

ON REINCARNATION AND THE NATURE AND PROGRESS OF THE SOUL

EXTRACTS FROM THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS

by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice
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From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

1. Thou hast asked Me concerning the nature of the soul. Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him. If it be faithful to God, it will reflect His light, and will, eventually, return unto Him. If it fail, however, in its allegiance to its Creator, it will become a victim to self and passion, and will, in the end, sink in their depths.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), pp. 158–159)

2. Thou hast, moreover, asked Me concerning the state of the soul after its separation from the body. Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly, return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved. By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue describe. The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Consider how meal needeth leaven to be leavened with. Those souls that are the symbols of detachment are the leaven of the world. Meditate on this, and be of the thankful.

In several of Our Tablets We have referred to this theme, and have set forth the various stages in the development of the soul. Verily I say, the human soul is exalted above all egress and regress. It is still, and yet it soareth; it moveth, and yet it is still. It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end. Behold how the dream thou hast dreamed is, after the lapse of many years, re-enacted before thine eyes. Consider how strange is the mystery of the world that appeareth to thee in thy dream. Ponder in thine heart upon the unsearchable wisdom of God, and meditate on its manifold revelations....

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 161–162)

3. O My servants! Sorrow not if, in these days and on this earthly plane, things contrary to your wishes have been ordained and manifested by God, for days of blissful joy, of heavenly delight, are assuredly in store for you. Worlds, holy and spiritually glorious, will be unveiled to your eyes. You are destined by Him, in this world and hereafter, to partake of their benefits, to share in their joys, and to obtain a portion of their sustaining grace. To each and every one of them you will, no doubt, attain.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 329)

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

4. Thou didst write of reincarnation. A belief in reincarnation goeth far back into the ancient history of almost all peoples, and was held even by the philosophers of Greece, the Roman sages, the ancient Egyptians, and the great Assyrians. Nevertheless such superstitions and sayings are but absurdities in the sight of God.

The major argument of the reincarnationists was this, that according to the justice of God, each must receive his due: whenever a man is afflicted with some calamity, for example, this is because of some wrong he hath committed. But take a child that is still in its mother’s womb, the embryo but newly formed, and that child is blind, deaf, lame, defective—what sin hath such a child committed, to deserve its afflictions? They answer that, although to outward seeming the child, still in the womb, is guilty of no sin—nevertheless he perpetrated some wrong when in his previous form, and thus he came to deserve his punishment.

These individuals, however, have overlooked the following point. If creation went forward according to only one rule, how could the all-encompassing Power make Itself felt? How could the Almighty be the One Who “doeth as He pleaseth and ordaineth as He willeth”?¹

Briefly, a return is indeed referred to in the Holy Scriptures, but by this is meant the return of the qualities, conditions, effects, perfections, and inner realities of the lights which recur in every dispensation. The reference is not to specific, individual souls and identities.

It may be said, for instance, that this lamplight is last night’s come back again, or that last year’s rose hath returned to the garden this year. Here the reference is not to the individual reality, the fixed identity, the specialized being of that other rose, rather doth it mean that the qualities, the distinctive characteristics of that other light, that other flower, are present now, in these. Those perfections, that is, those graces and gifts of a former springtime are back again this year. We say, for example, that this fruit is the same as last year’s; but we are thinking only of the delicacy, bloom and freshness, and the sweet taste of it; for it is obvious that that impregnable centre of reality, that specific identity, can never return.

What peace, what ease and comfort did the Holy Ones of God ever discover during Their sojourn in this nether world, that They should continually seek to come back and live this life again? Doth not a single turn at this anguish, these afflictions, these calamities, these body blows, these dire straits, suffice, that They should wish for repeated visits to the life of this world? This cup was not so sweet that one would care to drink of it a second time.

Therefore do the lovers of the Abhá Beauty wish for no other recompense but to reach that station where they may gaze upon Him in the Realm of Glory, and they walk no other path save over desert sands of longing for those exalted heights. They seek that ease and solace which will abide forever, and those bestowals that are sanctified beyond the understanding of the worldly mind.

When thou lookest about thee with a perceptive eye, thou wilt note that on this dusty earth all humankind are suffering. Here no man is at rest as a reward for what he hath performed in former lives; nor is there anyone so blissful as seemingly to pluck the fruit of bygone anguish. And if a human life, with its spiritual being, were limited to this earthly span, then what would be the harvest of creation? Indeed, what would be the effects and the outcomes of Divinity Itself? Were such a notion true, then all created things, all contingent realities, and this whole world of being—all would be meaningless. God forbid that one should hold to such a fiction and gross error.

For just as the effects and the fruitage of the uterine life are not to be found in that dark and narrow place, and only when the child is transferred to this wide earth do the benefits and uses of growth and development in that previous world become revealed—so likewise reward and punishment, heaven and hell, requital and retribution for actions done in this present life, will stand revealed in that other world beyond. And just as, if human life in the womb were limited to that uterine world, existence there would be nonsensical, irrelevant—so too if the life of this world, the deeds here

1 cf. Qur’án 3:35; 2:254.

done and their fruitage, did not come forth in the world beyond, the whole process would be irrational and foolish.

Know then that the Lord God possesseth invisible realms which the human intellect can never hope to fathom nor the mind of man conceive. When once thou hast cleansed the channel of thy spiritual sense from the pollution of this worldly life, then wilt thou breathe in the sweet scents of holiness that blow from the blissful bowers of that heavenly land.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), pp. 183–185)

5. Thou hast asked concerning reincarnation: Reincarnation as understood by the people, is untrue; but in the Gospel, “return” is referred to, and that is the return of qualities² and not the return of entities. This matter is explained in detail in the Book of Ighan, which is translated and published. Study that Book....

Thou hast asked concerning the spirits of men: They are not at all annihilated—they are immortal.³ The spirits of heavenly souls will find eternal life, that is, they will attain the highest and most great stations of perfection; but the spirits of the heedless souls, although they are eternal, yet they are in a world of imperfection, concealment and ignorance. This is a concise answer. Contemplate and meditate upon it, in order that thou mayest comprehend the reality of the mysteries in detail. For instance: No matter how much the mineral has an existence and life, yet in comparison to man, it is entirely non-existent and deprived of life. For where man is translated from life to death, his comparative station will be that of a mineral existence.

(Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. III (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1930), pp. 549–550)

6. With the soul it is different. The soul is not a combination of elements, it is not composed of many atoms, it is one indivisible substance and therefore eternal. It is entirely out of the order of the physical creation; it is immortal!

(Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911–1912 (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 91)

7. Thus it is evident that movement is essential to all existence. All material things progress to a certain point, then begin to decline. This is the law which governs the whole physical creation. Now let us consider the soul. We have seen that movement is essential to existence; nothing that has life is without motion. All creation, whether of the mineral, vegetable or animal kingdom, is compelled to obey the law of motion; it must either ascend or descend. But with the human soul, there is no decline. Its only movement is towards perfection; growth and progress alone constitute the motion of the soul.

Divine perfection is infinite, therefore the progress of the soul is also infinite. From the very birth of a human being the soul progresses, the intellect grows and knowledge increases. When the body dies the soul lives on. All the differing degrees of created physical beings are limited, but the soul is limitless!

(Paris Talks, p. 89)

8. The rational soul—that is to say, the human spirit—has neither entered this body nor existed through it; so after the disintegration of the composition of the body, how should it be in need of a substance through which it may exist? On the contrary, the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists. The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance, veiled and deprived from beholding the signs of God.

(Some Answered Questions (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), pp. 239–240)

9. “Progress” is the expression of spirit in the world of matter. The intelligence of man, his reasoning powers, his knowledge, his scientific achievements, all these being manifestations of the spirit, partake of the inevitable law of spiritual progress and are, therefore, of necessity, immortal.

My hope for you is that you will progress in the world of spirit, as well as in the world of matter;

² i.e., the return of the qualities, powers and attributes in another human being.

³ i.e., in the sense of continued existence after the death of the body.

that your intelligence will develop, your knowledge will augment, and your understanding be widened.

(Paris Talks, p. 90)

10. As to the soul of man after death, it remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body, and after it is freed from the body it remains plunged in the ocean of God's Mercy.

From the moment the soul leaves the body and arrives in the Heavenly World, its evolution is spiritual, and that evolution is: *The approaching unto God*.

(Paris Talks, p. 66)

11. In another place He [Christ] said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The meaning of this is that if man is a captive of nature, he is like unto an animal because he is only a body physically born—that is, he belongs to the world of matter and remains subject to the law and control of nature. But if he is baptized with the Holy Spirit, if he is freed from the bondage of nature, released from animalistic tendencies and advanced in the human realm, he is fitted to enter into the divine Kingdom. The world of the Kingdom is the realm of divine bestowals and the bounties of God. It is attainment of the highest virtues of humanity; it is nearness to God; it is capacity to receive the bounties of the ancient Lord. When man advances to this station, he attains the second birth. Before his first or physical birth man was in the world of the matrix. He had no knowledge of this world; his eyes could not see; his ears could not hear. When he was born from the world of the matrix, he beheld another world. The sun was shining with its splendors, the moon radiant in the heavens, the stars twinkling in the expansive firmament, the seas surging, trees verdant and green, all kinds of creatures enjoying life here, infinite bounties prepared for him. In the world of the matrix none of these things existed. In that world he had no knowledge of this vast range of existence; nay, rather, he would have denied the reality of this world. But after his birth he began to open his eyes and behold the wonders of this illimitable universe. Similarly, as long as man is in the matrix of the human world, as long as he is the captive of nature, he is out of touch and without knowledge of the universe of the Kingdom. If he attains rebirth while in the world of nature, he will become informed of the divine world. He will observe that another and a higher world exists. Wonderful bounties descend; eternal life awaits; everlasting glory surrounds him. All the signs of reality and greatness are there. He will see the lights of God. All these experiences will be his when he is born out of the world of nature into the divine world. Therefore, for the perfect man there are two kinds of birth: the first, physical birth, is from the matrix of the mother; the second, or spiritual birth, is from the world of nature. In both he is without knowledge of the new world of existence he is entering. Therefore, rebirth means his release from the captivity of nature, freedom from attachment to this mortal and material life. This is the second, or spiritual, birth of which Jesus Christ spoke in the Gospels.

(The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912 (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 304–305)

From letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers

12. As to your question concerning reincarnation: The Bahá'í view of the life after death can in no way be reconciled with certain Indian and Sufi doctrines which teach that the human soul can pass from one body to another. This doctrine, known as metempsychosis, is not only too materialistic in its view, but is purely imaginary and fatalistic. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that after its separation from the body, the human soul begins to lead a new life, of which we can have no definite knowledge, in the same way as the child in the embryo cannot visualize the type of life it is destined to lead in this world.

(10 August 1934)

13. The Bahá'í view of "reincarnation" is essentially different from the Hindu conception. The Bahá'ís believe in the return of the attributes and qualities, but maintain that the essence or the reality of

things cannot be made to return. Every being keeps its own individuality, but some of his qualities can be transmitted. The doctrine of metempsychosis upheld by the Hindus is fallacious.

(27 March 1938)

14. Evolution in the life of the individual starts with the formation of the human embryo and passes through various stages, and even continues after death in another form. The human spirit is capable of infinite development.

Man's identity or rather his individuality is never lost. His reality as a person remains intact throughout the various stages of his development. He does not pre-exist in any form before coming into this world....

The passage on page 156 of "Gleanings" regarding the evolution of the soul after death clearly proves that the soul after its separation from the body keeps its individuality and its consciousness both in relation to other souls and to the human beings in this world.

(26 November 1939)

15. No Revelation from God has ever taught reincarnation; this is a man-made conception. The soul of man comes into being at conception; we do not believe it goes on to another planet.

(1 April 1946)

16. Regarding your question about reincarnation: we Bahá'ís do not believe that one individual soul keeps returning to this earthly life in different bodies. This is a very ancient belief, and based on a great truth—namely that the soul does go on developing and unfolding and returning towards its Creator. But the concept of its returning to this physical world is erroneous, and an outgrowth of man-made doctrines which have grown up about the fundamental concept of the progress of the soul. It would be like putting the child over and over again back into the world of the womb. It is unnecessary; but from state to state spiritually, after death, the soul does go on and go higher, so to speak.

(26 December 1948)

17. We know from His Teachings that reincarnation does not exist. We come on to this planet once only. Our life here is like the baby in the womb of its mother, which develops in that state what is necessary for its entire life after it is born. The same is true of us. Spiritually we must develop here what we will require for the life after death. In that future life, God, through His mercy, can help us to evolve characteristics which we neglected to develop while we were on this earthly plane. It is not necessary for us to come back and be born into another body in order to advance spiritually and grow closer to God.

This is the Bahá'í Teaching, and this is what the followers of Bahá'u'lláh must accept, regardless of what experiences other people may feel they have. You yourself must surely know that modern psychology has taught that the capacity of the human mind for believing what it imagines is almost infinite. Because people think they have a certain type of experience, think they remember something of a previous life, does not mean they actually had the experience, or existed previously. The power of their mind would be quite sufficient to make them believe firmly such a thing had happened.

We must use the Writings of the Prophets as our measurement. If Bahá'u'lláh had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices; if He had believed that reincarnation was a fact, He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race.

We must turn our faces away from these things, and toward the actual practice of His Teachings in our everyday life through our Bahá'í Administration, and in our contact with other people and the examples we give.

(22 April 1954)