

Dua in Islamic Teachings, Part I

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Dua is one of the very important notions in the Quran, which is very difficult to translate. Equivalents like praying, calling, or supplicating do not precisely convey the profound meaning of this word, so in this article we will just use the term *dua* and will gradually explain its meaning. We will also discuss the different types of *dua* and how we can improve our *duas* to increase the possibility of their being answered by God.

Let us first discuss the significance of *dua* according to the Quran and *hadith* and then analyze its concept.

The Quran 40:60 reads,

وَ قَالَ رَبُّكُمْ اِدْعُونِي اَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ

In this famous verse, the Quran has a message for us from the One who is your Lord, the One who knows what you need, what suits you, and what can develop you, says. “Call me! I will answer” (Quran 40:60)

Note that the verse mentions, “call me!” not necessarily “ask me!” We usually think that *dua* means asking, but it does not necessarily involve requesting. It is a broader concept that includes all kinds of calling.

For us as the servants of God, the most important thing is to be able to communicate and be connected to our Lord. Not only can we not survive without God, but we cannot survive without being connected to Him.

Suppose God is there, but He says, “I don’t want to talk or listen to you or have anything to do with you.” As God’s servants, we cannot survive without His mercy and grace. Think about a little child, for whom it would be a great punishment, if his father or mother said, “I won’t speak to you anymore.” In their early years, children have no sense of independence. This is why it is mentioned in *hadiths* that whenever you promise your children, keep your promise, because they look at you as their lords who give them their sustenance.¹ You are their only hope, so never disappoint your children.

So just as it is a great punishment for a small child to hear from his parents that they do not want to talk to him, for a person who realizes his total dependence on God, it would be a severe punishment if God did not pay attention to Him. This is why Imam Ali (a) in *Dua Kumayl* says,

هَبْنِي صَبْرْتُ عَلَىٰ عَذَابِكَ فَكَيْفَ أَصْبِرُ عَنِ النَّظَرِ إِلَىٰ كِرَامَتِكَ

The Imam (a) is saying, “Suppose that I can be patient, that I can tolerate your punishment, how can I be patient with being deprived of beholding your magnanimity?” If supposedly I can endure remaining in Hellfire, how can I stand being far from you and your love and attention? For the person who understands that he is totally dependent on God, the main thing is to keep the line of communication with Him open. So the fact that God says, “Call me! I will answer” (Quran 40:60) means “You can call Me during the day or night, on weekdays or weekend; any time you call Me, I am available.” Although, as the Lord, He can set different conditions and say, “If you want to call Me, you must call Me in such a time or place, with such and such conditions,” He is so kind that He just says, “Call me! No matter when or where, I will answer to you.” Of course, He also expects us to answer Him whenever He calls us:

¹ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 6, p. 50. The original text is Arabic reads as follows:

عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ ع قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ص أَحِبُّوا الصِّبْيَانَ وَارْحَمُوهُمْ وَإِذَا وَعَدْتُمُوهُمْ شَيْئاً فَفُوا لَهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ لَا يَدْرُونَ إِلَّا أَنَّكُمْ تَرَزُّوْنَهُمْ

There is a similar hadith which says: “Be kind to your children and do good to them, because they think that you are their sustainers” (*Mustdarak al-Wasa'il*, vol. 15, p. 171). The Arabic text is as follows:

فَفِيهِ الرِّضَا عَ أَرْوِي عَنِ الْعَالِمِ ع أَنَّهُ قَالَ لِرَجُلٍ أ لَكَ وَالِدَانِ فَقَالَ لَا فَقَالَ أ لَكَ وَلَدٌ فَقَالَ نَعَمْ قَالَ لَهُ بَرِّ وَوَلَدَكَ يُحْسَبُ لَكَ بَرٌّ وَالِدَيْكَ وَ رُوِيَ أَنَّهُ قَالَ بَرُّوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ وَ أَحْسِنُوا إِلَيْهِمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّكُمْ تَرَزُّوْنَهُمْ

O you who have faith! Answer Allah and the Apostle when he summons you to that which will give you life. Know that Allah intervenes between a man and his heart and that toward Him you will be mustered. (Quran 8:24)

Unfortunately, we set different conditions for our response to God's call; we say, "I will become a practicing Muslim after I finish my university, after I marry, after I have children, or after I get a stable job. Let me now enjoy myself a little bit and then later when I get old, I'll accept."

After inviting us to call Him, God says,

Truly those who refuse to worship me they will enter hell while they are humiliated. (Quran 40:60)

One may ask, "What is the relation between worshipping God and calling Him?" The answer is that, according to above-mentioned verse, calling God is worshipping him. This idea has been stated in Islamic traditions as well:

- *Dua* is 'ibadah.¹ (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:467)
- *Dua* is the core of 'ibadah.² ('Amili 1988, 7:28)
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When we realize what is the meaning of *dua*, we see that worshipping God is not possible without *dua*.

The above verse tells us also about the fate of those who refuse to worship God out of arrogance: "they will enter hell while they are humiliated" (Quran 40:60). Their arrogance in the Hereafter manifests itself in humiliation. This is very beautiful point, because the Hereafter is where the hidden realities become manifest, and the reality of arrogance before God is nothing but meanness and dishonor.

Hence the verse shows the significance of *dua*: the *dua* of those who really call God is answered, *dua* is 'ibadah, and we should not feel arrogant with

¹ فَإِنَّ الدُّعَاءَ هُوَ الْعِبَادَةُ

² الدُّعَاءُ مَخُّ الْعِبَادَةِ

respect to calling God, because it will lead to our dishonor and make us lose our eternal happiness.

Another verse is Quran 25:77, which is very moving:

Say, "My Lord would not care for you were it not for your prayer."

Had it not been for our *dua*, God would not pay attention to us. True that God is so kind and merciful, but this is a law, which no one can change. Two plus two equals four; Just as it is impossible to ask God to make it equal to five by his mercy, it's impossible to grow spiritually without *dua*. Although God pays attention in this world to everyone, believers and non-believers, regarding their physical needs, if one seeks the attention, support, care, and guidance of God for his spiritual growth, he has no way other than resorting to *dua*.

We have many *hadiths* about *dua*, its conditions, and etiquettes. Also, the Ahl al-Bayt (a) have taught us several *duas* to recite in different occasions. Below, we will briefly discuss these *hadiths*:

It is reported that Imam Baqir (a), commenting on Quran 40:60, said. "This [i.e. the worshiping mentioned in the verse] is *dua*, and the best type of worship is *Dua*."

In another *hadith* the Imam (a) was asked, "What type of worship is the best?" The Imam said, "There is no worshipping like asking and requesting God what He has" (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:466). Sometimes people ask if it is good to ask God for worldly things. The answer is yes! We should ask Him for anything we need. Of course, it is not good to ask Him only for worldly things; it is not good either to ask for worldly things more than the Hereafter; we have to maintain balance, but we should never be shy to ask God what we need. It is reported that God said to Prophet Moses (a) to ask Him even for the salt of his food, and along the same lines Imam Baqir (a) says that there is nothing better in the sight of God than asking Him for what He has.

In another *hadith*, Imam Sadiq (p) says to Muyassar,

O Muyassar! Pray to God, and do not say things are already decided. Verily, there is a station with God Almighty that cannot be reached except by asking. If a servant shut his mouth and did not ask, he would not be given anything. Ask so that you will be given. O Muyassar! There is no door that is knocked on except that its owner will likely open it. (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:466-7)

We should never think that it is too late to ask God and that He must have already decided things, but always take the opportunity to pray and ask. There is a station with God that one cannot reach except by *dua*, except by asking. Even if what one asks for was not given to him for some reason, what he achieves through asking is more important. Asking is not merely a means to achieving things; it is itself an end.

There is another chapter in the same section of *al-Kafi* entitled “*Dua* is the Weapon of the Believer” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:467). But why do we need a weapon? Because we are all involved in a battle with Satan and the carnal soul, which is our worst enemy;

Your most hostile enemy is your [carnal] soul, which is between your two sides. (Majlisi 1403AH, 76:64)

This is because without the help of our carnal souls, Satan cannot do anything. Now, since we are in a battle, we need to be equipped with weapons. According to the *hadiths*, our main weapon is *dua*; *dua* is the weapon of the believer and the mosque is the best place to fight Satan, because he is very weak in the mosques; this is why we have the *mibrab* in the mosque; the *mibrab* is the place of *harb* (fight), *harb* against Satan, ignorance, and bad habits. And the imam of the mosque is the leader and commander in this battle. In that chapter of *al-Kafi*, there are several *hadiths*; one from Imam Sadiq (a) reads,

The Messenger of God (s) said, “*Dua* is the weapon of the believer, the pillar of faith, and the light of the heavens and the earth.” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:468)

This is a weapon which is easy to get and use. One just needs to appreciate that God has given him the ability to do *dua* any time, free of charge. Do not say, “I did *dua* last year!” You need a weapon today, a modern weapon. Always keep it fresh and updated! *Dua* is the pillar of faith. Even *salat* is a kind of *dua*. *Dua* is to reflect the light of God. *Dua* is not only related to human beings; everything in this world is doing *dua*. Birds are doing *dua*; they are performing *salat*:

Have you not regarded that Allah is glorified by everyone in the heavens and the earth, and the birds spreading their wings. Each knows his prayer and glorification, and Allah knows best what they do. (Quran 24:41)

God is “the light of the heavens and the earth” (Quran 24:35), and, according to the above *hadith*, *dua* is also “the light of the heavens and the earth”. This is because, as was already mentioned, God is the source of light, and *dua* is like a mirror that reflects.

In another *hadith*, Imam Ali (a) says,

Dua provides the keys to success and the keys to happiness (salvation). The best *dua* is that which comes from a clean and pure heart. (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:468)

According to this *hadith*, *dua* is not just a key (singular) to success, but provides the “keys” to success. This means that there is more than one key to success. If one wants to be more successful, he has to increase his prayers to God. *Dua* is also the key to happiness. The best *dua* is the *dua* which comes from a clean and pure heart, because it is through the heart that one connects to God. The mind is just for theoretical knowledge. Perhaps someone knows in his mind that God exists, but he is still not a believer. The place of belief and disbelief is the heart,¹ and for *dua* we need to have a pure heart.

In another *hadith* we read,

¹ It is obvious that what is meant here by heart is not the physical heart.

The Prophet (s) said, “Shall I guide you to a weapon that saves you from your enemies and increases your sustenance?” They replied, “Yes.” The Prophet (s) said, “Pray to your Lord day and night; indeed, the weapon of the believer is praying.” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:468)

Note that the Prophet (s) does not say, “Shall I guide you to a weapon that *destroys* your enemies”; He says “a weapon that *saves* you from your enemies.” We need a weapon to save ourselves. We do not want to harm anyone; what we want is to be protected. If you would like to receive your sustenance, if you seek protection, you need a weapon. The Prophet (s) teaches that this weapon is praying to our Lord day and night.

In another *hadith*, it is mentioned that

Imam Rida (a) used to say to his companions, “Make use of the weapon of the Prophets.” Someone asked, “What is the weapon of the Prophets?” The Imam replied, “*Dua*.” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:468).

Imam Sadiq (a) is also reported to have said,

Dua is more effective than a steel-tipped spear.” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:469)

Another chapter in *al-Kafi* is about the power of *dua* to change the *qada'* (divine decree). We know that when something is going to happen, certain conditions must already have been met. For instance, if we want to heat a room, we should have fire, dry wood, and oxygen. Otherwise, we cannot have fire.

Sometimes everything is ready for a tragedy to happen, but *dua* comes in the last moment and prevents that tragedy. In the beautiful story of Prophet Yunus, we read that he left his people when he was disappointed at them and saw the signs of the coming of the divine punishment:

And the Man of the Fish, when he left in a rage, thinking that We would not put him to hardship. Then he cried out

in the darkness, “There is no god except You! You are immaculate! I have indeed been among the wrongdoers.”
(Quran 21:87)

The divine punishment was coming, and he saw its signs and thus left the people. When he left, one learned person from those people said, “I am sure that the chastisement is coming. We have only one way to save ourselves, and that is doing *dua*, and asking God for forgiveness.” The people listened to him and thus the punishment was prevented. About this, the Quran says,

Why has there not been any town that might believe, so that its belief might benefit it, except the people of Jonah? When they believed, We removed from them the punishment of disgrace in the life of this world, and We provided for them for a while. (Quran 10:98)

Although the punishment was about to take place and its signs had appeared, they were saved from it because of their *duas* to God. So *dua* is so powerful that it can change the divine decree; It is so effective that, according to some *hadiths*, it can change what is decided in the *Laylat al-Qadr*. So we should never lose hope; it is never too late for doing *dua*.

The following *hadith* from Imam Sadiq (a) reads,

Dua stops the divine decree (*qada'*) after it comes down from heaven and is firmly determined. (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:469)

In a similar *hadith*, Imam Sajjad (a) said,

Indeed, the *dua* prevents a calamity after it is firmly determined. (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:269)

Prophet Ibrahim (a) very much wanted to have children; he prayed for many years and finally his *dua* was fulfilled. He was not only given two noble sons, Isaac and Ishmael, but also it was from among his descendants that the later Prophets were chosen. All of our Imams are also the progeny of Ibrahim (a).

This is the power of *dua*. If Ibrahim (a) had stopped doing *dua*, if he had lost his hope, he would have been deprived of this honor.

Prophet Zachariah (a) did not have a child either, but he kept praying and God gave him Yahya (John) (a). Zachariah himself was surprised by this:

He said, ‘My Lord! Indeed my bones have become feeble, and my head has turned white with age, yet never have I, my Lord, been disappointed in supplicating You! (Quran 19:4).

This is the power of *dua*, which makes such miracles possible.

There is another *hadith* in which Zurarah, a close companion of Imam Baqir (a) and Imam Sadiq (a), says,

Imam Baqir (a) told me, “Shall I guide you to something to which the Prophet (s) did not make any exception?”¹ I said, “Yes!” The Imam said, “*Dua* can push back the divine decree (*qada’*) after it is finally determined.” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:470)

Therefore, *dua* should not be something marginal in our lives; rather, it should be one of our main deeds, as it is the source of our power, the core of our worship, and the way that we can connect to our Lord.

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¹ Or alternatively, “something about which the Prophet (s) did not say ‘if God will.’” Based on this reading, the *hadith* points to the absolute effectiveness of *dua*.

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