

# Etiquette of the Ritual Bath (Ghusl)

**Description:** Islam being a comprehensive way of life; it teaches us how to maintain and improve our hygiene. This lesson incorporates the Islamic etiquette of bathing and its relation to spiritual purity. Special attention is given to the aspects specific to Muslim women.

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## Prerequisites

- How to Pray for a Recent Convert (2 parts).

## Objectives

- To understand the relationship of bathing to good health.
- To learn the correct way to perform the ritual bath.
- To understand when is the ritual bath required and some related miscellaneous issues.

## Arabic Terms

- *Wudoo* - ablution.
- *Salah* - the Arabic word to denote a direct connection between the believer and Allah. More specifically, in Islam it refers to the formal five daily prayers and is the most important form of worship.
- *Ghusl* - ritual bath.
- *Jihad* - a struggle, to exert effort in a certain matter, and may refer to a legitimate war.
- *Hadith* - (plural - *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

## Introduction

For many people, the main purposes of bathing are to remove dirt and odors and slough off dead skin cells - basically, to maintain good hygiene. In addition, people bathe to feel clean, smell fresh, and revitalize or relax. Good hygiene helps promote health and prevents disease.

Islam is a comprehensive way of life and teaches us how to maintain and improve hygiene. Bathing etiquette is raised to the level of worship, and good hygiene is tied to

spiritual purity. A new Muslim should learn the simple rules of bathing to maintain physical and spiritual cleanliness. *Ghusl* is the Arabic word for washing, specifically washing the entire body with water in a prescribed manner. Sometimes it is also called the 'ritual bath' or 'major ablution' to distinguish it from 'minor ablution' (*wudoo*). When one seeks to purify themselves from major state of impurity, they should bathe keeping this intention in heart

Water as a purifying element is not unique to Islam, but is common to Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Shintoism, and others. In Judaism, water was traditionally used in the *mikvah* (Jewish bath) and in rituals of conversion. Also, the ritual bath (*ghusl*) should not be confused with Baptism, a ritual performed for admission into some Christian churches whose forms and rituals vary, such as by immersion in water or bathing the head, starting from the forehead. In contrast, the ritual bath (*ghusl*) is not associated with the removal of an inherited sin.

In this lesson, we will learn how and when to perform the ritual bath. We will also discuss the aspects of the ritual bath specific to Muslim women.

## How is the Ritual Bath Performed?

It is sufficient in the ritual bath that a person wash all his body completely,<sup>[1]</sup> but the correct manner and order of performing the ritual bath, as did the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, is as follows:

- (1) the person must intend in their heart to purify themselves in a prescribed manner for Allah's sake. The intention is a simple matter that changes regular bathing into an act of worship pleasing to Allah.
- (2) say '*Bismillah*' [meaning: (I begin) in the name of Allah]
- (3) wash both hands three times.
- (4) then wash the genitals with the left hand.
- (5) make ablution (*wudoo*) like the one made for prayer.
  - wash the hands three times.
  - rinse the mouth and nose.
  - then wash the face three times.
  - followed by washing the right hand and arm up to and including the elbow three times.
  - then the left hand and arm likewise.
  - wipe the entire head and ears (inside and out).

The Prophet used to delay washing his feet until the end of his ritual bath. You may

wash them now or delay till the end. Wash the right foot first.

(6) rub water through one's hair three times, letting the water reach down to the roots of the hair.

(6) pour water over the entire body, beginning with the right side, then the left, washing under the armpits, inside the ears, inside the navel, between the toes and whatever part of the body that can be easily reached.[\[2\]](#)

## When Does the Ritual Bath Become Required?

Without bathing, certain acts of worship cannot be performed. Negligence in these cases is sinful. The following situations require a Muslim to bathe and perform the ritual bath.

### 1. The emission of semen or orgasmic fluid.

If the discharge of semen or orgasmic fluid is accompanied by feelings of desire, the ritual bath is required. The ritual bath is not required if they are emitted unintentionally with no feelings of desire.

The ritual bath must be performed if the emission of sperm or orgasmic fluid:

- (a) is due to stimulation while awake (like sexual intercourse and masturbation) resulting in ejaculation of semen or orgasmic fluid.[\[3\]](#)
- (b) happens while one is asleep (like wet-dreams[\[4\]](#)). In other words, if one does not feel that they experienced a nocturnal emission but happens to find him or herself wet upon awakening, they must perform the ritual bath.

The ritual bath is not required in the following cases:

- (a) If semen or orgasmic fluid is emitted unintentionally without stimulation with no feelings of desire, such as due to illness or cold weather.
- (b) If they feel they had a nocturnal emission but find no traces, then they need not perform the ritual bath.

### 2. Penetration.[\[5\]](#)

If the penis enters the vagina, the ritual bath becomes obligatory on both spouses whether there is ejaculation or not and whether a condom is used or not. Mere rubbing or outward touching of genitals does not make the ritual bath necessary.

### 3. Menstruation and post-natal bleeding.

A woman must perform the ritual bath after her period ends, known by the white discharge generally recognized by women. She should also perform the ritual bath after post-natal bleeding following delivery. The ritual bath is required in both cases before she can resume the daily prayers (*salah*), fasting, and conjugal relations with her husband.[\[6\]](#)

#### 4. Death.

The body of a deceased Muslim of either gender must be given the ritual bath (*ghusl*<sup>[7]</sup>), unless he or she died of wounds suffered in *Jihad* <sup>[8]</sup> (struggle or war in Allah's cause)

#### 5. On entering Islam.

Some scholars maintain that the ritual bath (*ghusl*) is required of a new Muslim on entering Islam<sup>[9]</sup>, in order to purify oneself from the major state of impurity. Thus one should perform it to be on the safe side.

In subsequent lessons, you will learn more about other times when bathing is legislated, not in the obligatory sense rather encouraged.

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Endnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> Umm Salama reported that the Messenger of Allah told her that after sexual intercourse: 'It is enough for you to throw three handfuls of water on your head and then pour water over yourself, and you shall be purified.' (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

<sup>[2]</sup> This account is based on a report from the Prophet's wife, 'Aishah: "When the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, took his bath after sexual intercourse, he would begin by washing his hands. Then he would pour water from his right hand to his left and wash his sexual organs, make the ablution for prayer, take some water and put his fingers to the roots of his hair to the extent that he sees that the skin is wet, then pour water over his head three times and then over the rest of his body." (Related by *Saheeh Al-Bukhari* and *Saheeh Muslim*)

<sup>[3]</sup> Messenger of Allah said, "Water (washing) is needed after ejaculation of sperm." (*Saheeh Muslim*). Also, it is impermissible for a Muslim to resort to masturbation to satisfy sexual desires.

<sup>[4]</sup> A nocturnal emission is an ejaculation of semen experienced by males during sleep. It is also called a "wet dream". Nocturnal emissions are most common during teenage and early adult years, and are the result of accumulated semen production. However, nocturnal emissions may happen any time after puberty, not just adolescence and early adulthood. They may or may not be accompanied by dreams. Some males will wake during the ejaculation, while others will sleep through the event.

<sup>[5]</sup> The Prophet said: "If one part enters the other part, then *ghusl* becomes obligatory." (*Musnad, Saheeh Muslim*)

<sup>[6]</sup> Allah says in the Qur'an, "**Do not approach them until they become pure. And when they have purified themselves, go to them as Allah has prescribed for you.**" (2.222) Also, the Messenger of Allah told a female companion, "Do not pray during your period. After it has ended, perform the ritual bath and pray." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

[7] When Zainab, the daughter of the Prophet died, he said: “Wash her with water three or five times, or as many times as you see fit” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

[8] In an authentic *hadith*, Jabir ibn Abdullah said that the Prophet ordered the martyrs of Uhud to be shrouded, and buried, in pairs ‘with their blood on their bodies - and they were neither washed nor did he offer a funeral prayer for them.’ (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

[9] This is based on the Prophet commanding Abu Talha, a new Muslim, to perform *ghusl* on entering Islam (*Ahmad*).

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