

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

## Keeping it real in the Prayer

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It's probably one of our most common and indeed biggest individual problems that we face in our *salāh/namaz/prayer* every day and that is to actually know what you're doing, where you are, what you're saying, what's going on, feeling the presence and making it a *real* act of worship.

And by keeping it real, I mean keeping it **real**. Not false. Not a waste of time. Proper. Correct. Beneficial. Rewarding. Insha'Allāh.

There is not a single person on this planet that is safe from this *fitnah* and very effective tool of Shaytan and indeed weakness of our *nafs*: to mentally wander anywhere but within the domains of the prayer itself.

I was recently reading something beneficial on this subject from the late Shaykh al-'Uthaymīn (*rahimullāh*) who used to mention that one of the great benefits of utilising all the various different Sunnah *wird/du'ā/dhikr* that has been narrated from the Prophet (*sallallahu 'alayhi wa-sallam*) in the different parts of the prayer is that it leads to *hudhur al-qalb* i.e. makes your heart feel more alive and present in the moment.

This increased awareness and presence of the heart and thus the mind stems from changing our normative behaviour in any action, let alone the prayer. For example, when you stand for prayer and have made your *niyyah* and then say "*Allāhu Akbar*", the first thing that happens to all of us (except that lucky one upon whom is the mercy of Allāh) is that we go into cruise control.

We slip through the gears as if setting off from the traffic lights, into 2nd, then 3rd and into 4th, as natural as you like. We take the foot off the clutch with "*Subhanaka Allāhumma wa bihamdika...*" and then make *ta'awwudh*, and then slip into the *basmalah*, and then smoothly into *al-Fatihah* and then we slow down because there is a potential hazard in the road: the need to choose a *surah*.

So, we choose that *surah* and then let the car do the driving for you until...hold up...what's this? Oh, into *ruku'* we go, up again, yep, I know this route like the back of my hand...

And this really is the reality behind our prayers as they become the monotonous acts of ritualism they sadly turn into.

Except if we change it up a little here and there and start to feel more alive and with it.

There is only so much benefit that learning the meanings of what you're saying will bring you. There is only a limited amount of benefit that seeking refuge with Allāh from the whisperings of Shaytan will produce. There is only so much help that your *du'ās* for greater presence of mind will grant you.

The *one* thing that is really a great tool in your hand is the ability to mix it up, to utilise new supplications, to utilise the immense and beautiful variety that has been narrated in the tradition.

It's amazing when you say "*Allāhu Akbar*" at the beginning and automatically start "*Subhanaka Allāhumma wa bihamdika...*" and then suddenly you stop and say, "Hold on! I don't want to say that today. Actually, let's have a "*Allāhumma ba'id bayni wa bayna...*" for once."

Your presence of heart and mind during your new *du'ā* (or maybe your well-known *du'ā* but the first time you've used it today) will be incredible. Try it. And don't tell me how great it was. Been there, buzzed off it.

You see, the problem isn't just that "*Subhanaka Allāhumma wa bihamdika...*" becomes attached to the opening *takbeer*, but it's that "*Qul huwallāhu ahad...*" becomes attached to "*Ameen*" and "*Subhana Rabbiyal-'Adheem*" becomes attached to the *takbeer* of the *ruku'* and so on etc until the whole prayer just turns into a blur of fleeting moments and pauses, until possibly you pause for thought at the end of "*Innaka Hameedu'm-Majeed*" and suddenly think, "Right, what now?" and then you choose a *du'ā* if you're lucky (or you don't if you're an Asian and you just flow straight into "*Rabbana Aatina...*" or "*Rabbij-'Alnee...*") and then *salams* and then you think, "Wow. That's another *salāh* that bites the dust."

I won't patronise anyone here by saying this is unacceptable, because it isn't. It is totally unacceptable. And we have to find our own solutions. And fast.

So just as you found that a new *du'ā* for *istiftah* (when you say “*Subhanaka Allāhumma wa bihamdika...*”) was great for waking you up in the prayer, try some of the following:

1. Change the position of your hands slightly, a little bit up or a little bit down. Physical changes like this, within the range of legislated acceptability, have a marked effect on ones mental state as well.
2. Change the exact height of where you raise your hands to whilst making the opening *takbeer*, i.e. from your thumbs being level with your ears or touching them, to the finger tips being level with the ears instead. Both are acceptable and authentic derived understandings.
3. If you're struggling learning some *new Istiftah du'ās*, leave out your current *Istiftah* on a very rare occasion, just to show yourself that it is not an obligation and shock you into a change of routine, and also to instill its importance in you the next time you recite it and realise how beautiful a wisdom it is to be able to praise Allāh in the most excellent manner before you are about to beg Him for salvation in *al-Fatihah*.
4. Change the *ta'awwudh/isti'adha* (saying “*A'udhu billahi...*”) by seeking refuge from the additional tricks of Shaytan.
5. Learn a different *qira'ah* (such as *Warsh, Qalun*) of *al-Fatihah*.
6. Study a *tafseer* of *al-Faithah*. You'll wish you never recited anything else in the prayer after that.
7. Learn some new *surahs*, and chop and change regularly. Practise the new ones in the prayer as well, knowing that you can always fall back on something you know if you get stuck.
8. Instead of saying *takbeer* and going down for *ruku'*, stop. Add another *surah* to the one you just recited. Which one? Any one, especially *al-Ikhlās* but others are ok too.
9. Just getting into your rapid threesome of “*Subhana Rabbiyal-'Adheem*”? Well, make it a single for the sake of reminding yourself that only once is an obligation. In the next *ruku'*, make it a 9 or 11. Sorry - those numbers have been politically imprinted on my heart so that my whole *Deen* must revolve round them right?

10. Add a bit of spice. The *du'ās* for the *ruku'* are many, and although not taking the place of “*Subhana Rabbiyal-'Adheem*”, they make a great addition such as “*Subbuhun, Quddusun...*”

11. In your standing position again, change your *du'ā* a bit, add a bit as well and make it a nice long standing of contemplation as you praise Allāh ‘azza wa jall with “*Mil-assamawati...*”

12. The next time you get up from *ruku'*, go straight down with no time wasted. You'll appreciate the previous time more and you'll look forward to using your new *du'ā* again next time.

13. Well, now that you're all the way down here, you might as well add some new *du'ā* and *dhikr* in your prostration. There are loads to choose from - its open house down here minus the reciting of the Qur'ān.

14. And open house means your own personal *du'ās*. Plenty of it. And here's a gift from my school and their scholars: whilst you're learning the Arabic equivalent, you can make your personal supplication in your own language so that you can really feel the moment. Don't over abuse this though because you'll just get greedy!

15. Whilst sitting between the two *sajdahs*, try learning one or two supplications for this position.

16. Back into the next *sajdah*, why don't you do the exact opposite of what you did in the first one - make it long and personal if it was a quick one first time, or do the opposite. At least you'll know where you are and your prayer will be anything but monotonous.

17. The *Tashahhud* has also got various versions that can help bring it to life. Learn them.

18. You see that finger? Use it. If you don't believe in moving it all the way from the beginning, make sure you take great spiritual strength from the very moment you do when you declare that there is nothing worthy of worship except Allāh. Feel it. Live that witnessing, and don't let it just be a flick of the finger.

19. And if you *do* have a trigger finger then use it to good effect as the scholars would mention, using it to make supplication with and making sure that it keeps Shaytan at bay. Concentrate and focus on that finger as it flows your spiritual energy and words into a physical servitude of itself to its Lord.

20. The sending of salutations upon our Prophet (*sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) should be a great moment, not just because we can change the versions between those authentically narrated but also because those who are too lazy or forgetful to do this outside the prayer, have a real opportunity to focus and pick up a **bargain** right here during your obligatory prayer. May Allāh grant our beloved Messenger the very highest station in Paradise, *ameen!*

21. You want to change the ritual? You've come to the right place folks. The moments just before the *salam*-giving is a treasure trove for those who know how to dig. Utilise this moment to express yourself with a **huge variety of *du'ā* and *dhikr***, even that which you'd normally say outside the prayer - bring them in from the cold and let them give you company in your nice and warm house!

22. You need *more* ways on how to chop and change in the prayer?! Give over!

This list really could go on and on, but the point is that although we might know all these variations and versions of *du'ā*, know all of Shaytan's armoury, know how much we like to wander in the prayer, know how easy it is to fall into the routine and get the job over and done with - although we know all this, we all need to increase our presence of mind in the prayer and these are just some suggestions to help us all do that insha'Allāh.

And if you think you've benefitted from this little piece, then spare a thought for the immense grief we suffered and great loss to myself and thousands of other students when perhaps one of the greatest teachers in modern times, Shaykh Muhammad b. Salih al-'Uthaymin passed away in January 2001 and left us nothing but his wisdom through the writings of his students, may Allāh have mercy upon him and grant him *al-Firdaws*.

Ameen.