

Dua in Islamic Teachings, Part 2

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In the first part, we studied the significance of dua. Based on Islamic narrations, dua was introduced as “the core of worshipping God” and “the weapon of believers.” We saw that dua is a powerful means by which one can change one’s destiny, the destiny of one’s family and even of one’s community.

It is never too late to supplicate. No one should fail to supplicate because he thinks that his destiny is already decided; dua can change the decree (qad) which has been made firm and final. In this part, we are going to study the very notion of dua and see whether dua is to request something from God or to call God even without making any request. We will also study different types of dua.

What is Dua?

There are several verses in the Quran about dua. There is also rich hadith literature on dua from Prophet Muhammad (s) and his household. Numerous books have been written on dua. This is in addition to countless books that have chapters or sections on dua. For example, many books on akhlaq (ethics) and Quranic commentaries include discussions about dua.

However, Islam is so deep and so comprehensive that there is always a chance for new research and new insights. One area of research which is very important and, I believe, still needs to be scholarly

pursued is dua. In this article, we will try to answer the following questions: Is dua asking God for something, or is it to speak to God and to call Him? Is dua to remember God? Is it possible to have silent dua? What are different types of dua?

Two types of Dua

Normally it is said that dua has two types. Sometime dua is a request; you ask God for something. There are people who may ask for something from other sources. For example, when idol-worshippers had a problem or needed things like rain, good harvest, or children, they used to go to their idols and call upon them. There is also the modern type of idol-worshipping and that is when we rely on our worldly resources for help. For example, we may think that it is our degree, experience, professional society, or political party that can solve our problem, and we so much depend on them as if we were worshipping them.

However, a believer is the one who always depends on God and asks Him for help. Even if believers ask someone else for help, they know deep in their mind and heart that they are not asking that person independently.

So if, for example, I was in need of treatment, I would go to a physician and seek help, but I know that the doctor is not the one who is healing me; he may be a means or a channel through which I receive healing from God. Similarly, if I ask someone for financial help, I know that they have no independent power or authority to help me and that they can only be intermediaries through whom God may bless me. Therefore, a believer never asks anyone independently of God. Moreover, a believer is normally hesitant to mention his or her requests to anyone other than God or His pious servants.¹ So a believer always clearly knows that he is not asking anyone other than God.

Here, I would like to cite two beautiful duas: one from Imam Sajjad (a) and the other from Imam Sadiq (a) as examples of how to communicate to God. I have chosen these two passages because they relate to the whole issue of talking to God. As we saw in the previous part, it is very important for us to have communication with God and keep this line open with Him. This is our honor and, indeed, a great achievement. If someone is in constant communication with God, he does not need anything else. A real believer or mystic (‘arif), who is constantly connected to God, may not feel the need to ask God for anything else. In any case, these two passages focus on the concept of dua and communication to God.

Imam Sajjad (a) prays to God by saying:

وبأي لسان أدعوك وقد أخرست المعاصي لساني وكيف أدعوك وأنا العاصي؟!

O my Lord! By which tongue I can call you, while [I know that] my sins have made my tongue dumb.

How can I call you while I am disobedient?2

This means that we may not be able to call God or to speak to Him, because of our sins that either make us feel embarrassed to talk to our Lord whom we have disobeyed3 or make our spiritual tongues dumb.

But, on the other hand, we say:

وكيف لا أدعوك وأنت الكريم

How can I not call you while I know you are very honorable and generous?4

So we have a dilemma here: Whenever we look at our own deeds and qualities we feel very embarrassed to call God, but when we think of God's great kindness and mercy we get the courage to speak to Him and even ask Him what we need. Then Imam Sajjad (a) says:

وكيف أفرح وأنا العاصي

How can I be ever happy while I am a sinful person?5

Imagine an offender that the police and people are after him! How can he ever have joy or live a happy life? Such people are always worried, because they have a bad record. But, on the other hand, the Imam (a) says:

وكيف أحزن وأنت الكريم

How can I ever be sad, while [I know that] You are very generous?6

The dua continues with the following sentence:

وكيف أدعوك وأنا أنا

How can I call you while I am what I am?

This is a very brief sentence, but full of meaning. When one is unable to count his multitude of problems and sins, it is better to just say to God, "How can I call you while I am what I am?"

But, after saying this, the Imam (a) says:

وكيف لا أدعوك وأنت أنت

How can I not call you while You are what You are?⁷

This means that when it comes to God, there are so many beautiful attributes and actions that we cannot do justice to them by attempting to describe or even count them, so it is sometimes better to just say, “You are what You are.” And if God is what He is, how can we stop calling Him? And then later the Imam (a) says:

و أنا أستحيي أن أدعوك و أنا مصر علي الذنوب و كيف بعبد لا يدعو سيده، و
أين مفره و ملجأ ان يطرده. الهى بمن أستغيث ان لم تقلني عثرتي، و من
يرحمني ان لم ترحمني، و من يدركني ان لم تدركني، و أين الفرار اذا ضاقت
لديك امنيتي، الهى بقيت بين خوف و رجاء، خوفك يميّتي و رجائك يحييني،
الهى الذنوب صفاتنا، و العفو صفاتك

I feel embarrassed to call You while I am insisting on my sins. But, on the other hand, what is going to happen to a servant who is not calling his Lord?⁸

Where can he run away? Where can he take refuge, if his master rejects him? O my Lord! From whom I should seek refuge, if you do not forgive my sins, and who is going to have mercy on me, if You do not show mercy to me? Who is going to help me, if You do not help me? ... I am left between fear and hope. Fearing You kills me and hoping You revives me. O God! Sin is our characteristic and forgiveness is Your characteristic.

What is going to happen to a person who has no Lord, who has no one to look after him? How can a two-year-old child, who is in need of his parents for food, love, support, clothing, and protection, survive without them? When it comes to God our need is even more than a two-year-old child. We cannot even stand on our feet without God; we cannot do anything without Him.

The second passage is from Imam Sadiq (a):

إلهي! كيف أدعوك وقد عصيتك وكيف لا أدعوك وقد عرفت حبك في قلبي

O God! How can I call you while I have disobeyed you? And how can I stop calling you while I have found your love in my heart?

وإن كنت عاصيا مددت إليك يدا بالذنوب مملوة وعينا بالرجاء ممدودة

If I am a sinful person, I stretch to you the hand that is full of sins. And I want to look at you with the eyes that are full of hope⁹.

My hand is full of sins, but still I want to stretch my hand to you, not anyone else. And although my hands are full of sins, my eyes are full of hope.

مولاي أنت عظيم العظماء وأنا أسير الاسراء

You are the greatest of the great, and I am the captive among the captives¹⁰.

I am not able to move or to do anything on my own. I am like a captive because of what I have done to myself.

أنا أسير بذنبي مرتهن بجرمي

Because of my sins I have become captive, and because of my crimes I have been imprisoned.¹¹

إلهي لئن طالبتني بذنبي لأطالبنك بكرمك ولئن طالبتني بجررتي لأطالبنك بعفوك

O God! If you ask me about my sins, I will ask You about Your generosity. If you ask me about my crimes, I will ask You about Your forgiveness.

In a very humble and lovable way, we can and should say these words to God. This is an expression of appreciation and gratefulness, not arrogance.

Then the Imam (a) says:

ولئن أمرت بي الى النار لأخبرن أهلها أنني كنت أقول لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول

اللهم إن الطاعة تسرك والمعصية لا تضرك. فهب لي ما يسرك وأغفر لي ما لا يضرك

If you command [the angels] to take me to hell, I will inform its people that I used to say that there is no god but God and that Muhammad was His messenger. O God! Truly obedience pleases You and disobedience does not harm You. So please grant me [ability to do] what pleases You, and forgive for me what does not harm You. O Most Merciful of the merciful. 12

Everyone has to think about the possibility of going to hell. You have to warn yourself. It is not something that could happen only to other people and not to us. Everyone must really think and be worried about this possibility. You have to equip yourself. You have to take all the provision and all the equipment that can help you to be safe. So when people are judged and some are taken to heaven and some to hell, if I was taken to hell, what would I say to God? Can I say that there was a mistake in His judgment or that it was not fair? Can I say to Him, “You did not treat me with favor and I went astray as a result?” What excuse can I have? Can I blame other people? Certainly, I cannot say any of these. So the Imam (a) says, if You ask them to take me to hell, I am not going to argue anything, but I will do something that You will not then be letting me to go to hell. I am going to tell the people of hell that I am a believer. This either means that then I am going to tell them that You have put a believer in hell (but I am sure that You are not going to let this happen), or it means that even if you put me there, I have such a loyalty to you that I will not change my mind; even if you put me in hell, I will proclaim with all honor that I believe in you.

When God sees that there is such loyalty in a person, He will forgive him. Of course, having such loyalty to God is not easy. How many of us would still love Him, even if we are put into hell by His judgment? Sometimes in this world we go through difficult conditions that make us describe our lives as being like hell. In such circumstances, we realize how difficult it is to still love God and be pleased with whatever He decides. Satan comes and tactfully tries to stop us loving God. He tells us, if God is kind, why is He ignoring you? Why is He not listening to you? Why does not He accept your prayer? Why should such a nice person like you have all the problems, but those who have no faith or good deeds enjoy their life? How many of us can face such challenges and still maintain his love for God?

Now imagine that a person is taken, because of his own misdeeds, to hell. If he still can really say that he loves God, I do not think the fire can touch him; I am sure that this person would be released from fire, because he cannot be dishonest. If you manage to love someone even when your beloved does not pay attention to you and rather puts you in trouble, you are a real lover. But if you love only when your beloved is good to you, this is not a real love. Love is not easily switched on and off. Love takes time to be switched on and when it is switched on it never stops. Those whom you see that today they love each other and tomorrow they hate each other; they are not true lovers.

Afterwards, the Imam (a) says:

اللهم إن الطاعة تسرك والمعصية لا تضرک فهب لي مايسرك واغفر ما لا
يضرک يا ارحم الراحمين

O God! Obedience pleases you, and sin does not harm you; so enable me to do what pleases you and forgive what cannot harm you! O Most Merciful of the merciful! 13

This is a very beautiful point; if you do something good God becomes pleased, but if you do something wrong, it does not harm God in any way. Compared to God's greatness and glory, we are insignificant, less than even a mosquito or a fly. A fly can annoy or sometimes even kill people (as in the story of Nimrod), but we are even less capable than a fly in relation to God; we cannot do anything to annoy or harm Him. So the Imam (a) says to God, please forgive the bad things I have done, which have never harmed you, and enable me to do what makes you happy.

So, as we saw, one can always find ways to speak to God: if you feel happy, speak to God; if you feel sad, make this sadness an opportunity to speak to God and get rid of your sadness; if you feel lonely, speak to God; if you are with many people around you, speak to Him. A believer always finds an excuse to speak to God and to prolong his speech with Him, because he enjoys speaking with his Lord. Many scholars of classical Arabic rhetoric's have mentioned that this is why Prophet Moses (a) gave a quite lengthy response when God asked him,

وما تلك بيمينك يا موسى

What is in your right hand? O Moses! (Quran 20: 17)

Here, it is worth thinking why God asks this question in the first place. God knows what is in the hand of Moses (a), but the reason seems to be the fact that He wants to talk to Moses (a) and wants him to reply. In response to this question, Moses (a) started with these words:

هي عصاي

It is my staff. (Quran 20: 18)

Moses (a) could have ended his response here; there was no need to explain more to his All-Knowing

Lord about his staff and what he does with it, but he so much loved to talk to God that he continued:

هي عصاي أتوكأ عليها وأهش بها على غنمي ولي فيها مآرب أخرى

It is my staff. I lean upon it, and with it I beat down leaves for my sheep; and I have other uses for it. (Quran 20: 18)

So Moses (a) did not just say, this is my staff, but used that opportunity to speak to God. And this is how all believers should be, trying to stay more and more connected to God.

Therefore, dua is sometimes to ask God for something, sometimes just to call God and speak to Him without necessarily asking anything, and sometimes just to remember Him. There are even certain duas in which we do not talk to God directly but speak about Him as a third party. Still they are considered as dua, because we remember God in them; for example, about dua in ‘Arafat, Prophet Muhammad (s) quoted as saying:

أكثر دعائي ودعاء الانبياء قبلي بعرفات: لا إله إلا الله وحده لا شريك له. له الملك وله الحمد وهو على كل شيء قدير

The dua that the Prophets before me and I most frequency say in ‘Arafat is “There is no god but God. There is no partner for Him. Kingdom belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him, and He has power over all things.”¹⁴

This dua is very short and brief. Everything is based on, and evolving around, tawhid. There is no request. Nor is God called upon. Still this is a dua, because dua is to remember God. Remembrance can come by talking to God with request or without request. Remembrance can come even when you do not talk to God, but when you remember Him in your heart. This is dua; this is calling God, because God is omnipresent. Sometimes I speak to you. Sometimes I read something that I have written about you when you are with me and listening to me. In sura al-Fatiha, we have a beautiful combination: In the beginning, God is mentioned in the third person;

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ * الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ * مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful, Master of the Day of Retribution. (Quran 1:2-4)

But then we address God directly:

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ * اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ * صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ
عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

You [alone] do we worship, and to You [alone] do we turn for help. Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have blessed such as have not incurred Your wrath, nor are astray. (Quran 1:5-7)

So, as our scholars say, here we have the style of iltifat or the shift, in this case, from third to second person. This is because when you start talking about God, you reach a point where you can no more talk about Him in the third person; your love for Him is so great that you cannot but talk to Him directly.

Similarly, in Dua al-Nudbah, when we reach Imam Mahdi (a), in some parts we talk about him and in some parts we talk to him; for example, in some parts we say,

أَيْنَ مَعزِ الْأَوْلِيَاءِ وَمَنْزِلِ الْأَعْدَاءِ

Where is he who gives honor to the friends and removes the honor of the enemies?

But then we reach a point where we talk to our Imam (a) directly:

لَيْتَ شِعْرِي أَيْنَ اسْقَرْتَ بِكَ النُّوَى

I wish I knew where you have resided!

Therefore, whether you address God or remember Him without addressing Him or even without saying anything, you are doing dua. Indeed it can even be said: a believer when he is also silent, it's possible to be in the condition of Dua; maybe he's not saying anything, in his heart he cannot forget Allah (swt), in his heart he is talking to Allah (swt). When you really love God, you cannot stop thinking about Him, whether you say anything or not. You may even be talking to someone else, but in your heart you are thinking about God.

So dua is very close to dhikr; although most of the time it comes with request, it can come without any request as well. Because of this close connection, so much emphasis has been put in Islam on dua and at the same time on dhikr. Dua is a kind of dhikr to say the least, though I think it can be argued that dua

is even equivalent to dhikr.

I would like to conclude this article with a short discussion about this well-known and beautiful verse in the holy Quran:

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ

When My servants ask you about Me, [tell them that] I am indeed near most. (Quran 2: 186)

This is one of the beauties of religions, especially Abrahamic religions, which establish a very close and intimate relation between God and people. Through philosophy, you cannot see such an intimate relation with God. Philosophers introduce God as the first cause, first mover, Necessary Being, and so forth. They speak as if He is something very abstract and far. In some eastern religions also, they either do not talk about God, as in Buddhism, or they believe in pantheism, that is, they believe that the universe is identical with divinity like in Hinduism. However, in Abrahamic religions, the transcendence of God is maintained, we do not regard God as a physical being, we do not make God like human beings, but you can always speak to God, you can have a personal relation with God; so God says to the Prophet,

When My servants ask you about Me, [tell them that] I am indeed near most. (Quran 2: 186)

Note that God does not even say, tell them I am near. He is so near that just He says, if they ask you, I am near; there is no need that you tell them, I am giving them the answer directly. Then the verse continues:

أَجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ

I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me. (Quran 2: 186)

So dua is not necessarily coming with request; everyone who calls Me, I answer. This is the best thing. Of course, you can ask for other things, but the best thing is to draw the attention of God to yourself. Imagine that you invited by a very important person to a very big gathering in his place; ten thousand people are there to see a great person. And you are one of the ten thousand people there; you waive your hand and that person smiles at you; you are so happy that out of all those people that important person paid attention to you. You will be very happy to have received his attention.

What is greater than receiving the attention of God?! Out of the billions of people on the earth and many more other creatures who call Him, you can always call His attention to yourself in a special way:

أَجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly. (Quran 2: 186)

If there is any condition for dua, this is the only condition: you should call Him, not anyone else, and wait for the response! If you want to call someone but you dial a wrong number, you should not expect your call to be replied. Also, if you dial the right number but you are not patient enough and hang up before the other person picks up the phone, you should only blame yourself, not that person. This is important.

The verse also mentions that

فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly. (Quran 2: 186)

We also should respond to God and believe in Him, not because He needs our response or faith, but because we find in this response our way towards our happiness. "Rushd" is the opposite of "ghay" (being misguided); it means is to be guided and be able to secure one's interest. If you ask a teacher or a consultant for help and he responds to you and gives you some instructions, you have to follow their advice; you cannot say, thank-God I got in touch with my consultant, but I am not listening to him. This does not help in reaching rushd.

This discussion will be continued in the next issues.

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1. This includes tawassul and that is to appeal to the pious servants of God by visiting or remembering them. We approach them with our requests not because they are able to give it independently of God, but because they are close to God, so we ask them for prayer. This is not shirk (polytheism); indeed it is a humble way of asking God, because it indicates that we

do not consider ourselves worthy of asking Him directly, so we ask Him through the people who are close to Him. This is pure tawhid. This is a very beautiful and humble way of expressing our appreciation of God's greatness and our dependence on Him.

2. Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar 1403 AH, 91: 139

3. If you have wronged someone, especially someone to whom you owe a lot, it is very difficult to go and speak to him. Sometimes, you even feel embarrassed to go and ask for apology.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Shaykh al-Saduq, Al-Amali, 1400 AH, 357

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Majlisi, Mir'at al-'uqul fi sharh akhbar al al-rasul, 1404 AH, 12: 1.

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