

BACKGROUND SALAH

Prayer in Islam is regarded by many Muslims as the most important of the practical pillars because its purpose is to ensure they come into direct contact with Allah regularly, at intervals throughout the day, so as to reinforce an awareness of the fundamentals of the Muslim faith – submission and obedience. This encourages a constant awareness of God or as Muslims would say, **taqwa**, meaning a respectful fearfulness (sometimes explained as God directed consciousness).

Salah is the term for prayer in Islam, but this term is usually specifically focussed on the ritual practice of five daily prayers. Salah involves practical features known as **rakahs**, sometimes translated as ‘movements’ or ‘units’. Each rakah is a set procedure, the most famous of which is **sujud** (prostration) whereby a Muslim is fully submitted and involves the forehead, nose, both hands, knees and all toes touching the ground together.

Prayer in Islam encourages a deliberate preparation or intention to contact Allah, it is not just spontaneous. It is this reason that prayer must be performed with ‘intention’ (**niyati**). Broadly speaking, this means the correct attitude and state of mind as one prostrates before the one true God. Humility and total outpouring of self to God are part and parcel of this act of submission.

Prayer must be performed in a state of purity. In ordinary circumstances, the ritual purification involves ablutions and is known as **wudu**. This is ‘minor ablution’ and includes washing the mouth, nose, ears, face and whole head and extend to arms, hands and finally feet.

In addition to Salah there are other types of prayer that have their own distinctive features and purpose.

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Muslims may offer personal prayers (**du'a**). The term literally means 'cry (of the heart)' and its purpose is to further reinforce the emotional bond established through Salah. Du'a usually follows after one of the set prayers although it does not have to. There are various types of du'as but they tend all to involve a personal petition of some sort. This petition can be, for example, asking for God to increase their faith or help them spiritually or it could also be, for example, asking for things pertaining to the world such as more children or greater wealth.

Many Muslims will carry and use **tasbeih** beads to remind themselves of the importance of prayer. Using the tasbeih beads they recite the 99 names of Allah to reinforce God directed consciousness constantly. Tasbeih usually translates as 'glory to God' and hence the purpose of this type of meditation on God is to praise and glorify.

Muslims are also encouraged to make **nafila** (extra voluntary prayers). Most nafila prayers are performed either before or after the daily prayers.

There is also a voluntary night prayer called **tahajjud**. The purpose is to confer extra benefit on the person performing these prayers as they not only draw a person closer to God, but also helps them to attain better success in the afterlife.

Jummah prayer on Friday is considered special and is often translated as 'congregational prayers. It is obligatory for all adult males to attend Friday prayers and is supported in the Qura'n 62:9-10. The practice of communal prayer on Fridays builds up a (religious) community. It signifies the unity of the Ummah and the essential equality therein. They are taken so seriously that after three weeks absence it is considered that a person has abandoned Islam.

For Sufi Muslims, '**wird**' is an approach to prayer through meditation and reciting of the Qur'an with the purpose of becoming closer spiritually to Allah. It can take many outward forms of expression by the Sufi devotee.