219510 - Does a toothbrush have the same virtue as a siwak?

the question

If someone does wudu and cannot find a siwak, can toothpaste take its place? Will the one who does that be rewarded for that?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Using the siwak is a proven prophetic Sunnah; many hadiths have been narrated which speak of its virtue and encourage using it. We have previously discussed some of the rulings on it in the answer to question no. 2577.

The hadiths which speak of the virtue of the siwak and encourage using it apply to every tool with which the teeth can be cleaned, if the purpose of using it is achieved, and the user has the intention of following the Sunnah when doing that, whether that is done using a twig from the arak tree (Salvadora persica), or from an olive tree or date-palm tree, or anything else.

That also includes using a toothbrush, as using it achieves the purpose of brushing and cleaning the teeth. Moreover, the toothbrush cleans both sides of the teeth easily, with the use of purifying and cleansing substances (toothpaste).

Several things indicate that the toothbrush shares the virtues of the siwak:

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The original linguistic meaning of the word *siwak* refers to the action of brushing the teeth, regardless of the tool that is used. Later on it came to be used to refer to the tool, and customarily it is usually used to refer to a twig from the arak tree.

Az-Zubaydi said: The verb *saka* refers to rubbing. From it is derived the word *miswak*.

End quote from *Taj al-`Arus*, 27/215.

Ibn Daqiq al-Eid said: The word siwak refers to the action. An example of its use is the hadith: “Siwak (brushing the teeth) is purifying for the mouth and pleasing to the Lord.” The jurists say “siwak (brushing the teeth) is recommended”, “siwak is not obligatory”, and other phrases which cannot be anything but the description of an action.

The word siwak may also refer to the tool with which the teeth are brushed.

End quote from *Sharh al-Ilmam*, 1/10.

Ibn al-Athir said: The *miswak* is a stick with which a person brushes his teeth, and the verb *saka/yasuku* refers to the action of brushing the teeth with a siwak.

End quote from *An-Nihayah fi Gharib al-Hadith wal-Athar*, 2/425.

Imam an-Nawawi said: The word siwak refers to using a stick or the like on the teeth to remove dirt. It is derived from the verb *saka*, which refers to rubbing, or from the word *tasawuk*, which refers to moving side-to-side.

End quote from *Tahrir Alfaz at-Tanbeeh*, p. 33.

The word siwak does not refer only to twigs from the arak tree, as some may think; rather it is a word that refers to the action of brushing the teeth and cleaning them with any tool, no matter what that tool is. The word may refer to any stick that is used to clean the teeth, and the linguists did not limit the meaning of siwak to a twig of the arak tree.

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The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) did not only use twigs of the arak tree to clean his teeth; rather he used them in most cases, but he also used other things.

One of the reports which speak of him cleaning his teeth with a twig of the arak tree is that which was narrated from `Abdullah ibn Mas`ud, who said: I was cutting siwak from an arak tree for the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)… Narrated by Ahmad, 3991; Abu Ya`la al-Mawsili in his *Musnad*, 9/209; classed as sound (hasan) by al-Albani.

The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) also cleaned his teeth with a twig from the date-palm.

It was narrated that `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) said: The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) passed away in my house, on my day, leaning against my chest. One of us [his wives] would seek refuge for him with Allah from sickness by offering supplication. I started seeking refuge for him with Allah, and he raised his head and looked up, and said: "With those on high, with those on high."

'Abd ar-Rahman ibn Abi Bakr passed by with a fresh palm-tree twig in his hand, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) looked at it, so I thought that he wanted it, so I took it, chewed the end of it and shook it, then I gave it to him and he cleaned his teeth with it in the best way he had ever cleaned his teeth. Then he gave it to me, and his hand dropped, or it fell from his hand [and he passed away]. Thus Allah caused my saliva to be mixed with his on his last day in this world and his first day in the hereafter. Narrated by al-Bukhari, 4451.

The word translated above as palm tree twig refers to the stem of the leaf after the leaflets (fronds) have been stripped from it.

End quote from *Al-Misbah al-Munir*, 1/96.

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The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) enjoined cleaning the teeth, but he did not tell his companions to take twigs from any particular tree. The Arabs used to clean their teeth with many things.

It says in *Al-Bayan wat-Tabyin* by al-Jahiz (3/77): Sticks that may be used to clean the teeth include

those that come from balsam of Mecca (Commiphora gileadensis), terebinth (Pistacia terebinthus), the wild olive tree, the arak tree, and branches of palm trees. [These are all trees that were known to the Arabs.]

See also: *Mushkilat Muwatta' Malik ibn Anas* by al-Batlayusi, p. 72.

Ibn `Abd al-Barr said: The siwak of the people [at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)] came from arak trees and balsam of Mecca. Anything that cleans the teeth, does not harm them and gives a good smell and taste is permissible to use for cleaning the teeth.

End quote from *Al-Istidhkar*, 1/365.

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The jurists did not limit the ruling on cleaning the teeth to twigs from the arak tree; rather they mentioned that cleaning the teeth may be done using anything that achieves the purpose of cleaning the mouth, such as coarse twigs or other things.

Ibn `Abd al-Barr said: Cleaning the teeth that is recommended is something that was well known to the Arabs and at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), which was done using twigs from the arak tree and balsam of Mecca, and anything that is good for cleaning the teeth.

End quote from *At-Tamhid*, 7/201.

And he said: Anything that cleans the teeth, does not harm them and is not regarded as adornment for women is permissible to use to clean the teeth.

End quote from *At-Tamheed*, 11/213.

An-Nawawi said: It is recommended to clean the teeth with a twig from the arak tree or anything else that can be used to brush the teeth to remove dirt, such as a piece of rough cloth, or materials derived from other plants.

End quote from *Sharh Sahih Muslim*, 3/143.

Al-`Iraqi said: Following the Sunnah [in this regard] may be done by using anything coarse to remove yellowness of the teeth.

End quote from *Tarh at-Tathrib*, 2/67.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said: It is recommended that the siwak should be a soft stick that freshens the breath and not harm the mouth and does not crumble, such as twigs from arak trees, olive trees and date-palms.

End quote from *Sharh `Umdat al-Fiqh*, 1/221.

Shaykh Ibn `Uthaymin said: The virtue of cleaning one's teeth (siwak) may be attained by using a twig from the arak tree or any similar twig.

End quote from *Sharh Riyad as-Salihin*, 5/226.

None of the scholars, as far as we know, said that the meaning of siwak is limited to a twig from the arak tree. Rather they are unanimously agreed that cleaning the teeth (siwak) may be done by using anything else that is fit for that purpose.

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Cleaning the teeth is not a pure act of worship or ritual; rather it is an act of worship with a purpose, namely cleaning the teeth and freshening the breath, and this may be achieved using any tool that is fit for that purpose.

Shaykh al-Islam said: That is because cleaning the teeth was prescribed for the purpose of freshening the breath, and purifying and cleansing the mouth.

End quote from *Sharh `Umdat al-Fiqh*, 1/218.

Thus it becomes clear:

that the virtue of siwak that is mentioned in the text refers to the action of cleaning and brushing the teeth, not the tool that is used for that purpose. So the virtue is not attached to the twig from the arak tree; rather it is attached to the action of cleaning the mouth and teeth.

It says in *`Awn al-Ma`bud* (1/46): It refers to both the action and the tool, but the former is most likely what is meant here – that is, in the hadiths which speak of the virtue of cleaning the teeth and urge people to do that.

Shaykh Ibn `Uthaymin was asked: Does using toothpaste take the place of using the siwak, and will a person be rewarded for using it with the intention of purifying his mouth? In other words, is it regarded as equivalent to using the siwak in terms of the reward which the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) encouraged the one who cleans his teeth with a siwak to seek?

He (may Allah have mercy on him) replied: Yes, using a toothbrush and toothpaste takes the place of using a siwak, and in fact that is more efficient in cleansing and purifying. So if a person does that, he will have followed the Sunnah, because what matters is not the tool; rather what matters is the action and the outcome, and using a toothbrush and toothpaste leads to greater results than using a siwak on its own.

But can we say that we should use toothpaste and a toothbrush every time it is recommended to use the siwak, or can we say that this comes under the heading of extravagance and going to extremes, and perhaps it could affect the mouth by causing it to smell or injuring it and the like? This is something that is subject to further discussion.

End quote from *Fatawa Nur `ala ad-Darb*, 7/2).

Secondly:

Having said that it is permissible to clean the mouth with a toothbrush and that one will attain reward if there is the intention to follow the Sunnah, nevertheless brushing the teeth with a twig from the arak tree still has an advantage because it is following the example of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and his companions as the twig from the arak tree is

what they mostly used, in addition to the fact that it is easy to carry and keep it with you in all places and situations, and people are used to it, so no one finds it objectionable or weird, in contrast to the toothbrush which it is not possible to use at all times, because it needs to be used in a specific place.

It says in *Al-Mawsu`at al-Fiqhiyyah* (4/140): The jurists of all four madhhabs are agreed that the best of all is the twig from the arak tree, because it freshens the breath and has a pleasant smell, and it has some fibres that help to dislodge dirt and clean in between the teeth. End quote.

Ibn `Allan said: The best is the twig from the arak tree, because it is following the example of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), in addition to it having a pleasant taste and smell, and small fibres which clean in between the teeth. Next to it is the twig from the date-palm, because it is the last type which the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) used to clean his teeth.

End quote from *Dalil al-Falihin*, 6/658.

Shaykh `Atiyyah Muhammad Salim said: If we look at the purpose behind using the siwak, it is as mentioned in the hadith: “purifying to the mouth and pleasing to the Lord.” So anything that purifies the mouth will do what is required, but what the early generations used to do is better and healthier in medical terms.

End quote from *Sharh Bulugh al-Maram*, 13/5.

For more information, please see the answer to question no. 115282, which discusses the medical benefits of using the twig from the arak tree.

And Allah knows best.