

Psychology and Knowledge of Self

by Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

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From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

1. The first Taraz and the first effulgence which hath dawned from the horizon of the Mother Book is that man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty . . .
(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1982), pp. 34-35)
2. True loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self.
(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 156)
3. Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men, and have evinced such power as is born of God and such might as only the Eternal can reveal.
(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), sec. XXVII, p. 68)
4. Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self . . .
(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. XLIII, p. 94)
5. And now, concerning thy question regarding the creation of man. Know thou that all men have been created in the nature made by God, the Guardian, the Self-Subsisting. Unto each one hath been prescribed a pre-ordained measure, as decreed in God's mighty and guarded Tablets. All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify this truth . . .
(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. LXXVII, p. 149)
6. Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributed are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery." Manifold are the verses that have been repeatedly revealed in all the Heavenly Books and the Holy Scriptures, expressive of this most subtle and lofty theme. Even as He hath

revealed: “We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves.” Again He saith: “And also in your own selves: will ye not, then, behold the signs of God?” And yet again He revealeth: “And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves.” In this connection, He Who is the eternal King—may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him—hath spoken: “He hath known God who hath known himself.”

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. XC, pp. 177-78)

7. The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. CVI, p. 213)

8. Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom . . .

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. CXXII, p. 260)

9. From the exalted source, and out of the essence of His favour and bounty He hath entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation . . .

There can be no doubt whatever that, in consequence of the efforts which every man may consciously exert and as a result of the exertion of his own spiritual faculties, this mirror can be so cleansed from the dross of earthly defilements and purged from satanic fancies as to be able to draw nigh unto the meads of eternal holiness and attain the courts of everlasting fellowship. . .

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. CXXIV, p. 262)

10. Whoso ariseth among you to teach the Cause of his Lord, let him, before all else, teach his own self, that his speech may attract the hearts of them that hear him. Unless he teacheth his own self, the words of his mouth will not influence the heart of the seeker. Take heed, O people, lest ye be of them that give good counsel to others but forget to follow it themselves . . .

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. CXXVIII, p. 277)

11. Blessed art thou for having utterly abolished the idol of self and of vain imagination, and for having rent asunder the veil of idle fancy, through the power of the might of thy Lord, the Supreme Protector, the Almighty, the one Beloved . . .

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. CXXXV, p. 291)

12. O My servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves—a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. Ye would find yourselves independent of all else but Me, and would perceive, with your inner and outer eye, and as manifest as the revelation of My effulgent Name, the seas of My loving-kindness and bounty moving within you. Suffer not your idle fancies, your evil passions, your insincerity and blindness of heart to dim the luster, or stain the sanctity, of so lofty a station . . .

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec. CLIII, p. 326-27)

13. . . . certain invalid souls have confined the lands of knowledge within the wall of self and passion, and clouded them with ignorance and blindness, and have been veiled from the light of the mystic sun and the mysteries of the Eternal Beloved; they have strayed afar from the jewelled wisdom of the lucid Faith of the Lord of Messengers, have been shut out of the sanctuary of the All-Beauteous One, and banished from the Ka'bih of splendour. Such is the worth of the people of this age!

(The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986), pp. 19-20)

From the Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

14. Today the confirmations of the Kingdom of Abha are with those who renounce themselves, forget their own opinions, cast aside personalities and are thinking of the welfare of others. Whosoever has lost himself has found the universe and the inhabitants thereof. Whosoever is occupied with himself is wandering in the desert of heedlessness and regret. The “master-key” to self-mastery is self-forgetting. The road to the palace of life is through the path of renunciation.

(Star of the West, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 348)

From letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

15. . . . self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í writings; one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as “he hath known God who hath know himself”, etc. The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection

(10 December 1947 to an individual believer)

16. Life is a constant struggle, not only against forces around us, but above all against our own “ego”. We can never afford to rest on our oars, for if we do, we soon see ourselves carried downstream again. Many of those who drift away from the Cause do so for the reason that they had ceased to go on developing. They became complacent, or indifferent, and consequently ceased to draw the spiritual strength and vitality from the Cause which they should have. Sometimes, of course, people fail because of a test they just do not meet, and often our severest tests come from each other. Certainly the believers should try to avert such things, and if they happen, remedy them through love. Generally speaking nine-tenths of the friends' troubles are because they don't do the Bahá'í thing, in relation to each other, to the administrative bodies or in their personal lives.

(8 January 11949 to an individual believer, published in Principles of Bahá'í Administration: A Compilation (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), pp. 87-88)

From letters written by or on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

17. Your letter of 4 December reports certain pilgrim's notes which have attributed to the beloved Guardian unfavourable comments on psychiatry and psychology. For your assistance we offer an excerpt from a letter from the Guardian published in U.S. Bahá'í News No. 236, October 1950, in which it is stated:

There is nothing in our teachings about Freud and his method. Psychiatric treatment in general is no doubt an important contribution to medicine, but we must believe it is still a growing science rather than a perfected science. As Bahá'u'lláh has urged us to avail ourselves of the help of good physicians Bahá'ís are certainly not only free to turn to psychiatry for assistance but should, when available, do so. This doesn't mean psychiatrists are always wise or always right; it means we are free to avail ourselves of the best medicine has to offer us.

Doubtless what the Guardian has said about psychiatry may also in general be said about psychology, including child psychology, but we have not found any texts to support this view.

(18 February 1972 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

18. In all this we have been speaking about the attitude that Bahá'ís should have towards the law of Bahá'u'lláh. You, however, as a doctor working mainly as a counsellor in family and sexual problems, will mostly be concerned with advising non-Bahá'ís who do not accept, and see no reason to follow, the laws of Bahá'u'lláh. You are already a qualified practitioner in your field, and no doubt

you give advice on the basis of what you have learned from study and experience—a whole fabric of concepts about the human mind, its growth, development and proper functioning, which you have learned and evolved without reference to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Now, as a Bahá'í, you know that what Bahá'u'lláh teaches about the purpose of human life, the nature of the human being and the proper conduct of human life, is divinely revealed and therefore true. However, it will inevitably take time for you not only to study the Bahá'í teachings so that you clearly understand them, but also to work out how they modify your professional concepts. This is, of course, not an unusual predicament for a scientist. How often in the course of research is a factor discovered which requires a revolution in thinking over a wide field of human endeavour. You must be guided in each case by your own professional knowledge and judgement as illuminated by your growing knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings; undoubtedly you will find that your own understanding of the human problems dealt with in your work will change and develop and you will see new and improved ways of helping the people who come to you. Psychology is still a very young and inexact science, and as the years go by Bahá'í psychologists, who know from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the true pattern of human life, will be able to make great strides in the development of this science, and will help profoundly in the alleviation of human suffering.

(12 January 1973 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

19. As for the system called individual psychology, there is nothing in the Writings which supports any particular theory of that science . . . Doubtless, in time, Bahá'ís of talent and scholarly bent who will have access to the full Texts of the Holy Writings will effect great progress in the development of psychology, as in other sciences, for the benefit of all mankind.

(21 June 1976 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

20. The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 24 April on the matter of some modern concepts of psychology and has asked us to transmit its comments.

Your concern about the overemphasis upon the self and ego echoes a central theme of the Manifestation Himself, and it is the subject of many allusions in His Writings wherein, for example, He speaks of “the evil of egotism” and of those who are “captives of egotism.” The Master refers to “the rust of egotism” and tells of “. . . the subtlety of the ego of man. It is the Tempter (the subtle serpent of the mind) and the poor soul not entirely emancipated from its suggestions is deceived until entirely severed from all save God.” In another passage He says: “As long as the ego is subjected to carnal desires, sin and error continue.” And He promised that with assiduous effort “Man will become free from egotism; he will be released from the material world . . .”

Extracts from letters written on behalf of the beloved Guardian by his secretaries will be most helpful in clarifying certain of your questions.

Regarding the question you asked in your letter: The only people who are truly free of the “dross of self” are the Prophets, for to be free of one's ego is a hallmark of perfection. We humans are never going to become perfect, for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter. However, we must constantly mount higher, seek to be more perfect.

The ego is the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires. By obeying the laws of God, seeking to live the life laid down in our teachings, and prayer and struggle, we can subdue our egos. We call people “saints” who have achieved the highest degree of mastery over their ego.

There is no contradiction between “Gleanings” p. 66 and p. 262. In one place He says the mirror will never be free from dross, in the other He says it will be “so cleansed . . . as to be able,” etc. It is relative thing; perfection will never be reached, but great, and ever greater, progress can be made.

(To an individual believer dated 8 January 1949)

The believers, as we all know, should endeavour to set such an example in their personal lives and conduct that others will feel impelled to embrace a Faith which reforms human character. However, unfortunately, not everyone achieves easily and

rapidly the victory over self. What every believer, new or old, should realize is that the Cause has the spiritual power to re-create us if we make the effort to let that power influence us, and the greatest help in this respect is prayer. We must supplicate Bahá'u'lláh to assist us to overcome the failings in our own characters, and also exert our own will power in mastering ourselves.

(To an individual believer dated 27 January 1945)

Regarding the points you refer to in your letter: the complete and entire elimination of the ego would imply perfection—which man can never completely attain—but the ego can and should be ever increasingly subordinated to the enlightened soul of man. This is what spiritual progress implies.

(To an individual believer dated 14 December 1941)

For further assistance in this complex matter of self and its attributes you may find it helpful to consult Bahá'ís who have been trained in psychology and psychiatry and who may be able to elucidate the differences between the current scientific concepts of the mind and its functions and those concepts which emerge from the Holy Writings.

The Writings are rich in allusions to the individual and his integrity, but also to the social disciplines based upon the moral precepts of the Faith, precepts which each of us must heed lest we fail to reflect in our lives those virtues propounded by the great Teacher for our day, and hence fail to meet our true destinies as spiritual beings.

(4 August 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

21. Regarding your request to know what concepts of psychology are valid according to Bahá'í standards, the House of Justice suggests that an intensive study of Part IV of “Some Answered Questions”, particularly chapter XLVIII on “The Difference which exists between Man and the Animal”, will help you to view, in their proper perspective, any concepts being taught in your doctoral program. As a Bahá'í you will be able to detect when a concept ignores the spiritual part of a human being.

(14 September 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

22. Your inquiries into matters of mental health are timely, for of all medical science studies, remedies for disorders of the brain and mind are possibly the most important for mankind. In a letter written on behalf of the beloved Guardian, which refers to Freudian methods, it is stated that “psychiatric treatment . . . is still a growing rather than a perfected science,” hence requires contemporary disciplined study. In another letter he provides guidance by suggesting that, despite the many mental diseases and troubles of the present day, the power in the Faith is such that it can sustain Bahá'ís, whatever their ailments may be, on a much higher level than is given to others who are denied its healing grace.

(8 July 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

23. You are advised to bear in mind the fact that mental illness is not spiritual, although its effects may hinder and be a burden to an individual who is striving toward spiritual progress. In a letter written on behalf of the Guardian is found the following passage: “You must always remember, no matter how much you or others may be afflicted with mental troubles . . . that your spirit is healthy, near to our Beloved, and will in the next world enjoy a happy and normal state of soul.”

The House of Justice advises you to persevere in your efforts to secure good medical assistance, from psychiatrists or others, and to follow the advice of these specialists. It also suggests that through daily prayer, and specially by observing the daily obligatory prayers, through study of the Writings, through active participation in teaching efforts and in the activities of the community, and through constant effort to sacrifice for the Faith you love so well, you will obtain a spiritual counterpart to the professional help you will receive from the experts. In general, the best results for the healing process are found when the spiritual approach is combined with the remedy offered by competent doctors.

(26 July 1988 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

24. Regarding your question about the term “scientific system of healing”, that phrase was first used by the beloved Guardian; subsequently the Universal House of Justice was asked whether the meaning

of “scientific” might not vary from country to country. In response, the House of Justice concurred that the term “scientific” is not fixed, its connotative meanings may vary.

What the friends must try and grasp, however, is that the Bahá'í Faith at this stage in its evolution cannot place its seal of approval on any one of the plethora of healing techniques. In the rising Bahá'í society of the future, it may then be possible to make definitive judgement or to evolve practices more directly predicated on the Bahá'í Writings. However, there is at present enough development in the medical field and a wide record of experience to enable a person after reasonable investigation to choose a suitable doctor or medical institution to deal with a case of illness.

The basic instruction in the Writings to one who is ill is to find a doctor in whom confidence can be placed, to follow his advice and to put one's trust in God through prayer. Of course, no healing technique which would lead the practitioner or the patient to contradict the Laws of the Faith is acceptable. We must be careful not to fall prey to quackery or to unnecessarily endanger the lives and health of either ourselves or of the loved ones with whose welfare we have been entrusted because of an arbitrary distrust of scientific methods of healing. If one feels that one is unable to make valid distinctions, it would be well to turn to others for advice, whether to Assemblies or to individuals possessing good judgement.

(10 May 1990 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

25. The House of Justice is pleased that you are making a determined effort to resolve the problems in your marriage and that you are consulting with a professional therapist. You should feel under no obligation to continue to consult with someone in whom you have lost confidence or who you believe may cause you to act contrary to the teachings of the Faith. However, it should be understood that counselling of the type you are receiving may cause a variety of emotions to surface as a normal part of the therapy. Individuals sometimes feel close attachment to their therapist or experience other feelings which might be unsettling because they are unexpected; such emotions may simply represent a beginning of helpful change and need prove no danger to one's own moral standards.

(7 September 1990 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)