

Core Curriculum

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3 Foundations of Islam - Obligatory Acts

3.1

Accepting Islam: Putting Faith into Action

Islam is not a JUST a noun, it is a verb. This means that Islam is not just a belief, but an ongoing activity. Worship of God in Islam is a state of mind, and beliefs and actions are what produce states of mind. Being a Muslim is therefore not a private belief, but a **constitutive activity in the world.**

When we talk about putting faith into action in Islam, **this is not an option.** It is not a choice where one chooses to do it or not, it is an obligation that is made directly by God upon humankind.

If a person has to abstain from pork or alcohol, and has to pray five times a day and fast during the holy month of Ramadan, he or she cannot exercise choice and decide not to do it. If one fails to do so, then he or she has disobeyed God, broken the covenant and fallen into a sinful state.

Obligations also help maintain a healthy believing community. Islam establishes a series of obligations between all humans, including men, women, adults, children, Muslim and non-Muslim, all so that there may be a proper equilibrium. A healthy community (both spiritually and materially) is where a healthy spiritual heart grows.

Action also proves one's faith. It is when God gives us a series of obligations to

fulfill, which, when we fulfill them, our devotion to Him is proven. It is thus in the realm of action that a real Muslim and a real believer stands out.

3.2

Jihād in Islamic Law and Spirituality

Jihad literally means struggle. In Islam it means to struggle for the sake of Allah. This can be done in two ways. The first way is through something we call the “Minor Jihad” and the second way is what we call the “Major Jihad”.

The minor Jihad is when an aggressing army attacks you, or your village or town is invaded and you defend yourself.

The second form of Jihad is called the Major Jihad or al-Jihād al-Akbar. According to the Prophet Muhammad (s), this is the most difficult kind of jihad because it is a fight against your deepest desires.

this jihad is a struggle between 1) the divine and angelic powers that we have inside us which command us to the good and 2) the satanic forces that want us to follow our bad desires.

How does one win this battle though? It sounds like a pretty tough struggle. Remember we had a specific discussion on the nafs previously. Winning this inner battle means winning against our bad habits and developing new and good ones. The more we get used to saying no to our bad desires, the stronger our will becomes and the easier it becomes to say “no” to them overtime. But if we are constantly submitting to whatever desires our evil selves push us to, we will get used to that and over time, it will get harder and harder to say no to the bad desires.

3.3

Salāt: Obligatory Ritual Prayers in Islam

When we talk about salāt in the furū‘ al-dīn we are talking about the five obligatory ritual prayers in Islam which all Muslims must believe in.

The times of these prayers are not static but dynamic as they follow the

movement of the sun.

The first prayer is the morning prayer. In Arabic it is called *salāt al-fajr* and it begins at dawn.

The second prayer begins at noon and is called *salāt al-dhuhur*,

the third is the afternoon prayer and it is called *salāt al-‘asr*,

the fourth praying is the sunset prayer called *salāt al-maghrib*

and finally, the last prayer is called *salāt al-‘ishā* which is the night-time prayer.

Each prayer has units called *rak‘ats* where you bow with your hands on your knees. The total amount of times a Muslim must do this is 17 times across 5 prayers throughout the day.

Salāt is the foundation of religion. Without it, none of Islam’s other practices or beliefs will stand. We say this because *salāt* is what establishes our relationship with God.

Prayer is the only ritual in Islam that a person cannot be free from. One may be relieved from fasting, or Hajj, or any other ritual, but with prayer one may not do away with it as long as one is conscious, sane and reached puberty.

3.4

Ritual Purity in Islamic Law: Understanding Tahāra and Najāsa

If a Muslim wants his or her prayer, fasting or Hajj to be valid, then he or she must be in a state of ritual purity before performing those actions. In other words, one must be *tāhir*. To ritually purify oneself, one can do one of three things, perform *wudū* (minor ablution), *ghusl* (major ablution) or *tayamum* (purification through the use of earth or dust).

A common misunderstanding about *tahāra* and *najāsa* is equating the terms with cleanliness and dirtiness. But this is incorrect. *Tahāra* and *najāsa* refer to ritual

purity and impurity, meaning that they are pure or impure within the context of religious rituals. For example, items that are najis or ritually impure include pigs, dogs, blood, semen, or feces among many other things. But this does not mean they are necessarily dirty. A pig or a dog may be given a bath and thus be considered clean in the conventional sense but still ritually impure.

This distinction is really important to understand because often enough, it is used as a point to attack Islam. For example, a woman who is in her menses or who just gave birth will be required at some time to perform ghusl if she wants to pray again. But some people mistakenly interpret this as a form of sexism where they think that women's biology is dirty according to Islam. They forget that men can also enter states of ritual impurity, like when they discharge semen. So these kinds of ignorant statements should be discarded because 1) both genders have states of ritual impurity and 2) ritual impurity does not necessarily mean dirty!

3.5

The Five Categories of Islamic Law

Every single action we do, or situation we put ourselves in will affect our souls for the good or for the bad.

In order to nurture us, God has set five categories in the Sharī'a (or Islamic law) to guide our spiritual lives.

1. Wājib: Obligatory or necessary, like fasting.
2. Mustahab: A recommended act. You don't have to do it, but if you do it, you will get rewards.
3. Mubāh: Neutral act, like drinking water regularly.
4. Makrūh: Hated act, but if you do it, you won't be sinful.
5. Haram: forbidden act. If you do it, you are sinning.

Remember that all of these acts are subject to change depending on conditions. Something may be wājib like fasting, however, if it becomes dangerous for your health, then it becomes haram on you. The same thing does for a mustahab act. If a mustahab act impedes on your wājib acts, then the mustahab act becomes

impermissible for you to do.

Something may be harām for us, but under certain conditions it may become wājib. For example, if you're stuck in a desert and you have nothing to eat and drink except for wine and pork and you see that you may die from hunger and thirst, then it becomes wājib on you to drink wine and eat pork!

3.6

Tawalla and Tabarra, its Basics and Purpose

The last two elements of the the furū' al-dīn are called tawalla and tabarra. Tawalla is to love and follow Allah, the Prophet Muhammad (s) and his Ahl al-Bayt. Tabarra means to disassociate from people who are against Allah, the Messenger of Allah and his Ahl al-Bayt (as).

Tawalla and tabarra are what ground us in our religious lives. They provide for us the guiding platform and gauging basis of our actions, including Commanding the Good and Forbidding Evil.

What is tawalla? Tawalla comes from the root word walā' in Arabic which means friendship and allegiance. Tawalla is therefore a form of love, friendship and allegiance one has towards the Prophet (s) and his Ahl al-Bayt (as). But it doesn't stop there!

Tawalla is an umbrella term, meaning that this love and friendship is also inclusive of people who also love the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt (as). So this means that we should love people who love the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt.

The word tabarra comes from the word barā'a which means to free oneself or disassociate oneself from something. Tabarra thus means to disassociate from people who hate the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt.

3.7

The Purpose of Zakat and Khums in Islamic Law

Zakat in the furū‘ al-dīn is an obligatory form of charity. Just as salāt is an obligation we have towards God, zakat in a way is an obligation that we have towards God’s creation.

It is obligatory because it is a right that the poor have on those who are more fortunate. In other words, zakat is principally designed to help those who suffer from severe poverty. Zakat is also there to help people free themselves from slavery, or those who cannot provide for themselves because they are drowning in debt.

Zakat cannot be paid with modern currencies in Islamic law as taught by the Prophet Muhammad (s) and his Ahl al-Bayt (as). Zakat is usually paid from tangible items from one’s “sitting” assets like gold or silver. Other items may include wheat and barley, and also live stock like camels, cows and sheep. One usually pays 2.5% from this income.

As zakat is generally geared towards helping the poor, khums (which literally means 1/5th) is generally geared towards helping Muslim institutions. Indeed, khums may be used to help the poor and the less fortunate, but it is more expansive and for this reason, its tax rate is higher.

Khums was originally meant to be offered to the Messenger of Allah (s) or an Infallible Imām. Since our last Imām is in occultation, Islamic law permits Muslims to pay their khums to a just marja‘ (a high ranking scholar of law that is a source of legal emulation) or legitimate Muslim organization that collects on behalf of a scholar.

The money gained from khums today is what funds Mosques and their respective programs, Islamic schools, live religious events, feeding the community during special religious days, paying the salary of a resident ‘ālim, etc.

3.8

The Hajj Pilgrimage

The word Hajj literally means “pilgrimage”. Thhe Hajj season begins in the last

month of the Islamic calendar. This month is called Dhū al-Hijjah and it begins on the 8th of the month and ends on the 12th. The ninth day of the month is called the Day of Arafah. This is the central day of the Hajj and is the day where everyone must perform the Hajj rituals.

The Hajj is the largest annual gathering of people on earth. It is also the world's largest pilgrimage. During the week of Hajj, Muslims perform a series of rituals. Among these rituals, Muslims walk counter-clockwise around the Ka'ba seven times.

The Hajj pilgrimage was made obligatory upon Muslims during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (s). The pilgrimage itself, however, goes back as far as the time of the Prophet Abraham (as). In Islamic history, God wanted to create a new center for His community of believers in an ancient location called Mecca.

The Hajj, aside its ritual significance, is meant to establish a universal brotherhood and sisterhood of equality among all Muslims in the Islamic community. It is meant to bring people together as Muslims irrespective of their cultural, tribal or national loyalties.

3.9

The Furū' al-Dīn: The Fundamental Practices of Islam

Furū' al-dīn literally means the "branches of religion". Just like the roots feed a tree and keep it alive, branches, along with their leaves, also nourish the roots in return. The furū' al-dīn are ten: ṣalāt, siyam, Hajj, Zakāt, Khums, Jihad, Commanding the Good, Forbidding Evil, Tawallā and finally Tabarra.

Ṣalāt: obligatory five daily prayers.

Siyam: fasting during the Holy month of Ramadān. One must abstain from food, intimate relations, drink, smoking, as well as sins like gossiping.

Hajj: The pilgrimage that every capable Muslim must make to the Holy Kaba in the city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

Zakāt: Tax which eligible Muslims must pay to the poor.

Khums: a one-fifth tax of one's sitting income in addition to other forms of income. It is there to help fund religious institutions.

Jihad: Struggling in the path of God, both in fighting one's egoic self that commands evil, as well as defending one's locality from aggressors.

Commanding the Good and Forbidding Evil: Encouraging what God has established as the good and discouraging people from what is evil.

Tawalla and Tabarra: Loving the Prophet Muhammad (s) and his Ahl al-Bayt (as) and disassociating from their enemies.

3.10

Fasting in Islam, its Purpose, Dos and Don'ts

The ultimate purpose of fasting is to instill God consciousness (taqwā) in human beings.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan is obligatory on all adult and sane Muslims. The month of Ramadan is the month that the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (s). According to the Prophet (s), the month of Ramadan is where the demons or shayātīn are restrained and Muslims are allowed to grow spiritually at an accelerated rate. It is where sins are forgiven, and prayers receive more rewards than they usually do.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan must begin with the intention or niyya of fasting. Before dawn, one wakes up for suhūr or the predawn breakfast. This ensures that a person can function during the day. Iftār on the other hand is when a person breaks his or her fast at sundown or sunset.

Fasting is recommended on most days of the year when desires become overwhelming. Fasting helps tame these desires.

One cannot fast anytime one wants. There are times when fasting is prohibited.

Fasting is prohibited when it seriously endangers a person's health, or when a person travels or when it is the Day of Ashura.

3.11

Other Obligatory and Forbidden Acts in Islam

he furū' al-dīn are the platform of Islamic law. This does not mean that they are the entirety of the law. Just because prayer or salāt may be the most important ritual practice of Islamic law, it does not mean that other practices are unimportant. Every aspect of Islam plays a specific role.

Think of it as a bunch of pillars in a building. Every pillar plays a critical role in upholding a building. Yes, some pillars may be bigger than the others, but they are all important in their own way. Here is a small list of other obligatory and forbidden acts in Islam:

Marriage can be wājib: If a person is afraid that by staying single, he or she will fall into sin, then marriage becomes obligatory. Remember that marriage is one of the most important foundations of the Islamic community's salvation in the Hereafter since it protects them from zina.

Zina is forbidden in Islam. It is one of the major sins (kabā'ir, sing. kabīra). Zina is illicit intercourse in Islam between a man and a woman. Usually zina either takes place between two unmarried people, or takes place as a form of adultery. Zina carries a heavy penalty in Islam as it risks the health of the Muslim ummah by undermining the sanctity of marriage. According to Islam, marriage is the best institution for raising spiritually healthy children. Without marriage, the future of the next generation is put in danger.

Drinking alcohol or taking drugs is haram in Islam. Drinking alcohol is also a kabīra and is punishable in Islam. Alcohol is often the source of many of society's crimes and family breakdown. But in Islam, alcohol's worst effect is on a person's soul, spirit and heart. It is detrimental to a person's spiritual health for it opens the gates for Shaytān.

3.12

Niyya: Religious Intention as the Foundation of Islamic Practice

The pivot which centers the purpose of all of our actions and beliefs in Islam is

something called niyya. Niyya is the intention we have behind any religious act that we do as Muslims. What we would call a “good” niyya would be a something we do for Allah’s sake alone and not for someone or something else. In other words, as the Prophet Muhammad (s) and his Ahl al-Bayt (as) have taught us, a good niyya is a means for Qurbatan illa-Allāh.

Qurbatan illa-Allāh means “to seek closeness to Allah.” So when you do an action, your niyya may be considered good if your sole intention is to be closer to God. If you’re performing a religious act for the sake of something or someone other than Allah, then you’re in trouble!

So it’s pretty simple to see that the intentions we have behind the things we do really determines whether or not we’ve actually sinned, or if we’ve done something that will help our salvation and the salvation of the Muslim ummah.

If you do something for God’s sake, you will get your rewards. If you don’t, you won’t get them. But there is more. Sometimes we make honest mistakes, like accidentally eating pork. If our intention or niyya was not to sin, then Allah will not take us to task for that sin. So what does this tell us? Niyya isn’t something that you just say before you do something, niyya is a state of the heart, it is your heart and soul's intention.

3.13

Commanding the Good and Forbidding Evil in Islam

The 7th and 8th items of the Furū‘ al-Dīn are called Commanding the Good (Amr bi al-Ma‘rūf) and Forbidding Evil (Nahī ‘an al-Munkar).

Commanding the Good and Forbidding Evil are important social duties in Islam.

Through the Prophet Muhammad (s) and the Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), God has taught us what is good and what is bad. First we need to apply them to ourselves. Second, we need to apply them to others by educating them and encouraging them to do good and discouraging them from doing evil.

If you see someone not praying, try encouraging them to pray. If you see

someone lying, try teaching them that lying is bad.

If the Ummah is healthy, we ourselves have a better chance at finding salvation. Think about it this way, will you or your kids be able to lead a healthy spiritual life in a sinful environment? It's very hard to do so!

Commanding the Good and Forbidding Evil only has value if it is done for the sake of Allah.