

PROSTRATION (SAJDA) ON DUST

Within the body of Islamic teachings, the act of 'prostration' to God occupies a significant position. It symbolises devotion and submission to the will of Allah beyond the individual's own will. *Salah*, of which prostration is an intrinsic and essential constituent, enjoys the position of the best form of worship and one that is most frequently commanded by religious texts.¹ It is termed as *Mi'raj al-Mu'min* (the heavenly ascension of the faithful) and exemplified in the actions of the Prophet (s), the Imams (a) and their companions as they stood in prayers in the lonely hours of the nights. Prostration is the apex of *Salah*, in other words the *Mi'raj* of *Salah* itself. The Qur'anic verses are sufficient to ascertain its worth especially the ones in which Allah praises those of His servants who bear the signs of prostration.² Similarly it is enough to make reference to some of the many *Hadīth* (the traditions of the Prophet (s) and the Imams (a)) that advocate the merits of prostration, to understand its worth. Among such traditions we have one from the first Imam (a) in which he states that a believer would not raise his head from prostration till the Day of resurrection if he knew its worth,³ and the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet (s) which he was asked by a group of companions to guarantee them paradise on behalf of Allah, to this the Prophet replied, "Assist me through lengthy prostrations."⁴ For the Shi'a, prostration needs no introduction or emphasis considering that both Imam 'Alī (a) and Imam al-Ḥusayn (a) gave their lives whilst in prostration to Allah. In addition for the fourth Imam (a) to be popularly known as *Sayyid al-Sajidin* meaning 'the master of those who prostrate' as opposed to any other designation aptly signifies its lofty status.

The purpose of this article is to examine the meaning, the spirituality and the method of prostration. Reference to the spiritual and legal religious texts will be made to acquire an understanding of the meaning of prostration, the significance of its posture and the relevance of the objects upon which the forehead should be placed during the act of prostration. In this context the issue of prostration on the ground and on the dust of Karbala will be clarified in light of the reports from the Prophet (s) and the Imams (a) together with references to certain recent scientific studies. Furthermore, the theological implications that arise from the whole notion of prostrating on objects such as the issue of 'innovation' (*bid'a*) and 'association with God' (*shirk*) will also be assessed to a level befitting this article.

¹ The various types of prayers comprising of units composed of actions such as standing, bowing and placing the forehead onto the floor or ground.

² Qur'an 48:29.

³ Mizan al-Hikma v.?, p. ?

⁴ Mizan al-Hikma v.?, p.164

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THE GENERAL MEANINGS OF PROSTRATION

The word *Sajdah* comes from the root verb *sajada* which literally means 'to bow down', to 'throw down' or 'to prostrate'. It is easy to understand how the act of bowing or throwing oneself to the ground or prostrating in front of another would symbolise worship and submission. The Qur'an mentions prostration in several places in a general sense to signify the meaning of submission. However, the meaning here is not confined to 'submission' as in the conventional sense, that is, of a human act or condition of submitting to another but is in a more universal sense depicting a state of surrender enjoyed by all of existence. This state of submission is portrayed in the Qur'an as either an inescapable natural dictate of being where all things conform to the will of Allah or a form of willful act performed by human beings. Instances of both of these meanings are evident in the following verses:

“And for Allah prostrates whoever is within the heavens and the earth willfully or through force and their shadows at dawn and dusk.” (13:15)⁵

And:

“Do you not see that to Allah prostrates whoever is within the heavens and the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, the crawling creatures and many among men...”(22:18)⁶

The condition of 'submission' and 'devotion' in this context are further defined by the Muslim philosophers as a natural and unavoidable desire for completion which gives rise to motion.⁷ This claim is substantiated by them through Qur'anic verses such as:

“There is nothing save it praises it's Lord but you do not comprehend its eulogy.”(17:44)⁸

What this means is that every aspect of existence is in a state of compliance to that which gives it its completion and it is this natural submission that creates motion within it. The motion for completion in turn is an act of praise for Allah. This, it is reasoned, is because ultimately Allah is the most complete and the locus where all want or motion to completion terminates whether Allah is

⁵ Qur'an 13:15

⁶ Qur'an 22:18

⁷ Usul al-Ma'arif p. 74 in the section of causation

⁸ Qur'an 17:44

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recognised as such or not. With this understanding, it cannot be objected that the exclusive desire for things (without any notion of God) such as wealth, beauty, power and the like are objects of want per se and thus cannot be a form of motion to Allah. This is because the very desire for such things in itself is indicative of a state of inner lack which in turn requires fulfillment and hence the desire for completion and subsequently a motion to God.⁹ According to this therefore, prostration is an expression of the want for Allah at every level of existence and in every aspect of it through an awareness befitting existence at its differing degrees. In the case of human beings however, this want for Allah or the desire for completion in addition to being an unavoidable condition enjoyed by all existence is also a conscious act and as such is both a prescribed formal act of worship by the law of Shari'a and a spiritual activity of the soul.

THE POSTURE OF PROSTRATION

From the extensive spiritual and religious literature, we discern that the specific formal posture of prostration is symbolic of active submission. The individuals are required to consciously direct and focus themselves to Allah alone by removing all forms of distractions and be mindful of their state of utmost humility. The objective of this is to assist in the removal of pride which, in accordance with the spiritual literature, is the greatest impediment in achieving 'individual completion' and the attainment of God. The above understanding is fully expressed in the following report of the sixth Imam (a):

“By Allah! The one who performs a proper prostration even once in a lifetime is not in loss! Never is a person who seeks proximity through prostration, far from Allah. A person can never be close to Allah whose heart is attached to other than Allah in the state of prostration. Prostrate in humility and with humbleness knowing that you have been created from the dust that people tread upon. Indeed Allah has made prostration a means of proximity to Him through the heart and the spirit. The one, who draws near to Him, becomes distant from other than Him. Do you not see that prostration is not proper except by becoming concealed from all things and hidden from all onlookers? This is how Allah desires the inner state.”¹⁰

⁹ Usul al-Ma'arif p. 75 in the section of causation

¹⁰ Al-Bihar al-Anwar v.85, p.136

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In terms of why a particular posture should be so significant with regard to prostration, we can discern from the general understanding among Muslim scholars that there is an intimate connection between the physical and non-physical aspects of a human being, that is, the body and the mind. Thus the manners of physical actions of worship play an important role at a psychological level of human existence and allow for a state of balance and harmony between the mind and body.¹¹ We understand from this that, the specific prescriptions and instructions for the physical performance of acts of devotion are intended to bring about a sense of balance and inner peace. This is further strengthened by a survey of the laws of Islam that reveal a connection between the prescribed forms of human devotions and the physical nature. For instance, the laws of *Ṣalah* and fasting clearly indicate a correlation between the respective acts of worship and the movements of the sun and the moon. Also the executions of the ceremonies during Hajj are contingent upon the presence of the worshipper in specific places at precise times. In a similar manner prostration which is considered the utmost expression of devotion has a connection to the earth.

THE MANNER OF PROSTRATION

The act of prostration within *Ṣalah* is performed by placing seven parts of the body onto the ground. These are known as *Masājīd* (plural of *masjid*) which means ‘places of *Sajda*’. They comprise of the forehead, palms of the hands, knees and the tips of the two big toes. It should be noted that the aforementioned seven parts must be placed on the ground or the floor; however, other parts of the body may also be placed. The criterion of the posture during prostration is that the act should not be such that conventionally it would not be termed as prostration of *Ṣalah*, for instance, lying flat on one’s stomach and face. Therefore it is acceptable to place the forearms on the ground and the tip of the nose.¹²

THE PLACE OF PROSTRATION

The minimum requirement for the place of prostration in prayers is that it needs to be ritually pure (*tāhir*) for the place of the forehead. As for other parts of prostration, their respective places may be contaminated by impure substances provided there is no transference of the impurities to the

¹¹ Here, mind refers to the cognitive faculty and the soul denotes the overall state of conscious

¹² See *Minḥāj al-Ṣāliḥīn* of Sayyid ‘Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Sīstānī, v.1, under the section of *ṣalah*

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devotee.¹³

THE OBJECTS ON WHICH PROSTRATION IS TO BE PERFORMED AND IT'S RELEVANCE

There is an authoritative tradition from Hisham Ibn Hakam in which he reports:

“I asked Abī ‘Abd Allah [the sixth Imam (a)]: ‘inform me of those things on which it is permissible to prostrate as opposed to those on which it isn’t!’ He [(a)] said: ‘prostration is not valid save on earth or on its produce except what is eaten or worn of it.’ I asked him [(a)]: ‘what is the reason for this?’ He [(a)] said: ‘prostration is [a gesture of] humility for Allah the Exalted hence it is not befitting to prostrate on things that are eaten and worn. This is because the people of the world are slaves to what they eat and wear whilst the one who prostrates is in worship of Allah the Exalted during his prostration and thus it is not befitting for him to place his forehead on the object of worship of the people of the world who are deceived by it’”¹⁴

It needs to be clarified that it is commonly understood by the scholars that when the Prophet (s) or the Imams (a) were asked to supply the reasons for stipulated laws they responded in a manner that was understood by the questioner. In this sense the above response is apt but may not be the only reason for the law. Here the reply addresses the distraction of the mind through the attachment with matter. This is a very central reason but it may also be construed that the physical contact of the forehead with such materials impact on psychological states similar to the connection between certain food substances and states of mind.

There are numerous *ḥadīth* in the mainstream Muslim sources that validate the prostration on earth and its inedible produce such as:

1. The Prophet (s) is reported to have said: “the earth has been made a Masjid and Tuhur for me.”

Here, the word *Masjid* means ‘the place of prostration’ and *Tuhur* means a source of dry ritual purity (*tayamum*).

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Wasa’il al-Shi’a v.3, p. 591, chapter 1 of the chapter s of prostration.

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2. Umm Salma [the wife of the Prophet] reports that the Prophet used to command the companions to place their cheeks on the dust for Allah.
3. Wa'il Ibn Hajr (a companion of the Prophet (s)) reports: "... whenever he [Prophet (s)] would prostrate, he would place his forehead and [the tip of] his nose on the earth."
4. Jābir Ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ansārī reports: "I would pray Zuhr [noon prayers] with the Prophet [(s)], and would grab small stones to cool them in the palm of my hand in order to place my forehead"
5. Razin reports: " 'Alī Ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote to me: 'send me a tablet from the stone of Marwa so that I may prostrate on it'."
6. Abū Sa'īd (a companion of the Prophet (s)) narrates: "I entered upon the Messenger of Allah [(s)] and he was praying on a mat."

These are some of the narrations from the Sunni works of *ḥadīth*. There are numerous other reports in which it is related that the noble companions were prostrating on earth and that the Prophet (s) would physically remove the cloth of the turbans covering their foreheads as they prostrated so that a direct connection existed between the foreheads and the earth.¹⁵ There are other traditions that explicitly attach the ordinary physical act of prostration on dust to God and the Hereafter such as a narration from the first Imam, 'Alī (a), which reminds the devotees to be alert, during the two prostrations in every unit of prayers, of the fact that they have been created from dust and that they would return to dust and be raised from it once again.¹⁶

PROSTRATION ON DUST IN LIGHT OF SOME MODERN STUDIES

Certain recent scientific studies of the functions of the human brain have provided some insight on the importance and significance of the posture and place of prostration. Empirical studies have revealed that the frontal lobe of the brain is partly responsible for producing substances that give a sense of spiritual upliftment and tranquility and that this process is aided through pressure

¹⁵ For a list of these traditions refer to Jafar Subhani's *Der Tariq Wahdat Islami*, p.78-87

¹⁶ *Mizan al-Hikma* v.?, p.

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applied to the forehead.¹⁷

In another research, it is claimed that the vast electromagnetic waves that surround people today due to the technological bent of modernization have a negative effect on the cells of the body causing fatigue and exhaustion. Prostration facilitates the discharge of these electromagnetic waves which cause many ailments such as headache, muscular cramps, neck spasms, tiredness and exhaustion as well as forgetfulness and absentmindedness. It stresses that the non discharge of the electromagnetic charges and their subsequent accumulation aggravates and perpetuates these symptoms because they cause a disturbance in the internal mechanisms of the cells which inhibit their performance. Consequently, carcinogenic tumors may grow and deformities in fetuses are more probable. The researchers claim that prostration on the ground provides an excellent medium for the discharge of the accrued waves in the body without using medicines and analgesics that may cause harmful side effects. This discharge process only occurs when there is a connection between the forehead and the ground, just as there is in prostration. Thereafter the positive charges are transferred from the human body to the negatively charged ground. Consequently, the body is freed from excess charges, especially when prostration is frequent.¹⁸

Assuming the above claims are credible and accurate, we can clearly assume that there is an inextricable association between spirituality and the physical aspects of human existence in the sense of a better state of mind.

Prostration on the Dust of Karbala

There is unanimous agreement among the Imami scholars that prostration on the dust of Karbala is better than prostration on any other type of earth. Here there is no need to prove why the dust of Karbala enjoys precedence over that of other places including Makkah and Madinah with complex philosophical and theological arguments because there are several traditions which explicitly refer to the subject from the Shi'a Imams who are acknowledged as authorities within the Imamiyyah school of thought. The following are two such examples:

1. Mu'āwiyah Ibn 'Ammār reports: Abī 'Abd Allah [the sixth Imam (a)] had a yellow cloth, in it was the dust of Abī 'Abd Allah [Imam al-Ḥusayn (a)]. Whenever prayers would approach, he would [open and] place the cloth on

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¹⁸http://www.55a.net/firas/english/?page=show_det&id=20&select_page=8

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his prayer mat and prostrate on it. Then he [(a)] would say: ‘prostration on the *Turbah* (dust) of Abī ‘Abd Allah [Imam al-Ḥusayn (a)] breaks through the seven veils.’”¹⁹

2. Al-Qummī reports in his book that Imam al-Ṣādiq [(a)] said: “Prostrations on the clay of the grave of al-Ḥusayn [(a)] illuminates the seven earths. The one who holds a rosary (tasbeḥ) made from the clay of the grave of al-Ḥusayn [(a)] is reckoned to be actively engaged in the act of praising [Allah] even if he isn’t [physically] praising [Allah] through it...”²⁰

There are numerous other reports that discuss the great merits of both praising and prostrating to God via the dust of the grave of Imam al-Ḥusayn (a), to the extent that such prostration would elevate the person’s devotion to the Throne of God.²¹

It needs to be clarified at this point that in accordance with Islamic spirituality, the act of praising God at a conscious level is not the mere pronouncement of His Names rather it is more a state of being in which there is balance, calm and focus directed to Allah. Also that the terms used in the above narrations such as ‘the seven veils’ or ‘the elevation (as a result of prostration) to the Throne’ also signify a befitting state for the human conscious attained through a broader understanding of submission to Allah. In this respect *Thawāb* or good deeds are not to be seen as mere merits written on a book which is to be opened on the Day of Judgement but also in terms of a growing human soul and awareness.

A question may arise as to why the dust of al-Ḥusayn (a) enjoys such an elevated status as opposed to other parts of the earth. One may quell all such doubts by reference to the popularly narrated tradition in which the Prophet (s) had once instructed certain companions to rub the dust of Madinah onto their bodies as a means of cure from certain ailments.²² If this is the case then there certainly is a correlation between the human use of the soil of spiritually endowed places and the subsequent benefit to the physical body which will inevitably have a positive impact on the spirituality of man. There is much that still needs to be understood and discovered about the physical nature and the properties of this world and their connection with the body and the mind. As a result,

¹⁹Misbah al-Mujtahid, p. 677

²⁰Al-Faqih, v.1, p. 174

²¹This may be because the dust of Karbala bore the blood of Imam al-Husayn (a) and was purified through his love for God.

²² It is popularly narrated historical event in which the wounded soldiers returning from an expedition were

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religious instructions and reports like the above should not be discarded due to the lack of understanding of their relevance but should serve as sources of guidance to something beneficial and an encouragement to discover and understand the fuller workings of nature.

Prostration on the Dust of Karbala a form of Innovation (*bid'a*)

Innovation of every kind in any aspect of Islam is a serious matter; one needs only to refer to the *ḥadīth* to comprehend its severity, such as the Prophetic tradition: “every form of innovation is misguided and every form of innovation is in the fire.”²³ The Imamiyyah are often made a target of various forms of criticism including the charges of innovating Islamic rituals and ‘association with God’ due to their practice of prostrating on earth and more specifically because they prostrate on the dust from the grave of Imam al-Ḥusayn (a). In order to clarify what qualifies as an innovation, we need to first understand the concept and thereafter its jurisdiction and scope of application. Thus innovation in Islam, by looking at its various qualifications, is:

“The introduction of a practice into religion as a part of faith without religious authority.”

Therefore, as innovation is only said to exist when there is no authoritative backing from the faith, prostrating on earth is clearly not a form of innovation since it was the practice of the Prophet (s) and the Imams (a) and as such their practice constitute religious law. As for the particular claim that prostration and *Taṣbīḥ* on the dust of Karbala is a form of innovation, this too can be discounted by the fact that it is well documented that after the death of Ḥamza,²⁴ Lady Fāṭimah (a) made a rosary from the dust of his grave and initiated a tradition that the Prophet (s) endorsed.

Prostration on the dust of Karbala a form of Association (*shirk*) with God

The claim that prostration on a tablet made from the clay of Karbala is ‘association with God’ requires a distinction to be made with regard to the object of the act of prostration as opposed to the object upon which prostration is made. Ja‘far Ṣubḥānī, a contemporary Iranian scholar, has made this valuable distinction and is of the opinion that prostrating “to” denotes worship and devotion whilst

instructed to rub dust of Madina as a form of cure. However I have not been able to locate the source

²³ Al-Kafi

²⁴ The uncle of the Prophet (s), who was designated as the lord of the martyrs after the battle of *Uhud*

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prostrating “on” is a mere means to it and the two are not incompatible.²⁵ Therefore prostrating on an object provided it is not with the intention of prostrating to the object is in no manner a form of ‘association with God’. We need to be mindful at this point and understand well that *Shirk*, by definition, is not a mere act of assigning the rank of godhead to other than God but even the attribution of independence in lordship to other than God constitutes association with God. According to this therefore, the gestures of respect offered to the Imams (a) are not forms of ‘association with God’ since they are not considered as God however it may still constitute *shirk* if these personalities are considered independent agents. Therefore the proper manner of offering gestures of respect and making prayers through other than Allah is to clearly know that other than Allah are mere means who are functioning through Allah’s consent. With this sort of understanding therefore, prostrating towards the shrines of the Imams or prostrating on tablets that are inscribed with the names of Allah or the Prophet or the Imams is permissible and not considered *shirk*. The only problem is when such acts either cause misconception in the minds of the people that leads them to believe that these personalities are objects of worship or in the views of onlookers necessitating beliefs that the followers of the Imamiyyah school worship the Prophet (s) and Imams (a).²⁶

Prostration an expression of Devotion and Worship reserved specifically for God

It needs to be born in the mind that even though gestures of respect and veneration are permissible by the Islamic law to other than God as long as it is not done with the intention of worship, certain gesture have become conventionally associated with the worship of God alone and hence are not to be offered to other than God. According to this understanding prostration as we understand from religious teachings as the placing of the forehead on the ground and not mere bowing, can only be performed for Allah regardless of whether it is done as a gesture of worship and devotion or just out of respect. This understanding can be clearly discerned from those supplications that are recommended to be recited immediately after offering two units of *Ṣalah* subsequent to the performance of the *Ziyarah* (salutations at the shrines of the Imams (a)). An example of this is a caption in the prayer that is recited after the *Ziyārah* of Imam al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (a) which states:

O Allah, I have offered *Ṣalah*, have performed *Rukū’* (bowing) and *Sajda* (prostration) for You alone- You have no partner. *Ṣalah*, *Rukū’* and *Sajda*

²⁵ Jafar Subhani, Dar Tariq Wahdat Islami, p.78

²⁶ This is based on secondary law which is determined by the specific circumstances

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cannot be performed except for You because You are Allah, there is no god but You!²⁷

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above that prostration is the most preferred form of devotion at a conscious human level. It connects the individuals with the nature of their own physical being and the nature of the world at large thereby enhancing the level of their being and accelerating the process of 'inner completion'. Prostration on earth and especially on the dust of Imam al-Husayn (a) elevates the whole process of devotion and also the subsequent human completion through it to a very high degree. The reasons for this, apart from the aforementioned benefits of connecting the forehead to the ground, are not known fully as yet. Prostration is an acknowledgement of the Lordship of Allah and the state of poverty to Him and therefore deserves to be performed in a calm state of being with the mind directed and focused on Him.

²⁷*Mafitih al-Jinan, Ziyarat Mutlaqah of Imam al-Husayn, no. 7*