

Tips for Experiencing Salat Better

Spahic Omer

Salat or Salah (prayer) is the most important commandment in Islam which is performed five times a day, individually and collectively. It is the second pillar of Islam. Yet, it is the pillar of the pillars of Islam. The entire edifice of Islam rests on it. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that between a person and polytheism (*shirk*) and non-belief (*kufr*) stands abandoning salat (Sahih Muslim).

Indeed, no Islam without salat; no Muslims and Islamic identity, and no hope for a better future, without it; and, of course, no salvation on the Day of Reckoning without it.

The Prophet (pbuh) said that the first deed for which every person will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment will be his salat. "If it is good and in order, then he will have prospered and succeeded. But if it is bad or lacking, then he will be doomed and will have failed" (Jami' al-Tirmidhi).

When the Qur'an speaks in *surah al-Mu'minun* about the true believers, it presents their underlying characteristics in such a way that they begin with salat ("those who humble themselves in their salat", *al-Mu'minun*, 2) and end with it ("and those who strictly guard their salat", *al-Mu'minun*, 9). It is only such people who will be successful and will inherit *Jannah* (Paradise) (*al-Mu'minun*, 1, 10-11).

The same is done in *surah al-Ma'arij*. The description of those who will be the honoured ones in the Gardens of bliss (*Jannah*) on the Day of Judgment begins with "those devoted to salat and who remain steadfast in their salat" (*al-Ma'arij*, 22-23) and ends with "those who

strictly guard their salat" (al-Ma'arij, 34). All other features are sandwiched between these two portrayals.

The message is clear. In the life of a believer, salat is everything. It is his life's heart and soul. Everything starts with salat, everything revolves around it, and everything in the end returns to it. When the criminals are asked on the Day of Judgment about what led them into Hell-fire, the first thing they will say will be: "We were not of those who used to offer their salat" (al-Muddaththir, 43).

The following are some elaborate conceptual, reflective and practical tips for a better experience of salat. They aim to help us enhance the quality of our physical, spiritual, intellectual and emotional relationship with our salat. That in turn will enhance our affiliation with Islam as a whole. It will make us better Muslims.

It is salat, not prayer

At the outset we commit a cardinal mistake. We translate salat as prayer, which is inadequate. We rob thereby salat of much of its substance.

A prayer is generally defined as "a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God" or "a religious service at which people gather to pray together".

There are several other interpretations of the concept, all of which, however, revolve around the same core. They accommodate the conceptions and practices of all religions, revealed and non-revealed, pertaining to deliberate communication and interactions with God and any other deities. They are in the forms of various invocations, supplications, chants, thanksgivings, praises and meditations.

The English word "prayer" is derived from Old French "preier" (in Modern French it is "prier"), which was based on Vulgar Latin

"precari". In both cases, the word means "ask earnestly, beg, and pray earnestly to a god, deity or saint" (etymonline.com).

Undoubtedly, the word originated in pagan religious milieus, and was advanced as well as refined with the maturation and spread of Christian theology. It therefore unmistakably oozed the latter's rationale and fundamental nature.

That is expected because language is generally understood to be an instrument of thought and a conduit for ideas. Language and thought exist as an integrated whole. Language is thought, and thought is language. They operate in a reciprocal relationship. Irrespective of which one exactly is the cause and which one the effect, language and thought are fated to rise and decline together.

Incompatibility between salat and prayer

Thus, to equate the Arabic (Qur'anic) concept of salat, which is an exclusive and inimitable heavenly gift to mankind as part of God's final monotheistic revelation to man, with the English concept of prayer, which originated and evolved in the midst of pagan and Christian religious propensities and practices, is plain wrong.

The quintessence and souls of the two are incompatible and unable to get along. Salat personifies truth and its actualization, whereas prayer personifies truth's desertion, distortion, or just a desperate quest for it. Moreover, salat is an act (process) of internalizing and enjoying what was attained, whereas prayer is an act of endless seeking and probing, and of miscalculated results. Salat enriches and boosts faith, while prayer often quizzes, obscures and even unsettles what people regard as their personal and institutional faiths.

It follows that the concept of salat has no linguistic counterparts not only in English, but also in any other language. Hence, the best thing would be to adopt the Arabic (Qur'anic) term and assimilate it as such in other languages.

It was on account of this that some visionary Muslim scholars called for what could be dubbed an "Islamization of English". The reason is that a great many key concepts and ideas of Islam, when arbitrarily and inaccurately translated into English, are rendered imprecise. That contributes to the misrepresentation of the image of Islam and Muslims in the eyes of the world. It also makes the prospect of teaching the pure and authentic Islam, both to Muslims and non-Muslims, all the more difficult.

One of those visionary scholars was Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, who wrote a book titled "Toward Islamic English". The book represents a segment of the author's profound philosophy of "Islamization of knowledge".

Salat as an institution and a way of life

Salat is one of those key ideas than can easily be misunderstood. Translating it as prayer is unfair. It alters its compass and diminishes the scale and intensity of its meanings.

For example, salat is generally translated as prayer, and so is *du'a*. However, in the Qur'anic (Islamic) vocabulary, the two concepts are fundamentally different. Thus, translating them in the same way makes neither of them clear. Both of them get garbled.

Salat is much more than prayer. It is an act of exemplary piety, of the affirmation of absolute truth, of holistic worship, of direct communication with, and of total submission to the authority and will of Almighty God alone.

Salat is not a single, or isolated, act. It is not a mere ritual, rite, or a religious ceremony either. Rather, salat is a complex and enduring process. It is an inclusive institution (establishment). Its cumulative meanings and effects connote a way of life.

The five periods of a day, when the five prescribed prayers (salats) are performed, are five points in time when the energies and *elan vital* of the physical and metaphysical realms come closest to each other. They almost converge in the consciousness and spiritual state of a believer who performs salat.

The Prophet (pbuh) said that a person is closest to his Lord when he is prostrating in his salat. And since salat is a form of communication and conversation with God, the Prophet (pbuh) advised: "So say a great deal of *du'a* (prayers and supplications) (while in the state of prostration)" (Sahih Muslim). That may result in making the prostration lengthy, which is every so often advisable.

The five major aspects of every life circle

According to Fakhruddin al-Razi, every aspect of existence - including the lives of people - features a full circle that consists of five major stages, or points.

First is the stage of birth and joining the phenomenon of existence (after which growth inevitably follows). Second is the stage of attainment of perfection, which remains so for a while. The third stage is one of elderliness and maturity, when serious defects start emerging. Fourth is the stage of death, and fifth is the post-death stage when some faint signs and traces of a formerly living thing are still perceptible. However, very soon they too disappear, leaving nothing conspicuous whatsoever about that thing.

The cycle thus becomes complete. It starts with death (nothingness), exhibits successive phases of life, and ends with death (nothingness) again. Everything returns to its original primordial state.

This cycle applies to the day as a unit of measurement of time as well, with the sun as God's major sign in creation and its rising and setting as the main events.

Firstly, dawn as the first appearance of light in the sky before sunrise indicates the birth of the sun and its imminent "joining" of the rest of creation. Secondly, the sun rises until it reaches the highest position in the sky at noon. Soon after that - thirdly - it starts declining until its power and intensity noticeably wane in the afternoon. Fourthly, the declining process then dramatically intensifies until the sun sets or disappears completely (it "dies"). Fifthly, after the sun's "death", some of its traces and residues remain on the horizon for a short time (twilight), following which they too completely disappear as if the sun and its awesome powers were never present.

In the morning, a new cycle again begins, making life nothing but a series of identical cycles with identical existential stages that feature in every aspect and component of creation. These cycles are as evident in the smallest and least consequential, as in the grandest and most consequential elements of creation.

With this, the Qur'an, to some extent, debunks the mystery of time. It also proves the transience of everything except the Creator and Master of life. The Qur'an declares: "All that is on earth will perish. Only the Supreme Essence of your Glorious and Gracious Lord will remain forever" (al-Rahman, 26-27).

All these happenings on earth signify the undeniable evidences of Almighty God's greatness and care for his creation. A single day is packed with the portents of the spectacles of life and death, of resurrection and renewal, of matter and spirit, of rise and fall, and of tranquillity and buzz. A single day is a microcosm of existence in its totality. It also exemplifies the lifecycle of man with his recurring cultural and civilization quests.

It stands to reason that the five daily salats were prescribed at their meticulously fixed times in order to commemorate the five most critical points in the circles of life, along with the five most significant phases in the biological, spiritual, cultural and civilization growth of

man. Man is likewise bidden to contemplate through his five salats and reflect on the divine patterns and laws that govern the world.

God reveals: "Verily, salat is enjoined on the believers at fixed times (hours)" (al-Nisa', 103).

The five daily salats are: *al-Fajr* (dawn, before sunrise), *al-Zuhr* (midday or noon, just after the sun passes its highest point), *al-'Asr* (the late afternoon), *al-Maghrib* (immediately after sunset), *al-'Isha'* (night-time before midnight).

Salat as a heavenly thing

Salat is the only injunction that was given to the Prophet (pbuh) during his ascension into Heaven, on the night of the *mi'raj* (ascension). It was not prescribed like the rest of Islamic injunctions, which were brought down to earth from God by an angel.

The Prophet (pbuh) was honoured by being taken up to Heaven and by being addressed directly by God concerning the matter of salat. It could be that all prophets received the obligation of salat directly from God, for if salat was most important for Muhammad (pbuh) as the Seal of prophets and his followers, the same might have been the case for the rest of the prophets and their own followers.

Such is the value of salat. No righteous life on earth, and no success either in this world or in the Hereafter, are conceivable without it. Salat transcends the bounds of time and history. It is a heavenly thing. It aims but to elevate man's status and to facilitate his constant remembrance of God and his celebration of God's name.

Prophet Musa (Moses), for example, was instructed to establish salat when he was directly conversing with God. The Qur'an says: "And when he came to it, he was called: "O Musa, indeed, I am your Lord, so remove your sandals. Indeed, you are in the sacred valley of Tuwa. And I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed (to you). Indeed,

I am Allah. There is no deity except Me, so worship Me and establish salat for My remembrance" (Ta Ha, 11-14).

Prophet Musa's appointment as a prophet, during which he received the obligation of salat, was perhaps the most dramatic event on earth prior to the arrival of the final prophet: Muhammad (pbuh). During the prophet-hood of Muhammad (pbuh), the exuberance and otherworldliness associated with the concept and institution of salat were completed. That was done in the most spectacular fashion and under the most extraordinary circumstances: right in Heaven and in direct proximity to the greatest metaphysical realities.

Hence, it was only appropriate that Musa and Muhammad (pbuh) met during the latter's *mi'raj* (ascension into Heaven) journey, and that their conversation revolved mainly around salat.

Salat as the believers' *mi'raj*

It is therefore rightly said that salat is the believers' *mi'raj* (ascension towards and into Heaven). Some even attribute this statement to the Prophet (pbuh), which nevertheless is incorrect.

Salat is a form of *mi'raj* because through it, in spiritual terms, we most directly face Almighty God and talk to Him. We are closest to Him when we perform our salat. Our spiritual faculties are sharpest and most disposed to truth in our salat.

Synchronization of the body, mind and soul is most effective in salat. In his salat, a person is most human, most sensible and most otherworldly. He operates at full capacity and lives "to the fullest".

In every physical condition of his, when he duly performs his salat, a person is able to free his soul - his spiritual being - from the fetters of matter, human ego and animal desires, and rise indefinitely through the vastness of spiritual spheres. There is no challenge that is unbeatable, and obstacle that is insurmountable.

While rising towards the spiritual fulfilment (and Heaven), a person's vantage points improve, and so do his judgmental capacities. He can see and understand more and more, and can judge more appropriately how inconsequential matter and this world in general are when juxtaposed with the merit of spirit and Heaven.

Every salat is expected to be a step higher in the right direction, guiding a person through the hierarchy of spiritual degrees and stations. The lower his station is, the closer this world and the farther Heaven appear; and the higher his station is, the farther this world and the closer Heaven appear.

When he comes to the verge of his spiritual fulfilment, and approaches the completion of his personal existential *mi'raj*, a person sees, and craves for, nothing but Heaven. The physical world with all its temptations and false splendour simply disappears over the horizon. The ultimate objective of salat - and life in general - will then be accomplished.

A person needs to "die" in the material world if he wanted to be "born" in the world of spirit. There is a vast amount of attractive and repulsive forces at play. Salat is that which can control and coordinate them all.

There is a bit of symbolism here as well. The Prophet's *qiblah* at the time of his *mi'raj* was *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* in Jerusalem. Before the *mi'raj*, he was firstly taken to Jerusalem, to the very place of his *qiblah*. That part of the occasion is called *isra'* (night journey). Thence, the Prophet (pbuh) ascended the heavens for the *mi'raj*.

Similarly, during our *salat* and personal *mi'raj* experiences, we also have to face our *qiblah*: the Ka'bah and its *al-Masjid al-Haram*. That way, additionally, we face the exact location - that is, *al-Masjid al-Haram* - where Archangel Jibril (Gabriel) came to the Prophet (pbuh) and took him on his historic earthly and heavenly journeys (*isra'* and *mi'raj*).

Like so, in every salat of theirs the believers establish an axis that connects them to the most critical pivots of the spiritual presence both on earth and in the heavens. They tap into their inexhaustible resources and capacities, generating enough spiritual energy needed for the journeys ahead.

One of those journeys is the personal *mi'raj* (spiritual ascent) journey. Salat is synonymous with it. The *qiblah* is its launch pad, the Prophet (pbuh) the exemplar, and God's pleasure, symptomatic of Heaven, the goal.

The believers' constant facing of the *qiblah* inspires, motivates and directs them. It harnesses and channels their vigour. It keeps them determined and focused, and gives them a sense of purpose and direction in their spiritual journey(s).

The example of Prophet Yunus (Jonah)

Indeed, God is everywhere with his knowledge, power, compassion and will. He is as close to us as we are willing and able to concede. God can be "near", but also "far", just as His omnipresent signs can be "visible and legible" but also "invisible and illegible", subject to people's abilities and zeal. Salat is a window into the incalculable treasures of the spiritual Kingdom. Possibilities and boons are infinite.

For instance, Prophet Yunus (Jonah) was swallowed by the whale. Despite that, he supplicated and prayed to God as though there was nothing unusually standing between them. His connectivity and communication with God remained uninterrupted, yet might have been intensified.

Yunus took the belly of the whale as his "mosque" (a place of worship), setting in the process some of the highest standards of piety and worship. His iconic supplication in the darkness of the whale's belly became the most treasured legacy he bequeathed to posterity.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "The supplication of Dhu al-Nun (Prophet Yunus) which he said when he was in the belly of the whale: "None has the right to be worshipped but You (O Allah)], glorified (and exalted) be You (above all that (evil) they associate with You)! Truly, I have been of the wrongdoers." No Muslim recites this supplication concerning any matter but Allah will answer him" (Jami' al-Tirmidhi).

In essence, Yunus was as near to God in the whale's belly as the Prophet (pbuh) was during the *mi'raj* journey. The difference was in accidents and contexts only. Merely the body of Yunus was trapped. His soul roamed freely in the immediate proximity of the Creator.

The believers strive for a similar condition primarily through their salat and as much as possible. The prophets are their role models.

The Qur'an proclaims: "And to Allah belongs the east and the west. So wherever you (might) turn, there is the Face of Allah. Indeed, Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing" (al-Baqarah, 115).

"And when My servants ask you, (O Muhammad), concerning Me - indeed I am near" (al-Baqarah, 186).

"...And He is with you wherever you are..." (al-Hadid, 4).

Performing salat versus establishing salat

As per the Qur'anic terminology, salat is to be both performed (*salla, yusalli*) and established (*aqam al-salah, yuqim al-salah*).

Performing implies a mere act and execution of something, while establishing denotes setting-up, instituting, creating, organizing and building something in such a way that it eventually becomes a permanent feature, institutionalized, and a second nature. It becomes proven, authenticated and accepted.

It follows that salat can hardly be performed properly if it signifies no more than a series of isolated acts partly or fully in disagreement with the rest of a person's behavioural models. Salat can be said to be performed only when it is part of a bigger picture, which is the establishment of salat as a standard of living. Performing salat ought to have a fitting context and background.

That is why sometimes it is said that a person should not just perform salat, but should have salat as a value, ethos and character instead; that a person should not just perform salat, but should worship God (through it) instead; and that a person should not just perform salat, but instead should have salat as a convention and a contract with God, as well as with his self, people and the rest of creation.

On a regular basis the Qur'an speaks of salat as being established and enhanced as life's permanent and mindful routine, procedure, system and institution. Its five determined times throughout the day and night, and its *modi operandi*, connote a framework within and around which all other life activities are conceived, planned and executed.

Salat is the prime mover in a believer's life schedules, dynamism and success. Under no circumstances can its role and authority be bartered. It is primary, everything else is secondary.

In passing, herein lies a clue about a person's commitment to salat and his punctuality in relation to it - and otherwise.

If a person imagines his life as a canvas with a regular outline of five daily prayers, within and around which he needs to plan and slot all his personal, professional, family and social activities, he will never have any problems with his salat. This is so because to such a person nothing is more important, and more deserving to be attended to, than salat.

However, if a person imagines his life as a canvas jammed with all sorts of undertakings and activities, within and around which he has to plan and slot his five daily salats, he will regularly face all sorts of

problems with his salat, both with regard to its quality and quantity. This is so because to such a person everything seems to be more important, and more deserving to be attended to, than salat.

Without doubt, establishing salat promotes and teaches discipline, management, effective planning, time optimization and accountability. It does so at all possible levels. Mismanagement and mishandling of salat lead to the antitheses of all those first-rate attributes.

The Qur'an mentions 9 times only that salat is and should be "performed", employing different forms of the type II verb *salla* (meaning "to perform salat"). That is always done in the frame of some larger contexts and backgrounds, where salat alone is not the main focus; it is merely one of a few pursuits intended to be highlighted.

At the same time, however, the Qur'an mentions 46 times that salat is and should be "established", employing different forms of the type III verb *aqama*, which is then followed by the word "salat" (meaning "to establish salat").

The message of the Qur'an is unambiguous.

The compass and depth of the notion of "establishing salat" could be further elucidated if the literal meanings of the verb *aqama*, which precedes *salat*, are enumerated. The verb *aqama* generally means: to establish, erect, reside, institute, found, build, install, administer, inhabit, implement, demonstrate, provide a proof for, etc.

Thus, for instance, the Qur'an addresses the Jews and Christians as follows: "Say: "O People of the Scripture, you are (standing) on nothing until you uphold the law of the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been revealed to you from your Lord" (al-Ma'idah, 68).

The verb *tugimu* is used in the context of upholding (observing, standing fast by, keeping up, following, acting according to, or performing) the law of the Torah, the Gospel, and whatever has been

revealed from God. The verb is thus used in connection with the ascertaining of truth and the integrity - or the lack of it - of the Jews and Christians.

Also, the verb *aqama* is used in the story of Musa and Khidr, when the latter restored a wall in a town they visited. The Qur'an says: "And they found therein a wall about to collapse, so he restored it (*aqamahu*)" (al-Kahf, 77).

After the wall was repaired (restored, set up straight, or put into a right state), it became sound, functional and useful again. It secured a commanding presence and sound physical appearance. Most importantly, it regained its individuality. It got an important role to play in relation to its own purpose and the purposes of the rest of the town's morphology.

Similarly, establishing salat in the long run means ascertaining truth, practicing integrity, securing a commanding presence and identity, building a future, and providing a proof for righteousness and virtue. Salat extends into the domains of all provinces of life.

Preparations for salat

For salat to become the centre of gravity in a person's life, he must meticulously attend to it. His dealing with his salat must cover every aspect of it, before, during and after.

Things that deserve special attention are as follows.

Preparations for salat should be methodical, thorough, and even creative. They are to be physical, mental and spiritual, and should be taken very seriously. Performing ablution or *wudu'* (a prescribed washing of certain body parts) is meant, among other things, to facilitate the process. Minding the cleanliness and overall state of clothing, the whole body and the place of salat, should be seen in the same light.

Ablution cleanses our body, awakens and realigns our mind, and re-orientates plus calibrates our soul. It is no surprise that the Prophet (pbuh) said a great deal of goodness concerning it and its function.

He said for example: "There is no one among you who does *wudu'*; and does it well, then says: "I bear witness that there is no god except Allah alone, with no partner or associate, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His slave and Messenger", but the eight gates of Paradise will be opened for him and he will enter through whichever one he wants" (Sahih Muslim).

According to another narrations, the following is to be added to the supplication: "O Allah, make me one of those who repent (spiritual cleanliness) and make me one of those who purify themselves (physical cleanliness)" (Jami' al-Tirmidhi).

A person should gradually disengage from the worldly concerns and worries, and start focusing on spiritual matters well before salat. This by no means implies that a person should stop doing what he is doing long before his salat, but at least should start preoccupying his thoughts and feelings as early and as much as possible.

The beginning of salat signifies the climax of that process. A person should not approach his salat while he is still fully engrossed in worldly matters. If in salat our minds and hearts are already preoccupied and full, how can there be any place in them for what salat is supposed to serve?

As a result of ablution (*wudu'*), we should approach salat "washed" and "clean", both physically and spiritually. Salat is always ready for us, so we too should be ready for it. Salat is always ready to give us its maximum, so we too should be prepared to do the same for it. The relationship is mutual and causal.

It is widely held that our problem in salat is absent-mindedness. That is a cliché. Rather, our problem is what could be dubbed whole-

mindedness. This is so because we live in the ages of information and internet, and being unable to be selective and discreet we are overstuffed with junk knowledge and information. Instead of being in control, we are being controlled. Our limited capacities are exhausted, or are stretched to breaking pint. We must learn where and when to stop and when to say that it is enough.

How can such a mind and soul be ready for the riches and effects of salat? We must remember that salat and a heedless heart and a thoughtless mind are unsuited to each other.

It is high time that we start taking stock of our lives and start setting our priorities right. We must stop fooling ourselves and must start asking and answering correctly the biggest life questions before it becomes too late to make amends.

Punctuality in salat

Furthermore, salat is to be performed on time, as part of meticulous preparations for it. Punctuality in salat is a great virtue; unwarranted procrastination is a demerit, especially if it involves joining or missing out on congregational prayers. As soon as a time for a salat is due, a person's worldly interests should come - or should start coming - to a halt. The times of salat are the Creator's calls and invitations, so people as creation and servants need to respond.

Depending on personal conditions and external circumstances, when a time for a salat arrives, there must be in every true Muslim a genuine feeling aroused and a sincere reaction caused, regardless of their exact natures and intensities. If absolutely nothing happens and nothing is felt, and salat is attended to at will belatedly and hurriedly, such amounts to a cause for real concern and a reason to feel real anxiety.

Accordingly, a companion of the Prophet (pbuh), Abdullah b. Mas'ud, reported that he asked the Prophet (pbuh): "O Messenger of Allah,

which deed is best?" The Prophet (pbuh) replied: "Salat in its proper time" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

While performing salat

While performing salat, we should be humbly submissive (*khashi'un*) (al-Mu'minin, 2). Salat is to be experienced as a meeting and conversation with our Creator. We are to acknowledge in the process His transcendent greatness, omnipotence and omniscience, and our smallness and all the other human limitations of ours.

We are to display our utmost awe, respect and love for God. Our fear to displease Him by way of committing inappropriate actions should also be evident. Thus, salat is a combination of worship, remembrance, recitation of the Qur'an as God's holy Speech, salutations upon the Prophet (pbuh), supplications, exaltations, praises, thanks-giving, confessions, repentance and seeking forgiveness. These are the best things a person can ever do, and the best things are reserved for the best, i.e., for salat. That way, salat becomes a restorer of truth and values.

A person's experience of salat and his solemnity and full submissiveness in it are significantly aided by comprehending and internalizing what is being recited. There should exist a close relationship between the functions of the tongue, mind and heart. They in unison should lead to a common goal, which is the ultimate goal of salat.

It is impossible to utterly experience and appreciate salat if there are veils of unfamiliarity standing between it and those who perform it. It is then that human minds and souls become most vulnerable and most susceptible to inattentiveness, wandering and distractions. Needless to say, therefore, that salat, with all its conceptual, jurisprudential, spiritual and behavioural aspects and dimensions, should feature most conspicuously in Muslim formal and informal educational systems. Muslims should learn about authentic salat most.

It is always easier to focus when one knows what is being said and recited. Just to follow and contemplate the meanings and messages could generate a whole lot of gratification and excitement, which in turn can go a long way in making salat what it was meant to be.

But to know nothing or very little can easily make a person feel as though a stranger in the orb of salat, or can make salat seem as though an oddity and outsider in people's personal universes. It then becomes very hard to develop a meaningful and productive relationship between people and their lives, and salat.

As an illustration of how God speaks to man in salat through *surah al-Fatihah*, which is the pillar of salat, the Prophet (pbuh) declared that Almighty God had said: "I have divided salat into two halves between Me and My servant, and My servant will receive what he asks. When the servant says: Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the universe, Allah the Most High says: My servant has praised Me. And when he (the servant) says: The Most Compassionate, the Merciful, Allah the Most High says: My servant has lauded Me. And when he (the servant) says: Master of the Day of judgment, He remarks: My servant has glorified Me; and sometimes He would say: My servant entrusted (his affairs) to Me. And when he (the worshipper) says: Thee do we worship and of Thee do we ask help, He (Allah) says: This is between Me and My servant, and My servant will receive what he asks for. Then, when he (the worshipper) says: Guide us to the straight path, the path of those to whom Thou hast been Gracious not of those who have incurred Thy displeasure, nor of those who have gone astray, He (Allah) says: This is for My servant, and My servant will receive what he asks for" (Sahih Muslim).

It goes without saying that salat's main thrusts are humble submissiveness, devotion and perseverance.

The Qur'an repeatedly reveals that everything in the universe ceaselessly worships, glorifies and praises God. Everything offers to the Creator and Master its decreed form of salat.

Man's salat is a microcosm of all those salat forms, and his places of worship and salat (*masajid* or mosques) are the microcosms of the universe as a macro-abode of the veneration and extolment of Almighty God.

It is thus suggested that different postures in our salat indicate different forms of worship and salat undertaken by different existential realities. By way of example, standing upright characterises all beings that worship God and pray to him in like manner, bowing down represents those with four feet or anything like that, prostrating calls to mind all the crawling and creeping beings, and so on. The content of human salat may likewise contain the essence of all other salat (worship) forms.

The impact of salat

Salat is expected to impact greatly on our lives. After each salat, a person is expected to be a step closer to his self-actualization. He is to keep intensifying and monitoring his spiritual ascent thereby.

Surely, a believer's life is anything but a static and lethargic affair. It is rightly said that he whose two days are equal is a loser, he whose today is worse than his yesterday is accursed, he who is not on the increase (in terms of knowledge and good deeds) is on the decrease, and death is better for him who is on the decrease. This proverb is often erroneously ascribed to the Prophet (pbuh).

It is said in the Qur'an about salat as a restrainer of lewdness and iniquity, and as a catalyst for goodness and virtue: "...Salat restrains from and prohibits immorality and wrongdoing" (al-'Ankabut, 45).

In this verse, the chief criterion for salat's validity and acceptance is presented. Salat is all about quality and excellence, rather than quantity and patchiness. Salat dominates, yet determines, a person's moral disposition and performance.

There is no morality without salat's uprightness and vitality, and there cannot be high ethical standards and values without salat's as high fortitude and as clear direction and guidance. Salat is the cause, all goodness is the effect. This applies as much to the level of individuals as to the social level, and as much to the ambit of the spiritual progression of individuals as to that of societies.

Due to this, when the Qur'an refers in *surah Maryam* to some people (some generations) who will face perdition, it confirms that they, firstly, "neglected salat" and, secondly, "followed lusts" (Maryam, 59).

It is impossible that someone "meets' and talks to God most privately five times a day, making all sorts of spiritual acknowledgments, pledges, praises, exaltations, etc. in the process, only to betray himself and God as soon as his salats are over and go about committing evil deeds without any pangs of conscience whatsoever.

Something like that can find refuge only in the abyss of the waywardness and double standards of hypocrites. The Prophet (pbuh) said that there are three signs of a hypocrite, even if he claimed to be a Muslim: "When he speaks he lies, when he gives a promise he breaks it, and when he is trusted he betrays the trust" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

In the context of salat, hypocrites speak to God but lie; they give promises to Him and themselves, but they break them; and they are entrusted with faith and salat, but they betray all their trusts.

It is owing to this when the Qur'an speaks about hypocrites and salat, it speaks about two separate and totally dissimilar entities: they and salat. One is in one "valley", and the other in another "valley".

If they were to hypocritically perform salat, hypocrites stand up (move from one position and attitude) to perform salat (to another position and attitude). They and salat will never be one. They will never be on the same wave length.

Hypocrites neither perform nor establish salat. More accurately, they "stand up to prayer" (*qamu ila al-salah*). Even when they do so, they do it "lazily, just to show that they pray, but, in truth they remember God very little" (al-Nisa', 142).

Finally, the following two authentic *hadiths* (traditions) of the Prophet (pbuh) summarize the meaning and virtues of salat.

The Prophet (pbuh) asked his companions: "What do you think if there was a river by the door of any one of you and he bathed in it five times a day, would there be any trace of dirt left on him?" They said: "No trace of dirt would be left on him." He said: "That is like the five daily salats, by means of which Allah erases sin" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

Once a man asked the Prophet (pbuh) about the most virtuous deed. The Prophet (pbuh) stated that the most virtuous deed was salat. The man asked again and again. The first three times, the Prophet (pbuh) again answered: "salat", then on the fourth occasion he stated: "Jihad in the way of Allah" (Musnad Ahmad).

Salat is at once the soul and the face of Islam. To do it regularly and properly is not easy. As the Qur'an verifies: "And seek help through patience and salat, and indeed, it is a hard thing except for the humbly submissive (to Allah)" (al-Baqarah, 45).

Thus, we should never stop learning about and improving our salat. It may yet be our ticket to *Jannah* (Paradise), insha'Allah.