

The Islamic Understanding of Prayer

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ABSTRACT: *Du'a*, the Arabic word for prayer or supplication, is the calling of a servant to His Deity. Summoning to God is highly encouraged in Islam, as prayer is considered to be the essence of worship. But what exactly is sincere supplication, and what do we achieve from it? How do we ensure a response from God, and what prevents a prayer from being accepted? This article explores the stages of a sincere prayer, as well as explaining its importance, etiquette, and conditions to enable one to acquire moral virtues, improve one's self-discipline and intellect, add brightness to the heart, and above all, achieve nearness to God.

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Introduction

One of the most enduring manifestations of the human soul and one of the most fundamental aspects of human existence is the act and longing to supplicate and worship. While examining the remnants of mankind throughout history, we can determine that worship and prayer have always existed alongside mankind. Any differences in this worship lie in its method and the deity invoked.

In terms of the method of worship, there have been various approaches and forms. This has ranged from dancing rituals and rhythmical group movements, together with verbal expressions of admiration and reverence to the most humble submissions to the deity. In terms of deities worshipped, there have been several, both material and immaterial. Idols of stone and wood have been worshipped throughout time, as has the eternal All-sustainer, who is not bound or limited by time and space.

Worship was not innovated by the prophets. Rather, they taught mankind the best form of worship. They clarified its finest method which includes the actions to be carried out and the manner in which they should be done. In addition, they opposed the worship of deities (*shirk*, polytheism) other than the One God. Indeed, the Prophet Adam was a monotheist, verifying that mankind was originally monotheistic; only later did they deviate to the worship of idols.

Supplication, a form of worship, can be defined as a spiritual condition that creates a bond of attraction and intimacy between a man and his deity. It is one of the most sublime and noblest of spiritual actions that can bring a person closer to God. Manifested with a true supplication is recognizing God and being humble towards Him, while simultaneously realizing one's insignificance. For this sincere supplication to occur, there are three stages and prerequisites briefly mentioned in the following:

The first stage is to have true belief and faith in God. The reason for this is quite obvious: if one does not believe in God, communication with Him and attempts to attain nearness to him is futile and meaningless. It is important to note here that while believing in God is necessary, this belief can have many different levels and qualities.

The second stage is that the individual should believe that he, a needy person, has the ability to communicate with an immaculate being that is absolute, needless, and entirely self-sufficient. This ability can be better understood if we take into account the fact that soul does not belong to the material world: it is essentially immaterial. Thus, for the soul to truly communicate and build a relationship with God is possible.

The third prerequisite is invoking God and having hope in Him. This happens in its true form when a person ceases to trust or hope in anything except God. The individuals and beings involved in this person's affairs become irrelevant, and one begins to view God as the sole and absolute cause of everything.

In fact, a person views all circumstances and situations to occur because of Him and as a part of His plan. It is in this state of mind that supplication is realized in its full potential. Even if a person's tongue is not engaged in physical prayer, the heart continues to be occupied with worship and supplication to God. To clarify, I will expand on the concept of *du'a*, Arabic for 'supplication', which has been described as the gem and spirit of all worship. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of verses from the Qur'an and narrations, I will discuss: (a) the quality of a true *du'a*, (b) the etiquette and conditions of a *du'a* required for a response from God (*istijābah*), (c) the obstacles of *istijābah*, (d) the effects of *du'a*, (e) the qualities and importance of *du'a*, and finally, (f) its spiritual effects.

The importance of prayer

In order to attain spiritual peace, acquire moral virtues, improve our willpower and intellectual capabilities, and above all, achieve nearness to God, praying to Him is vital. Prayer is also imperative so as to refrain from sins and to rid ourselves of moral defects and satanic temptations. Additionally, it is essential to request for material and spiritual support from God.

During the prayer, a person calls on God and speaks to Him in a manner and wording of their choice in order to gradually receive and realize His response. It is essential to discover the response of God through His hints. There are many forms of communication beyond the conventional use of language, and these are discovered solely through empathy and intimacy. Whilst speaking

to people, God begins by speaking to a person's consciousness. Imam Ali (a) has said, "In various eras, God has spoken to His servants in the depths of their conscience, and following this consistent conversation, the light of awareness emerges in their eyes, ears, and hearts." But du'a is not simply calling upon God; it is also an opportunity to *know* him. Communication necessitates at least two parties, and it is in these conversations that the intimacy and knowledge of God can be achieved. Through these exchanges, one's soul can be purified and one's faith can be strengthened. Furthermore, one's heart and intellect will find peace and serenity. It is for this reason that people should go with all of their integrity before God, and forget everything else.

When God becomes more than the First Cause (of the creation of the world) in the eyes of a person, and a conversation ensues with the intimacy of a friend and beloved one, a person can finally be considered a true supplicant. It is in this moment that one is able to truly benefit from and enjoy serving God, choosing the best and most pure way to live in this world.

A du'a in its essence speaks of a lover's needs and hopes. It speaks of love, fear, and knowledge (*ma'rifah*). It speaks of repentance and regret, benevolence, and a response (*ijābah*). It speaks of both worldly necessities and noble, heavenly ideals. It speaks of submission (*taslim*) and learning. In fact, it could be said that nothing other than du'a contains such a vast amount of divine blessings, with so much relief and countless merciful advantages.

Communication with God is so valuable and advantageous that it is even attractive for those who desire the temporary and perishable necessities of this world. Perhaps such necessities become a tool to call upon God, and can thus be a means for return to God. In fact, they may elevate a person from inferior spiritual levels to superior ones, even if this intention does not initially exist. Thus, it is not problematic to begin du‘a with these requests in mind; however, it is problematic if one remains in this condition for an extended period of time. Du‘a may initially be a path with a certain purpose or goal in mind, and a person may seek du‘a simply desiring something else. However, a fortunate person is someone who supersedes this basic level to the point where du‘a itself becomes the goal, as opposed to the means. Invoking God and speaking with Him becomes a person’s most substantial wish, as other desires consequently become insignificant. A real du‘a is a du‘a in which the world is deemed insignificant. This is the mystical side to supplication that gives a concrete meaning and a worthy purpose to life. Without a concrete purpose to one’s life, a person can only lead it aimlessly.

The meaning of *Du‘a*

Da‘ā (Arabic past tense verb for the third person masculine singular) means “he attracted someone”, “he asked for help”, or “he called (someone) towards himself”. *Da‘ā-hu* (دعا له) means “he called him to eat”. *Da‘ā lahu* (دعا له) means to pray for someone, and *da‘ā ‘alayhi* (دعا عليه) means to pray against someone.¹

¹ *Majma‘ al-Bahrayn*, pp. 138-141

In *Minhāj al-Sādiqin*, it is mentioned that the meaning of *du‘ā* is to become detached from everything except God and to only move towards Him. It is shedding tears and asking for help that is the most sublime form of worship. Indeed, according to a *hadith*, “*Du‘ā* is worship.”¹

To summarize, *du‘a*, in a religious context, is the calling of a servant to his God. It is the communication between the servant of God and God Himself, both through one’s heart and one’s tongue, and it is the most basic part of true servitude.

In his commentary on the Qur’an *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*, ‘Allamah Tabataba’i states:

Du‘a is turning oneself to the Deity and calling upon God with honesty and sincerity. This occurs when the hopes of a supplicant are alienated from all other apparent causes and tools. It is when the supplicant realizes and truly believes that nobody other than God is able to solve his problems. Consequently, his hands, heart, and tongue turn together to God, and it is in this state that his *du‘a* is sincere and unlikely not to be answered.

God has mentioned absolutely no conditions or prerequisites for *du‘a*, simply that one must “call Me in *du‘a*”, as mentioned in the verse:²

¹ *Minhāj al-Sādiqin*, vol. 1, p.425: الدعاء عبادة

² *Tarjume-ye Tafsir al-Mizan*, vol. 15, p. 595

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ

When My servants ask you about Me, [tell them that] I am indeed nearest. I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me. (Qur'an 2:186)

In the book *Kashf al-Asrār*, it is mentioned that du'a is of two types. One is the type that contains the praise of God:

يا حي يا قيوم يا ذا الجلال و الاكرام، يا ربّ، يا الله، ربنا لك الحمد
لا اله الا انت

Oh the living, oh the self-subsistent, oh the possessor of glory and generosity, oh my Lord, oh Allah, oh our Lord. All praise is due to You. There is no god but You.

The other type of du'a is one that requests something from God:

اللهم افعل بي كذا و كذا

Oh my Lord, grant me so and so.

The word *du'a* and its derivatives have been used approximately two hundred and twelve times in the Holy Qur'an.¹

The Etiquette of Du'a

It is highly recommended for every supplicant to adhere to certain etiquette. In what follows, we will refer to some of them.

¹ *Kashf al-Asrār wa 'Uddat al-Abrār*, vol. 1, p. 498

a) **Knowledge (*ma'rifah*)**

The following verse from the Holy Qur'an was recited in the presence of Imam al-Sadiq (a):

أَمَّنْ يُجِيبُ الْمُضْطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ وَيَكْشِفُ السُّوءَ

Is He who answers the call of the distressed [person] when he invokes Him and removes his distress? (Qur'an 27:62)

Someone then asked the Imam, "Why is it that God does not respond to our du'a?" The Imam (a) replied by saying that "Your du'a is not responded because you do not know the God that you call in your du'a, nor do you [fully] understand what you are requesting from Him."

The feeling of yearning and dependence of a servant toward his Lord is actually fundamental to our faith. Supplicating extensively without any real knowledge of God is a sign of weakness. Someone who does not realize with certainty that his heart and his consciousness are subservient to His power is actually ordering God with his du'a. Although a person may believe that it is simply a supplication, this kind of du'a in its real essence is ordering and commanding God and shows one's insolence and arrogance towards Him.¹ God says in the Holy Qur'an:

فَادْعُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ

¹ *Al-Sāfi fi Tafsiṛ al-Qur'an*, vol. 1, p. 204

So supplicate God, putting exclusive faith in Him.
(Qur'an 40:14)

b) Internal and external purity (*tahārah*)

A very important condition for the effectiveness of worship (like *dhikr* and *du'a*) is to have internal purity in addition to external purity. Merely moving one's tongue is not useful, nor effective, and may even cause the hardness of one's heart. God says:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُنْطَهِّرِينَ

Indeed Allah loves the penitent and He loves those who keep clean. (Qur'an 2:222)

Certainly, God will respond to the *du'a* of someone whom He is fond of.

Another item that must be purified is one's property and wealth. Imam al-Sadiq (a) has said, "Whoever wishes for his *du'a* to be accepted should purify his earnings and eat *halal* food."¹ Imam al-Rida (a) has said:

Do not be tired of praying to God (*du'a*) as it has a high position in the eyes of God. Be patient, earn a *halal* living, establish bonds of kinship (*silah rahim*) and do not quarrel with people. Indeed we, the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad (s), keep binds of kinship with

¹ *Wasā'il al-Shi'ah*, vol. 4, p. 1129: من سرّه ان يستجاب دعوته فليطيب مكسبه

anyone who breaks contact with us, and we do good to those who do evil to us. By God, I see a good future in this.¹

The Prophet (s) has said, “Whoever wants *his du‘a* to be accepted should purify his food and his income.”² A divine narration (*hadith qudsi*) says:

When you supplicate to me and make requests, I will respond and answer. No supplication will be hidden from Me except the supplication of someone who eats *haram* food.

The requirement of prayer

In order to examine the qualities by which one should supplicate to God, we will look at verses from the Holy Qur’an. It is narrated that the companions of the Prophet (s) asked him, “How should we pray to God? Is God near us so that we should whisper to him? Or is He far from us so that we should call Him loudly?” The following verse was subsequently revealed:

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ
فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

¹ *Wasā’il al-Shi‘ah*, vol. 4, p. 1129:

قال لا تمل من الدعا فانه من الله بمكان و عليك بالصبر و طلب الحلال و صلته الرحم و اياك و مكاشفه الناس فاتا اهل بيت تصل من قطعنا ونحسن الي من اساء الينا فنرى و الله الينا فنرى والله في ذلك العاقبه الحسنه

² *Che Bāyad Kard: Tarjome va Tanzimi Vizhe az Al-Murāqibāt*, vol. 2, p. 150

When My servants ask you about Me, [tell them that] I am indeed nearest. I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly. (Qur'an 2:186)

This verse explains the concept of du'a in its most pleasant manner, its most delicate structure, and its most beautiful form. There are some subtle points in this verse, which denote the importance of the matter.

- a) The words of God are in the first person narrator form, not the third person. This indicates that a great amount of attention is paid to the subject.
- b) Instead of saying something like "when people ask you...", the word "عِبَادِي" has been used, which means "when My servants ask you..." This shows the greatness of His kindness, and that again, attention is given to the subject.
- c) The expected response for "When My servants ask you about Me" would be "tell them that He is indeed nearest." However, in this verse the intermediary [i.e. tell them] has been removed, and the verse says "فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ" "I am indeed nearest".
- d) The sentence has been emphasized with "إِنَّ" meaning "indeed."

- e) In the original, Arabic, God's state of proximity is mentioned with a modifier (قَرِيبٌ), and not a verb. Thus, the more permanent quality of the relationship is emphasized.
- f) The action of answering is mentioned in the present tense (أُجِيبُ), which indicates the repetition and continuity of God's response.
- g) The response of du'a is mentioned with the condition of "إِذَا دَعَا" (when he calls Me). This condition is not truly an additional condition as the action of supplicating to God requires that someone is doing this. What this implies is that a response is not limited by any condition, and the du'a of a supplicant will be answered unconditionally, as is mentioned in the verse: "Call Me, and I will hear you (40:60)." This verse indicates that "supplicating" is the only condition to receive a response.

Each of these points in its own right indicates that intimate care and attention have been paid to the issue of du'a. Another characteristic of this verse is that the first person pronoun is used seven times, and it is the only verse in the Holy Qur'an in which this occurs.

In addition to mentioning the issue of a du'a's response, the verse has also mentioned the reasons for it. For instance, the reason that God is near is because they are His servants, and therefore, they are completely dependent on Him. Moreover, because He is so close to them, He answers their du'as. Since there is no condition for a du'a to be answered, God will answer the supplication of

anyone who supplicates. The only condition for His response is that the supplicant should call to God. Although this condition is not an addendum, it indicates that a supplicant should be sincere in his supplication, and should only desire it from God. A true prayer entails the presence of one's heart and soul and not merely with the presence of one's tongue.

The Outcomes of Du'a

a) Nearness to God

In Islamic philosophy, it has been accepted and proven that existence has several levels. The lowest level of this existence is the material, physical world. At the other end of the spectrum, at the highest level of existence, is the Divine Existence. As a person advances to the higher levels of existence whilst acquiring virtues, he also becomes closer to God at the same rate, and enjoys its infinite benefits.

Through performing the recommended prayers, one is able to reach a position of closeness to God. This fact has also been mentioned in the following divine narration (*hadith qudsi*):

My faithful servant is always becoming nearer to me.¹

And:

¹ *Akhlāq-e Islami*, p. 55: لا يزال ليتقرب عبدى المؤمن بى.

Indeed, he [a faithful servant] becomes near to Me through the recommended prayers (*nawāfil*).¹

In another authentic divine narration, God says:

Of the actions that bring my servants closer to me, there is nothing dearer to me than the completion of the obligations that I have assigned to him. And indeed he gradually draws nearer to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him. When I love him, I become the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks, and the hand with which he holds. If he calls upon Me, I answer him, and if he asks from Me, I grant his request.²

b) The brightness and insightfulness of the heart

When one turns towards God, a light from within shines onto one's soul and illuminates one's heart. Thus, in Islamic teachings, both the remembrance of God and supplication to Him are described as "the light of the hearts" and "the refinement of the hearts." This spiritual light liberates the heart from every darkness and impurity that has resulted from paying attention to things other than God.

¹ *Al-Kāfi*, kitab al-Imān wa al-Kufr, vol. 4 , p. 41: **وَأَنَّهُ لِيَتَقَرَّبَ إِلَيَّ بِالنَّوَافِلِ**.

² *Risāle-ye Liqā Allah*, p. 30

Thus, remembrance and supplication can cause many great spiritual effects:

I Revival of the heart: In Islam, it is believed that the biological life is not the only life available to us. Rather, higher life requires a second birth, which is only possible through knowing God and turning to Him, as said in the holy Qur'an:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اسْتَجِيبُوا لِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ إِذَا دَعَاكُمْ لِمَا يُحْيِيكُمْ

O you who have faith! Answer God and the Apostle when he summons you to that which will give you life. (Qur'an 8:24)

Thus, the condition to attain the real life, or “the goodly life”, is to pay attention to God. Similarly, the death of one’s heart is a result of neglecting Him. The Holy Prophet (s) says:

Through the remembrance of God, hearts are given life, and their death lies in neglecting Him.¹

When the heart neglects God, it becomes distressed, and consequently one becomes afflicted with various mental diseases. The only cure for this grueling spiritual disease that has brought humanity to its knees is to become acquainted with God, and to direct one’s heart towards Him.

II Unique energy and freshness to the heart: This solves the problem of inaction and/or lack of motivation that one may feel

¹ Tunbih al-khawat, p. 360: بذكر الله تحيى القلوب وينسيانه موتها.

in different ways throughout life. By attaining this spiritual freshness and happiness, one also becomes more spiritual. Imam Ali (a) has said:

Persistence in remembering God empowers one's soul.¹

III Insightfulness: Remembrance of God brightens the heart and the mind with the light of insight. It is because of this insight that pious people are saved from Satan's temptations and assaults. Regarding this, the Holy Qur'an says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا إِذَا مَسَّهُمْ طَائِفٌ مِّنَ الشَّيْطَانِ تَذَكَّرُوا فَإِذَا هُمْ مُبْصِرُونَ

When those who are Godfearing are touched by a visitation of Satan, they remember [Allah] and, behold, they perceive. (Qur'an 7:201)

The acceptance of prayer

a) The conditions of acceptance

Presence of the heart: One of the most crucial conditions in supplication is the presence of one's heart. To merely move one's tongue is futile, and may possibly lead to the hardness of the heart as one's words lack thought. An absent heart is similar to a lamp without light: it is pointless. Without this light, a person will be unable to understand the true realities of existence. A person

¹ *Ghurar al-Hikam: قوه الذكر، قوه الارواح*

who utters *dhikr* without the presence of heart is similar to a blind man who carries a torch in his hand, unable to benefit from its light. Hence, one should focus on God whilst in supplication. In fact, if one's heart is occupied with other than God during supplication, it would be considered an act of rudeness towards Him. Such a supplication would not bring about nearness to God; instead, it would take a person further away from Him.¹

Being completely detached from everything other than God:

One of the ways in which a person's supplications may be answered is by completely detaching oneself from everything other than God. More importantly, it is to put a special trust in the Lord of the universe, and to pay special attention to Him. The Cause of all causes (*'illat al-'ilal*) is God. All other causes and actors serve as channels of His grace to us to change our lives. These are all divine agents that execute His orders and divine will. The only true actor in this universe is the Almighty God. Imam al-Sadiq (a) quoted the Prophet (s) as narrating from God:

If a person requests something from Me while truly realizing that all benefits and losses lie in My hands, I will grant them their request.²

Being certain that one's du'a will be answered: The Holy Prophet (s) has said:

¹ *Risāle-ye Nūr-e 'alā Nūr dar Dhike wa Dhākir wa Madhkūr*, pp. 62 & 79.

² *Al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 273: قال رسول الله: من سألني و هو يعلم اني اضر و انفع استجب له.

Call upon God while being certain that your call will be answered.¹

To explain this hadith, ‘Allamah Tabatabai says:

The truth behind this fact is that supplicating with doubt and hopelessness indicates that one does not know what one seriously wants. Hence, it has been discouraged for a person to ask for something that is seemingly impossible.²

Imam Ali (a) says, “One who has been granted [the blessing of] supplication will not be deprived from its answer.”³

b) The obstacles of acceptance

Sin: According to many narrations, one of the most dangerous factors that can prevent acceptance of our prayers is committing sins. Further, it can cut off the root of our relationship with God and prevent us from paying attention to Him. Imam Ali (a) says, “Committing sins prevents the acceptance of prayer.”⁴ Imam Sajjad has said, “One of the sins that causes du‘a to be rejected, and also darkens the air, is to disobey and hurt one’s parents.”⁵ Imam Sajjad (a) also says, “The sins that cause one’s du‘a to be

¹ *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 93, p. 305: ادعوا لله و انتم موقنون بالاجابه.

² *Al-Mizan*, vol. 2, p. 47

³ *Wasā’il al-Shi‘ah*, Kitāb al-Salāh, Abwāab al-Du‘ā, Bāb 2, no 3: من اعطى الدعاء لم يحرم الاجابه.

⁴ المعصيه تمنع الاجابه

⁵ *Ma‘āni al-Akhbār*, p. 270.

rejected are: bad temper, hypocrisy (*nifāq*) with brothers in faith, disbelieving in *istijābah*, supplicating whilst delaying one's obligatory prayers (*salāt*) until their due time passes, and being rude and obscene in one's speech."¹

Although all sins have negative effect on the acceptance of one's prayers, there are some sins that have been specifically mentioned as an impediment to acceptance of prayer like: a *harām* earning, committing any injustice (*ẓulm*) and abandoning the action of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil.

Supplicating without action: If God has given someone the keys to fulfilling this goal, and this person, being ungrateful, refuses to use these keys, then such a du'a cannot be answered. This person wants God to open the door for him - a door to which he has been given the key, and to remain motionless, making no effort. This type of supplication is against the laws of nature. The purpose of du'a is to acquire an ability or competence in one's troubling situation. In the case where God has already given this capability to someone, asking for it would be asking for something that has already been given.

c) Factors that increase the likeliness of acceptance

Time: The time in which one supplicates has an important role in the success of a du'a, as does the state and emotions of a supplicant. Nighttime specifically has an exceptional status for personal supplication, invocation and thought. The night has a

¹ *Ma'āni al-Akhhār*, p. 271

mysterious character and draws one to contemplate the inner-self and the mysteries of one's soul. The Almighty has said:

إِنَّ نَاشِئَةَ اللَّيْلِ هِيَ أَشَدُّ وَطْئًا وَأَقْوَمُ قِيْلًا إِنَّ لَكَ فِي النَّهَارِ سَبْحًا
طَوِيلًا

Indeed the watch of the night is firmer in tread and more upright in respect to speech. For indeed during the day you have drawn-out engagements. (Qur'an 73:6-7)

In many ways, rising in the night for du'a increases the unity between one's heart and tongue and what is said is firmer and more focused. This is because there are many obligations and responsibilities during the day. Finding extra time during the day is difficult with the constant engagements of life and sustenance. Except for those who can always remember God and "whom neither trading nor bargaining distracts from the remembrance of God" (24:37), the night has a vital role in the purity of one's soul and one's spiritual ascension.¹

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَتَهَجَّدْ بِهِ نَافِلَةً لَّكَ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَبْعَثَكَ رَبُّكَ مَقَامًا مَّحْمُودًا

And keep vigil for a part of the night, as a supererogatory [devotion] for you. It may be that your Lord will raise you to a praiseworthy station. (Qur'an 17:79)

¹ *Risāle-ye Nūr-e 'alā Nūr dar Dhike wa Dhākir wa Madhkūr*

There are many Qur'anic verses and narrations regarding the importance of praying and supplicating at night, and seeking forgiveness (*istighfar*) before dawn. Imam al-Sadiq (a) has said:

The Holy Prophet (s) has said: 'The best time to supplicate to God is during the early hours of the morning before dawn (*sahar*).' He (s) then recited this verse quoting Prophet Jacob (a) when his children requested his prayers: 'I shall plead with my Lord to forgive you.' The Prophet (s) then he said that 'Jacob (a) delayed the prayer until the time of dawn (*sahar*).'

On the day of 'Arafah, Imam al-Sajjad (a) saw that a beggar was asking others for money. The Imam (a) then said to him, 'Woe to you! Are you requesting from someone other than God on a day in which there is even hope in the fetuses that lie in their mothers' wombs, that the grace of God will extend to them and that they will become prosperous?'

Another crucial time for supplication is during the days and nights of the holy month of Ramadan and as well as the night of *Eid al-Fitr*.¹ Imam Ali (a) has narrated that he was shocked at a person who did not pray on these nights. Other key times for prayer and supplication include the night of *Eid al-Aḏḥā*,² the

¹ The Muslim holiday that marks the end of the Month of Ramadan. This is an occasion to celebrate completion of one month of fasting and obedience.

² The "Festive of Sacrifice," one of the important Islamic holidays, in which Muslims celebrate the arrival of another season of hajj and their ability of offer some sacrifice to God in a way similar to the sacrifice made by Abraham.

night of middle of *Sha‘bān*¹ and the first night of *Rajab*.² Further, the times between the daily prayers and on Fridays are significant in this matter.

Place: Some of the privileged places of worship and supplication are: mosques, Masjid al-Haram,³ Masjid al-Nabi,⁴ Karbala⁵ and the shrines of the Holy Imams (a).

The etiquette of serving God:

One of the most excellent manifestations of *tawhid* (monotheism) is du‘a and supplication. However the etiquette of true servitude demands that one does not request anything from the Almighty, but instead, simply calls upon Him and praises Him. This being said however, there are narrations where believers are told to specifically request for their desires. Requesting something is

1 The eighth month of the Islamic calendar, considered one of the four sacred months in Islam. In the middle of this month in the year 255 A.H., the twelfth Imam was born. There are many supplications and acts of worship recommended for this day and night.

2 The seventh month of the Islamic calendar, considered one of the four sacred months in Islam. On the 27th of this month the Prophet Muhammad (s) was appointed by God as His messenger and on the 13th of this month Imam Ali (a) was born. There are many supplications and acts of worship recommended for this month, such as staying in the Grand Mosque of the town for three days in fasting and worshipping. This is called “i‘tikāf.”

3 “The Sacred Mosque” surrounding the Ka‘bah located in Mecca and is considered the holiest site in Islam.

4 “Mosque of the Prophet” located in Medina and known as the second holiest site in Islam.

5 A city in Iraq known as the location of the Battle of Karbala and is one of the holiest cities for Shi‘a Muslims where Imam Husayn (a) and 72 of his family members and companions who were martyred on the Day of Ashura are buried.

different than calling upon God. Those who have achieved the position of *taslim* (submission) always call upon God without requesting anything from Him. The narrations that speak of making specific requests are for ordinary people, not a true *muwahhid* (monotheist). Even if a *muwahhid* makes a specific request, it is because the nature of *du'a* is related to worship. Essentially, asking for something from God is in itself a type of servitude. Other than this, a *muwahhid* is not requesting anything from God as they have reached a point of absolute submission.

Nevertheless, this position is for a person who is truly acquainted with their Lord, and prefers being present in front of Him over anything and everything else.

من ذا الذى ذاق حلاوه محبتك فابتغى عنك بدلا...

Who has tasted the sweetness of Your love and
then taken an objective other than You?¹

Thus, the etiquette of true servitude demands that one does not desire anything other than God Himself. This is the class of worship that the true friends of God, the noble and the free-spirited people have, resulting from the high ambitions of a servant.

In any case, supplication is a requirement of servitude, as are the appropriate etiquette in the presence God. However, it is important to note that the feeling of helplessness that is followed

¹ *Maḥāṭih al-Jinān*, Munajāt al-Muhibbin, p. 252

by turning to God is a blessing given to us by Him. Such a supplication does not require *istijabah*, because the *du'a* itself is God's response. When one calls upon God due to a burning love, this *du'a* itself is the *istijabah* and the way in which God has turned towards the individual. This is a case where an individual does not want anything specific: he simply wants to call upon God. Here, a relationship with God is what is desired, and this is precisely what true servitude is.

Thus, the most delightful phenomenon in the world of humanity is the satisfaction and sweetness of having a true relationship with God that consists of both companionship and conversation. The most beautiful scene in this world is that of servants calling upon God. The finest of drops are those teardrops that fall to the ground from the eyes of a loving supplicant in the depths of the night, due to the fear and love of God.

و آخر دعوانا ان الحمد لله رب العالمين

And our concluding call is 'All praise belongs to
God, the Lord of all the worlds'

Conclusion

Having true faith in God, awareness of one's neediness, while invoking and hoping in God are some of the fundamentals of a sincere supplication. It is important to beseech God for a variety of reasons: to attain high morality, improve ourselves in every aspect, and to refrain from satanic temptations that lead us to sins. A person is to know God and possess internal and external purity

when invoking Him. He or she should also call to Him with the presence of his heart and soul, while being detached from everything other than God. Refraining from both sinning and supplicating without putting for the effort is also important when asking God for blessings. It is until then that a person can have a bright and insightful heart and achieve nearness to Him.

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