blend together such that as you are saying the phrase then you will mean the phrase because you become used to this process.

At the time of saying things to *Allah* we should mean them. It is a really obvious point. There is nothing special about that idea because that is how we communicate. When you talk to anybody, the way you feel and think and the words that you say are all lined up. When they are lined up then it is meaningful communication. The other person has a good sense of what you are saying, why you are saying it, what you mean, what you intend and if you are serious in your communication.

It is the same thing here. The fact that we have made our prayer into something almost separate or departed from normal principles of communication is not correct. It is wrong. It actually means we are paying less attention and less respect to *Allah* than we do to others which is clearly upside down. This is important. It requires work and thought. But in making that struggle you are really working at unlocking the beauty of *salah*, the power of prayer and the blessings of this most important action of our lives.

## Step 12

# Standing Opening Invocation

We are going to use the opening invocation in a way to really illustrate how to talk to *Allah* properly. The opening invocation is not something which is an obligatory part of the prayer but it is definitely recommended. It seems that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would start with some form of either praise or even supplication after saying *Allahu Akbar* before going into *Surah al-Fatihah*. There are various things that are reported that he used to say.

## Opening Invocation

***Du'a al-istiftah* (opening invocation)  
or *Thana* (statement of praise)**

*Subhanak-Allahumma*

*Wa bi hamdika*

*Wa tabarak-asmuka*

*Wa ta'ala jaddukka*

*Wa la ilaha ghayruk(a)*

We are going to only look at what is the most commonly said statement. This is called the *du'a al-istiftah*, the opening invocation or the *thana* – statement of praise.

**Subhanak-Allahumma**  
**God, how perfect You are**

**Wa bi hamdika**  
**And Yours is the praise**

Look at this phrase. God, how perfect You are. You are standing in front of *Allah* and addressing Him saying how perfect You are. There is a way to say that. It is direct. It is second person; you are not even talking in a third person here. You are addressing *Allah* directly.

*Wa bi hamdika* – and Yours is the praise.

What two short powerful phrases we are uttering here. I want to explore and remind you about some of the beauty, power and station of this particular phrase that so often we begin our prayer with but express with very little meaning.

## The most beloved statement in this life

Abu Dharr reported: the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "Shall I inform you of the most beloved statement to God?" I said, "O Messenger of God, do inform me about the most beloved statement to God." The Prophet said, "Indeed, the most beloved statement to God is, 'How perfect is God and His is the praise' (*subhan-Allahi wa bi hamdihi*)."

The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "There are two statements that are light on the tongue, heavy on the Scales and are dear to the Lord of Mercy, 'How perfect is God and His is the praise,' (*subhan-Allahi wa bi hamdihi*) and, 'How perfect is God the Majestic (*subhan-Allahil-'Adhim*).'"

[al-Bukhari, Muslim]

Here it is in the third person *SubhanAllahi wa bi hamdihi* so we are saying *Subhanaka Allahumma wabi hamdika* which is in the second person You – how perfect You are and Yours is the praise. The most beloved statement to *Allah*, so how do we say this most beloved statement to *Allah*? Think about it.

Then in another famous narration. There are two statements that are light on the tongue but heavy on the scales and are dear to the Lord of Mercy - *SubhanAllahi wa bi hamdihi* and *SubhanAllahi Adhim* which echoes the phrase we say in our *ruku*, the bowing position.

So powerful yet such a short statement. It is expressing the perfection of *Allah*. When we say *Subhana* – it means to declare how far-removed *Allah* is from all imperfection that is not appropriate to say or think certain things about *Allah*. In the *Qur'an* for example when the issue of Isa '*alayhi salam*, Jesus, being the son of God is discussed, *Allah* dismisses that claim and He would say *Subhana*. He is far above that, He is removed, He is perfect, way beyond this idea of having a son like a human being that we have a child. He is above and beyond that. Or *Subhanahu wa ta-ala amma yushrikun*. He is far removed and far beyond what they associate with Him or *amma yasifun* – or what they attribute to Him.

There is a certain statement that someone might make which is inappropriate and then in a relative sense we will say *SubhanAllah* meaning *Allah* is not that, He is beyond that. He is perfect. He is not associated with this

imperfection that you are claiming. When a thought comes to mind that is inappropriate about Allah then we say *SubhanAllah*. Allah is perfect. He is far removed from this negative thought that I had. Now in an absolute sense that when we are just saying without assuming anything, we are just saying *Subhanaka Allahumma wabi hamdika*- we are declaring in absolute terms that God is perfect, His is the praise.

## Our main proclamation in the next life

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ يَهْدِيهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ بِإِيمَانِهِمْ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهِمُ الْأَنْهَارُ فِي جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٩﴾

دَعْوَاهُمْ فِيهَا سُبْحَانَكَ اللَّهُمَّ وَتَحِيَّاتُهُمْ فِيهَا سَلَامٌ ۗ وَأَخْرَجُوا دَعْوَاهُمْ أَنْ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

But as for those who believe and do good deeds, their Lord will guide them because of their faith. Streams will flow at their feet in the Gardens of Bliss. **Their proclamation in them will be, 'God, how perfect You are!'** their greeting, 'Peace,' and the last part of their proclamation, 'Praise be to God, Lord of all that exists.'

[Chapter 10, Jonah, Verses 9-10]

transform  
my prayer

This particular phrase is in the *Qur'an - Subhanaka Allahumma*. It is the main proclamation in the next life according to these verses. The last part of the proclamation is 'Praise be to God, Lord of all that exists'. All three phrases are contained within the *salah* so:

*Subhanaka Allahumma* – we say typically at the beginning. Of course, *Subhan* is a big part of *ruku* and *sujood*, the bowing and prostration.

*Salam* – the whole sitting position is full of *salam*.

Then *Alhamdulillah Rabbil 'aalamin* – all praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all that exists which is in *Surah al-Fatihah*.

I am illustrating all of this just to say this is such a significant phrase. If we are going to raise our hands and say *Allahu Akbar* and do everything that we said, let us really go into the first phrase really meaning Allah, You are Perfect and Yours is the Praise.

*Subhanaka Allahumma wabi hamdika* because it is the most beloved statement to Allah in this life and a central part of our statements *insha'Allah* in the hereafter, in *Jannah*.

**Wa tabarak-asmuka**  
**How blessed is Your name**

Your name is the source of *barakah*. Through Your name and invoking You does *barakah* come. Now what does this mean? *Barakah* means it is not a discreet blessing like a *ni'mah*. I have a home, car, a computer or whatever. These are material blessings.

*Barakah* means whatever we have is given longevity, that it goes further for us. You might have an hour of time, I might have an hour of time. But your hour is full of *barakah*. It is full of blessings. You got so much out of that time, whereas maybe I did not.

Or two people have the same amount of wealth. One person has 10k and another has 10k but someone's 10k does a lot more for them. There is more *barakah* in it whereas for the other person their wealth got squandered without much benefit. So this is the idea of *barakah*. It is through invoking Allah's name that *barakah* is sought. *Barakah* is given this extra blessing, call it amplification of the *ni'mah* or the *na'im* we receive.

## ***Wa ta'ala jadduka*** **How lofty is Your status**

*Jadduka* – the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is reported to have sometimes said after the *salah* addressing *Allah*, that the honour or the status of the one who possesses status is of no benefit in front of You. It does not matter if someone is a president, CEO, prime minister, king, queen, director, trustee, or manager – all of these titles in and of themselves mean absolutely nothing in front of *Allah*.

That is not what gives you rank in front of *Allah*. It can do if you have these roles and responsibilities and you do justice to them. You assume your responsibilities well then it is a great means of becoming close to *Allah* and gaining His acceptance, no doubt. But in of themselves, they mean absolutely nothing. The most ennobled of you in front of *Allah* or with *Allah* is the most God conscious amongst you.

Here we are seeing now how lofty is Your status. We remind ourselves that the status of everybody else even ourselves is nothing compared to the status of *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*.

## ***Wa la ilaha gharuk(a)*** **There is no god other than You**

No one else is worthy of worship except for You. All of these statements are so beautiful because if they are said meaningfully not only do they reveal and express a great connection between the servant and his/her Lord but they also really give a confidence to what you are doing. Sometimes we feel a friction about *salah*. Sometimes we feel it is a bit of an inconvenience and we are just trying to fit it in. Perhaps we are in a scenario where we have had to battle with ourselves to pray because maybe other people are around.

These statements are so beautiful, powerful and direct so that is why it is such a shame that sometimes we rattle through these statements without thinking. Let us really say them with meaning and feeling. Express these statements in English outside of your prayer in a way that is expressive to *Allah*. Talk to *Allah*, just say that to *Allah*, *Allah* how perfect You are, Yours is the praise, how blessed is Your name, how lofty is Your status, there is no God other than You. Saying it in English like that and forcing yourself to say it.

Do not just hear it from me now and that is enough, no. Say it to *Allah*. You can use these words or whatever words you feel are appropriate as translations because obviously there are no perfect translations. Say it in English then in Arabic, then in English and then say it together until you are practising and feeling whilst that you are now saying it in Arabic. Until you feel you are really saying it from your heart with meaning.

It makes a massive difference to the quality of your prayer, the focus that you have and to a meaningful connection. *Allah* will accept such a contribution, submission and offering whereas of course if we just rattle through the statements in an empty fashion then why should He accept it? Speaking like that to anybody is rude. It is not right even if the meanings of the words in principle are correct but if we say them in a way that we are not feeling them, that is not going to count for much. So may *Allah* help us to internalise this lesson and to talk to

Him in a way that is respectful, meaningful and to express these beautiful phrases in ways that do justice to the meanings they stand for.

### Step 13

# Standing Taking Refuge

After the opening invocation, we are taking refuge. Who are we taking refuge in and what are we taking refuge from? We know the famous statement:

***A'udhu billahi***  
**I take refuge in God**

***minash-Shaytanir-rajim***  
**from Satan, the rejected one**

The question is:

**Why are we taking refuge?**

Taking refuge means we are taking protection and often when this word is translated - *A'udhu*, we say seeking. There is something a bit stronger about *A'udhu* rather *isti'idu*. *A'udhu* means to take refuge.

*Isti'idu* means to seek refuge so there is something quite insistent about the statement. We are taking refuge in *Allah* almost not asking just simply stating the fact that is exactly what we are doing because we know His doors of protection are open if we would only walk in. So we are saying I take refuge in *Allah* from the rejected *Shaytan*. We are doing that at many levels, probably at three levels that we can think of.

We are about to recite from the *Qur'an*. *Allah* says when you are about to recite or read the *Qur'an* then seek refuge in *Allah* from the rejected *Shaytan*, from the rejected devil. So before we engage in *Qur'anic* recitation, we take refuge in *Allah*. In the context of the *salah*, we know that the devil comes to distract us and puts thoughts into our mind. We think about certain things in our prayer that we do not even think about at any other time.

The devil who sees us engaged in this core act of devotion to God and wants to distract us. He wants to undermine the quality and commitment we are displaying in our prayer. So at that level we are also taking refuge. Then more generally we are taking refuge in *Allah* from *Shaytan* because the devil is our worst enemy in life.

## Our worst enemy

And then Iblis said, 'Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lie in wait for them all on Your straight path: I will come at them—from their front and their back, from their right and their left—and You will find that most of them are ungrateful.'

[Chapter 7, The Heights, Verses 16-17]

From the *Qur'an* we know it is important to remind and help ourselves to say this statement *A'udhu billahi minash shaytaanir rajim* with more meaning. That means more urgency because if you feel the threat of your enemy then the way you seek protection will be much more meaningful. There will be a certain level of urgency, even desperation in your voice because you appreciate the threat is significant.

After the incident in which Adam *'alayhi salam* is diverted by Iblis, he says because you have put me in the wrong, so he blames Allah. Iblis is saying to Allah that the way in which he is going to undermine human beings from being on the path is to make them ungrateful. You will not find them to be grateful people.

*Shukr*, being thankful and grateful to Allah is a core part of our faith, belief and relationship with Allah. Satan is your enemy so treat him as an enemy.

Satan is your enemy — so treat him as an enemy — and invites his followers only to enter the blazing fire.

[Chapter 35, The Creator, Verse 6]

So how should you treat an enemy? He is a very beguiling enemy because he is one that does not just attack you directly. He makes you think that he is your friend in some way and he makes enticing to you the things that are bad for you. Allah says about the *Shaytan* that he beautifies or adorns their deeds for them. It is very important that we are asking Allah for protection when we say *A'udhu billahi minash shaytaanir rajim*. How is that protection provided? Through alertness and consciousness that we can actually differentiate between the positive or negative devilish inclinations that we receive. So we can filter them properly and then act accordingly.

Allah tells us how to respond in this verse:

## Our worst enemy

If Satan should prompt you to do something, seek refuge with God — He is all hearing, all knowing — those who are aware of God think of Him when Satan prompts them to do something and immediately they can see straight; the followers of devils are led relentlessly into error by them and cannot stop.

[Chapter 7, The Heights, Verses 200-202]

The devils do not have self-control so when we say *A'udhu billahi minash shaytaanir rajim* we are asking Allah for self-control, an insight, to be reflective people and to be able to differentiate between the negative and positive influences.

In today's day and age, it is increasingly hard to do that. We need to be in some ways analysts where we are able to consider carefully to ourselves whether a certain course of action, type of response, a certain new direction of life is something that is really coming as a response to the devilish kind of inclinations which might be wrapped

up in all sorts of positivity sometimes or is it something truly angelic or illuminated, inspired from *Allah* and for His sake.

We are actually in a very vulnerable position potentially as human beings. The devil is not going to stop. The devil and his minions are at work. They are our worst enemy. We need to treat them like an enemy. We need to be aware because the saying goes 'the greatest trick the devil ever played was to convince the world that he does not exist'.

Is it not true that we go through each day, day in and day out actually even without thinking about *Shaytan* explicitly? Thinking about *Shaytan* explicitly in this way helps us because we realise there is an enemy. We realise there is a source of *wasswass*, whispers of inclinations that are negative. Thinking about the fact that we have an enemy that needs to be defeated, that needs to be prepared for is very important in the context of recitation and the prayer overall and in life generally.

## A defence strategy in prayer

'Uthman ath-Thaqafi narrated that he came to the Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) and asked him, "O Messenger of God, the devil intervenes between me and my prayer and my recitation of the Qur'an, and he confounds me."

Thereupon, the Messenger of God said, "That is (the doing of) a devil who is known as Khinzab. When you feel his effect, take refuge with God from him and spit three times to your left." 'Uthman said, "So I did that, and God dispelled him from me." [Muslim]

One particular narration mentions a physical but also a psychological way to ward off the inclinations from the *Shaytan*. This refers to a very dry spitting. The kind of spitting where you are not spitting out actual contents from your mouth or throat. A sort of dry spitting with a slight head movement to the left which acts as a psychological way to dispel the inclination. To realise there is an external force that is confusing you in which unit of the prayer you are in, what you just said and maybe making you think about all sorts of other things.

We may realise that is happening to us and feel that we are a bit all over the place. It is very important in *salah* that if you feel that that I have become confused and distracted to actually pause. I do not mean drop your hands and stop the prayer. Just hold wherever you are and gather your thoughts together. Practice this Prophetic advice. Then regain a sense of what you are saying and the meanings of the words that you are saying, who you are directing them to and then to continue.

So if you notice while you in *ruku*, the bowing position, that all of a sudden that your mind had gone elsewhere, it is quite important just to hold yourself there. Do not just carry on *Sami Allahu liman hamidah, Allahu Akbar* etc. If you just do that, you rush through you will not be able to regain a sense of control over the process.

It is important to pause, hold that position, reflect, think carefully, and see yourself in *ruku*, in the bowing position. For example, that you are submissive and bowing to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*. Remind yourself of the words that you are saying, what they mean and dry spit to the left. You could even say *A'udhu billahi minash shaytaanir rajim* again and take refuge in *Allah*. Be alert and place some of these external negative thoughts that come to us in the context of *Shaytan* and to take refuge in a meaningful fashion. *A'udhu billahi minash shaytaanir rajim* – I take refuge in *Allah* from *Shaytan* the rejected one.

## Step 14

# Standing

## Beginning in God's Name

After we take refuge in *Allah* from the rejected *Shaytan*, we then say this phrase:

***Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim***  
**In the name of God, the Lord of  
mercy, the Giver of mercy**

*Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*. Mercy is this idea of loving care and protection. *Rahman* is the One who is the overall Lord of mercy meaning that this is His essential quality and nature. *Rahim* refers to His distribution of His particular care, protection and mercy.

The key part I want to focus on is this *bismillah*. In the name of *Allah*. We are now saying that we are doing it for His sake and in His name. It is a huge statement of commitment. I really want to focus on two key aspects or effects of *bismillah*.

## Two key effects of *Bismillah*

- Focus
- Confidence

It gives us focus and confidence. So having just taken refuge in *Allah* from the *Shaytan*, we say *Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim*. We are saying this is for *Allah*, in the name of *Allah* because *Allah* has invited me to be here. *Allah* asked me to be here. I am starting now in His name.

You also say *Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim* in the context of *Surah al-Fatihah* itself as you begin the recitation of the *Qur'an*, starting with the opening chapter. It gives a sense of focus. We are focused. It is about intention. We are locating our intention in this particular activity towards *Allah*, our Lord.

The other aspect of *Bismillah* is this aspect of confidence that no harm can come to us if we take *Allah's* name. It gives us a sense of energy so if you think outside of the *salah* when there is a great difficult task ahead. We are trying to muster our will and determination, we say *Bismillah*, come on, let's do it. It gives you confidence as you are directing your attention towards *Allah*. But also, you are trying to get some inspiration in feeling the strength and you realise *la hawla wa la quwwata illa billahi*, there is no power or might except with *Allah*.

So it gives both senses. There is a phrase that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was reported to have said and advised his companions to say:

*Bismillahil-ladhi laa yadurru ma`as-mihi shai'un fil-ardi wa laa fis-sama'i, wa Huwa-Sami`ul-`Alim*

In the Name of *Allah* with whose name there is protection against every kind of harm in the earth or in the heaven, and He is the all-Hearing and all- Knowing.

Once His name is taken, nothing in the earth or the heavens can cause harm because you have the protection and the confidence that *Allah's* name brings.

So when we say *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim* in our prayer, we should say it with real intentionality, focus and a sense of confidence. When we say *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*, this actually just adds to that because it gives us a sense that *Allah* is taking care of us and that He is giving us His protection. He is giving us His loving attention so it should give us a great deal of mental peace and security when we say *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*.

Just a small technical point. People differ about whether *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*, in the context of *Surah al-Fatihah* is an actual verse, or just an opening statement like the other chapters in the *Qur'an*. The key focus here is when we say *A'udhu billahi minash shaytaanir rajim*, *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim* etc. that we are saying it with a sense of meaning, understanding, focusing on what we are saying and really expressing ourselves to *Allah* in such a way that we would hope then He would take us seriously because we are giving Him our full attention.

Try to and bear that in mind. We say this particular phrase so often. So express it in a way that really directs you towards *Allah*, makes you feel that sense of energy, confidence and trust in the fact that He is *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.

## Step 15



*Surah al-Fatihah* the opening chapter in the *Qur'an* is a central part of the whole *salah*.

## There is nothing quite like it

The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "By the One in whose hand is my soul, **God has not revealed the likes of it** in the *Torah, Injil, Zabur* or [the rest of] the *Qur'an*. It is the seven oft-repeated verses." [Muslim]

While the Messenger of God was sitting with Gabriel, he heard a creaking sound above him. Gabriel looked up and said, "This is the sound of a gate that has been opened in Paradise today and has never been previously opened." Then an Angel descended through it and came to the Prophet and said, "Rejoice in the good news of two lights that have been given to you such as no Prophet before you has been given. They are The Opening Chapter and the last two verses of Surah al-Baqarah. **You will never recite a word from them without being given the blessings they contain.**" [Muslim]

This is a significant chapter and in terms of this last statement here that you will never recite a word from them without being given the blessings they contain. The recitation that is needed in order to gain the blessings of *Surah al-Fatihah* is an expression that is meaningful. I will keep emphasising this point about the words that we say and the way we say them need to be meaningful.

What we are trying to avoid is a repetition of these verses in a way that lacks that connection and expression. In fact, each time when we say the verses of *Surah al-Fatihah*, they should feel completely fresh as if we are saying them for the first time. Really infusing them with a sense of emotion and an appropriate emotion because as we are about to see in the next few steps that each of these verses says something very different but all connected. There are many different layers of understanding and many points of significance that is important for us to think about as we proceed.

### The objective

- The *Surah* has one central objective
- Keep the end in mind throughout

It is important to realise that the *surah* has one central core objective. This central objective forms one of only two supplications that we make in the *salah*.

This is the only supplication that you have to necessarily make for your *salah* to be complete. The only other supplication that you make or is emphasised although some say not entirely necessary is in the sitting position is when we say *Allahumma salla 'ala Muhammad*. This is a supplication invoking *Allah's* blessings upon the final Messenger. Apart from that, this is the only actual *du'a* or request we necessarily make. Even in the *sujood* or the *ruku*, we may not necessarily supplicate or ask *Allah* for anything but by saying *Surah al-Fatihah*, we have to make a certain request and that request is for guidance.

# Guidance!

**“Guide us on the Straight Path”**

The entirety of *Surah al-Fatihah* is a build up to this central request for guidance and therefore it tells us something very significant about the place of prayer itself in our lives. We need to understand and remind ourselves that we are on a constant journey trying to navigate our way on this straight path. Sometimes we lose consciousness and an awareness of that. We become too vested, involved, distracted by the roots off the straight path which the world will take us down and *Shaytan* the devil will encourage us to go down.

But actually, each prayer is a moment in which we reorient ourselves. We redirect ourselves and we ask our Lord to guide us on the straight path so it is very important to go into the occasion feeling somewhat lost, uncertain, feeling the need for that guidance and support.

Bear that in mind when it comes to *Surah al-Fatihah*.

## Step 16

### The format: **build-up**

*Alhamdulillah Rabbil-‘alamin*

All praise belongs to God, Lord of all that exists

*Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*

The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

*Maliki yawmid-din*

Master of the Day of Judgement

The first thing that we say is all praise belongs to God, Lord of all that exists. Here we are opening this chapter and this statement with saying *Alhamdulillah*. All praise belongs to *Allah*. This is a good way to start thinking about the many levels at which statements can be made in our *salah*. Whilst we are making this statement, to what extent is the particular knowledge that we have about our Lord coming into mind? Such as that we are praising Him with a level of appreciation. Perhaps even thinking about something particular that may have happened, something we have been reflecting upon or we are aware of that makes us feel that we would give an extra level of praise to *Allah*.

The second half of that verse informs us why praise is due to God which is the fact that He is *Rabbil 'aalamin*. *Rabb* is the one who nurtures, develops, cultivates and moves things from one stage to the next. We have the word *tarbiyyah*, development or education in the context of children or even personal development. The idea that the *Rabb* is not just the One who has mastery but the One who actually takes a certain care over that which is under His control. He is *Rabbil 'aalamin* and *aalamin* is basically everything besides *Allah*. Everything that is out there.

Think about the vastness of what is out there. We now have a sense of that unlike any time before. We have a certain sense of the vastness of existence. There are videos where you can see how less than a speck of dust that the earth seems in the context of the whole vastness of the universe. There are so many amazing things just within earth itself are going on. *Allah* is in charge of and making sure everything is happening all the time. Just imagine the wisdom, creativity, power, ability and the capability to be operating all of that. This is the power of *Allah*. This is the *Rububiyyah*, the Lordship and the Mastery of *Allah*.

The earth is just a tiny speck in the vastness of all existence. The *aalamin* that He is controlling and that He is in charge of. So when we say *Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil 'aalamin*, not only do we feel a sense of appreciation, respect and awe when we express the phrase but actually our mind should expand to the vastness of the *aalamin*. We almost zoom out of our immediate situations as we see ourselves in *salah*. We realise that we are referring to everything that is out there and then to the One who is in charge of all that.

This kind of reflection will help with the way in which we say this particular statement. Pausing after we have said this statement to reflect on some of this will help the statement settle further within our hearts and for us to become further humbled.

We then go to *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. The quality of *Rahmah* is mercy, loving care and protection is one which we can understand best when we think about the *Raham* - the womb of the mother. A child in the womb of the mother is like the human being in the *Rahmah* of *Allah*. *Allah* talks about the ones He enters into His *Rahmah* as if His *Rahmah* is like this protective bubble and now you have entered within it.

You have that protection following you around where you go. When you are in that, it is like the baby being in the mother's womb meaning that you do not even have a sense of where the protection and nourishment is coming from. You have no idea where the support is coming from and the harm and difficulty that is being warded away from you. The baby has no idea what is going on but it is being nurtured, cared for, loved and being developed.

Similarly, the one who is in the mercy of *Allah* in the *Rahmah* of *Allah* experiences life as something like that. We also know that the *Rahmah* of *Allah* is His dominant quality. Each *surah* in the *Qur'an* begins *Bismillah Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim* with the exception of one and *Allah* Himself says that My *Rahmah* encompasses or overcomes My anger. In another place, My mercy, My *Rahmah* encompasses everything so when we say *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim* there is a certain positivity and hopefulness that we can really say that statement with and an appreciation of who Our Lord is. *Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil 'aalamin* is a statement of love and respect. *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim* is a statement of hope.

Then we come to *Maliki yawmi-din*. Master of the day of judgement lest we become too hopeful without the balance of the awareness. We have a fear of the Day of Judgement as we remind ourselves *Allah* is the One who is the Owner and the Master in charge when that day comes.

The word *din* also relates to the word *dayn*. The idea of the *yawmi-din* as scholars have explained is this understanding that this is the day when scores are settled. All the injustices that took place in this life will be put right. He is charge on that day and in *Surah al-Infitar* which is towards the end of the *Qur'an*, *Allah* tells us about the *yawmi-din*. What will make you know what this *yawmi-din* is?

Then what will make you know what this day of judgement is? It is like how can He explain to us such a huge occasion? *SubhanAllah* the phenomenal scene of the day of judgement and the magnitude of that occasion. How can He get it through to us? What is the way that He is going to explain? What is going to make you understand He says? That is the day when no soul will have any capability, power or dominion over any other soul and the matters on that day all rest with *Allah*.

We realise that actually when we say *Maliki yawmi-din*, we are recognising that He is in charge of the Day of Judgment as we ourselves have no *mulk*. We will have no capability of influencing things this way or that way, not for anybody else not for ourselves.

We remember not only the horrors of the Day of Judgement but the great trial of standing to account before *Allah* and having to explain ourselves. How we used our time. How we used our resources. Did we work in this life in

such a way that was truly preparing for the Day of Judgment? That was truly for the sake of *Allah*, for His cause, truly out of love and devotion to Him. Did we really live a life of *la ilaha illAllah* - that there is no God except for God?

These three verses are a build-up. Remember we talked about the central objective for that request for guidance where it is almost as if we are recognising different critical components of the nature of our Lord that praise belongs to Him. He is the Rabb, He is the One who cultivates, develops and He is the One who is in charge of everything. Yes He does have the qualities of being absolutely loving, caring, protecting and merciful but we remind ourselves that He is also in charge on the Day of Judgement. We need to work in such a way that is always cognisant and conscious of Him in this life.

Contained within these three verses are various emotions of love, respect, awe, hope and fear. The reason we are analysing it in this way so it will hopefully help you to understand that therefore the way you say these verses needs to reflect that. You cannot say *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim* with the same emotion as you would say *Maliki yawmi-din*. They are referring to completely different qualities or attributes of *Allah*. *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim* will definitely give us a sense of hopefulness, comfort and assurance. *Maliki yawmi-din* makes us sit up a little bit. Think, pay attention and our mind is cast forward to the Day of Judgment.

So that is why each statement needs to be said slowly and carefully. Thinking about we are doing. That we are now really offering our recognition towards the King that we understand and recognise that these are His qualities before now we pivot and shift our statement to something a little different.

## Step 17

So after the build-up of the first three verses:

- *Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil 'aalamin*
- *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*
- *Maliki yawmi-din*

### The format: pivot

*Iyyaka na'budu wa iyyaka nasta'in*

It is You we serve and it is You we ask for help

We then come to this particular verse which I described as a pivot which means a shift or juncture where we are changing as we move onto a different theme and aspect. There are a number of different points to be aware of when we say *iyayaka na'budu wa iyyaka nasta'in*.

#### 1. Switching to the 2nd person

Firstly, it is important to be aware of the fact that we are now switching to the second person when we are addressing *Allah*. So far it has been in the third person – all praise belongs to *Allah*, the Lord of all that exists as if to say He is the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, He is the Master of the Day of Judgement so here now we are saying *iyayaka* – You we serve, You we ask for help so it is a lot more direct.

#### 2. Emphatic

Secondly, it is the emphatic nature. *Iyyaka* means You and You alone. Normally in Arabic if you wanted to say we serve You and we ask You for your help, you would say *na'abuduka* and *nasta'iinuka* but here we are using a very emphatic form – *Iyyaka*. You can hear and feel the emphasis just in that word. *Iyyaka* – You and You alone. This particular pronoun is before the verb so it is even more emphatic. It is very different even in English to say we serve You and we ask You for help on the one hand and on the other hand to say it is You alone we serve and You alone we ask for help.

So when you are expressing yourself, you are saying to *Allah iyyaka na'budu wa iyyaka nasta'in* and then that is something to be aware of and to give a particular emphasis to the repeated phrase twice – *iyaka*. It did not have to be twice. You can say reasonably in Arabic *iyaka na'budu wa nasta'in*. That You alone we serve and ask for help but we doubly emphasising the fact that it is You *Allah* and You alone. You and You alone.

### 3. Two very different but connected claims

It is very important for us to also separate between the two claims that are being made here. We are expressing to *Allah* that it is Him and Him alone we serve and Him alone that we ask for help. We are not saying we are trying to do that; we are saying that we do that.

The statements are very different. *Na'budu*, is we serve. We are telling *Allah* that we serve Him and worship Him. That is a statement of commitment. We are committed to You. We serve You, we recognise Your Lordship and our servanthood before You.

On the other hand, when we say we ask You for help and it is You alone that we ask for help, you are expressing need. The fact that we need *Allah's* help and that we cannot do it all on our own. In this journey we need His assistance and guidance. Once we have committed to *Allah*, we know that on the journey we are going to need His help so the two are clearly connected. But they are very different. The reason I emphasise that when you say this particular verse you realise again that there is a different kind of emotion even in this short verse, in the two halves of it.

When you say *iyaka na'budu*, you are telling *Allah* that You alone we serve and that you feel that commitment to Him. When you say *wa iyyaka nasta'in* – it is You we ask for help, you feel that need and an almost desperation for the support that you require from *Allah*.

### 4. Speaking on behalf of the collective

Another interesting point about this particular verse is the fact that it is speaking on behalf of the collective. Notice it is we and we. It is You that we serve, it is You that we ask for help. Even when we are praying alone the format of *Surah al-Fatihah* is the same. We always speak on behalf of the collective. When we are together it feels more real that we are saying this statement on behalf of everybody in the congregation. But when we are even alone, it is important for us to be aware that we are speaking on behalf of the collective.

It reminds us of this collective congregational idea that we are together as believers in our effort to serve and worship. We are together in our need and requesting Allah for help and support. So that is something to be aware of. When you are saying it, have in your mind this awareness that you are making these statements not just for yourself but on behalf on yourself, those around you, those praying and engaging in *salah* with you, your family etc.

I find that this particular verse is very what I call almost the standard setting verse where it really gets you to think. When we were talking about *Allahu Akbar* and we were saying and considering to ourselves how truthful are we when we say *Allah* is the greatest meaning yes in principle, He is but is He really to us? Here again we are making a very personal claim.

We are telling *Allah* that You alone we serve and that You alone we ask for help. One of the ways in which being in *salah* consciously helps us is that we are constantly making a statement to *Allah* 17 times a day or more. We are telling Him that You alone we serve and You alone we ask for help. 17 because this is the number of units of

the obligatory prayers. If we are saying it consciously that has a real impact and effect in how we lead our lives in between the prayers.

We cannot keep saying You alone we serve but then in between our prayers we are serving other than *Allah*. Or doing things in a way that clearly are outright disobedience or forgetfulness of Allah. Then what is the truth of the claim of You alone we serve?

When we are in need and when we are requesting help then is it the case that we actually go first to *Allah* or is that we rely on ourselves, google or other people? We ask others before even asking Allah at all and only typically when all other roads are closed that we feel maybe hopeless then we turn to *Allah* when the situation is desperate.

If it is Him alone that we serve and Him alone we ask for help that is something really important for us to reflect on. I myself whenever I say this verse, I am conscious and thinking about what I am saying. You feel a certain sense of humility and shame in front of *Allah*. You say, You alone we serve and You alone we ask for help, but then we know with so many things we do, they fall short of this standard. But what this does do is to remind us of what that standard is and it brings about that humility.

So it is certainly not to depress us but it is to each time with the *salah* to engage in this positive renewal and affirmation of our connection and servitude to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* and to remind us and get us back on track. In every *salah*, whatever has happened has happened now and the past is the past. The point of this prayer now is to reorient yourself and get back on track if you have gone by the wayside. Even if you are on track then to keep expressing your servitude to *Allah* and your need for help so that He can keep us going and on the straight path.

### Step 18

After we have built up the statements of *Surah al-Fatihah*, praising *Allah*, recognising His Lordship, His Mastery, recognising His qualities of *Rahmah*, recognising that He is the Master and Owner of the day of judgement, telling Him it is Him alone that we serve and Him alone we ask for help, we then make our request.

## The format: ask

*Ihdinas-siratal mustaqim*

Guide us on the straight path

### 1. What is the straight path?

*Allah* makes us through our recitation of *Surah al-Fatihah* clarify what the straight path is and what it is that we are actually asking for. Before we come onto that, it is worth also looking at this particular narration to give us a way to visualise and think about this particular straight path upon which we are asking *Allah* to guide us on.

# The Straight Path

The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "God has given an example of the straight path: on each side of the path are walls with open doors, with curtains over the doors. There is a caller at the end of the path and above it calling, 'God invites to the House of Peace and guides whom He wills to the straight path.' [Chapter 10, Jonah, Verse 25]

"The doors on each side of the path are God's limits. No one breaches God's limits unless the curtain is lifted. And the one calling from above is one of their Lord's warners." [at-Tirmidhi]

No one breaches the limits until after the curtain is lifted – meaning you have to consciously go that way if you are going to go way off the path. We lifted the curtain and walked through. We consciously left.

The one who is on behalf of *Allah* is giving us that reminder and that warning. That consciousness that we have within tells or reminds us deep down what is right and correct. We know where we should be going so we constantly hear that invitation. It is beautiful to think about this because when we are thinking about life and the struggles that we have and the direction that we want to go in, it is always worth reminding ourselves about this. *Allah* is inviting us to the house of peace. He guides whom He wills to the straight path. What we need to do is to commit to that journey and ask for guidance.

This is the straight path, the one that leads to *Allah* directly. That ends up in a place where we can meet Him in a way that He is pleased with us and we are pleased and satisfied with our Lord too.

## 2. Asking on behalf of the collective

Just as we expressed on behalf of the collective when we said, You alone we serve and You alone we ask for help, we are also asking for guidance not just for ourselves as individuals but for all of us.

*Ihdina* - there is a *na* on the end of *ihdi* which refers to all of us. Guide us. So there is a reminder us about the desire we should have for all people to be guided, helped, supported and to be kept on the straight path. We are asking here on behalf of the collective. We should think about that to realise the request that we are actually making is for everybody.

## 3. The central request in our prayer

We said that apart from the part in *salah* when we say *Allahumma salle 'ala Muhammad* which is where we are invoking blessings upon Muhammad, the family, and followers of Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, this is the central request.

The *Fatihah* is the central part of the *salah* such that without the *Fatihah*, there is no *salah* according to one narration. This request for guidance is absolutely critical. Therefore think about the way that you make the request.

## 4. Do we ask as though we are struggling for directions?

That we do not know where to go. We have a sense of uncertainty because whilst the path is straight, it is difficult to uncover sometimes. In reality, in life for us to stay on the straight path, it actually involves us making sacrifices, going into what appears to be different kinds of directions in a material standpoint. So we can be journeying inwardly consistently on the straight path but practically speaking more outwardly that might mean doing a whole load of different things at times depending on the situation.

So it is very difficult. We do not know always that we are going the right way. Is this the particular route that I should be taking? Is this the particular life decision that I should be making? It could be who you are marrying. It could be a job or work I am doing. It could be where I am choosing to live or move house. All of these things can have an effect and impact on the way in which we stay true to our purpose as human beings or not.

So every time we say *ihdina-siratul mustaqim*, guide us to the straight path, we should really say and express it with a feeling, emotion and with a need that *Allah*, I am lost, I am doing my best and I do not know. It is almost as if to say take me by the hand and help me, guide me, show me the way, make it clear to me and make me not fall in error. Partly we are helped to really drive this point home in our request and to remind ourselves what we are asking for through this last verse of *Surah al-Fatihah* which is its longest verse, which is an elaboration or clarification of the path that we are seeking guidance for.

### The format: elaboration

*Sirat alladhina an'amta 'alayhim*

the path of those whom You have favoured

*Ghairil maghdubi 'alayhim wa lad-dallin*

not of those who have incurred Your anger nor of those who have gone astray

It is the path of those whom You have favoured. In another verse in the *Qur'an*, *Allah* says that the ones whom He has favoured, meaning *nabiyyeen*, *siddiqeen*, *shuhada'a* and *saliheen* from the Prophets.

*Siddiqeen* - from those who are true to the Prophets and their mission at their time or after their time and those who bore witness.

*Shuhada'a* - the martyrs who gave their life and made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of *Allah*.

*Saliheen* – the righteous, upright and people who are whole and they also sought to be rectifiers not just of themselves but also of society at large as well.

These are the people that *Allah* has favoured. We are asking *Allah* that we want to be on that path. We want to follow in their footsteps. We want to go by their example. So there is a humility in that as well because we are saying that we are not necessarily amongst those people in that sense but we are asking *Allah* to guide us on the path where those people have trodden and gone.

Emphasising *ghairil maghdubi 'alayhim wa lad-dallin*. Within this is contained two ways that people can go wrong. Those who incur *Allah's* anger are those who know the direction they should be going in but they reject. They have knowledge of their actions but it is at odds with their knowledge or they do not act upon what they know. On the other hand, you have the *dallin* – those who do not have the knowledge or awareness and they go astray. They may be well intentioned but they have gone astray.

Those who incur *Allah's* anger are those whose intentions are not right in the first place. They are aware of what they should be doing but they reject, are haughty and arrogant. On the other hand, you might have well intentioned people who do not have sufficient knowledge and they have gone astray.

In our case we want to be protected and saved from both. Life is about constantly improving our knowledge, understanding and then improving our action. A little bit like this whole journey in terms of transforming our prayers, making our prayers better and taking our *salah* to the next level. We increase our knowledge and understanding of what *salah* is and the various components of it but then we need to act and put these things into practice. You need to try and effect change in your prayers otherwise if we have done all of this but we are not doing it then we risk incurring *Allah's* anger.

If we never bother to try and know Him in the first place then we risk being astray thinking that we are doing a good thing but not necessarily. So this reminds us of the path, *siratal mustaqim* of the people of knowledge and action which is what the Prophets and the other people that we mentioned did. They had knowledge, spread knowledge, acted and led by example. Those are the kind of people that we want to be and that is what we are asking for when we say guide us on this straight path.

## The format: sealing it off

*Amin!*

May it be so!

Then we finish by saying *Amin*. Be aware when you are saying *Amin*, you are saying may it be so. Remind yourself of what exactly you are saying *Amin* to. When the *imam* recited *Surah al-Fatihah*, he has asked *Allah* on behalf of this group who have turned up at the doors of *Allah* to guide us all on the straight path, described that path and then *Amin*. Everyone says *Amin*, may it be so. May we be guided. That is why we are saying *Amin*. So when you say *Amin*, you are sealing off *Surah al-Fatihah* then realise that is exactly what it is we are requesting.

Look at this narration:

Abu Hurayrah reported: The Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "When the Imam says *Amin*, then say *Amin* as the angels say *Amin*. Whoever says *Amin* when the angels do, their previous sins will be forgiven." [al-Bukhari]

The angels are on our side are rooting for us. *SubhanAllah* in *Allah's* mercy and His forgiveness we make a true statement of *Surah al-Fatihah*, a true *Amin*, and a true desire of, may we be guided, may we put our errors, mistakes and bad habits behind us. May we pursue a path of purity, prayer and remembrance of *Allah* and sacrifice for Him.

If we make that commitment truly then *Allah* is so generous. He will wipe away our previous sins and transgressions.

So as you can see there is so much going on in *Surah al-Fatihah*. At this juncture, it is important to emphasise that we say it with meaning and understanding. Feel the build-up, pivot, the statement where we say You alone we serve and You alone we ask for help. Make the request for guidance like you really want guidance and then when you say *Amin* say it with a conviction.

There is a special component of *Surah al-Fatihah* that we are going to cover which is the interactive nature of this surah. When we understand it and are conscious of it during our recitation of *Surah al-Fatihah*, it makes a huge difference in terms of how we experience this most important part of the *salah*.

## Step 19

### The interaction

Abu Hurayrah said: I heard the Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) say: God (the Mighty and Sublime) has said,

'I have divided the prayer between Myself and My servant into two halves, and My servant shall have whatever they ask for.'

The wording of this narration says that I have divided the prayer, the whole *salah* between Myself and My servant into two halves – actually all that is mentioned in this narration is *Surah al-Fatihah*. So it is as if to say that the whole prayer is contained within *Surah al-Fatihah* or to give an emphasis to *Surah al-Fatihah* to its centrality within the *salah*. Without *Surah al-Fatihah*, there is no *salah*. It is a critical component of the prayer.

### The interaction

When the servant says: All praise belongs to God, Lord of all that exists.

God says: My servant has praised Me.

This is something to be thought about because when you and I say *Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil 'aalamin*, do we pause not just to think about what we said and reflect but do we think about the fact that *Allah* is responding? *Allah* is saying My servant has praised Me. It gives us a more direct awareness that *Allah* is listening and paying attention to us when we speak and when we say the various phrases not just in *Surah al-Fatihah* but elsewhere too.

### The interaction

When the servant says: The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.

God says: My servant has exalted Me.

My Servant has praised Me and recognised My qualities of *Rahmah*.

### The interaction

When the servant says: Master of the Day of Judgement.

God says: My servant has glorified Me.

Each of these three statements:

- *Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil 'aalamin*
- *Ar-Rahmanir-Rahim*
- *Maliki yawmi-din*

We spoke about how we need to give these three verses importance and consideration. *Allah* is saying:

- My servant has praised Me.
- My servant has exalted Me.
- My servant has glorified Me.

Meaning He is recognising each of these statements that we are making. So when we are aware of this we should be even more conscious of the way in which we are talking to *Allah*.

## The interaction

When the servant says: It is You we serve and it is You we ask for help.

He says: This is between Me and My servant, and My servant shall have whatever they ask for.

The reality of the truth of our claim is between us and *Allah*.

When we ask *Allah*, we should ask with confidence. We should ask with a trust in *Allah* that He will help us. He will give us and deliver His promise. It might not always be in a way that we understand or in a way that we want. We should always trust that it is in a way that is in our best interests.

## The interaction

When the servant says: Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have favoured, not of those who have incurred Your anger, nor of those who have gone astray.

He says: This is for My servant, and My servant shall have whatever they have asked for.

So *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* is listening, paying attention and responding in a way that befits His Majesty. Something that we cannot necessarily fathom completely because there are millions of people making these statements and requests and *Allah* is acknowledging each one of us. That is the point of this to appreciate. That *Allah* is acknowledging us. Do not think that when you stand in prayer, you are not being watched or appreciated. One of the qualities of *Allah* is *as-Shukr*, the One who appreciates our efforts. Your efforts and striving are met with appreciation.

So going through this narration helps us to think about the fact that *Allah* is listening and responding. He is recognising what we are saying and so it should make us even more alert about how we are saying it. So practice *Surah al-Fatihah* even outside of your *salah*. Practice saying the verses in such a way that as you are saying each verse, you are really able to think about what it is you are saying and saying it from your heart in a meaningful manner.

We spoke earlier also about the importance of sometimes practicing saying the words in English or whatever language you are most comfortable with outside of the prayer as a way to practice expressing yourself meaningfully. This is what we are saying:

- In the Name of God

- The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy
- All praise belongs to God, Lord of all that exists
- The Lord of Mercy, Giver of Mercy
- Master of the Day of judgement
- You alone we serve and You alone we ask for help
- Guide us on the straight path
- The path of those whom You have favoured not of those who have incurred Your anger nor of those who have gone astray
- May it be so

When I say a slow considered way, you have a sense or feeling that yes I am expressing these words in a meaningful manner. There is some emotion there, connection and reality to this conversation and interaction. It is very important for us to be able to say these things comfortably to our Lord in the language that we are most familiar. When we are able to do that when we are able to connect it back to the Arabic much more effectively and then we can express ourselves in a way that *insha'Allah* will be much more meaningful and powerful. You will experience a different feeling in your *salah* when you are saying each statement in this particular way.

## Step 20

# Standing

## Reciting a portion of the Qur'an

After the first two units of any obligatory prayer then there is no requirement to recite from the *Qur'an* after *Surah al-Fatihah*. But in the first two units, it is highly emphasised.

## Key questions

- How much do we need to recite?

Typically what is said is either 3 short verses or one long verse. When we talk about three short verses there is *Surah al-Kawthar* the shortest chapter in the *Qur'an* which many of us will recite sometimes. *Inna aatayinaka-l-kawthar, fasalli lī Rabbika wa-nhar, inna shāni'aka huwa-al-abtar* – this much would suffice or any equivalent such as *Surah al-Ikhlās, Falaq, Naas* etc. Or one long verse so for example, *Ayat al-Kursi* is an example of medium length verse which we could recite. A small amount is sufficient but what is important that I would emphasise is the meaning and the way in which we recite.

- What is the significance of reciting a portion of the *Qur'an* after *Al-Fatihah*?

This is worth asking ourselves. One of the ways to think about this is what we have just asked for. We have asked *Allah* for guidance. Did we just not say *ihdinas-sirātul mustaqīm*? There are many ways in which that guidance comes no doubt but one of the central ways in which that guidance has already been delivered or can be delivered were we to open ourselves up to it is the *Qur'an* itself.

After all, does *Allah* not describe the *Qur'an* as *hudā* – as guidance? It is probably one of the most common descriptions of the *Qur'an* in the *Qur'an* that the *Qur'an* is guidance. Right at the beginning, *dhālikal Kitābu lā*

*raiba fih; hudā-lilmuttaqeen*. That is the book, the scripture in which there is no doubt. It is a guidance for those who are God conscious, for those who are aware of *Allah*. In a way, we should realise that the request we made in *Surah al-Fatihah* of requesting guidance has already started to be answered by our recitation of the *Qur'an* which is guidance.

So that brings about an important question or reflection. What do we actually get out of what we recite? Do we derive any guidance from the recitation of some short verses or portion of the *Qur'an* after *Surah al-Fatihah*? Many of us do not. We say *Surah al-Fatihah* and we say some verses but we did not think about anything we said. We did not take anything from it. We did not actually learn any lessons which is clearly an error and a mistake. There is no time we engage with the *Qur'an* that we should not derive something from it in terms of a message, instructions, learning and reflection. That is the point of the scripture.

- How can we make our recitation more meaningful and effective?

It really is to do a similar process with the verses that you recite in the *salah* after *Surah al-Fatihah* that we have gone through. If you say *Inna aatayinaka-kawthar, fasalli lii Rabbika wa-nhar, inna shāni'aka huwa-alabtar*, the question for you is, do you have any idea what it is that you have recited and if not then how can we possibly derive any guidance, learning, lesson or reminder? The *Qur'an* is a guidance and *dhikr*, a reminder. So it is important for us to go through that process. That is something that *inshā'Allah* you can do in your own time and work on. Go through the short *surahs*, chapters of the *Qur'an* in such a way that will assist you when you are in the *salah* to say them in a meaningful way.

It is very simple and easy for someone to memorise in a short period of time the meaning of *Surah al-Kawthar*, *Surah al-Ikhlās*, *al-Falaq*, *Naas* etc. *SubhanAllah* how often have we said *as-Samad* in our *salah* where we have no idea what it means? Do you know what *Samad* means? If we do not know what it means then we cannot feel anything towards that statement or regarding that statement. We cannot derive anything from that statement which is such a powerful quality of *Allah*.

It is really important for us to take this particular aspect of the procedure of the *salah* seriously because we know the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would often engage in long recitation in his standing in *salah* in different prayers whether the obligatory or voluntary prayers, or in *tarawih* after *Salatul Isha* in the month of *Ramadhan*. In the night prayers, he would engage in long recitations. He was interacting and learning from those verses. He was reflecting and pondering during those verses. They were affecting and guiding him in his mission. As we go through life, as we have asked *Allah* to guide us on the straight path, He has sent His guidance. He can open our hearts to that guidance if only we will allow ourselves to be open to it.

It is very important to reflect on the fact that this portion of the *Qur'an* we recite is something that can be meaningful. Even in the short chapters in the *Qur'an* that we often do recite, they all have their different character and lessons. *Al-Kawthar* is very different to *Ikhlās* which is different to *al-Falaq* which is different to *an-Naas* which is different to *Al-Nasr*. All very different contexts, meanings and verses. So let us really try and start a journey of looking into those short chapters of the *Qur'an* that we recite so that we can make our recitation much more meaningful. So we can remind ourselves about certain critical lessons and *Qur'anic* messages when we stand and recite these verses in our *salah*.

## Step 21

# Bowing

We are now lowering ourselves into the bowing position or the *ruku*.

### Remember, we are trying to align our:

- Positions / actions
- Words
- Thoughts
- Emotions

It is worth reminding ourselves about what it is, that we are trying to do since we are moving from the standing position for the first time. A reminder about the overall alignment that we are trying to achieve between our positions/actions, our movements as well as the fixed positions, the words that we say, thoughts and emotions we feel within ourselves and our hearts. The idea is to try and find an alignment between all of these such that the true potential, power and benefits of the *salah* unlock for us.

## Moving into *Ruku'* (bowing)

- Pausing after recitation and before moving

So let us think about moving into *ruku*. After we have finished the recitation of either *Surah al-Fatihah* or the section of the *Qur'an* that we recite after *Surah al-Fatihah* before moving into the *ruku*, first thing is to pause. Let us just take a little bit of time before we say *Allahu Akbar* and we move into the *ruku*. Often immediately after we have finished reciting *Surah al-Fatihah* or the verses afterwards, we move straightaway. Not a good idea.

We need to be in control of the process, taking things steps by step, stage by stage and moving consciously from one position to the next. So allow just a moments pause to think and reflect on what we are about to do. To actually lower ourselves to bow before the King. That is something important to bear in mind. With these positions of bowing and prostration, we become so used to them that we have lost their significance inside of ourselves. We do not actually feel internally the level of humility that should be associated with the bowing position.

### • Raising the hands?

There are differences of opinions on the issue of whether when saying *Allahu Akbar* and going into the *ruku*, one should raise one's hands in the same way that one raises one's hand at the time of the original *takbir*, the *Takbiratul-Ihram* that begins the *salah*. So when you say *Allahu Akbar* at the beginning of the prayer, you raise your hands with your palms facing forward. Similarly here the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was reported in many places to have raised his hands with his palms facing forward before going into the *ruku* position.

My aim here is not to enter into a technical or legal discussion but I would say two things. If you are somebody who already raises your hands alongside your statement of *Allahu Akbar* before going into *ruku* then remember everything we said about raising the hands before. Make sure that it is meaningful and purposeful.

Usually with the very first *takbir*, it is easier for us to be mindful of what we are doing but then subsequently we become a little bit disconnected from what we are doing and the raising of the hands becomes less meaningful. We just literally flap our hands up a little bit and then we move forward. Make it a symbol and a sign of your respect, submission and surrender before *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* as you go into the new position.

If you are not accustomed to raising your hands in this way then of course there is no harm in doing so. Sometimes these things are discussed as if this is absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Perhaps it is the case that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* did this on some occasions and not on other occasions. If you are somebody who does not currently raise your hands but it is something that you want to do out of a demonstration of an extra gesture of submission so it is coming truly from a meaningful place as opposed to just ticking a box or following a rule then that is something definitely recommended. It is an extra manifestation and demonstration of your humility and submission before *Allah* to raise your hands upon saying *Allahu Akbar*.

## • Saying the *Takbir* (*Allahu Akbar* – God is greater)

That is the next thing to reflect on is the fact that we are saying the *takbir* again. So for the first time since the start, we are saying *Allahu Akbar*. We will keep saying *Allahu Akbar* throughout the *salah* to denote the movements with one exception when we come up from the *ruku*.

## • Moving slowly and deliberately

It is important to be mindful of what we are saying. God is Greater, He is the Greatest. Raising our hands, feeling that surrender and then lowering ourselves consciously into position. That is why it is important for us to move slowly and deliberately. Really imagine the divine presence in front of you. You have recited *Surah al-Fatihah*, praised *Allah*, asked for guidance, recited something from the guidance of *Allah* in the *Qur'an* and now you feel compelled to demonstrate a greater degree of submission before *Allah*. So pause before doing so to manifest your submission clearly, to say the words *Allahu Akbar* with meaning and then to move slowly and deliberately into position with humility.

### How should we bow?

- Hands
- Arms
- Back
- Head
- Gaze

Just to look at the aspects of the physical position that are important for us to note in order for us to bow smartly or perfectly in front of *Allah*. Our hands should be placed on our knees with our fingers slightly outspread. Our arms should be stretched out if we are praying alone. You should stretch your elbows out if you are praying alone but tuck them in if you are alongside others in a congregation.

Your back should be as straight as possible, so absolutely straight. In one narration, it is mentioned that the back of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was so straight in his bowing position that even if a cup or container full of water was placed on it that it would not spill. So completely straight. The back of the head should align with the back itself so you are not looking too far up or looking too far down. The back of your head should be aligned with the straightness of the back.

Your gaze will fall naturally downwards anyway so you do not need to force it this way or that way but keep your gaze downwards which would automatically be the case when your head is lowered. The key question is:

# What is the significance of the *Ruku'* position?

There is something about the position which we automatically feel in terms of its humility. We are lowering and submitting ourselves to *Allah*. A bow is generally speaking in various cultures is a sign of respect.

Just one other thing to mention with respect of bowing is the instability of the position. Every other position of the *salah* whether you are standing or even the prostration where seven parts of you are on the ground which are all much more stable positions. Whereas the bowing is quite an unstable position. You might have even found yourself wobbling a little bit sometimes when bowing. There is something about that which contrasts with the words we say in the bowing position and the Majesty Supremacy and the stability of our Lord that we are contrasting against.

Just as in the prostration, we are contrasting our lowness with reminding ourselves about *Allah's* Highness. Here we are reminding ourselves about our instability and vulnerability relative to *Allah's* Supremacy and Majesty.

Try to almost see yourself in the *ruku* position from outside of yourself. We are so used to it that we lose that sense of significance around what it is that we are doing. Think about that and reflect on it. If you do all these things and just put into practice some of the small tips that have been discussed, the bowing position will become a lot more meaningful. It becomes even more meaningful when we think about what it is we say when we are bowing.

## Step 22

The most famous and well understood phrase we say is:

### What do we say?

***Subhana Rabbiyal-'Adhim***

**How perfect is My Lord, the Majestic**

At the beginning, just after the *takbir*, we looked at the phrase *Subhanaka Allahumma wa bihamdika*. We are saying *Subhana*- declaring *Allah's* perfection.

### • How many times can/should we say it?

Typically it is recommended to say this phrase three times but even one time would suffice. It is encouraged if we wanted to increase in the number of times. You will find statements from previous early pious *Muslims* and scholars who talk about saying this statement 5, 7 times or more. Typically an odd number of times.

The idea being that it is not just about the number, or increasing the number of times we say it without any associated feeling, appreciation or meaning. But to be aware of the fact that three is typical and recommended. One would suffice and if we can say more in order to declare *Allah's* perfection and if we do so in such a way that is meaningful then that will only be of benefit.

## • Can we say anything else?

Yes we can but in the *ruku* it is all about magnifying and exalting *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*. There is a narration in which the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* mentions that the purpose of *ruku* is to exalt *Allah* and the prostration is to increase in supplication. It is as if this *ruku* is a progressive stage where we are still building up before we get to the point of the *sujood*, the actual prostration itself.

There are other phrases that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would say. You can look those up. The purpose here is not to go into detail into all of those different phrases because what we are trying to focus on here is whatever small amount we say to make that meaningful.

## • What is the significance of this particular phrase?

Do you realise that for the first time that you are talking in very personal terms *Subhana Rabbi* – my Lord, how perfect is my Lord, the Majestic. Do we sense, feel and have we internalised the relationship that we have with *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* directly? He is my Lord. *Rabb* is the One who cultivates, develops and takes something or someone from stage to stage. We feel that He is our Guide, Teacher, Master and our Lord. So we are saying *Subhana Rabbi* – how perfect is my Lord.

Even in English, you look at that phrase and think in order to say that phrase meaningfully like you really have to feel that. You cannot just say how perfect is my Lord without a sense of real appreciation and understanding.

*Al-Adhim* – and then declaring one of His major qualities that He is the Majestic or the Supreme. To elaborate a little bit or to help you think about what you might bring to mind when talking about *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* in this way, have a look at these verses from *Surah al-Waqi'ah* as just one example:

### Why exalt God, the Majestic?

It was We who created you: will you not believe?

Consider [the reproductive fluid] you emit—do you create it yourselves or are We the Creator? We ordained death to be among you. Nothing could stop Us if We intended to change you and recreate you in a way unknown to you. You have learned how you were first created: will you not reflect?

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground—is it you who make them grow or We? If We wished, We could turn your harvest into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we are bereft.'

Consider the water you drink—was it you who brought it down from the rain-cloud or We? If We wanted, We could make it bitter: will you not be thankful?

Consider the fire you kindle—is it you who make the wood for it grow or We? We made it a reminder, and useful to those who kindle it...

## so glorify the name of your Lord, the Majestic!

[Chapter 56, The Inevitable Event, Verses 57-74]

*Allah* is challenging us throughout these verses to look at this and look at that. Did you do it or did We do it? The royal 'We'. Was it you the human beings or was it Us? Was it Me, *Allah* is saying, Who made all of this possible? As these verses are being revealed and we are reciting and reading them then we realise of course *Allah* it is You, it is not us, it is You, it is not us.

Then *Allah* says so glorify in that case, exalt, declare the perfection of the Name of your Lord, the Majestic. So when we say in our *ruku Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*, in some way we are responding to this command. *Allah* says glorify the Name of your Lord, the Majestic. We say how perfect is my Lord, the Majestic, *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*.

So why *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*? Look at everything that *Allah* is doing. Look at these things He is referring to here. In our minds, we can think about these things. Think about the water that we drink and that only *Allah* sends it down for us. We do not do anything to deserve or warrant it. Consider the fire and heat, all of this is so useful for us. All of these things that *Allah* talks about even the reproductive process. The fact that we are born and have come into being from what? A fluid that we would wash from our clothes that is considered to be an impure fluid that *Allah* has formed us.

For anybody with children or for anyone who can reflect on this, it is just phenomenal and amazing. It happens every day that babies are born, formed, grown and developed. Just that fact of the way that the human being comes together in the mother's womb from what it was and then is born and goes through its stages of development is mind blowing, amazing and miraculous.

If we have a consciousness of this then we will really say *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*. How perfect is my Lord, the Majestic. There is no end to the number of things we can reflect on or think about would then give us a greater and a deeper sense of *Allah's* Majesty of His Creativity, Wisdom and Power. We need to bring all that reflection into that statement. Then truly we will be uttering something meaningful. This is why when we reflect on the way in which we might be used to saying *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim* in our *ruku*, in our bowing position, we realise actually that often times it is really wrong the way we do it.

(Say *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim* 3 times quickly and monotonously). We often say it quite fast without really thinking about what we are saying. No, rather it should be said slowly, carefully, and meaningfully because just imagine you are saying this in English to your Lord. How perfect is my Lord, the Majestic, How Perfect is my Lord, the Majestic, How Perfect is my Lord, the Majestic.

Each one almost builds on the other one. The first one you say it and you feel that sense of declaring *Allah's* Majesty and His Perfection but then you realise it is not enough. So you need to say it again and then you say it again and then this is the basis then if you want to say more. You say more because you want to because you feel you have not said or expressed it enough. So you might say this again another couple of times until you feel satisfied that you have Glorified and Exalted *Allah* in a way that is appropriate.

Of course there is never enough. It does not matter how many times we glorify, praise, or thank Him. It is not enough compared to who He is and what He does. But it is important to find that connection in each aspect of the

*salah* that we feel yes I have done my best that I have offered my adulation, praise, and glorification. Then and only then should we think about moving from this position to the next.

### Step 23

## Standing up from *Ruku'* (bowing)

We have lowered and humbled ourselves, and recited *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*, how perfect is my Lord the Majestic. We then need to stand up again and come out of that position. There is a conversation about whether the hands are raised at this stage or whether they are folded again.

- Raising and folding the hands?

So there are two parts here. One is the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is reported to have upon coming up from the bowing position raised his hands as done when we say the *takbir* and also reported to have sometimes folded them as well. So there are differences of opinion about these things. What is the better or right way to do this?

I am raising it here only to point out the inward or the meaningful aspects of these gestures. If we do raise our hands then make sure we raise them with a sense of submission and to bring in the meaningful aspect of that particular gesture or action.

Similarly we may either drop our hands by our sides or we may fold our hands. Some say the hands should be folded because the default in the standing position is to fold the hands as per the folding of the hands during the recitation. Others say you just leave your hands by your side. It may be something to do with the length of the standing but it is something to be aware of if you do these gestures. Think through them and make sure you do them in a meaningful way.

- Moving slowly and deliberately

It is important to move slowly and deliberately. I think this is even more important when it comes to the standing up from *ruku*.

- What's different about going into and coming out of *Ruku'*?

This is the reflection that we need to consider. What is different about going into and coming out of *ruku*? Emotionally speaking going into *ruku*, we feel that sense of almost of that it feels right to humble ourselves to lower ourselves before *Allah*. When we are standing up again, we should do that with a sense of hesitation and with a sense of extra humility. To lower oneself in front of *Allah* is absolutely right but to stand up again in front of *Allah* is right but to stand up again in front of *Allah* like you could almost think about it as a brave thing to do.

Imagine the presence of *Allah* in front of you. You are bowing. The emotion of even lifting your head and standing up again. There is something about that which I think we should almost be standing with a greater feeling of humility than even before we went into the *ruku* in the first place. There is something about that shyness or hesitation almost that we would have in standing up again in front of our Lord.

It applies similarly to when we are coming out of the prostration. So something to think about. There are no right answers to these things that you have to feel this way or that way but we are having this discussion in order to try to think about treating each action as a real demonstration of something. We are talking about a real interaction

and *Allah* giving His attention whilst we are standing there in *salah*. How would we actually feel if His presence was real to us?

I think there is something significant and different to the emotion we would have when we go into the *ruku* than we come out of it. Then we say:

- *Sami'Allahu liman hamidah*  
God hears (or may God hear) the one who praises Him

A significant statement because it is the only statement that is different from *Allahu Akbar* when it comes to marking a movement in the prayer from one position to the next. What does it mean? It can mean God hears or may God hear. *Sami'a* – meaning to hear or to listen is in the past tense. Sometimes verbs in the past tense in Arabic can have a present meaning or even a future meaning. So as an example even when we say *insha'Allah*, if *Allah* wills, *shaa'a* which means to will is in the past tense. Literally if you were to translate it, it means if *Allah* willed but you are talking about the future.

Another example is *jazakumullahu khayran*. *Jaza* means to reward or to compensate. That is in the past tense but we are saying it as a supplication here. May *Allah* reward you abundantly so you are talking about something you hope will happen in the future but in Arabic using the past tense verb.

So similarly we could either understand it to say that *Allah* is hearing the one who praises Him or we are saying may *Allah* hear the one who praises Him. Now either way, what this statement does is really set us up for a proper demonstration, manifestation and an articulation of real praise. Look at what we are saying. We are saying *Allah* hears the one who praises Him. So if we are reminding ourselves of this juncture that *Allah* is present, He is listening, He is hearing us then surely the way in which we praise Him now will be much more real and much more heartfelt if we have reminded ourselves truly that *Allah* is listening.

That is what this phrase should do for us when we actually say it. It should not just be to mark the movement from one position to the next without thinking *Sami 'Allahu liman hamidah*. We should really be thinking and feeling *Allah* is hearing the one who praises Him so let me praise Him fully and properly. Let me express my gratitude, thanks, appreciation, respect and reverence. This will also help us avoid the scenario where we are rushing in between positions because now when I am standing I am going to praise properly before I move on.

Really focus and appreciate this particular movement from the bowing to the standing up position. It is significant.

We are standing up from the bowing so there is that shyness and hesitation in doing so. We should have an extra level of humility about us when we have stood up from the bowing. Then to say the words *Sami 'Allahu liman hamidah* in a meaningful way where we are really reminding ourselves that *Allah* is listening so I better talk properly and express myself well in front of *Allah*.

## Step 24

# Standing and praising

So we are going to spend some time now on standing and praising to almost overcompensate for the fact that often we treat this standing position after the *ruku* as a bit of a filler position.

- Not just an interim 'filler' position but an important stage of the prayer

I think it is important to think about the standing after the *ruku* just like you think about the *ruku* itself, prostration or the standing when you are reciting. We just treat it like this two second phase where we have stood up now we need to move on. Sometimes if we are behind the imam and he has said *Sami 'Allahu liman hamidah*. If he takes more than just a few seconds before he says *Allahu Akbar* and goes into prostration, we think something is going wrong. We feel actually a sense of physical tension. Some people almost move if they hear the first sound. They think they are hearing *Allahu Akbar* and they start to move into the prostration.

It is because we lack this control over ourselves as we progress through different parts of the salah. It is as if we are just being pulled through almost magnetically. A force is just pulling us through without our minds being fully engaged. But remember what we have just said, *Sami 'Allahu liman hamidah* that *Allah* is listening. That *Allah* hears the one who praises Him so then let us now properly praise Him.

- *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd*  
Our Lord! To You belongs all praise!

If this is all that we say which is the minimum then there is a way to say with meaning even if it is a short phrase. There is a massive difference (speaker says *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd* in a monotonous way) than saying *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd* (speaker says in a slow meaningful way). The difference is the first way does not sound meaningful but the second one does. We really think about the praise belonging to *Allah* and why we are praising Him in the way that we are. Take a look at this:

- *Hamdan kathiran, tayyiban, mubarakan fih*  
Praise that is abundant, beautiful and blessed

This is one example of an elaboration or an extra phrase, that you can say in order to praise *Allah* further. It is worth a look at the narration that relates to this particular extra phrase that is mentioned because it gives us an indication and encouragement to make our prayer something truly real and manifest.

## Praising beyond the minimum

The companion Rifa'a said, "One day we were praying behind the Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace). When he raised his head from bowing, he said, 'God hears the one who praises Him' (*Sami'Allahu liman hamidah*).

A man behind him said, 'Our Lord! To You belongs all praise! Praise that is abundant, beautiful and blessed!' (*Rabbana wa lakal-hamd, hamdan kathiran, tayyiban, mubarakan fih*).

When the Prophet completed the prayer, he asked, 'Who said these words?' The man replied, 'It was me.' The Prophet said, 'I saw over thirty angels competing to record it first.'"

So there are a number of things to take from this narration. Clearly the companion had uttered these words that others are unfamiliar with. The whole point of the narration or the reason why it became something worth illustrating is because the extra words were not known. They had not been taught to say these words.

He was expressing himself further such that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* even turned round to question who said these words. The Prophet, *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* praised that action by saying over 30 angels competed to record it first because it was such a beautiful heartfelt expression.

Nowadays we will look at that phrase and we will just repeat it: *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd, hamdan kathiran, tayyiban, mubarakan fih* but the original idea was to praise *Allah* organically and naturally from the heart in a way that was true to oneself.

There are differences of opinion over this issue on the issue of language. Some do permit that in this particular position of the *salah* or in the prostration during supplication that we can express ourselves in our own language. So if after saying *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd* you want to praise *Allah* further in your own words then that is something personally that I would encourage.

Others might say you should not use other than the Arabic language while others would say it is perfectly fine. It is one of those areas where there is some discussion. I am not insisting on it. You have to do whatever is comfortable to you but the idea is that we would praise *Allah* extra in our *salah* in a way that is meaningful to us.

*Allah* to You belongs all praise for having created the heavens and earth, for having sent down Messengers, for having revealed the *Qur'an*, for everything that you do for us day in, day out. This is a way to really praise *Allah*. The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would elaborate the praises of *Allah* in his own way beyond what we have looked at. He would say as much praise as fills the heavens and the earth and everything in between and as much praise as You will.

Sometimes the companions would think Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* had forgotten where he was in the *salah* because he was standing and praising for so long. Look at how we view this position. We either say nothing or we say a couple of quick words and then we move on. To encourage you further I wanted to look at a couple more narrations here:

## Praise Him like you should

Abu Hurairah reported: the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "When the Imam says, 'God hears the one who praises Him,' you should say, 'God! Our Lord! All praise belongs to You!' (*Allahumma Rabbana lakal-hamd*). If the saying of any one of you coincides with that of the angels, all their past sins will be forgiven." [al-Bukhari]

What a reward and recognition.

Thabit reported: Anas used to demonstrate to us the prayer of the Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) and, while demonstrating, he used to raise his head from bowing and stand so long that we would say that he had forgotten (the prostration). [al-Bukhari]

Look at the extent to which you can stand praising *Allah* and remembering Him. Think about all the things for which praise is due to Him.

## All praise belongs to God...

... Lord of all that exists. [Chapter 1, The Opening]

... who created the heavens and the earth and made darkness and light... [Chapter 6, Cattle]

... who sent down the Scripture to His servant and made it unerringly straight. [Chapter 18, The Cave]

... to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth, and praise be to Him in the life to come. He is the All Wise, the All Aware. [Chapter 34, Saba]

... Creator of the heavens and the earth, who made angels messengers with two, three, four pairs of wings. He adds to creation as He wills: God has power over everything. [Chapter 35, The Creator]

All of these verses begin with *Alhamdulillah* and so when we say *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd* or even when we say *Alhamdulillah Rabbi 'aalamin* this gives us more to think about. His creation of the heavens and the earth, His revelation of scripture, His power etc. All of these things can come to mind and we can think forward because His praises will echo in eternity.

Look at what *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* says towards the end of *Surah Az-Zumar*:

## His praises will echo in eternity

Those who were mindful of their Lord will be led in throngs to the Garden. When they arrive, they will find its gates wide open, and its keepers will say to them, 'Peace be upon you. You have done well. Come in: you are here to stay.'

And they will say, '**Praise belongs to God who has kept His promise to us and given us this land as our own.** Now we may live wherever we please in the Garden.' How excellent is the reward of those who labour!

You will see the angels surrounding the Throne, glorifying their Lord with praise. True judgement will have been passed between them, and it will be said, '**Praise belongs to God, Lord of all that exists!**'

[Chapter 39, The Throngs, Verses 74-75]

*Allah* does not say who said it. It will just be forever said by anyone and everyone - *Alhamdulillah Rabbi 'aalamin*.

This is such a central phrase that all praise belongs to *Allah* for everything that He does. For who He is. There is a general aspect to that beyond what we might directly experience and there is the aspect of that which is specific to us. There is a difference between praise and gratitude. Praise is owed to somebody for who they are and what they do regardless of whether we feel the direct effects of it. Gratitude is typically specifically in the context of the benefit that we feel and the gratitude therefore we want to express to someone as a result.

So when we are praising *Allah* we are encompassing both, the personal gratitude we feel but just in general the praise that is due to *Allah* for who He is. I give extra emphasis to this particular segment so that your standing after the *ruku* is truly something meaningful. *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd, hamdan, kathiran, tayyiban mubarakan fih*

– Our Lord, To You belongs all praise! Praise that is abundant, beautiful and blessed and then to add that praise in whichever way you see fit and in a manner that is befitting the Lord of all that exists.

## Step 25

# Prostrating

This is one of the positions or the position that is the most iconic of the *salah* itself and of the relationship between the believer and his/her Lord. Here are a few Prophetic narrations that give us an indication of the power of prostration.

## The power of prostration

The Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, “My community on that day **will surely have bright faces because of prostration**, and bright arms and feet because of ablution.” [Ahmad]

On that day meaning on the Day of Judgement. There is an illumination or correlation between the *wudhu* in this life and the illumination that we have in the hereafter. Similarly with the prostration. Ironically when we are putting our face on the ground that is where the least light gets to it when we are prostrating. Our faces darken somewhat when in prostration because the light is restricted. But there is a brightness on the faces that will be evident in the hereafter because of this prostration. So it is a distinction that we will have on the day of judgment.

There is a verse in the *Qur'an* in which the quality of frequent prostrations amongst the companions of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was mentioned - ‘their mark or their brand in their faces is from the traces of prostration’. Some said this is to do with the illumination and brightness of the face. It is a spiritual brightness in this life that can be seen because of frequent prostration.

Some also refer to the fact that someone’s forehead can be seen to have something of a mark on it just because the face is on the ground so often. You might notice on your foot that sometimes you get a mark as it is pressed into the ground a lot during the sitting position in the *salah*. There is the idea that is reflecting in this narration that people will have their faces illuminated on the day of judgement because of the prostration.

In another narration the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, was helped by this companion Rabi’ah ibn Ka’b with water for his ablution. There is this idea that in this *hadith* about the proximity to the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* on the Day of Judgement being linked to our frequent and lengthy prostrations. Within the prostration, supplication or extra *du'a* is something that is very much encouraged.

Rabi’ah ibn Ka’b reported: I spent the night with the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) and I brought him water for his ablution and his needs. The Prophet said to me, “Ask (for anything).” I said, “I ask for your companionship in Paradise.” The Prophet said, “Anything else besides that?” I said, “That is all.” The Prophet said, “**Then help me achieve it for you by prostrating often.**” [Muslim]

Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "The servant is closest to their Lord during prostration, so increase your supplications therein." [Muslim]

It is in the prostration that we come to the closest most intimate point. The point now where this is the time to make your requests. This is the time to open yourself up to your Lord. The Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is saying the servant is closest to their Lord during prostration.

Clearly we are not talking about a physical closeness but something by way of internal connection, so increase your supplications therein.

Ibn Abbas reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "...Verily, I have been prohibited from reciting the Qur'an while bowing or prostrating in prayer. As for bowing, you should exalt the Lord. As for prostration, you should exert yourself in supplication, for it is worthy for you to be answered." [Muslim]

This is echoed in this *hadith* which also gives us a contrast between what is encouraged in the bowing position the *ruku* and the prostration, the *sujood*. We are not supposed to recite the *Qur'an* in either of these two positions. The question commonly comes what about supplications or *du'a* that are in the *Qur'an* for example:

*Rabbana atina fid-dunya hasanatan-wa fil-aakhirati hasanatan-wa qina adhaban-naar*. Our Lord, give us goodness in this life and goodness in the hereafter and save us from the punishment of the fire. This is completely acceptable to say in your prostration. That is not counted as recitation of the *Qur'an* as far as the prostration or *sujood* is concerned. But you should not recite the *Qur'an* as we just recite the verses in the standing position for example.

In the bowing, you should exalt the Lord – *tasbih*. *Fa sabbih*. It is referring to the exaltation, the declaring of *Allah's* perfection. So the bowing position is one in which we do not necessarily ask for more. We simply exalt *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*.

*Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* is most likely to answer the servants' requests in the prostration position. Why? We are demonstrating our servitude and submission to the Lord of the heavens and the earth.

So if we are recognising His Kingship, His Lordship, and His Mastery in that way then it is only right that *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* would accept our requests. As long as we are present in mind and heart and sincere in what we are doing and saying.

Many of us do not increase in our supplication during the prostration. We simply say the words of exaltation which are also correct to say. Use your prostration as a way or a time to increase in your supplications. If you are unable to do so in Arabic in a meaningful way or because you do not know enough supplications in Arabic etc. many permit the idea that you can supplicate here in whatever language you want.

I think it is recommended for us to increase in our requests and opening ourselves up to *Allah* in this position especially. It makes it so much more powerful. It adds more meaning to the whole position and makes it a special moment in our day and in our life.

Abu Bakr said, "Indeed the Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) used to fall into prostration, thanking God, whenever a pleasant happening befell him, or he was given a glad tiding."  
[Abu Dawud]

This gets us to think about prostrating outside of the *salah* which is really worth reviving. Whenever something nice happens to you in your life or you receive good news, do you go into prostration? Do I go into prostration out

of gratitude? Gratitude is such a central characteristic that really flows through the whole prayer from beginning to end. Falling into prostration is something that we feel naturally innately whenever some pleasant thing happens and then we feel an urge to thank *Allah*. The way to do that is to fall down into prostration.

Prostration is also mentioned in the context of the recitation of the *Qur'an*. In previous times during engagement with scripture that the power of the revelation of *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* would drive people into prostration.

Interestingly there is also the incident of the magicians in the time of *Musa* and *Fir'aun*, Moses and Pharaoh. Where there is this competition going on when they witnessed this miracle of *Musa alayhi salam* with his staff and the snakes and then they fall into prostration. I think there is something there in terms of us to be really thinking about how natural this position to us is. It is very useful for us to think about it outside of the prayer because sometimes when we are in the mode of prayer we get into this mechanical ritual repetition and prostration is just part of that.

Then we lose a sense of this position. But the idea of actually falling into prostration in the context of reciting certain verses of the *Qur'an* or when something pleasant happens is something really special. If somebody were to demonstrate their gratitude and connection with *Allah* in this way even outside of the *salah*, that is an amazing demonstration of humility and a real connection between the servant and their Lord. May *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* help us to increase the quality and length of our prostrations.

## Step 26

# Moving into *Sujud* (prostration)

We are going to look at the physical aspects of moving into prostration and then the *sujood*.

- Moving slowly and deliberately

The first thing to say is the importance of moving slowly and deliberately. As with all of our movements, it is this idea of being in control and to think more about what we are doing. So partly it might be a time to just fall into prostration. Especially outside the prayer in the context of verses we have recited or that could be in the prayer. Also in the context of good news that we may just naturally fall into prostration with a suddenness.

There may be an appropriateness to that in the *salah*. It very much depends on our internal state but not just to rush. I think there is something about moving more deliberately and consciously into the prostration position. That we really feel ourselves lowering and moving into position in a much more considered way so we really understand and know what we are doing and we feel it as we go along.

- Hands first or knees first?

There is a discussion about whether the hands or knees should touch the ground when moving into the prostration position. Most seem to lean to the idea that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would place his hands down first, then his knees. Others say we should keep our back straight from the standing position, bend our knees, have our hands on our thighs, place our knees on the ground first and then move forward to place our hands on the ground.

One is almost like a smarter way to move in which is where we are putting our hands on our thighs and moving downwards then knees first. The other feels more like a lunge or more of a desperate or needy move into prostration. This is just to illustrate that there is this conversation with respect to the physical way in which to move into prostration. So something for you to be aware of and my role here is not to declare one to be correct and the other to be incorrect. I think both have their place.

It is something for you to think about and helps you to think a little bit more about the subtleties of how you move into prostration and why you do it in that particular way. Perhaps it may differ at certain times. Physical aspects may differ like exactly where you may place your hands when you are standing up etc.

There are different reports about the practice of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. The likelihood is that different things would happen at periods of his life depending on different factors. It could be where he was praying, age, mobility or other reasons.

## • Saying the *Takbir* (*Allahu Akbar* – God is greater)

We are now saying the *takbir Allahu Akbar*. Typically as we go into the prostration, it is the longest movement going from standing all the way into prostration and also as we go from prostration all the way up to standing. The *Allahu Akbar* will be elongated as well throughout the position.

In fact, it is probably the time when we move into the prostration that the statement *Allahu Akbar* seems to have even more significance in the sense that we are saying God is Greater and we are making ourselves smaller. We are curling up almost into that prostration position so the contrast if anything should be even more obvious to us at that time.

## • What are we feeling as we move?

To really think about what we are feeling as we move. To really feel that humility and to remind ourselves of *Allah's* presence in front of us. Then you really have it in your mind and heart that *Allah* is before me, watching me. I am in His presence and then you are moving into prostration. It is a very different feeling than when you do it in a mechanical way where you fall into prostration because that is the next move to do.

Before we move into that prostration position, it is worth taking our time after we have praised *Allah, Rabbana wa lakal-hamd* to just brace ourselves for a moment. To really think about what we are about to do and to remind ourselves of *Allah's* presence. To say *Allahu Akbar* with meaning, feeling and then in all humility to move into that position. Once we do, there are seven parts of us that should be touching the ground.

### How should we prostrate?

- Face
- Hands
- Arms
- Knees
- Feet

## • Face

So the face should be on the ground with the forehead and the nose. The bridge of the nose should be pressed into the ground as well. Sometimes we prostrate in a way where our nose is off the ground. That is not appropriate. The forehead as well as the nose should be pressed into the ground.

## • Hands

The hands should be placed in relation to the head similarly to how our hands are raised when we say the *takbir*. It is almost as if we are in the *takbir* position but flat on the ground and fingers pointing forward and fingers slightly apart.

## • Arms

The arms should be outstretched then we are praying alone. So both in the bowing position and the ruku as well as the prostration position. The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would actually make it quite a full position as far as his arms would be concerned. The arms and elbows would be out but if we are praying with others right next to each other then we would tuck in.

With the pandemic, people had the opportunity to really stretch out with their arms during the prostration. Once we are side by side again in the mosques or even at home then we should tuck our arms in.

## • Knees

Knees on the ground.

## • Feet

The feet should be together. The toes should be pressed into the ground and if we can the toes should be facing forward towards the *qibla* in the same way that our fingers are pointing forward. So this would be the fullest way of prostrating. When the forehead, nose or the face, two hands, two knees, two feet, sets of toes are pressed into the ground then we are very much rooted. It is a very stable position actually compared to the *ruku* where we are connected and rooted into the earth fully.

### Step 27

## What is the significance of the *Sujud* position?

When you think about the actual position itself, what comes to mind in terms of the symbolism and the significance of the position? Here are some reflections.

## • The most humble position...

That is the easiest reflection on this physical position. Our faces are on the ground and we are clearly in a state of submission, humility and surrender. No doubt about it.

## • ...but not flat out

However at the same time, it is worth reflecting upon the fact that we are not completely flat out. It is possible that *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-alā* could have wanted us or instructed us to put ourselves flat on the ground. That is even more humble as a position.

However there is something undignified about that whereas the prostration is a very dignified position. The ability of the human being to stand up is part of the nobility of the human being. Similarly even when *Allah Subhanahu wa ta- alā* requires us to prostrate before Him, there is something significant about the fact that it is not flat out. There is something about the prostration that is almost a very honourable position whilst also one being full of humility.

## • Self-effacing and realising your true identity at the same time

The prostration involves us putting our face on the ground and it is in our faces that our identities are known. We know each other first and foremost through our faces recognising each other in that way. When we put our face on the ground, it is like we are hiding our identity from anyone else. When we look at a sea of people in prostration, you cannot tell who is who.

So whilst we are hiding our identity from others, we are actually realising our true identity at the same time. Our true identity as *ibaad*, servants and as worshippers. That is who we truly are and so whilst we are in that position, no one else will recognise or know that it is us from a distance or if we were amongst others but *Allah* knows.

*Allah* sees us then truly for who we are, who we are supposed to be, what we are called to be as human beings. Which is people who are fully in remembrance of, fully submitted to and fully connected to the Lord of the heavens and the earth.

So a beautiful reflection here that it is in this position where our identities are hidden from others, that we are manifesting our true identity as human beings before our Lord.

## • Reconnecting to earth

The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to prostrate on natural surfaces so it was in the sand or mud. There are narrations about the fact that when he would come up from the prostration sometimes there would be traces of the mud or the dirt on his forehead. So it reminds us about this idea of praying on natural surfaces and reminding us of where we come from.

20:55

﴿مِنْهَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ وَفِيهَا نُعِيدُكُمْ وَمِنْهَا نُخْرِجُكُمْ تَارَةً أُخْرَى﴾

From the earth We created you, into it We shall return you, and from it We shall raise you a second time.

This is typically what believers say when we throw the dirt or the soil back into the grave that has been dug up. We are told *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* fashioned us from this earth. If we look at the composition of the natural earth, it is basically the physical composition of the human bodies from all of the same materials.

So we are fashioned from this earth, dissolve back into it and it is from here that *Allah* will resurrect us once again. There is something really significant about that. It is hard obviously to connect to that idea that when we are putting our faces on our lush prayer mats, carpets at home or wooden floorboards. We lose the sense of this connection with nature and natural order of things. Praying outdoors on natural surfaces is really powerful and something considering doing if you can. In any situation there is something about us earthing ourselves in our prostration.

## • Heart above head

It is the only position you will find yourself in where your heart is above your head. We are more in the speculative realm here in terms of our reflections so none of this is a definitive truth as such. Just as scholars will point out the reason why we do *tawaf* or go round the *Ka'bah* circumambulate anti clockwise. The reason why we do that is one of the symbolic points that the heart of the human being is inclined slightly to the left and so as we go around the *Ka'bah*, our heart is closer to the *Ka'bah*.

There is something similar here that in the prostration, that our brains, minds and hearts are subdued. Our emotional state is lifted close and higher. This is not necessarily the time for rationalising and intellectualising in the prostration, rather it is a time to submit your mind and lift your heart up towards *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* and to try really connect at a deeper level.

## • Resembling the foetal position

If you look at the prostration position from the side and rotate it somewhat, it does reflect the curling up foetal position. There is this quality of *Rahmah* of *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* which is typically translated as mercy but it is closer in meaning loving care and protection. There is something about being in that prostration position that makes us most likely to be receiving. To be blessed with the love, mercy, care and protection of our Lord so when we humble ourselves before Him just as a baby is curled up in the womb of the mother, then we are in a position to really receive. This links to the idea of increasing in your supplication and asking *Allah* more in that position. Then He will give and He will respond.

We have to have that confidence when it comes to our supplications and our requests. A real confidence that we are being heard, understood and that the best thing will be done for us. Similar to when a child requests something from the parent. The child may be desperate for something but the child does not always know what is in its best interest so the parent may sometimes not exactly give the child what the child is asking for. The loving parent will reciprocate, give or support the child in a way that is best for its own development and the child's progress.

Similarly when we ask *Allah*, we do not know. We do not know if the thing we are asking for that we want is necessarily the best thing for us. Even when we are asking for relief from a difficulty, we do not know if being relieved from that difficulty sooner rather than later is better or worse for us. Only *Allah* knows.

So we ask with a confidence that *Allah* will give but He will give us in a way that is best for us whether it is now, later in this life or in the hereafter. It is important that we always maintain that perspective whenever we make requests of our Lord.

So we ask *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* to make our prostrations truly significant. In the next step there are some reflections to help us think about the beauty, symbolism and the power of the physical position of the *sujood*.

### Step 28

We find ourselves now prostrating before *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala*.

## What do we say?

The most common phrase that we say is this one:

## ***Subhana Rabbiyal-A'la***

### **How perfect is My Lord, the Most High**

So we spent some time talking before about the concept of *tasbih* or saying *Subhan, SubhanAllah, Subhana Rabbi, Subhanaka-Allahumma* etc. How perfect is my Lord. Remember just as with the bowing position it is very personal now. It is my Lord. In the *Fatihah*, we talk about serving You and we are asking for help, to guide us. In the bowing and the prostration positions, we are very much personalising it a lot more – *Subhana Rabbiyy* how perfect is my Lord.

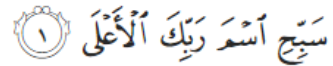
In the bowing, we said *Al Adhim* - The Majesty, Supremacy contrasts with the instability of the bowing position in some way. Here we are saying *al- A'la*, The Most High, where we now find ourselves in the lowest position.

- How many times can/should we say it?

We can say even as little as once but typically recommended is three. An odd number of times is encouraged but we can certainly increase beyond three. The emphasis is on saying this meaningfully and not rushing. Really declaring *Allah's* perfection truly, feeling it, internalising it and taking Him by His name The Most High.

It is as if this statement is a response to the chapter in the *Qur'an* of *Surah Al-A'la*. The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to recite it often in the *Jumuah, Eid* and *Witr* prayers.

87:1



[Prophet], glorify the name of your Lord the Most High,

Here we are almost responding to the first verse when we say *Subhana Rabbiyal A'la*.

- What is the significance of this particular phrase?

It is to do with saying my Lord and personalising. But also *al- A'la* the contrast between saying the Most High and us finding ourselves in the lowest position.

- Can we say anything else?

It is recommended to supplicate and to ask *Allah*. If we always say *Subhana Rabbiyal A'la* in our prostration 3 times only then clearly we are missing something because as we have seen in many narrations that the encouragement is really to ask *Allah* in this particular position.

There are other ways in which the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to glorify *Allah*. He would say things in the praise of *Allah* in the prostration as well. As a starting point focus on saying this phrase in a meaningful way. Make sure we increase or exert ourselves in supplication too even if briefly but to ask *Allah* in each of our prostrations for something.

- See opening verses of Chapters 17, 57, 59, 61, 62, 64 and 87

17: **Glory to Him** who made His servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place of worship, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him some of Our signs: He alone is the All Hearing, the All Seeing.

57: Everything in the heavens and earth **glorifies God**—He is the Almighty, the Wise.

59: Everything in the heavens and earth **glorifies God**; He is the Almighty, the Wise.

61: Everything in the heavens and earth **glorifies God**—He is the Almighty, the Wise.

62: Everything in the heavens and earth **glorifies God**, the Controller, the Holy One, the Almighty, the Wise.

64: Everything that is in the heavens and earth **glorifies God**; all control and all praise belong to Him; He has power over everything.

87: [Prophet], **glorify the name of your Lord** the Most High.

The opening verses of these chapters of the *Qur'an* begin either by saying *Subhan, yusabbih* or *SubhanAllah* meaning either how perfect is *Allah* who is such and such, things that are in the heavens and the earth or they declare *Allah's* perfection etc. So similarly when we looked at the verses that begin with *Alhamdu* it is worth just looking at some of the chapters that begin in this particular way just to give you extra context meaning and depth.

Any time you say *Subhana Rabbi, Subhanaka-Allahumma, Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim, Subhana Rabbiyal A'la*, it adds more of an understanding about what you are saying and aligning that with those things in the *Qur'an* where *Allah* mentions this particular phrase. I do think it really helps to bring certain things to mind when we are saying *Subhana Rabbiyal A'la*. It could be around times like Easter and Christmas where there are conversations about Jesus and people are referring to him as the son of God.

That is something to which we take exception and it might be at those times where we are saying *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim, Subhana Rabbiyal A'la*. *Allah* says Himself in the context of the claim that He has a son, He says *Subhanahu*. That He is perfect, beyond that. He is far removed from such statements. In other places, *Allah* will mention this or declare His own perfection in the context of His creative power etc.

When we praise *Allah*, it is helpful to bring things to mind. It could be different things at different times but it gives depth to our actual praising. It gives depth to our statement of declaring *Allah's* perfection.

## Step 29

### Moving in between prostrations

We will go into moving after the first prostration and then moving into the second prostration.

- Moving slowly and deliberately

Moving slowly and deliberately is really important here. We are in this period of the prayer where it is very easy to rush. It is very dangerous to do so and we can really jeopardise our *salah*. If you think about the actual position which is the prostration itself, it is only appropriate that we move with a certain dignity and in a considered mindful fashion.

- Saying the *Takbir* (*Allahu Akbar* – God is greater)

We are saying *Allahu Akbar*. Try your best not to let your stating of the *takbir* just to be an empty statement which does not really mean much as you say it, moving from one position to the next. Each time feel that you are saying yes *Allah* is Greater, God is Greater.

- What are we feeling as we move?
  - The difference between moving out and moving in

If we have a sense of the presence of *Allah* before us there is such a difference between the emotional state and thought process when we are moving into prostration versus moving outside of prostration. Moving out of prostration should be something that is done with an extra level of shyness and humility. Raising ourselves up again in front of *Allah* is a brave thing to do once you actually lowered yourself before Him now to lift your head up. As if to say who gave us permission to do that.

Of course we do need to move on but it is that feeling when you are in front of your Lord that you really felt His presence. It is as if it only feels right that you would wait for Him to permit you to move before we do *SubhanAllah*. Often times we move out of prostration and we are rushing through our *salah* as if we have something better to do but often times it is not that we do necessarily. Yes we have responsibilities and other things need to happen but have we really truly prostrated before *Allah* and committed ourselves?

When we are trying to move out of prostration, it is almost like a reluctant moving out – shy and hesitant not just moving out mindlessly. It as if something has actually happened and as if something has been meaningful. It is a little bit like any event or experience that is impactful for us. Once we have the opportunity to move on or to move out away from that circumstance, we will usually hold or pause and we will reflect somewhat before we move.

You can think of any experience where your senses have been fully involved and you have been fully engrossed. Then it comes to an end and now you have the ability to move on but usually you might just wait a little bit to take it in before you then move on to whatever else you have to do next.

So moving into prostration I think is something we should do with keenness. We should do it with the idea of really looking forward to it. The idea of that we are finding a place of intimacy, peace and connection with *Allah* like no other position, this closest position. But moving out is almost like a reluctant, hesitant or shy movement. Reflect and think about your own emotional and psychological state as you move in and out of the prostration.

### Reflection: why two prostrations and only one bowing?

The prostration is a climax of the prayer and it as if one is not enough for each cycle of the prayer. After the first prostration, it is like we feel we the need to prostrate again. After the bowing position then actually we go into prostration anyway. So that is really what we are building up to once we are in prostration. Two feels more appropriate than simply just one whereas everything else we do in the prayer is one at a time. We stand once for the recitation, we bow once, we stand and praise once, we sit in our long sitting position once. Everything else is once but the prostration is twice.

There is a reflection that is mentioned at times. When we go into the prostration the first time then we remind ourselves about the earth from which we were originally fashioned and created. Then when we come out of that prostration we remind ourselves about our birth, coming to life, becoming mature and growing up as a human being. Then when we go back into prostration, we remind ourselves that we will go back into the ground when we die. When we come out of the second prostration we remind ourselves of the resurrection.

So there is something there about that cycle of the two prostrations that gives us the cycle of our lives. It reminds us about where we came from. The fact that we have been brought to life by *Allah* and then going back into the ground when we die and then coming out again once we are resurrected.

So a point of reflection that can help our mental and psychological state when we are in these positions. The prostration's importance is emphasised not only by the various narrations and the verses we have looked at but also the fact that it is done twice in every cycle whereas everything else is done once. May we be people who really give it its due and really commit ourselves fully mentally, physically, verbally and emotionally into this position. When we do that we will really derive its benefits.

The illumination is not just in the next life but in this life. The inspiration, confidence, energy, tranquility and peace that we are looking for in our prayer must really be found in this particular position. May *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* help us to find all of these amazing treasures of the prostration.

### Step 30

## Sitting between prostrations

- Not just an interim 'filler' position but an important stage of the prayer

So as with the standing after the bowing when we praise *Allah* and we say *Rabbana wa lakal-hamd*, here too we should know that this is an important part of the *salah*. The stage in between the two prostrations. It is not just a quick filler position which we have move into and out of quickly. Rather we can sit there for some time. There are many reasons to do this.

Not only to say certain things which the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to say in this particular position. But also because if you are in between the two prostrations and they have been a significant experience then after the first one you would feel a sense of calming down, taking it in, the significance of what has just happened and then bracing yourself to go back in again.

It is a little bit like someone has been under water, coming up for breath and then going back in again. You take your time, take your breath and then go plunge back into the water. So there is that idea here that we should be really thinking about the sitting position in between the two prostrations as a position in its own right. One in which we find a level of stability, calmness, tranquility and stillness within us before we then progress and move on.

- *Rabbighfir-li. Rabbighfir-li.*  
My Lord, forgive me. My Lord, forgive me.

From what we know of the Prophetic practice, the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to supplicate briefly in this position too. It could be associated with the idea of the insufficiency of the prostration. It almost echoes this idea of almost like a hesitancy of coming out of the prostration in the first place. You can come out of the prostration but you do so with a certain reluctance or humility and ask for *Allah's* forgiveness. Or as is also reported:

*Allahumma-ghfir-li, warham-ni, wajbur-ni, wahdi-ni, warzuq-ni.*  
O God, forgive me, have mercy on me, console (or restore) me,  
guide me and provide for me.

There are other narrations *wa'afu 'ani*, *'āfini* etc meaning to forgive me, grant me wealth and wellbeing. We can supplicate in different ways in this interim position.

Remember to be really still and calm in this position before you move into your second prostration. There are many reasons as to why we must not rush in this particular position. What we want to avoid is that we come out of the first prostration, to barely even sit up and go back in again. This is something which is very much chastised.

Similarly speaking when we come out of the bowing position and move into prostration. We need to find the significance of these positions in their own right. We know that sometimes the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would stand in between the bowing and prostration and sit in between the prostrations for as long as he was bowing and prostrating.

Can you imagine? Nowadays we would find it odd to sit in between the prostration for as long as have prostrated even if our prostrations are relatively short. Usually the sitting position in between is super-fast. Similarly when we stand up after the bowing position, let that standing be as long as the bowing position itself. I am not saying it has to be.

We are about to look at the consequences of rushing which hopefully will really dissuade and discourage us from moving too quickly through the various positions of the *salah*.

### Step 31

## The consequences of rushing

The purpose of this section is to remind myself and you of the terrible consequences of rushing through our *salah*. We will start with the more general reflections on this from the narration of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

'Ammar ibn Yasir said: I heard the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) say. "A person may offer a prayer and nothing of it is recorded for them except one tenth of it, one ninth of it, one eighth of it, one seventh of it, one sixth of it, one fifth of it, one quarter of it, one third of it, or half of it."

[Abu Dawud]

This very much reminds us of the fact that just because we have gone through the physical motions of *salah* and said certain words that there are levels to the acceptance of the prayer itself. It is important for us to remind ourselves of that. We may perform *wudhu* and stand for prayer and at the end of it basically we get 1/10 or some other mark. But do we not want to get full marks or as close to full marks as possible?

Interestingly there is no portion mentioned in this hadith beyond a half. It is as if to say if even if you get more than 5/10 as if *Allah* will write the whole thing for you *insha'Allah* out of His mercy. But it is really important for us to remember that just going through the process is not necessarily what matters. What matters is actually doing it in a way that is meaningful.

The Prophet Muhammad (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "God has obligated five prayers. Whoever excellently performs their ablutions, prays them in their proper times, fulfils their bowing, prostration and humility (*khushu'*) has a promise from God that He will forgive them. But whoever does not do that has no promise from God. He may either forgive or punish them."

[Abu Dawud, Malik, Ahmad and others]

Look at how the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is mentioning *khushu'u* as a condition of prayer, just as the wudhu, praying on time, bowing, prostrating are all factors. These physical components are mentioned but then *khushu'u* is also mentioned alongside them which is just as important to be present for what makes for an acceptable prayer.

Such a person would have a promise from God that He would forgive them. That is how powerful *salah* is. But whoever does not do that has no promise from God. He may either forgive them or punish them. Obviously we do not want to leave that to chance.

The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) entered the mosque and a man came in and prayed, then he came and greeted the Messenger of God. He returned the greeting and said, "Go back and pray, for you have not prayed." The man went back and prayed as he had prayed before, then he came to the Prophet and greeted him, and the Messenger of God replied, "And peace be upon you," then he said, "Go back and pray, for you have not prayed." When he had done that three times, the man said, "By the One Who sent you with the truth, I cannot do more than that. Teach me." He said, "When you stand to pray, say the takbir (*Allahu Akbar*), then recite whatever you can of the Qur'an. Then bow until you are still and tranquil in bowing, then rise until you are standing up straight. Then prostrate until you are still and tranquil in prostration, then sit up until you are still and tranquil in sitting. Then do that throughout the entire prayer."

[al-Bukhari, Muslim]

Can you imagine a scenario where you have prayed and then you finish and then someone that you respect tells you that you need to go pray again? But I did pray. No you did not actually pray. Such an explicit definitive statement. You did not even pray. But the man went through the motions. He did bow and prostrate but he was told he did not pray. So the man went back and prayed as he did before and then he came to the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* to be taught.

So what is the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* emphasising? Simply that one should be in stillness, and calmness in between the two positions. It is not just talking about physically that we are motionless in between these positions or we give time. We could just do a count. We could come up from one prostration, count to three in our heads and then go again but notice the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is saying until you are still and tranquil – until you find or are in a state of inward tranquility and a stillness.

It means in your own heart and self that you are comfortable and focused in this current position. You are not thinking about moving or rushing into to the next one. Within yourself, you are present within that current position enjoying or engrossed in the moment and not worrying about the next thing or the next thing.

Abdullah ibn Mughafal reported: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "Verily, the worst thieves among people are those who steal from their prayers." It was said, "O Messenger of God, how do they steal from their prayers?" The Prophet said, "They do not complete its bowing or its prostration..." [al-Mu'jam al-Awsat]

Completing the bowing and the prostration means being in those positions for enough time, saying the words meaningfully and not rushing in and out.

The Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "God, Mighty and Sublime, does not look at the prayer of the servant who does not make their backbone upright in between their bowings and prostrations (i.e. they do not settle comfortably in those 'interim' positions before proceeding)." [Ahmad, Tabarani]

It means stand up straight. After the bowing before you go into the prostration and sit up straight before moving into the next one. So the same idea is emphasised. To be still and calm in those positions.

Abu 'Abdullah Al-Ash'ari (may God be pleased with him), narrated that the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace), saw a man who was not completing his bowing down and who was pecking in his prostration (i.e. moving up and down too fast) during his prayer. The Messenger of God said, "Do you see this? Whoever dies upon this (i.e. praying in this way) will die upon other than the way of Muhammad."

Like a bird or a pigeon – their head bobs up and down really fast when they are grabbing some breadcrumbs. That is sometimes how we go in between the prostrations. On a different *fitrah*, on a different way. This is not the way of the true believer. This is not true *Islam*, submission or surrender to just go up and down in this way because it is a disrespect of the One before whom you are standing or sitting.

Then, the Messenger of God said, "The likeness of the one who pecks in their bowing and prostration is like a famished person who only eats one or two dates, so how will they be of any benefit?"  
[Ibn Khuzaymah]

Think about when you are fasting in *Ramadhan* or at any other time. At the end of the day you have *iftar* and all you can have, is one or two dates, nothing else and then you go to the next day. What kind of satisfaction would you derive from that? We will not derive any. We are hungry and we need more to fill ourselves. Similarly our souls and inner selves need more. They need more than simply just going up and down too fast. The analogy gives us the sense that we need to take our fill. Our hearts and souls need that. To take our fill from bowing and prostrating in front of *Allah*. We will not achieve that by rushing.

You can see the consequences are therefore quite dire for someone who rushes through their prayer and is not in a state of calmness in that position. What does that really communicate? What it says to *Allah* is that you would rather be elsewhere frankly and that you just want to get on with this. You will be glad when it is over. You are not really interested in expressing yourself in front of *Allah* and demonstrating truly your submission and humility before Him. That is what matters.

So I encourage you really to reflect on this. Think about your own practice and try as much as possible to really find that peace and tranquility. Demonstrate your humility in front of *Allah* in a way that is appropriate in the positions of bowing and prostrating. But especially in between these positions because it is these that we can see that people's prayer can be truly won or lost.

# Sitting: the position

We are now looking at the long sitting position either at the end of the *salah* or it might be in a 3- or 4-unit prayer. We may have a medium length sitting position as well up until the point of ending the *tashahhud* with saying *ashhadu an-lā ilāha illAllāh*.

The idea of this short section is simply to think about the actual physical position itself both in terms of how we sit as well as the significance of the position.

## • How should we sit?

In terms of how we sit, a few different things are actually narrated about the practice of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. The most common is the fact that when we sit down in the *salah* that our right foot should be upright with our toes pressed into the ground and our left foot should be on its side with our weight then on our left foot. Now there are various other things that are mentioned. The feet in slightly different positions. Sometimes the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would sit on the ground to one side with his feet to the other side.

I do not want to get too much into the technicalities but just to mention this is the most commonly understood way of sitting in all sitting positions of the prayer is where our right foot is upright with the toes pressed into the ground and the left foot is on the side with weight of the body on the left foot. There are possible alternatives and also depending on one's physical situation. One is allowed to or recommended to sit in a way that is comfortable if there are any physical impediments to sitting in a way that we have discussed.

We have been in positions of quite significant intensity. In the standing position we are reciting, asking for guidance, reading from the *Qur'an*, in prostrations and in bowing, we are really exerting ourselves in exalting *Allah* and asking Him, supplicating etc. The sitting position both in its physical sense and as well as when you start to look at the words feels like a lot more relaxed in some way.

It is a little bit like having built up to and come to the closest point to *Allah*, we have now been told to be at ease and at rest now. The sitting position seems to reflect that. So in some ways almost whilst it is still an important and formal part of the prayer, it feels as though it is one in which we can be much more at ease and that we are coming towards the end.

When you actually look at the words that we will examine, it seems to align with this kind of feeling. So you know the analogy that we have given one or twice where the servant or the peasant from the land is invited by the king of the land to the palace.

Now the servant enters and goes through the various stages. So if you see the standing, recitation, bowing and prostration almost like stages in this progression through the palace until one comes literally into the presence of the king in the prostration. Then there in that position you are told to now sit.

Then we sit up and are seated. There is the king and the court of the king etc. and others around. Actually we make reference almost to others as well when we say the words that we say in this position. So if you just imagine it from that perspective. It is now that you have been accepted by into the presence of the king and are sitting before Him.

So that is one way to think about this particular position and its significance relative to the others. It does not seem to have that same level of intensity and rigour as the other positions while of course still being a very important and serious part of the *salah* no doubt.

There is another reflection that we can think about which is this idea of kneeling before *Allah*. Now whether the kneeling described here in the *Qur'an* is exactly the kind of kneeling or the sitting that we find ourselves in the *salah* but *Allah* says:

**You will see every community kneeling.** Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you will be repaid for what you did.'  
[Chapter 45, Kneeling, Verse 28]

There is that sense of stillness within that position, a sense of accountability and reminder. Just as we were talking about the standing position and being in the hereafter standing, waiting for our account to take place. Similarly *Allah* mentions and talks about communities kneeling and groups of people waiting for their record.

It would help for us also to think about it in that context where we can certainly reflect and cast our minds forward to the fact that we will be kneeling in front of *Allah* on the day of judgement and addressed in this way. Today you will be repaid for what you did.

A reminder for us to really reflect on and think about the actions we are involved in. What are we doing? What we are spending our life involved with? A time will come when we will need to account for all of that and we will need to have good explanations. As best an explanation that we can muster as to explain to *Allah* with what You gave us and in the time You put us this is what we did and this is why we did it.

### Step 33

## Sitting: the *Tashahhud* (witness statement)

We move on now to the *tashahhud*. A very significant statement or set of words are said in the long sitting position. We will look at this in three parts. In the first part, we are going to start by introducing the *Tashahhud* by looking at this narration.

Ibn Abbas said, "The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) used to teach us the *tashahhud* as he would teach us a chapter from the *Qur'an*." [Muslim]

There are various narrations that have slightly different wordings for the *Tashahhud*. There seems to be one that has become the most common but there are narrations that give slightly different wordings but not to the extent that they are completely different statements. They are relatively minor differences. It is very interesting to look at from this perspective which is in relation to this narration.

Abdullah ibn Masud said, "While observing prayer behind the Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) we used to recite 'Peace be upon God, peace be upon so and so.' One day the Messenger of God said to us, 'Verily God is Himself Peace (*as-Salam*). When any one of you sits during the prayer, they should say..."

*As-Salam* is the One who provides peace, security and safety. That is one of the names of Allah so how do you say peace be upon the One who is *as-Salām* Himself? So it was said one should say:

***At-tahiyyatu lillahi***  
**All compliments are for God**

***was-salawatu***  
**and all prayers**

***wat-tayyibat***  
**and all pure deeds**

Are you aware and conscious that when you are sitting and saying *At-tahiyyatu lillahi was-salawatu wat-tayyibat* that it is said to be almost as the equivalent of *As-salamu alaikum*, but in a way that is appropriate for *Allah*? The companions would say *as salām 'alā-Allah* but they were told that is not quite appropriate. So in the same way that saying *As-salamu alaikum* peace be upon you is appropriate for us to say to another human being, the equivalent appropriate statement for *Allah* is *At-tahiyyatu lillāhi*. *Tahiyya* means greeting so all compliments and all greetings are for God.

This greeting is coming very much towards the end of either a round of two units of prayer or the whole prayer. After having completed the standing position, bowing, prostrating etc. we are then saying greetings and compliments are for God. It echoes with the idea that it is almost now that we have found ourselves truly in *Allah*'s presence and at ease and comfort. Now we say *At-tahiyyatu lillāhi*. Compliments and greetings are for *Allah*. *Was-salawatu* and all prayers. *Salawat* being the plural of *salah* – our prayers. *Wat-tayyibat* and then all pure deeds.

So it is as if to say look our words, our intentions and actions are all for *Allah*. We are literally greeting *Allah*. Think about how you are expressing the words when you say *At-tahiyyatu lillāhi*. That should be one of the most significant heartfelt statements that we make when we actually say these words *At-tahiyyatu lillāhi*. We are dedicating the fact that this prayer, the previous ones and the ones to come are all for *Allah*. They are not for any other reason and are dedicated and devoted to Him.

*Wa-tayyibat* and all pure deeds. The *tayyib* deed is the one that is wholesome not just lawful or halal but beautified with *ihsan*, excellence and consciousness. The *salawat* or the prayers are just one subset of those wider deeds. We are recognising here that it is not just our greetings and compliments that are due to *Allah* but the actions too. The actions have to follow up. They have to be offered at that level of quality that is appropriate for the station and nature of our Lord.

So getting the pronunciation right, saying the words slowly and calmly. *At-tahiyyatu lillahi was-salawat wat-tayyibat*. Really feeling and understanding what it is you are saying. It is a whole different ballgame when you are now saying this. Really feel that you are actually sending greetings to *Allah* rather than *At-tahiyyatu lillahi was-salawat wat-tayyibat* (said quickly) muttering through. So hopefully this will help you *insha'Allah* in expressing these words in a way that is truly powerful and meaningful.

### Step 34

So having said *At-tahiyyatu lillāhi, was-salawat wat-tayyibat* that all greetings, compliments, all prayers and all pure deeds are for *Allah* and we then say:

**As-salamu 'alayka ayyuhan-nabiyyu**  
**Peace be upon you O Prophet**

**wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh**  
**and the Mercy of God and His blessings**

So we now for the first and only time actually in our *salah*, we directly address someone other than *Allah*. It is really important to be conscious about that. We are saying words that we are very used to saying – *As-salāmu alaikum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuhu*. The full length greeting of the believer that is peace be upon you, the mercy of God and His blessings.

We are directly addressing the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. This is just one narration of many in which we are told that *Allah* has angels that go around the earth:

Abdullah ibn Mas'ud said: The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "God has angels who go around on earth, conveying to me the greetings of my ummah."  
[an-Nasai]

The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* receives our greeting in some way and even responds as we understand it. *Allah* knows best the mechanisms. We know we are really encouraged to increase in sending him greetings as we know from the *Qur'an*: That *Allah* and His angels send blessings upon the Prophet to you who believe, invoke *Allah's* blessings upon the Prophet and convey to him your utmost greetings - *Surah Al-Ahzab* 33:56.

We are actually addressing him. It is significant because we have just greeted *Allah* Himself. We say *At-tahiyyatu lillahi* which is a greeting and compliments to *Allah*. Now we are turning to the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* not in a physical sense but in our minds we should understand we are addressing someone else now. We think about him, cast our mind to his grave in Madinah and offer our greeting directly.

Greet him as you would greet him were you to have the opportunity to meet him in the hereafter. Imagine *insha'Allah* if we get that opportunity, how would you greet the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*? How would you convey your salaam? Would it be *As-salamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakaatuhu* (said in monotonous tone) or would it be *As-salamu 'alayka ayyuhan-nabbiyyu wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuhu* (said with meaning in a slow manner). Say these words as though you are directly greeting the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

We move from here to another greeting. More *salam* and peace but upon us and the righteous servants of God:

**As-salamu 'alayna**  
**Peace be upon us**

**wa 'ala 'ibadillahis-salihin**  
**and upon the righteous servants of God**

In the sitting position it as if you are feeling the presence of everyone. You are recognising *Allah's* presence when you say *At-tahiyyatu lillahi*. Then the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, *As-salamu 'alayka ayyuhan-nabbiyyu wa rahmatullahi wa barakaatuhu*. Then your own selves and those around you *as-salam alayna* which seems to suggest those who are in the congregation. Then *wa 'ala 'ibadillahis-salihin* saying more generally upon the righteous servants of God.

*Salihah* means to make whole or complete or something that is well rounded. We talk about *amilus-salihat*. *Allah* says the believers are those who do righteous, good complete deeds and the *muslihin* are those who reform, who bring about reform and they fix things in society. Whereas the opposite is *fasad* or corruption.

So here we are saying peace be upon us and on the righteous servants of *Allah*. It is as if we are not saying that we are righteous. We are saying peace be upon us and the righteous servants of *Allah* but we have the humility to say we are not amongst them but obviously we aspire to be amongst them.

Continuing the narration when Abdullah ibn Masud said we used to say as *salam 'ala-Allah* peace be upon *Allah* and then the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* taught us to say this:

... for when they say this it reaches every righteous servant in the heavens and the earth. (And say further), 'I testify that there is no god but God and I testify that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.' Then they may choose any supplication which pleases them and offer it.'" [Muslim]

Just to emphasise this movement of attention and focus. All being done in the presence of *Allah* and being conscious of His presence. You are greeting Him, devoting your prayers and good deeds to Him. Then you are directly greeting the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. Then you are greeting those around you *As-salamu alayna* and invoking Allah's peace and security upon you and all the righteous servants of *Allah*. You are reminding yourself of who your team is.

There is a verse that your true friends and protectors are *Allah*, His Messenger and those who believe. Interestingly they are described as *alladhina yuqemuna-as-salah*. The first quality of those people are the ones who keep up and establish the prayer. So these are our true friends and protectors. This is the team – God, His Messenger and the believers.

That is what we are doing here in this sitting position. We are putting ourselves in context of this team. Before we depart from this formal meeting with *Allah*, we are going round giving this parting greeting to everyone before soon we are about to say the *salaam* and move on. If done consciously this brings a huge degree of confidence. The idea of *salam* and confidence really go together because when you are in *salam* and you have *salam* from *Allah*, you feel that sense of peace, safety and security. It gives you a confidence and really should help us exit the prayer with that sense as well.

So it is significant for us to reflect on this if we say it meaningfully. Remember each phrase trying to express and remind ourselves what it means. We can only do that when we do it slowly, calmly, carefully and express each phrase with proper meaning.

### Step 35

So after sending our greetings to *Allah*, His Messenger, the believers, we then say:

**Ash-hadu al-la ilaha ill-Allah**  
**I bear witness that there is no god but God**

**(wahdahu, la sharika lahu)**  
**(He is one and has no partner)**

**wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan 'abduhu**  
**wa rasuluh**  
**and I bear witness that Muhammad is His**  
**servant and messenger**

The middle part is in brackets because it is in some narrations and not others.

It is as if we are calling everybody around us to witness because we have greeted everybody and addressed everyone with this greeting of peace. It is as if we can feel that we are in everyone's presence. We have a sense of who is in our team and then we are reaffirming our commitment. We are saying yes we are in this; we are in this group and we are in this team.

I bear witness, there is no god but God, He is One and has no partner and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger. Let it be known and let everybody know.

It really plays for me that idea of confidence. Being a confident believer and truly bearing witness as a believer. We are not people to hide our identity and faith. We need to be confident believers. There is too much talk nowadays or too much of an attitude of us shying away from who we actually are and what we truly believe. Sharing and being confident in that with others is very important.

It is a very compromised belief if it is something that we are not confident of. Each time when we are in our *salah*, if done properly, it restores that sense of confidence, gives us that sense of dignity and self-esteem. Bearing witness that there is no god but God and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger. With that we raise the index finger:

## Raising the index finger

### • How?

The thumb and the middle should be connected like in a ring while the other fingers rest and the index finger is raised.

### • When?

There are discussions about when it is raised. Should it be raised throughout the whole sitting position or just when we say this phrase *Ash-hadu al-la ilaha ill-Allah*? Then do we put it down or keep it raised? I am not going to get into that too much because this is one of those issues where perhaps the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* did various things at times. There are different narrations and well-established differences of opinion. I am just going to leave it to you to decide what you feel you are comfortable with in terms of how you want to do this.

Clearly the idea is that we raise our finger. The point I want to look at is almost the strength and the attitude that we have when we do it. This is a narration which is indicated that the Prophet's *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* attention would be on his finger as it was raised.

## • Why?

Nafi' said, "When Abdullah ibn 'Umar sat during the prayer, he would put his hands on his thighs and point with his finger whilst looking at it. Then he said, 'The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, 'It (the index finger) is harder on the devil than iron.'"" [Ahmad]

So there is this idea of strength, confidence and raising your finger with an attitude of positivity and energy. Even though it is a very small gesture, there is a very big difference between a limp and a half-hearted raising of the finger and something that is firm and solid. It is something that you are doing with a real commitment and strength. The raising of the index finger is a very powerful symbol. It is a symbol of our commitment, allegiance to *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* and our allegiance to the team more widely.

So raise your finger with strength and confidence. Really feel your declaration of bearing witness. Know that bearing witness, the *shahada*, and being someone who bears witness, is that you do that in front of everybody. You are happy for the entire world and universe to know that yes I bear witness that there is no god but God and I bear witness that Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is the Messenger of God.

That is what I believe and that is the principle by which I live my life, the principle upon which I hope to die and that forms the answers to the questions that we will receive in the grave. When we do that with confidence then each time we do that in our *salah* honestly it really has a big impact when we go through this whole sitting position and raising our finger in a confident way.

So we ask *Allah* to help us with this. To make sure we really offer this part of our *salah* in a way that is strong, confident and will give us a sense of peace and energy.

## Step 36

# Sitting: the *Salawat*

After we say the *tashahhud* and raise our finger, we say *ash-hadu al-la ilaha ill-Allah wahdahu, la sharika lahu wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan 'abduhu wa rasuluh* – I bear witness that there is no god but God, He is One and has no partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.

Technically we can end the prayer there. We could say our *salam*, look right and left then finish. But it is extremely recommended and some emphasise it even further than just a recommendation to engage in the *salawat*. Invoking further blessings upon the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* and also to supplicate before finishing.

To give some context to the *salawat* the verse we mentioned before just to remind ourselves:

God and His angels bless the Prophet. So you who believe, invoke blessings upon him and give him greetings of peace.

[Chapter 33, The Confederates, Verse 56]

So it is a *Qur'anic* command for us to send peace and invoke blessings upon the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

## Have We not raised your reputation high? [Chapter 94, Relief, Verse 4]

The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was told have we not expanded your chest? i.e. have We not given you a sense of confidence and have We not raised your reputation high?

Look at the number of times a day that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is mentioned. Millions maybe billions of times his name is mentioned and blessings are invoked upon him. *Allah* has favoured him in that way. We are invoking blessings and sending him peace regularly. One reason is because of the love that we owe the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*

Anas ibn Malik reported, "The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, 'None of you truly have faith until I am more beloved to them than their children, parents, and all people.'" [al-Bukhari, Muslim]

This can come across as a statement of God forbid like almost an arrogant statement where the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was almost demanding requiring this devotion or attention but as we know he was a very humble man. All that we are understanding here is that he is a conveyer of revelation as having been sent by *Allah* to. He is the one to whom if we are true believers, we must always understand that we owe more to than anyone else. Our faith and connection to *Allah* is dearer than our life, relationships, family and friendships.

*Allah* manifested and brought this guidance about on earth for us through His Prophets and particularly through Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. So a certain devotion, love, gratitude, respect etc. must be there in ways that are beyond even the attachments that we have to our family members, parents, children, spouses and others.

It is important for us to understand that when we therefore offer our *salawat*, we are doing so in this spirit and to know that it is hugely rewarding. A famous narration where we are encouraged to send blessings upon the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*:

Abu Hurayrah reported, "The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, 'Whoever sends blessings upon me once will have God send blessings upon them ten times.'" [Muslim]

transform  
my prayer

So the idea of *salawat* being sent to the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* is very much reciprocated and even more so than for ourselves. So think about this and understand the significance and importance of these words that we see now:

**Allahumma salli / barik 'ala Muhammad**  
**O God, send Your grace / blessings upon Muhammad**

**Wa 'ala ali Muhammad**  
**and the family (or followers) of Muhammad**

**Kama sallayta / barakta 'ala Ibrahim**  
**Just as you sent your grace / blessings upon Abraham**

**Wa 'ala ali Ibrahim**  
**and the family (or followers) of Abraham**

**Innaka Hamidum-Majid**  
**Indeed You are Praiseworthy, Glorified**

There is a distinction between *Salli* and *Barik*. Loosely these terms are typically translated as blessings, but we need to distinguish exactly what we are talking about here.

When we say *Allahumma salli 'alā Muhammad* it is very much related to raising his station, giving him a high reputation, high standing with us and with people. Imagine you were a companion of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* sitting behind him in *salah* and you are saying *Allahumma salli 'alā Muhammad*, what are you saying? You are saying *Allah*, give him his station, backing and support amongst the people of leadership, of him being that Messenger and Prophet. Give his way support.

Then *bārik*. When we say *Allahumma barik*, blessings meaning *barakah* meaning longevity. *Barakah* is not *ni'mah*. *Ni'mah* is a discreet blessing. A *barakah* is a longevity of that blessing and how far it goes for us. So when we are saying *Allahumma salli 'ala Muhammad* we are saying raise the name, standing and station of Muhammad.

When we are saying *Allahumma barik 'alā Muhammad*, we are saying make his actions and words effective, blessed in the sense that they go far and have far reaching impact which is different to when we say *Allahumma salli*.

Then we say *wa 'alā ali Muhammad*. This is both understood to be the family as well as the followers of Muhammad meaning his people as well so now it starts to extend down to us too potentially not just his immediate family members but also his followers as well.

Then we make the connection to *Ibrahim*. I always like to think about these phrases in the context of the companions sitting behind the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* making these supplications because of what were they doing at this early stage of the mission. They were saying Lord give blessings and grace to this mission, Messenger and to our leader just as you did upon *Ibrahim* because they knew what *Ibrahim's* legacy was. A legacy of Prophets, monotheism and belief. A legacy of upholding the rights of *Allah*.

*Innaka Hamidum-Majid* – You are Praiseworthy and Glorified.

This is the only other supplication we have to make in our prayer. We do not have to supplicate extra in the prostration or elsewhere, it is voluntary. This is the only other supplication that we make in addition to saying *ihdinas sirātul mustaqim* – guide us on the straight path - *Allahumma salli 'alā Muhammad* etc.

So it is important for us to think about when we are making this request. We know what we are asking for. We know what the result looks like. So when we are making these requests, what results are we actually hoping for? What outcome are we hoping for when we supplicate in this way?

## The status of Abraham

So let us explore further the status of Abraham or Ibrahim *alayhi salam* upon whom be peace. He is such a key part of this message or statement at the end when we are invoking blessings and grace upon Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. We are saying do it for him in the same way that you did it for Ibrahim.

When Abraham's Lord tested him with certain commandments, which he fulfilled, He said, 'I will make you a leader of people.' ...

[Chapter 2, The Cow, Verse 124]

So here is an example that he is a leader for all people.

Abraham was truly an example: devoutly obedient to God and true in faith. He was not an idolater. [Chapter 16, The Bee, Verse 120]

Here Ibrahim is described as an *ummah* which we typically understand as nation or community. Ibrahim is described in that way almost like a one-man nation such was his example.

Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith? God took Abraham as a close friend. [Chapter 4, Women, Verse 125]

A close friend. Often at times we do not think about Islam as the religion of Abraham but that is exactly what it is. Even the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was told to follow the religion of Abraham. He is the one whose example, approach to faith and the *din* is one we are supposed to incorporate.

Who but a fool would forsake the religion of Abraham? We have chosen him in this world and he will rank among the righteous in the Hereafter. His Lord said to him, 'Devote yourself to Me.' Abraham replied, 'I devote myself to the Lord of the Universe.' [Chapter 2, The Cow, Verses 130-131]

Devote yourself to Me, become *Muslim* or be *Muslim* and *Ibrahim* said I devote myself. *Aslamtu*, I have become *Muslim*. So clearly you can see it is not just about saying ok be a *Muslim* or part of the *Muslim* community as we normally like to understand or see it. But it is just simple. Devote yourself. Submit yourself and surrender. *Ibrahim* said I surrender, I devote myself.

*Ibrahim alayhi salam* has a special status and he is constantly highlighted in the *Qur'an* as the one whose faith was really true. He made sacrifices. He had devotion, strength, confidence and reliance. From *Ibrahim* came a legacy of Prophets and guidance. We know his direct descendent was Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

When we say *Allahumma salli 'alā Muhammad, wa 'alā ali Muhammad, kama sallayta 'ala Ibrahim*, we should think and bring to mind the success of the Abrahamic mission in his time. To then realise what we are asking for is for the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* to have a similar success and to be known with a similar reputation as *Ibrahim alayhi salam* was known and understood.

This brings us to the point here:

# What kind of response are we hoping for?

Imagine being a companion behind the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* whilst he was alive and making a supplication. It would feel much more real. You know what you were asking for. You are saying O God, help our leader, make him successful, give him a good standing, make his actions effective and far reaching. Today after the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* has passed and we are still saying the same things, what are we asking for exactly and what kind of response are we hoping for?

I think it is very important for us to think about this because it is not just the fact that we are saying to make to make him effective in his work now because he has passed. We are asking for two things. One for his name, station and position to be respected and understood. Second, for his mission to keep being successful. For the message of Islam, of submission to God for the religion of Abraham to continue to flourish and succeed.

What is interesting though is that given that now he is no longer with us *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* then what we are asking for in some ways is for our ability to contribute to that. Who is going to make sure the Prophetic reputation is maintained and the Prophetic message is spread? It is you, me and other believers. So in some ways, this supplication is really asking for help, not just for Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, meaning for blessings and grace for him, but we are also saying to send that blessings and grace upon the family and followers of Muhammad. The implication is that we need to be spurred into action.

We need to be doing something for this supplication to fully manifest. *Allah* can make things happen in whichever way He wants but we need to derive a lesson or inspiration from making these statements that drives us to action that reminds us about our responsibility to actually bear, spread and convey the message in whatever way is appropriate and possible for us given our circumstances. It could be literally within our homes, family members and local communities.

For those of us who have the ability, reach and confidence as we should have and then further as well to actually do the kind of things that will help to directly, and indirectly protect and raise the reputation of the Messenger and to bear his message. He is no longer here to spread his message but he left us with a revelation which *Allah* revealed through him or to him in order to convey to us, what he has done. It for us now to really understand and convey that message. Convey it through our words, actions and behaviours and do justice to it.

If we become people who say *Allahumma salli 'alā* Muhammad in our *salah* but we then do not act in ways that reflect a true desire for his mission and reputation to be successful and to be on a good standing then these are empty words. It means we want this to happen but we do not want to do anything about it. That is not the attitude of the believer. The believer actually is committed to doing the things that are needed in order for the mission of Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* to be successful.

May *Allah Subhanahu wa ta-ala* open our hearts to this and give us an understanding. To help us to really act and speak in ways that make this supplication really true. Meaning that we become people who truly desire the success for the name and the message of Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

## Sitting: *Du'a* (supplication)

The Prophet *sallAllahu alayhi wa sallam* encouraged us to supplicate in the sitting position before we finish the *salah*. There are many supplications that you can say. There were certain supplications that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would teach.

**Allahumma inni a'udhu bika**  
**O God, I take refuge in You**  
**min 'adhabi Jahannam**  
**from the punishment of Hellfire**  
**wa min 'adhabil-qabr**  
**from the punishment of the grave**  
**wa min fitnatil-mahya wal-mamat**  
**from the trials of living and dying**  
**wa min sharri (fitnati)l-masihid-Dajjal**  
**and from the evil (trial) of the Antichrist**

In teaching this course before, people often comment on what feels like almost the negative energy of this supplication meaning compared to what we have just been looking at. Peace and praise, declaring *Allah's* perfection and His greatness and then asking for guidance, blessings, grace upon Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* and his family and followers etc. All of a sudden there is a mention of hellfire, trials, grave, evil, the antichrist etc.

One way I like to think about this is the fact that if this was our last prayer or even in the context of any prayer, what are the things that we are really desperate to avoid? They are pretty much captured here – we desperately want to avoid punishment in the hereafter of the hellfire. We desperately want to avoid any kind of punishment in the grave. We want to avoid the trials of living, dying and the *fitnah*, the tests and trials that challenge us and that we may fail if we are not careful. We want to avoid the evil of the *dajjal* – the antichrist.

I will not get too much into the *dajjal* but the point of the antichrist or the *dajjal* is that it represents a phenomenon that is very challenging to faith. That is what we understand. That when people see the acts of the *dajjal* whatever it or he is that they will feel that this is God the divine. It will challenge faith so only the true believers will overcome that particular test. You can see the link between that and all these other requests. So I do think there is something here saying if nothing else *Allah* please accept this supplication. Please protect me from all of these evils.

Whatever blessings, goodness or level of paradise we may or may not achieve, I just want to avoid these things. Please save me from these things. This supplication is recommended. We should try to learn and say it if we can. O *Allah* I seek refuge in You for the punishment of the hellfire, from the punishment of the grave, from the trials of living and dying and from the evil of the antichrist.

It is really important for us to remember and think about all these as real possibilities. It is not something we should be complacent about. Sometimes we maybe do not give enough thought to the possibility of punishment but the approach or the attitude of the believer is one of humility. One that despite the fact that we can and should have hope in His generosity and mercy, we should also fear the fact that we have been insufficient. We should fear the fact that we are not doing enough. We should fear the fact that we are not really fulfilling the rights of *Allah* in the best way that we could.

We have the humility to feel that maybe we are not just serving or worshipping to the standard that is required. It is with that attitude we should make this statement. There is a very similar sentiment that *Abu Bakr radi Allahu 'anhu* the close friend and companion of the Messenger of Allah *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to say:

**Allahumma inni dhalamtu nafsi dhulman kathira**  
**O God, I have wronged myself so much**

**wa la yaghfirudh-dhunuba illa anta**  
**and no one forgives sins except You**

**faghfirli maghfiratam-min 'indika warhamni**  
**so forgive me completely from Yourself and have mercy**  
**upon me**

**innaka antal-Ghafurur-Rahim**  
**You are the Forgiving, the Giver of Mercy**

What humility coming from *Abu Bakr radi Allahu anhu*. I have wronged myself. So there is this real idea of ending the *salah* with these supplications of humility, asking for forgiveness and protection. Things that we are really desperate for. We ask *Allah Subhanahu wa ta- alā* to purify us, to cleanse us, to accept our supplications.

Try to say one or both of these in your prayers if you can before you end. As well as any other supplication. This is the time to ask as we are about to leave the *salah* and the presence of *Allah*. Remember think back to that picture we were painting, being in the presence of the King and His Chief Minister Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* and then the others around you. Petitioning him, you have greeted them all, you have said the *shahada*, supplicated and asked for the success of the name and the mission of Muhammad *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*.

Now you are making the final request before you depart in which you will still be in the remembrance of *Allah insha'Allah* and thanking Him after the *salah* but it is not quite the same obviously. *Salah* is much more direct, personal and intimate in terms of the type of meeting you are having. It is not a distant kind of remembrance. We are about to leave the gathering so get your supplications in and ask sincerely for whatever you need. Know that *Allah* says call upon Me and I will respond to you.

### Step 39

## Sitting: the *Taslim* (greeting of peace)

We finish with the *Taslim*, the greeting of peace *As-salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatullāhi*. We look to the right, we look to the left and we say these words:

**As-salamu 'alaykum**  
**Peace be upon you**

**wa rahmatullah (x2)**  
**and the mercy of God**

When we were giving *salam* to the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* by saying *As-salamu 'alayka ayyuhan nabiyy*, we are directly addressing him. Then we were saying *As-salamu 'alayna* peace be upon us.

• Who am I addressing?

Here we are saying *As-salamu 'alaykum*. Peace be upon you, well who exactly? The people to our right, if we are praying with others, those around us, our households and those in the masjid with us. But more than that whether

you are on your own or with others, those far and wide too. In some ways it feels to me as though the greeting here extends to as far as you intend.

Just as with any greeting, any time you give your *salam* to anybody, any group or people who that reached was who you intended. If you meant to give it to this person then it went to them. If you meant to give it to these people then it went to all of them. Some also mention the idea of conveying greetings to the angels as well.

## • Where should I look?

If you are looking to your right and left, you can look towards the people you are greeting because the idea of a greeting is you actually face those people. So you are not turning your entire body but it is perfectly fine to look at whoever it is that you are greeting now.

Your eyes do not necessarily need to be cast downwards to make the greeting. It is important for us to realise the prayer has already ended in a way. We have supplicated and finished and now we are parting company. The way we do it is to offer the greeting of peace to those around us.

## • What is the significance of ending in this way?

It is a beautiful way to end. We go in magnifying *Allah* then we have declared His perfection, we praise Him, we ask Him for guidance and we declare His majesty, *Subhana Rabbiyal 'Adhim*. We stand and praise Him further, go into prostration, declare His highness, Your highness *al-'Ala*. Then there are all these greetings, peace and supplications and invoking blessings upon the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* making those final requests and now re-entering the earthly realm.

We are coming back down to earth now from our ascent that we had hopefully in our *salah* and we are re-entering with these greetings of peace and mercy. It should hopefully inform the attitude with which we re-enter and our own emotional state and the feelings that we have and the way that we feel towards others too when we say *as-salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatullāh*.

*As-salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatullāh* is not just a hi, hello or even goodbye. It is a supplication. It is invoking and hoping for peace and security on others and the fact that they are too are in receipt of *Allah's Rahmah*, care, protection and mercy. So when we say that, really mean it and intend it towards those that are around us as we should intend all our greetings and supplications of peace so may *Allah Subhanahu wa ta- alā* help us.

We have come towards the end of the journey now and at this stage the *salah* ends. It is a moment then worth reflecting on our state after the prayer. How do we feel, evaluating and thinking about it? Reflecting on our weaknesses and deficiencies so we can improve.

# After the Prayer

How **do** we feel  
once it's over?

How **should** we feel?

We might feel thank God it is over, so now we can move onto the next thing. Whatever is on our mind or on our to do list. Sometimes when you have had an unfocused *salah*, you suddenly realise what you were doing. You do the *salam* and then you realise oh yes I was in *salah*. I was in my prayer. Sometimes towards the end of the prayer is when we become most distracted because we are closer to the end point and we are thinking about what comes next. I think *Shaytan* goes on overdrive in this last part of the *salah* really trying to distract us.

I think there is a combination of humility, gratitude, relief, rest, energy, confidence, peace and all of these things we could feel. Again there is no right answer to that.

It is worth us taking the opportunity as we did right at the beginning reflecting on our initial mindset when the time for *salah* comes and we know that have to offer the prayer. Just as we were thinking about what we were thinking and how we were feeling, it is worth also doing the same immediately after the prayer just to evaluate what has taken place and how we currently feel.

## What to say after the prayer

*Adhkar* (statements of remembrance) and *Du'a* (supplication)

*Astaghfirullah* (x3)

I seek God's forgiveness

Famously the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* would say *Astaghfirullah* three times after the prayer. Amazing really after the prayer of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, the most connected of people to his Lord, to seek forgiveness three times. Almost out of humility to apologise almost for any shortcomings in the *salah*.

*Allahumma antas-salam, wa minkas-salam*

O God, You are the source of peace, from you is peace

*Tabarakta ya dhal-jalali wal-ikram*

You are the source of blessing, O possessor of might and honour

So more peace, more reference to this name of *Allah, as-Salam*. You are the source of peace, from You is peace. Between these two statements, you get a sense of the humility of the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* but also this sense of invoking of peace, tranquility, safety and security at the same time.

## What to say after the prayer

### *Ayat al-Kursi*

Abu Umamah reported, "The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, "Whoever recites the verse of the Throne (*ayat al-kursi*) after every prescribed prayer, there will be nothing standing between them and their entering Paradise except death." [al-Mu'jam al-Kabir]

So a great thing to do after each *salah* is to recite *Ayat al-Kursi* if you can as well as:

*Surah al-Ikhlās* – Chapter 112

*Surah al-Falaq* – Chapter 113

*Surah an-Nas* – Chapter 114

The last three chapters of the *Qur'an*. The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was reported to have done this three times each after *Fajr* and *Maghrib* and once each after the other prayers but even if you are able to say it just once after each of the *salah* then that is a good thing by way of protection and certainly a beneficial practice. Then famously this idea of saying *SubhanAllah*, *Alhamdulillah* and *Allahu Akbar* after each of the prayers. In this particular narration:

The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace), said, "Whoever exalts God (says *subhanallah*) thirty-three times immediately after each prayer, and praises God (says *alhamdulillah*) thirty-three times, and magnifies God (says *Allahu akbar*) thirty-three times, this makes ninety-nine, then to complete one hundred says *la-ilaha ill-Allah wahdahu la sharika lahu, la hul-mulk wa la hul-hamd wa huwa 'ala kulli shay'in qadir*, their sins will be forgiven even if they are like the foam of the sea." [Muslim]

This is very much about saying these things meaningfully. So it is not a case of repeating *SubhanAllah* (speaker repeats over and over saying it quickly) 33 times, no. If you are going to do it, do it properly. *SubhanAllah*, *SubhanAllah*, *SubhanAllah* (speaker says slowly and meaningfully. If that is too much, there is an alternative:

## What to say after the prayer

*Subhanallah* (x33) God is perfect

*Alhamdulillah* (x33) All praise belongs to God

*Allahu Akbar* (x33) God is greater

*La ilaha illallah, wahdahu la sharika lahu*

There is no god but God, He is one and has no partner

*Lahul-mulk, walahul-hamd*

He has all control and for Him is all praise

*wa huwa 'ala kulli shay'in qadir*

and He has power over all things

In this particular narration, there is a lower requirement. If we want to prioritise quality over quantity and we feel like we cannot do 33, 33 and 33 in a meaningful way then it is better to do less but say it better.

Abu Hurayrah narrated, "The people said, 'O God's Messenger! The rich people have got the highest degrees of prestige and the permanent pleasures (in this life and the life to come in the Hereafter).' He said, 'How is that?' They said, 'The rich pray as we pray, and strive in God's cause as we do, and spend from their surplus wealth in charity, while we have no wealth (to spend likewise).'

He said, 'Shall I not tell you something by doing which you will catch up with those who are ahead of you and supersede those who will come after you and nobody will be able to do such a good deed as you do except the one who does the same?' That deed is to say *subhanallah* ten times, and *alhamdulillah* ten times, and *Allahu akbar* ten times after every prayer.'" [al-Bukhari]

It gives us an indication that there are no fixed rulings around these things specifically. There are a variety of possibilities. The idea generally speaking is to remember *Allah*, to bring Him to mind and to supplicate to Him after the *salah* but that can be done in varying forms.

None of these things are obligatory but they are certainly beneficial and recommended. So prioritise quality over quantity - ten times each is better if done properly than 33 times each if done too fast and without thinking.

We finish with this beautiful narration:

Mu'adh ibn Jabal reported, "The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) took me by the hand and he said, 'O Mu'adh, I swear by God that I love you. I advise you not to forget supplicating after every prayer by saying, 'O God, help me in remembering you, and thanking you, and worshipping you excellently.'" [Abu Dawud]

It is a beautiful supplication. The Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* taught his friend, his companion *Mu'adh* this supplication out of love for him and we all get to understand it, hear and know it too.

It really summarises what we have been trying to do in this journey. We have been trying to learn, progress and go on a journey in which we are asking *Allah* to help us, to remember and thank Him, worship and serve Him excellently with *ihsan*. To approach Allah in a context of a direct personal relationship and to make sure this *salah* is something that is beautiful, true and offered with sincerity, respect and in a dignified way. So we supplicate to Him with this supplication to close.

*Allahumma a'inni 'ala dhikrika*

O God, help me in remembering You

*wa shukrika*

and thanking You

*wa husni 'ibadatik*

and worshipping you excellently

Just to say there are many other things that are reported that the Prophet *sallAllahu 'alayhi wa sallam* used to say after the prayer by way of remembering *Allah* and supplicating etc. We have covered a few of the main ones but there are others. This was not an exhaustive list but throughout my emphasis has been and still is and will continue to be on the issue of quality. Quality, over quantity.

It is really not so much about how much we say. It is not even about how many units of prayer we offer. The *Sunnah* and *Nafl* prayers and everything else, these things are important and recommended but it is really about us achieving quality in what we do and making sure that we try to strive towards high standards. May *Allah* help us, bless us and guide us to always continue to improve our prayer *insha'Allah* and make every *salah* that we offer better than the previous one.

# A comprehensive guide to the meanings of the words we say in the entire Salat

## Before you begin: the Iqamah

- *Allahu Akbar* x 2 - God is greater
- *Ash-hadu an-la ilaha illAllah* – I testify that there is no god but God
- *Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan-Rasulullah* - I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God
- *Hayya 'alas-salat, Hayya 'alā-alfalah* – Come to prayer, come to success
- *Qad-qamatis-salat* x 2 – the time for prayer has come
- *Allahu Akbar* x 2 - God is greater
- *La ilaha illAllah* – There is no god but God

## Takbiratul Ihram

*Allahu Akbar* – God is greater

What is the *Takbiratul-Ihram*? The opening sacred proclamation of God's greatness

17:111

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَمْ يَخْذْ وَلِداً وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ شَرِيكٌ فِي الْمَلِكِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ  
وَلِيٌّ مِّنَ الدُّنْيَا وَكَبْرَهُ تَكْبِيرًا ﴿١١١﴾

and say, 'Praise belongs to God, who has no child nor partner in His rule. He is not so weak as to need a protector. Proclaim His limitless greatness!'

## Let your heart tremble

8:2

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ اللَّهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ  
آيَاتُهُ زَادَتْهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

true believers are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord,

8:3

الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ ﴿٣﴾

who keep up the prayer and give to others out of what We provide for them.

8:4

أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ حَقًّا لَهُمْ دَرَجَاتٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

Those are the ones who truly believe. They have high standing with their Lord, forgiveness, and generous provision.'

## Opening Invocation

### Du'a al-istiftah (opening invocation) of Thana (statement of praise)

- *Subhanaka-Allahumma* – God, how perfect You are
- *Wa bi hamdika* – And Yours is the praise
- *Wa tabāarak-asmuka* – How blessed is Your name
- *Wa ta'alā jadduka* – How lofty is your status
- *Wa lā ilāha gharuk(a)* – There is no god other than You
- *A'udhu billāhi minash-Shaytānir-rajim* - I take refuge in God from Satan, the rejected one
- *Bismillāhir-Rahmānir-Rahīm* - In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

## Surah al-Fatihah

*Alhamdulillahilahi Rabbil 'ālamīn* - All praise belongs to God, Lord of all that exists

*Ar-Rahmānir-Rahīm* - The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

*Māliki yawmi-dīn* – Master of the Day of Judgement

*Iyyāka na'budu* – It is You we serve

*Wa iyyāka nasta'in* – And it is you we ask for help

*Ihdinas-sirātul mustaqīm* - Guide us on the straight path

*Sirāt alladhina an'amta 'alayhim ghairil maghdubi 'alayhim wa lad dallin* – the path of those whom You have favoured not of those who have incurred Your anger nor of those who have gone astray

## Sealing it off

*Amin* – May it be so

Abu Hurayrah reported: The Prophet (may God grant him blessings and peace) said, “When the Imam says Amin, then say Amin as the angels say Amin. Whoever says Amin when the angels do, their previous sins will be forgiven”. [al-Bukhari]

## **Ruku' (bowing)**

*Subhana Rabbiyal- 'Adhīm* – How perfect is My Lord, the Majestic

## **Standing up from Ruku'**

*Sami' Allahu limah hamidah* - God hears (or may God hear) the one who praises Him

## **Standing and praising**

*Rabbana wa lakal-hamd* – Our Lord! To You belongs all praise!

*Hamdan kathiran, tayyiban, mubarakan fih* – Praise that is abundant, beautiful and blessed

## **Sujud (Prostration)**

*Subhana Rabbiyal- 'Alā* - How perfect is My Lord, the High

## **Sitting between prostrations**

*Rabbighfir-li, Rabbighfir-li* – My Lord, forgive me, My Lord forgive me

*Allahumma-ghfir-li, warham-ni, wajbur-ni, warzuq-ni* – O God, forgive me, have mercy on me, console (or restore) me, guide me and provide for me.

## **Sitting**

*At-tahiyyatu lillāhi was-salawatu wat-tayyibat* – all compliments are for god and all prayers and all good deeds

*As-salamu 'alayka ayyuhan-nabiyyu* – Peace be upon you Prophet

*Wa rahmatullahi wa barakathu* – and the Mercy of God and His blessings

*As-salamu 'alayna* – peace be upon us

*Wa 'ala 'ibdillahis-salihin* – and upon the righteous servants of God

*Ash-hadu al-lā ilāha ill-Allah* – I bear witness that there is no god but God

*Wahdahu, lā sharika lahu* - He is One and has no partner

*Wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan 'abduhu wa rasuluh* - and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger

## **Salawat**

*Allahumma salli/barik 'alā Muhammad* – O God, send Your grace/blessings upon Muhammad

*Wa 'alā ali Muhammad* – and the family (or followers) of Muhammad

*Kama sallayta/bārakta 'alā Ibrahim* – just as You sent Your grace/blessings upon Abraham

*Wa 'alā ali Ibrahim* – and the family (or followers) of Abraham

*Innaka Hamidum-Majid* – Indeed You are Praiseworthy and Glorified

## Du'a (supplication)

*Allahumma inni a'udhu bika* – O God, I take refuge in You  
*min 'adhabi Jahannam* – from the punishment of Hellfire  
*wa min 'adhabil-qabr* – from the punishment of the grave  
*wa min fitnatil-mahya wal-mamat* - from the trials of living and dying  
*wa min sharri (fitnati)l-masihid-Dajjal* – and from the evil (trial) of the anti-Christ  
*Allahumma inni dhalamtu nafsi dhulam kathira* – O God, I have wronged myself so much  
*wa la yagfirudh-dhunuba illa anta* – and no one forgives sins except You  
*faghfirli maghfiratam-min 'indika warhamni* – so forgive me completely from Yourself and have mercy upon me  
*innaka antal-Ghafurur-Rahim* – You are the Forgiving, the Giver of Mercy

## The Taslim (greeting of peace)

*As-salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatullah* x 2 – Peace be upon you and the mercy of God

## What to say after the prayer

Adhkar (statements of remembrance) and Du'a (supplication)

*Astaghfirullah* x 3 – I seek God's forgiveness

*Allahumma antas-salam, wa minkas-salam* – O God, You are the source of peace, from You is peace

*Tabarakta ya dhal-jalali wal-ikram* – You are the source of blessing, O Possessor of might and honour

## Ayat al-Kursi

*Abu Umamah* reported “The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) said “Whoever recites the verse of the Throne (*Ayat al-Kursi*) after every prescribed prayer, there will be nothing standing between them and their entering Paradise except death” [*al-Mu'jam al-Kabir*]

*Surah al-Ikhlās* – Chapter 112

*Surah al-Falaq* – Chapter 113

*Surah an-Nas* – Chapter 114

*SubhanAllah* (x33) - God is perfect

*Alhamdulillah* (x33) – All praise belongs to God

*Allahu Akbar* (x33) – God is greater

*La ilaha illAllah, wahdahu la sharika lahu* –

There is no god but God, He is One and has no partner

*Lahul-mulk, wa lahul-hamd* – He has all control and for Him is all praise

*Wa huwa 'ala kulli shay'in Qadir* – and He has power over all things

*Mu'adh ibn Jabal* reported, ‘The Messenger of God (may God grant him blessings and peace) took me by the hand and he said, *O Mu'adh*, I swear by God that I love you. I advise you not to forget supplicating after every prayer by saying, ‘O God, help me in remembering You and worshipping You excellently’. [*Abu Dawud*]

*Allahumma a'inni 'alā dhikrika* – O God, help me in remembering You

*Wa shukrika* – and thanking You

*Wa husni 'ibadatik* – and worshipping you excellently

Say, Praise belongs to God, who has no child nor partner in His rule. He is not so weak as to need a protector. Proclaim His limitless greatness” (Chapter 17, The Night Journey, Verse 111)

## Is this the End or the Beginning?

Well done, congratulations. You have come to the end of the journey. You have finished the 40 steps to paradise. I really hope you have experienced some improvements in the consistency, regularity and the quality of your *salah*, your five daily prayers. The question now though is this the end or is it really the beginning? I would suggest to you that it is the latter. Hopefully a new beginning and it has given you a new way to think about this particular action and the relationship you have with your Lord.

What it really comes down to is you continuing in an ongoing relationship with your Lord. Never lose that curiosity, interest and wonder to learn more about who your Lord is because in the end this whole thing comes down to the truth and the extent to which we want to be in the presence of our Lord. We want to be with Him because we really appreciate Him, we know Him and we love Him for who He is. That is what the *salah* represents. The *salah* tells us and it sends that message to *Allah* that we are interested in that meeting. We want to be there and that we desire that ultimate meeting.

This relationship development is something ongoing so maintaining the consistency and the quality of your *salah* is a lifelong journey. I hope that you *insha'Allah* will maintain and keep up your practice, get stronger and stronger in your *salah* and that it will manifest its benefits and its blessings in all aspects of your life. I hope that you can share your learnings by example as well, that others around you can benefit in your family, community and in society at large.