

The Presence Of The Heart In Relation To The Prayer

Imaam ibn Qudaamah al-Maqdisee

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And know that the prayer has actions which are pillars, actions which are obligatory and actions which are Sunnah.

The spirit of prayer is in the niyyah (intention), ikhlaas (sincerity), khushoo' (awe coupled with humility and submissiveness) and the presence of the heart.

The prayer also contains remembrances, private conversations (with Allaah) and physical actions.

When the heart is not present the desired goal is not obtained by the remembrances and private conversations with Allaah, the Exalted. Because speech, when it does not express the innermost feelings or what is in the heart, is (nothing but) absent-mindedness and folly.

Likewise the desired goal (from the prayer) is not obtained from the (mere performance of) actions. The purpose of the standing in prayer is service (to Allaah) and the purpose of the rukoo' (bowing) and sujood (prostration) is magnification of Allaah and humility to Him. If the heart is not present, the desired goal will not be reached. When an action is devoid of the purpose and intent behind it, nothing remains except a picture or an impression which has no value to it. Allaah, the Exalted, said:

"It is not the meat or blood (of the sacrifice) which reaches Allaah but it is the taqwa (which is in your hearts) that reaches Him." [Soorah al-Hajj 22:37]

The meaning here is that what reaches Allaah is the quality which has overtaken and is predominant in the heart, so that this same feeling is present when the requested acts of worship are performed. It is vital that the heart is present.

Allaah has, however, overlooked the unmindfulness which occurs unexpectedly in the prayer because the judgement for maintaining the presence of the heart at the beginning of the prayer continues for the rest of it.

The meanings by which the life of the prayer is perfected are many.

The First: The presence of the heart as we have just mentioned. Its meaning is that the heart is empty and devoid of what is otherwise mixed with it. The cause of that is ambition and aspiration. When a matter is on your mind and concerns you, the heart will by necessity become engaged with it. There is nothing to cure this except to turn all your concerns towards the prayer (alone). A person's concerns in the prayer intensify and weaken in accordance with the strength of his Eemaan in the Hereafter and the extent to which he holds the world in contempt. If you find that your heart is not present during the prayer then know that the reason for it is weak Eemaan, so you must strive to strengthen it.

The Second: Understanding the meaning of the words and this is the matter which lies behind the presence of the heart. It may be that the heart is present with the pronunciation of the words but not with the meanings behind them. So it is desirable that the mind is turned towards perceiving their meanings by

repelling other distracting thoughts and cutting off their roots because unless roots are cut off the thoughts continue to arise from them.

The root can either be external, such as what occupies the hearing and sight, or internal and this is stronger, like the one whose concerns for the world have multiplied and diversified. His thoughts are not restricted to one matter and even lowering his gaze does not protect him from this because whatever occurs in his heart is enough to keep him occupied.

If the root is external the cure for it is to cut off what occupies the hearing and the seeing and this includes being close to the qiblah (i.e., sutrah), looking at the place of prostration, being careful of and avoiding places which are colourful or attractive and not leaving anything besides oneself which would occupy his perceptions and feelings. The Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) when he prayed in a shirt which had marks upon it took it off and said:

“It has just diverted me from my prayer.”

If the root is internal, the way to treat it is to compel the soul to become occupied with what one is reciting in the prayer. He should prepare for that before entering the prayer by freeing himself from (thinking about all) other occupations, striving to empty his heart (from everything but the prayer), to renew the remembrance of the hereafter in his soul, realise the seriousness of standing in front of Allaah, the Mighty and Majestic, and the terror of being examined. If these are not the thoughts present (in the prayer) then a person should know that (his heart) is reflecting about those things which produce aspirations and desires in him. Let him therefore leave those desires and cut off those attachments.

Know that when an illness sets in and becomes firm nothing but strong medicine can repel it. When an illness intensifies it competes with the one who prays and the one who prays competes with it until the prayer expires in this competition.

The example of this is of a man who is sitting under a tree, trying to devote himself to thinking and reflecting, but then birds disturb and confuse him. So he tries to make them fly away with the stick which is in his hand. He then thinks and (deep thought) has not yet lodged into his mind when the birds come back. It is said to him: “This thing cannot be prevented. If you want it to stop then cut the tree down.” This tree is the desire. When it becomes sick (corrupted) and its branches become numerous, thoughts and ideas are drawn towards it just like birds drawn towards a tree and flies towards dirt and filth. So one's precious life is spent in repelling what cannot be repelled. The cause of this desire which brings about these thoughts and ideas is love of the world.

It was said to 'Aamir ibn 'Abd Qais (may Allaah have mercy on him): “Do you converse with your soul about anything from the matters of the world during prayer?” He said: “That my teeth become twisted is better to me than that I find this.” Know that cutting off the love of the world from the heart is a difficult matter and to completely prevent it is a mighty task. Let him then strive in whatever is possible and Allaah is the One Who gives support and aid.

The Third: Magnification of Allaah and awe/reverence of Him. This occurs by two things. Cognition of the Majesty and Grandeur of Allaah, the Exalted, and cognition of the insignificance of the soul and the fact that it causes one to become enslaved. This cognition occurs by two things, willing submission/yielding (Istikaanah) and awe coupled with humility and submission (khushoo').

Included within this is hope as it is an addition to one's fear. How many venerated kings are there who are feared because of their authority and influence just as hope is placed in them for their benevolence? It is desirable, therefore, for the worshipper to hope for reward for his prayer and to fear punishment for his negligence.

It is also desirable for the worshipper to make his heart present during all the matters which are related to the prayer. When he hears the call of the mu'adhhdhin (the caller to prayer) he should liken it to the call on the Day of Judgement and set out to answer it with vigour and determination. Let him consider (the reality of) what he is responding to and in what state his body comes to the prayer.

When he has covered himself (for the prayer) he should realise that the purpose behind it is to conceal the shamefulfulness of his body from the creation. Let him also realise his deficiencies and defects and the scandals and disgraces of his inner self which none can know except the Creator and which none can cover or hide. Only remorse, modesty and fear can expiate for them.

When he faces the qiblah he has turned his face from all other directions to the direction of the House of Allaah and yet turning his heart to Allaah is more befitting than that. Just as he cannot face the qiblah without turning away from all else besides it, likewise the heart cannot turn to Allaah without turning away from all that is besides Him.

When you make the takbeer (i.e., say, "Allaahu Akbar"), O worshipper, do not let your heart treat your tongue as having lied, because if there is something greater than Allaah in your heart then you have lied. Beware also that your whim and desire is greater (than Allaah) which would be proven by your preference to go along with it (rather) than to give obedience to Allaah, the Exalted.

When you seek refuge, know that seeking refuge means recourse to Allaah, the Sublime. When you do not seek refuge with your heart (as well), then your words are futile and ineffective.

Understand the meaning of what you recite. Make this understanding present with your heart when you say:

All praise belongs to Allaah the Lord of all the Worlds.

Bring to mind His Benevolence when you say:

The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

And His Might and Grandeur when you say:

Master of the Day of Judgement.

And likewise (understand the meaning) of everything that you recite.

We have already reported about Zuraarah ibn Abee 'Awfaa (may Allaah have mercy on him) that when he recited in his prayer:

"And when the Trumpet is blown (a second time)."

He fell to the ground, dead. This did not occur except that he imagined and pictured that situation and it brought destruction upon him.

Try to feel modesty in your bowing and humility in your prostration because in such a position you have placed the soul in its proper place. In the prostration you have returned the limbs to their place of origin, upon the dust from which they were created. Understand also the meaning of the remembrances with inclination and zeal.

Know that performing the prayer with these internal conditions is a cause-of the purity of the heart from adulteration and pollution, of obtaining the light by which the Might and Greatness of the One Who is worshipped is realised and of discovering His secrets and none understands them except those grounded in knowledge (the scholars).

As for the one who is standing performing the external actions without knowing their significance or meanings he will not realise or discover any of the above, rather he will reject its existence.