

## Intention as the Spirit of Prayer

MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI

*International Institute for Islamic Studies, Qum, Iran*

**ABSTRACT:** Intention is the most important aspect of the prayer. Intention is not a part of prayer and other worships; rather it is the spirit of every act of worship. Comparing between intention and action, the author, according to the Qur'anic verses comes to this conclusion that Allah (*swt*) rewards His servants for the good intentions they have, even if they cannot actualise them. Also, quantity of the acts is not the main factor for being successful in Allah's test; rather, the quality of acts is very important here. A very important feature of intention is awareness. Intention does not only mean that one should know what he is doing at the moment. Indeed, we need to be aware of what we are doing and to have a good reason. One who does something good without understanding is not doing a good job, even if he has a good intention. Hence, when a person is reciting his or her prayers, he or she should not do it as a habit.

**KEYWORDS:** intention, prayer, awareness, reward, pretence

The status of fasting and prayer can be perceived from the following verse:

﴿وَأَسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَإِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ﴾

“And take recourse in patience and prayer, and it is indeed hard except for the humble.” (2:45)

According to several narrations, patience in the verse refers to fasting which indicates that fasting is one of the most prominent manifestations of patience.

Prayer consists of several parts, the first of which is intention (*nīyyah*). Intention is the most important aspect of every act of worship. To be more accurate, intention is not a part of worship; rather it is the spirit of every act of worship. While head, hands, feet etc. are considered as parts of a body with different degrees of importance, spirit cannot be placed beside them as a part of the body. It is quite possible that all parts of the body exist while the body is dead due to the absence of the spirit. The person who has just died may seem alive to the extent that no one becomes aware that he has passed away. This can be further illustrated by considering the case of Prophet Solomon (a) when he died while looking at his troops including the jinns. He passed away in such a situation, but because he was holding a stick in his hand he did not fall to the ground. Consequently, the troops unaware of the reality of the situation, continued to march by him. Thus, Prophet Solomon and his body were there, but there was no life since there was no soul. The same is true regarding intention.

One may practise all the necessary acts of the prayer, mentioned in the books of practical laws, including ‘*takbīr*’, ‘recitation’, ‘*rukū*’, ‘prostration’ and so on, but his deed is not considered as prayer, if he does not intend to say his prayer. To have a bad intention turns the prayer invalid as well, like the one who intends to show off. So, to summarise: a prayer without intention or with a bad intention and a prayer with good intention may all look the same to the extent that sometimes hypocrites, (whose intention for saying their prayers is to show off), may say more good-looking prayers in that they pray longer, put lots of effort into it, but not with the intention of pleasing Allah (swt). For example, there is a story of a man who was praying in the mosque and he heard a sound behind him. Thinking that people had entered the mosque and could see him, he started to pray in a better manner: his prayer became lengthier, etc. However, on finishing his prayers he realised that the sound he had heard behind him was a cat that had entered the mosque. This shows an intention that was not to please Allah (swt). Therefore, the intention serves as the criterion.

### **The role of intention in every action**

Based on Islamic teachings, every act of a person has the capacity to be regarded as an act of worship through the spirit of good intention. Two people who attend a religious sermon may be valued differently. The one who has joined it in order to know more about his faith and apply what he learns in his practical life would be rewarded by virtue of his good intention;

while the one who has taken part in it just for a mundane purpose is not the same, although physically, both of them have performed the same acts. The importance of good intention is to the extent that in the above-mentioned example, all preliminary acts of the first person for attending the sermon are counted as acts of worship—even his driving to the place where the sermon is held. Regular eating and drinking also can be worship if the one who eats and drinks has a good intention through that. Thus, intention is something that Allah (*swt*) has given us as a precious gift in order for us to make everything to our advantage. Although our life is short and our energy may be very little, we can still have such a beautiful power of intention so much so that we can change every act into an act of worship through good intention. Thus, everything we do: every action we take, every deed we perform should be for Allah's (*swt*) pleasure and to reach nearest to Him, by striving in His way and having a good intention.

According to the 20<sup>th</sup> supplication in *Al-Sahīfat al-Sajjādiyyah*, Imam Sajjād (a) prays:

اللهم وفر بطفك نيتي

“O God, grow my intention through Thy gentleness.”

Therefore, from the time one wakes up until he sleeps and even during his period of sleeping, everything can become as worship of Allah (*swt*), if one's intention grows and he does everything for the sake of God.

### Unrealised good intentions

As some narrations indicate, Allah (*swt*) is so merciful that He rewards His servants for the good intentions they have, even if they cannot realise them. The one who intends to do some acts of worship like giving a lot charity for the sake of Allah (*swt*), but due to lack of resources is unable to do so, will be rewarded by Allah (*swt*) as if he has realised his intention. The clever believer is the one who intends '*wholeheartedly*' to do all acts of worship; thus, he is endowed with divine reward for all those acts even if he is not able to bring into practice any of them. Therefore, limiting the intentions for righteous acts is a great loss. One who intends to give charity to all poor people, but is unable to afford to give charity to more than 30 people will be rewarded as if he has given charity to all of the poor people; while the one who intends to give charity to 30 people and does so will be rewarded just in accordance with the quantity he has spent. One who intends to guide people towards the

divine path should not limit his intention to the guidance of the people of his own family or neighbourhood or even his city or country; rather he must intend that as far as he is concerned, he wants to guide all the people even the next generations through writing books and the like. Of course, he must be honest in his intention and this honesty is proven when he does his best to realize his intentions. The only thing needed is a vast and great heart to have mercy upon all the people. Thus, intention is the most important aspect of every action.

Imam Kāzīm (a<sup>1</sup>) through his fathers (a) has quoted the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) as saying:

لكل امرئ ما نوى<sup>1</sup>

“There is for every person what he has intended for.”

It means that when you intend to do something you already have the reward of that action. The only necessary condition, as mentioned before, is to have honesty. The one who intends to feed all the people of the world, but does not feed as many people as he is actually able to, cannot be regarded as an honest person and such an intention is of no value.

### A comparison between intention and action

Imam Ṣādiq (a), interpreting the second verse of Chapter *Mulk* which reads:

﴿الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾

“He, who created death and life that He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct. And He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiving.”

Says:

"ليس يعنى أكثر عملا و لكن اصوبكم عملا و انما الاصابه خشيه الله و النيه الخالصه و الحسنه  
ثم قال الابقاء على العمل حتى يخلص اشد من العمل و العمل الخالص الذى لا تريد ان يحدك

<sup>1</sup> Hurr ‘Āmilī, Muhammad ibn Ḥasan, *Wasā’il al-Shī‘ah*, vol. 1, (Qum: Mu’assesseh ‘Āl al-Bayt li Ihya’ al-Turāth, 1410 A.H.) p. 48., no. 92.

عليه احد الا الله عزوجل و النيه افضل من العمل. الا و ان النيه هي العمل ثم تلا هذه قوله عزوجل: «قل كل يعمل على شاكلته يعنى على نيته».<sup>1</sup>

“Allah (swt) did not say that He may test people to see which one of them acts more; rather, he means the one who acts better and does right actions. To have good performance is dependent on fearing God and having pure and honest intention. To keep your good intention for doing an act is much more difficult than doing the act. And the purified act is the one for which one does not expect any one other than Allah (swt) to praise him for it and intention is better and more important than action. ‘Look! Intention is the very action.’”

Imam Ṣādiq (a) then recited the verse which reads: *"Say, every one acts according to his character (17:48)" and said "his character" means "his intention."*

Thus, quantity of the acts is not the main factor for being successful in Allah's test; rather it is the quality of acts that plays the main role here. It is evident that to have both quantity and quality is much better, but if one has the choice either to choose quantity or quality he should look for quality.

### **The importance of keeping good intention after fulfilling the act**

According to the above-mentioned narration, one who has done an act of worship should try to keep his act pure since sometimes Satan changes one's intention when the job has already been done or in the middle of that action. In an instructive story, it is said that a person was saying his prayers in a mosque while he was alone. Therefore, he, enjoying a pure intention, was praying to Allah (swt) wholeheartedly. Then, another person entered the mosque. The newcomer, observing the spiritual situation of that person, said wistfully: “Good for him! What an excellent prayer he is performing!” Hearing this, the man shouted while praying: “I am fasting too!” and thus damaged his pure intention. Satan, the accursed, knows how to approach human beings and for this, he has numerous kinds of policies and traps. Not only does he sometimes stop one from starting certain actions, but he sometimes comes to share the person's action whilst in the middle of performing it and can again show himself when the act has been finished.

<sup>1</sup> Kulaynī, Muhammad ibn Ya'qūb, *Uṣūl Al-Kāfi*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyah, 1388 A.H.) vol. 1, p. 16, no. 4.

A sign for possessing good intention, as mentioned in the narration, is that the one who does an act of worship with good and purified intention does not expect others to praise him for that act and he only hopes that Allah (*swt*) will reward him. This subtle point should not be misconstrued: expecting people to appreciate a good act done by somebody is not a bad thing if by people appreciating it they may benefit more or perhaps lend their support or get involved in the project, action or good deed. It is when this is not the issue and the intention is for acknowledgement and acclaim by other humans and not for Allah's pleasure that it is not correct. An example of this is when someone builds a mosque or writes a precious book, people may praise him for that and he becomes happy as a consequence of such appreciation. It does not necessarily mean that he has had a bad intention; rather, such happiness may be the result of the fact that he is joyful since he understands through this appreciation people will make the best use of the mosque and the book. What is blameworthy is building the mosque or writing the book for the purpose of being praised by other people. A true believer is the one who when he finds something to be right, praise or blame of people will not affect him. Regarding this, the Qur'an says:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَنْ يَرْتَدَّ مِنْكُمْ عَنْ دِينِهِ فَسَوْفَ يَأْتِي اللَّهَ بِقَوْمٍ يُحِبُّهُمْ وَيُحِبُّونَهُ أَذِلَّةٍ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَعِزَّةٍ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوْمَةَ لَائِمٍ ذَلِكَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴾

“O you who have faith! Should any of you desert his religion, Allah will soon bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, (who will be) humble towards the faithful, stern towards the faithless, waging jihad in the way of Allah, not fearing the blame of any blamer. That is Allah's grace which He grants to whomever He wishes, and Allah is All-bounteous, All-knowing.” (5:54)

In the same line, the Qur'an says:

﴿ إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا ﴾

“[Saying,] ‘We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks.’” (76:9)

Thus, one should not change his policy and deviate from the right path due to the blame of people or lack of their praise. Imam Ali (a) advises those who want to tread on the path of guidance:

"ايها الناس! لا تستوحشوا في طريق الهدى لقله اهله"<sup>1</sup>

“Oh people! If you are on the path of guidance, do not be terrified for the small number of its followers.”

So, one’s only duty is to ensure that he is on the right path. Then he must persevere without paying attention to what people say about him or to the number of the companions who accompany him in this way. None of the prophets started their mission with much support from others. All of them were almost alone in the first step and gradually gained a few followers. They, however, were persistent and continued their task and they finally managed to be successful.

#### **Awareness and its relation to intention**

A very important part of intention is awareness. Intention does not only mean that one should know what he is doing at the moment. Indeed, we need to be aware of what we are doing and to have good reason. One who does something without understanding is not doing a good job, even though he has a good intention. Regarding this, the verse 4:43 reads:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقْرَبُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَنْتُمْ سُكَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَعْلَمُوا مَا تَقُولُونَ﴾

“O you who have faith! Do not approach prayer when you are intoxicated, (not) until you know what you are saying.”

The one who is drunk does not understand what he is saying and doing. Therefore, his prayer is invalid and he has to delay it in order to understand what he is saying and doing.

One of the differences between human beings and animals is the fact that animals do things and do them correctly, but not with understanding why they are doing them and without being able to evaluate their jobs. It is for this reason that they cannot improve. But in contrast, human beings have the ability to observe their actions and evaluate themselves. Certainly, human beings may also not appreciate this faculty and thus do not improve or instead may even get worse.

<sup>1</sup> *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 201.

Hence, when a person is reciting his/her prayers, he/she should not do it as a habit. Of course, the habit of doing good actions is good per se, but one should keep his/her awareness and consciousness. The one who is professional in driving, no doubt, drives much easier than a beginner, but the fact that the professional one is used to driving should not lead him to a lack of awareness and consciousness. It should be mentioned that for many people prayer becomes almost habitual as they are able to perform them correctly while they think of everything other than the very prayer which they are saying. Therefore, remaining attentive during the prayer is a difficult task. For that reason, one should say his/her prayer in such a way as if it is his/her first prayer which needs a good deal of attention. At the same time, the feeling that this is one's first prayer should not disturb him/her. This point can be further illustrated through the example of the attitude of a professional lecturer. A professional lecturer is one who thinks of every lecture as if it is his/her first lecture which needs studying a lot before presentation. But simultaneously, this feeling should not turn him into a beginner who is worried about giving a lecture in front of a crowd.

To summarise, one may conclude that keeping awareness and attention along with the purity of intention are important factors for increasing the value of one's prayer and in evaluating a prayer, these factors are much more important than the parts of the prayer. What makes the prayer of the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) different from that of us is not the physical parts of it since we both do the same; rather it is his understanding and pure intention which distinguishes his prayer. The same is true with the prayers of Imam Ali (a) and other Imams (a). People may do the same thing, but depending on their understanding, the value is different.

In the battle of Ahzāb, 'Amr ibn 'Abd-i Wadd managed to cross the trench and challenged Muslims, everyone was frightened due to his excellent bravery in battlefields. It was Imam Ali (a) who asked the permission of the Noble Prophet (s) and went to the scene of the battlefield where he finished the threat by one strike. The Noble Prophet (s), as mentioned in the history, considered this strike as more precious than the worship of all jinns and human beings (ضربه على يوم الخندق افضل من عباده الثقلين)<sup>1</sup>. Such importance of this strike is not just because of strength of Imam Ali's enemy; rather, it is mainly because of his understanding and intention. He did not kill 'Amr ibn 'Abd-i Wadd in order for him to be praised by people.

<sup>1</sup> Sayyid ibn Tawus, *Iqbāl al-A'māl*, (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1390 A.H.), p. 467.



Thus, while intention is the most important aspect of the prayer, intention in its turn is evaluated based on one's awareness and understanding.

### **Bibliography**

Hurr 'Āmilī, Muhammad, *Wasā'il al-Shi'ah*, Qum: 1409 A.H, Ahlul-Bayt.

Ibn Ṭāwūs, Sayyid, *Iqbāl al-A'māl*, Tehran: 1367 S.A.H, Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyyah.

Kulayni, Muhamamd ibn Ya'qub, *Al-Kāfi*, Tehran: 1363 S.A.H, Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyyah, Fifth reprint.

Raḍīyy, Sayyid Muhammad, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Tehran: 1386 S.A.H, Daftar-e Nashr-e Farhang-e Islamī, 14<sup>th</sup> reprint.

