

Personal Hygiene (part 1 of 2): Cleanliness is Half of Faith

Description: The importance of personal hygiene in Islam.

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Muslims throughout the world have extremely high standards of personal hygiene, because Islam places great emphasis on both physical and spiritual, cleanliness and purification. While humankind in general usually considers cleanliness to be a pleasing attribute, Islam insists on it. Muslims are required to take care of their personal hygiene by assuring that they are well groomed, and that their bodies, clothing, and surroundings are clean. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, informed his companions and thus all of us, about the importance of cleanliness when he said, "**cleanliness is half of faith.**"^[1] The Quran is more specific and says,

"Truly, God loves those who turn unto Him in repentance and loves those who purify themselves." (Quran 2:222)

Personal hygiene is desirable at all times but certain aspects of personal hygiene are not only important but also compulsory. According to scholars, cleanliness is of three kinds, purification, or ritual washing in order to perform prayer; keeping the body, clothing, and environment clean; and specifically removing the dirt or grime that collects in the various parts of the body, such as teeth, nostrils, under the nails, in the armpits and around the pubic area.

Ritual Washing

The Arabic word for purity is *tahara* and it means to be free from filth, both spiritual and physical. Purity is the key to prayer. Spiritual *taharah* means being free from sin and idolatry and denotes believing in the Oneness of God. It is as important as physical cleanliness. Before a person stands before God in the special connection that is prayer, he must ensure that his heart is free from sin, arrogance, and hypocrisy. Once this is accomplished, or at least greatly desired, he is able to cleanse himself from physical impurities. This is usually achieved by using water.

"O you who believe! When you intend to offer the prayer, wash your faces and your hands (forearms) up to the elbows, wipe your heads, and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of Janaba (i.e. had a sexual discharge) purify yourself." (Quran 5:6)

Prior to obligatory or voluntary prayer a person must assure that he is in a state of cleanliness, he does this by performing either *wudu* (often translated as ablution) or *ghusl* (a full bath). *Wudu* rids the body of minor impurities, and *ghusl* cleanses the body of major impurities. *Ghusl* must be performed after sexual intercourse or any sexual activity

that releases bodily fluids. Ghusl is also performed at the completion of a woman's menstrual period or post partum bleeding.

Ritually cleansing the body by performing wudu includes washing the hands, rinsing the mouth and nose, washing the face, washing the arms up to the elbows, wiping the head (and beard), washing the ears, including behind the ears and washing the feet up to and including the ankle. A person does not have to repeat this ablution for every prayer unless he has broken his wudu by one of the following methods; urinating or defecating, breaking wind, eating camel meat, falling asleep while lying down, losing consciousness, directly touching the genital area or becoming sexually excited sufficiently to emit a discharge.

In the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, we are told that on the Day of Judgement those who complete a perfect wudu will be identifiable by the light shining from the areas washed in wudu.^[2] Prophet Muhammad also taught the believers to perform wudu in an environmentally friendly manner. Water was often scarce and he recommended using as little water as necessary to complete the wudu correctly. However, on certain occasions it was obligatory to take a full bath (ghusl), at which time water touches all parts of the body.

Under certain conditions, ritual purification can be achieved without water. This is called *tayammum*, or dry ablution. If water is not available in sufficient quantities, or if it would be dangerous to use water, for instance if a person was wounded or very ill, clean earth may be used instead. Tayammum is performed by striking the hands lightly over clean earth and then passing the palm of each hand on the back of the other, the dust is then blown off and the hands are passed across the face. These actions are performed instead of wudu or ghusl.

"...But if you are ill or on a journey or any of you comes from answering the call of nature, or you have been in contact with women (i.e. sexual intercourse) and you find no water, then perform Tayammum with clean earth and rub therewith your faces and hands. God does not want to place you in difficulty, but He wants to purify you, and to complete His Favour on you that you may be thankful." (Quran 5:6)

Although God expects those who worship Him to be ritually clean, He is Merciful and allows certain concessions. He (God) says in the **Quran (2:286)** that He does not burden a person beyond what he can bear. Thus, tayammum is one of the concessions as is wiping over the socks, headscarves, and turbans.

Islam is a holistic religion that takes into account humankind's need for a balance between physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Personal hygiene and cleanliness, both physical and spiritual, keeps both the body and mind free from disease. Cleanliness is an important part of the high standards and values that are inherent in Islam.

Endnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Muslim.*

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari.*

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