

Smiling, Anger and Mindfulness in Islam and their Connection to 21st Century Neuroscience (part 3 of 3): Mindfulness

Description: How the concept of *khushoo* can help cultivate mindfulness and make our lives more enjoyable and meaningful.

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Contrary to what many people believe mindfulness is not meditation. It is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. In the previous two articles, we discussed the latest findings on two of the traditions that Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, recommended to his followers; smiling and controlling anger. In this article, in light of the research on mindfulness, we are going to discuss Islam's version of mindfulness - *khushoo*, particularly *khushoo* in respect to the daily prayers.



Khushoo means concentration and humility in worship (particularly prayers) while wholeheartedly fighting away any distractions. To attain *khushoo* a person must be able to forget the world and be in the moment. One must be totally mindful that they are standing before God and engaged in worship of Him. If one is able to do this, they are then able to pray wholeheartedly and reap the rewards for doing so. They are also able to acquire traits that will hold them in good stead in their worldly lives.

Google says that mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. Other dictionaries define it as the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences.^[1] Mindfulness is both the current buzz word and a hot topic in western psychology. It is recognized as an effective way to reduce stress, enhance emotional intelligence and undermine destructive cognitive and behavioral processes.

Imagine if we could pray every prayer with a heightened awareness of what we are doing. In this day and age, it is easy to rush and be distracted by worldly affairs, the traffic, the milk you need to buy, the shirts you need to iron. We also know that each and

every one of us is distracted by the tricks of Satan, the whisperings known as *waswas*. Having *khushoo* or being mindful has been scientifically proven to be a crucial step for disentangling our minds from those ruminative thoughts.[2]

The word *waswas* comes from the Arabic word for delusion and means thoughts of doubt, apprehension or hesitation. It also covers the distractions that come to mind while a person is trying to concentrate on prayer, or trying to be mindful of the importance of the moment. Islamic scholars stress the importance of not giving into *waswas* and not letting it determine the quality of your prayer.

Prophet Muhammad said that whoever made ablution well and then prayed two units of prayer focusing on them completely without thinking of anything else will be forgiven all his previous sins[3], as long as they were not major sins[4]. Being mindful, being able to focus on the moment is a skill worth developing. There are numerous advantages attached to mindfulness both in this world and in preparation for the next.

Various studies in the past several years have concluded that mindfulness has numerous health benefits including increased immune function, positive cognitive effects, and the reduction of psychological stress.[5] In Islam, rewards are given according to the proportion of *khushoo*. Prophet Muhammad said that a person might pray but have nothing recorded of it except a tenth, or ninth or eighth and so forth[6]. His companion Ibn Abbas explained that meant a person will only have from his prayer that part on which he kept his focus.

In a 2007 study at the University of Toronto[7] new ground was broken in our understanding of mindfulness from a neuroscience perspective. Scientists discovered that people have two distinct ways of interacting with the world using two different sets of networks. One is called the default network and it is involved with planning, daydreaming, and ruminating. This network doesn't take much effort to operate. It is active most of the time. You take in information, interpret through a filter of everyday experiences and add your own interpretation.

Through this network a cool breeze isn't just a joyful experience; it is a sign that the weekend is nearly over, it reminds you of work tomorrow and taking the kids to school and packing lunches. It is the network that Satan takes advantage of, whispering this and that, and distracting you from worship.

There is however a whole different network, one of direct experience. When this direct experience network is activated, you are experiencing information coming into your senses in real time. Experiencing the world through the direct experience network allows you to get closer to the reality of any event.

People who practice mindfulness are able to notice the difference between the two networks and switch from one to the other. Thus practicing mindfulness means to bring awareness to the activities that you usually do on auto pilot. Many of us have been guilty of praying without a single thought about God or the prayer itself entering our heads. We recite the words and perform the actions and then congratulate ourselves for praying in the correct time frame. Mindfulness helps us to refocus our attention to the present

moment; to feel the action of raising our hands to begin the prayer and think about the moment we leave the world behind.

Muslims are able to begin each day on a high note by practicing mindfulness with the first prayer of the day. They are able to think about getting out of bed to thank God for another day, to follow that with an ablution in which they think about the washing away of sins and finally to pray with khushoo. This is the type of khushoo the companions of Prophet Muhammad struggled to have in their every prayer and every act of worship. Mindfulness or khushoo helps us to experience the prayer with all of our senses.

There is evidence to suggest that mindfulness can eventually become an effortless trait. If we try to be in the moment rather than trying to empty our minds of useless thoughts, we might find a way to experience the blissful nature of prayer. It may become our comfort as it was the comfort of Prophet Muhammad. He said to his companion; make the call to prayer so that we might be comforted by praying.[8] If we acquire the ability to have khushoo in all our prayers, we will have the ability to be mindful throughout our daily lives and thus be able to worship God in all that we do. When we examine khushoo, the state of mind all Muslims are required to strive for when worshipping God, we find that Muslims have been practicing mindfulness for a very long time. It is part of the structure of a daily life spent in the service of God. The wonderful scientific discoveries in the last two decades demonstrate to us that the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad are guides detailing how to live a worthwhile and content life even in the face of 21st century chaos.

Endnotes:

[1] (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mindfulness>)

[2] (<http://www.mindful.org/the-science-of-mindfulness/>)

[3] Saheeh Bukhari

[4] Saheeh Muslim

[5] (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/pst-48-2-198.pdf>)

[6] Imam Ahmad

[7] (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-brain-work/200910/the-neuroscience-mindfulness>)

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