

to the prescriptions and instructions of unskilled doctors while ignoring the remedies of the True Physician. And so, in the Bahá'í scriptures, Bahá'u'lláh issues His call, summoning us to a realisation of our true selves, urging us to free ourselves from the illusions of the world and to turn ourselves towards the Divine, the transcendent reality that is the true orientation of our lives. Only in this way would we find what will give us peace, contentment and lasting happiness.
O Son of Spirit!

I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty?

Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself?

Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me?

Out of the clay of love I moulded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? (2)

Bahá'u'lláh states that we as human beings are enmeshed in the snare of materialism. We are so engrossed in the drive to acquire the things of this world that we do not realise that although we think that we possess things, in reality we are often possessed by them. The larger and more expensive a possession is, the greater the tyranny it exercises over our lives. The more we have, the greater our greed becomes and so that greed will never be satisfied.

O Son of Man!

Thou dost wish for gold and I desire thy freedom from it.

Thou thinkest thyself rich in its possession, and I recognize thy wealth in thy sanctity therefrom.

By My life! This is My knowledge, and that is thy fancy; how can My way accord with thine?(3)

And even those who are not trapped by material things are often dominated by what the Bahá'í scriptures call the 'idle fancies and vain imaginings' of our minds.

O Son of Man!

Many a day hath passed over thee whilst thou hast busied thyself with thy fancies and idle imaginings.

How long art thou to slumber on thy bed?

Lift up thy head from slumber, for the Sun hath risen to the zenith, haply it may shine upon thee with the light of beauty.(4)

Looking at the condition of the human world then, Bahá'u'lláh condemns the materialism and self-delusion on which it is based:

Alas! Alas! O Lovers of Worldly Desire!

Even as the swiftness of lightning ye have passed by the Beloved One,
and have set your hearts on satanic fancies.

Ye bow the knee before your vain imagining, and call it truth.

Ye turn your eyes towards the thorn, and name it a flower.

Not a pure breath have ye breathed, nor hath the breeze of detachment
been wafted from the meadows of your hearts.

Ye have cast to the winds the loving counsels of the Beloved and have
effaced them utterly from the tablet of your hearts, and even as the beasts
of the field, ye move and have your being within the pastures of desire
and passion.(5)

Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that the days of our lives are swiftly passing while
we remain enmeshed in this lamentable condition:

O Ye That Are Lying As Dead on The Couch of Heedlessness!

Ages have passed and your precious lives are well-nigh ended, yet not
a single breath of purity hath reached Our court of holiness from you .

..

Him whom I abhor ye have loved, and of My foe ye have made a friend.

Notwithstanding, ye walk on My earth complacent and self-satisfied,
heedless that My earth is weary of you and everything within it shunneth
you.

Were ye but to open your eyes, ye would, in truth, prefer a myriad
griefs unto this joy, and would count death itself better than this life.(6)

O My Children! I fear lest, bereft of the melody of the dove of heaven,

ye will sink back to the shades of utter loss, and,

never having gazed upon the beauty of the rose,

return to water and clay.(7)

Bahá'u'lláh urges us during our brief, ephemeral lives upon this earth
to seize our chance:

O My Servant!

Free thyself from the fetters of this world,

and loose thy soul from the prison of self.

Seize thy chance, for it will come to thee no more.(8)

Everything in this world will return to dust and so if we want something
that will last, that will be of enduring value, Bahá'u'lláh says that we
must turn to the spiritual world, to eternal values and goals:

O Friends!

Abandon not the everlasting beauty for a beauty that must die,

and set not your affections on this mortal world of dust.(9)

And so God states that the answer, the prescription for the illness that afflicts the world of humanity, that which will give human beings the inner peace that they want, is to turn towards the Divine, to turn towards the spiritual and away from the material.

O Son of Utterance!

Turn thy face unto Mine and renounce all save Me;

for My sovereignty endureth and My dominion perisheth not.

If thou seekest another than Me, yea, if thou searchest the universe for evermore,

thy quest will be in vain.(10)

Bahá'u'lláh has revealed a great deal about the path of spiritual development that the individual must take. In a brief introductory survey such as this, it is only possible to focus on a few points.

Taking the first step

In travelling the path of spirituality, it is clear from the Bahá'í scriptures and indeed from the scriptures of other religions that it is up to human beings to take the first step on the path. Thus in the Bible, Jesus says: 'Knock and it shall be opened up to you' (Luke 11:9). We must make the first movement and knock. In the Qur'an, we find the words: 'Whoso maketh efforts for us, in our ways shall we assuredly guide them' (29:69). We have to make the initial effort and then God will guide us. Similarly the Bahá'í scriptures say that we must take the first step:

O Son of Love!

Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity.(11)

In the Bahá'í scriptures we find the analogy of the human heart as a mirror - it reflects whatever it is turned towards. If it is turned towards heaven it reflects heavenly things and if it is turned towards earth, it reflects earthly concerns and so we must make the effort to turn our hearts towards the Divine and away from the perishable and evanescent attractions of the world. It is we ourselves who must make that initial effort to move the mirror of our hearts. If we are not turned towards God, His light cannot shine in our mirror, His love cannot be reflected in our soul.

O Son of Being!

Love Me, that I may love thee.

If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee.

Know this, O servant.(12)

Detachment

After we have taken the first step and made the initial effort, we need

to try to detach ourselves from this world. We must try to cleanse our heart from their attachment to the things of this world, which Bahá'u'lláh likens to dust or mire and clay which he urges us to clean from off the mirror of our hearts. He tells us to:

. . . cleanse thine heart from the world and all its vanities, and suffer not the love of any stranger to enter and dwell therein. Not until thou dost purify thine heart from every trace of such love can the brightness of the light of God shed its radiance upon it, for to none hath God given more than one heart . . . And as the human heart . . . is one and undivided, it behoveth thee to take heed that its affections be, also, one and undivided. Cleave thou, therefore, with the whole affection of thine heart, unto His love, and withdraw it from the love of any one besides Him . . . My sole purpose in revealing to thee these words is to sanctify thee from the transitory things of the earth, and aid thee to enter the realm of everlasting glory.(13)

Bahá'u'lláh asserts that there is only room in our hearts for one love and so we must choose -- will we choose God or the world?

O My Friend in Word! Ponder awhile.

Hast thou ever heard that friend and foe should abide in one heart?

Cast out then the stranger, that the Friend may enter His home.(14)

Bahá'u'lláh reveals that if we truly seek for spiritual development we must first be prepared to detach ourselves from the things of this world.

In outlining the requirements of the spiritual quest, Bahá'u'lláh says:

O My brother! When a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading unto the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation

of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth . . . That seeker must, at all times, put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, must detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords.(15)

And so, the Bahá'í scriptures enumerate one by one the requirements of the true seeker upon the spiritual path. Their description of spirituality involves the acquisition of virtues.

Virtues

If we continue the passage from the Bahá'í scriptures that is quoted above, it goes on to describe the virtues that must be acquired upon the path to spirituality:

He must never seek to exalt himself above any one,
must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and
vain-glory,
must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence and refrain
from idle talk . . .

That seeker should, also, regard backbiting as grievous error, and
keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth
the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.

He should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate
desire.

He should treasure the companionship of them that have renounced the
world,

and regard avoidance of boastful and worldly people a precious benefit.

At the dawn of every day he should commune with God,

and, with all his soul, persevere in the quest of his Beloved.

He should consume every wayward thought with the flame of His loving
mention, and,

with the swiftness of lightning, pass by all else save Him.

He should succour the dispossessed,

and never withhold his favour from the destitute.

He should show kindness to animals,

how much more unto his fellow-man, to him who is endowed with the power
of utterance.

He should not hesitate to offer up his life for his Beloved,

nor allow the censure of the people to turn him away from the Truth.(16)

The Bahá'í scriptures teach that we must seek to acquire such virtues
as love, justice, patience, trustworthiness, truthfulness, etc. There is
not room to list and describe all of these, but some are described elsewhere
(pp. XX-X - ch 2).

Troubles and Difficulties

Bahá'u'lláh reveals to those that are seeking to follow the path of
spirituality that it is inevitable that they will meet with troubles and
trials and difficulties. The very act of breaking the ties of materialism,
greed and desire that bind us to this world is a painful one. Bahá'u'lláh
states that pain is our constant companion, our ever-present steed, as
we travel along the valley in our spiritual quest:

The steed of this Valley is pain; and if there be no pain this

journey will never end. In this station the lover hath no thought save the Beloved, and seeketh no refuge save the Friend . . .

Wherefore must the veils of the satanic self be burned away at the fire of love, that the spirit may be purified and cleansed and thus may know the station of the Lord of the Worlds.(17)

If there be no pain, there will be no progress. `Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, has described the way that pain and suffering functions in our lives. He was asked the question: `Does the soul progress more through sorrow or through the joy in this world?' He replied:

The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most.(18)

Thus suffering is necessary for our spiritual advancement and therefore if we understood its true nature, we would welcome it.

O Son of Man! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it.(19)

Prayer for Hardship and Difficulties

O my Lord! Thou knowest that the people are encircled with pain and calamities and are environed with hardships and trouble. Every trial doth attack man and every dire adversity doth assail him like unto the assault of a serpent. There is no shelter and asylum for him except under the wing of Thy protection, preservation, guard and custody.

O Thou the Merciful One! O my Lord! Make Thy protection my armour, Thy preservation my shield, humbleness before the door of Thy oneness my guard, and Thy custody and defence my fortress and my abode. Preserve me from the suggestions of self and desire, and guard me from every sickness, trial, difficulty and ordeal.

Verily, Thou art the Protector, the Guardian, the Preserver, the Sufficer, and verily, Thou art the Merciful of the Most Merciful. (`Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í

Prayers, pp. 136-13)

The Purpose of the Physical World

All that has been written thus far in this chapter is similar to what may be found in Islam and in other religions. Many of the great mystics, saints and spiritual masters have written in a similar way about the need for detachment and the virtues of the spiritual path. Some of the scriptures

of other religions are parallel to the quotations from the Bahá'í scriptures given above. Where the Bahá'í teachings do differ is in the practical details and structures that are given for ascending the spiritual path.

In many other spiritual traditions, the practical aspects of the spiritual path have been put in the hands of a spiritual guide: the priest of a community, the guru, the shaykh or murshid of a Sufi order, the abbot of a monastery. In many spiritual traditions, because the world has been recognised as being the source of our distraction from the spiritual path, the adherents of that tradition have been advised to remove themselves from the world, either as ascetics or in a monastic community. The Bahá'í teachings advise against both of these aspects of the path.

Bahá'u'lláh reveals that the use of a human spiritual guide is a dangerous practice. While undoubtedly genuine spiritual leaders do exist, many are also fraudulent or lead people into error. God has ordained that the day of the religious leader or professional - whether shaykh, molla, priest, guru, or monk - is over. Each individual now has the obligation of reading the scriptures for himself or herself and understanding the spiritual path for himself or herself.

Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people. By their sanction and authority, every Prophet of God hath drunk from the chalice of sacrifice, and winged His flight unto the heights of glory. What unspeakable cruelties they that have occupied the seats of authority and learning have inflicted upon the true Monarchs of the world, those Gems of divine virtue! Content with a transitory dominion, they have deprived themselves of an everlasting sovereignty.

Thus, their eyes beheld not the light of the countenance of the Well-Beloved, nor did their ears hearken unto the sweet melodies of the Bird of Desire. For this reason, in all sacred books mention hath been made of the divines of every age.(20)

Bahá'u'lláh reveals that while monasteries and spiritual asceticism may have had some role to play in the past, these are no longer appropriate today.

The pious deeds of the monks and priests among the followers of the Spirit [Jesus] - upon Him be the peace of God - are remembered in His presence. In this Day, however, let them give up the life of seclusion and direct their steps towards the open world and busy themselves with that which will profit themselves and others.(21)

God states that this physical world, far from obstructing us in our spiritual quest, has, in fact, been created specifically to help us:

O Son of Bounty! Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the

clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things. Thus, ere thou didst issue from thy mother's womb, I destined for thee two founts of gleaming milk, eyes to watch over thee, and hearts to love thee. Out of My loving-kindness, 'neath the shade of My mercy I nurtured thee, and guarded thee by the essence of My grace and favor. And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals. And yet heedless thou didst remain, and when fully grown, thou didst neglect all My bounties and occupied thyself with thine idle imaginings, in such wise that thou didst become wholly forgetful, and, turning away from the portals of the Friend didst abide within the courts of My enemy.(22)

The scriptures thus pictures this physical world as a giant classroom where human beings are obtaining spiritual education. We have not, however, been left to our own devices but have had spiritual educators, the founders of the world religions who give us the instructions we need to progress spiritually. Bahá'u'lláh reveals that we can best achieve this progress by living in the world not seeking to cut ourselves off from it. While a certain amount of removal from the world may be necessary in order to pray and meditate, which all religions tell us is important, we must also engage in the world so that the spiritual qualities we are seeking to acquire may be perfected. How will we know if we have acquired such spiritual qualities as love, justice, trustworthiness, and truthfulness, unless we live in the world and put ourselves to the test in the concrete situations of daily life?

Part of our spiritual progress is the spiritual discipline of saying daily prayers and meditating, observing an annual fast, and other laws. This pattern of life keeps us in touch with our true spiritual reality and connects us with the spiritual world which is the source of our strength. Such laws have been given in every religion. Bahá'u'lláh has revealed similar laws (see Bahá'í Laws).

Lastly, Bahá'u'lláh has given us a substitute for the spiritual communities of other religions, to take the place of monasteries and communities led by abbots, shaykhs and gurus. He has created the Bahá'í community, a structure that involves every one in such activities as consultation and united action in service to others, activities which help us in acquiring the virtues that we should seek to acquire (see What we must become). The ideal of unity and the mechanisms of consultation (see Consultation) in the Bahá'í community compel us to recognise faults of egotism and arrogance within ourselves and to try to remedy these. The ideal of consultation requires us to perfect within ourselves the qualities of patience, forbearance, justice and other virtues. Within the Bahá'í community, spiritual development becomes the responsibility and prerogative of everyone not a select group of monks or religious professionals.

Within the Bahá'í community structure, authority and obedience do not go to individuals such as mollahs, shaykhs, priests and gurus, they go to elected institutions. For spiritual guidance, Bahá'ís are advised to take advantage of the mechanisms of consultation so as to obtain the collective wisdom of a group of people and not the whims and comparatively limited knowledge of a single individual.

NOTES

1. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 106, pp. 213
2. Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, no. 13
3. Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, no. 56
4. Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, no. 62
5. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 45
6. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 20
7. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 13
8. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 40
9. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 14
10. Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, no. 15
11. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 7
12. Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words, no. 5
13. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 114, pp. 237-8
14. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words, no. 26
15. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Iqan, pp. 192-3
16. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Iqan, pp. 193-4
17. Bahá'u'lláh, Seven Valleys and Four Valleys, pp. 8, 11
18. `Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 178
19. Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words 51

20. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Iqan, pp. 15-16

21. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh,
p. 24

22. Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words 29

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