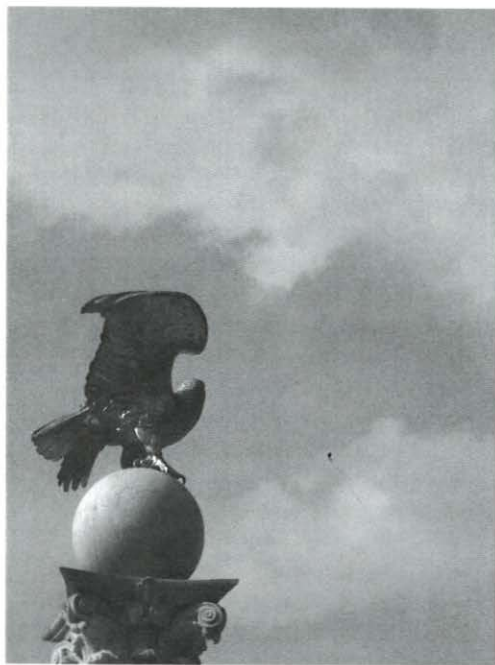


The Purpose of Creation



Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, made the staggering claim that He was the Great World Teacher promised throughout history in the scriptures of the world's religions, and that the application of His teachings to the life of society would unlock humanity's true potential and bring about the long-awaited age of peace and justice for all mankind. He called upon the political and religious leaders of His time to investigate His teachings and to judge for themselves whether or not they might benefit mankind, and in response, He was banished from His homeland and imprisoned for life. In spite of the opposition He faced, however, His teachings have spread to all four corners of the earth and a global community bearing His name, the Bahá'í Community, has emerged to continue the promotion and practice of His teachings. In the lives of millions of Bahá'ís around the world, these teachings have demonstrated their efficacy in creating loving relationships and supportive communities, and it is with the hope that they can be of benefit to all humanity that the Bahá'í Community continues to share them and strives to practice them.

PART I The Purpose of Creation

Throughout His life, Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly and emphatically declared that the purpose of our lives - indeed the purpose of all existence - is love. '*Ye were created,*' He wrote, '*to show love one to another.*' His teachings shed much light on the nature and practice of love, but in order to understand those teachings we must first begin by examining His teachings on that great and ancient mystery which is the original source of all that exists, including love itself.

Bahá'u'lláh described that great 'mystery of mysteries', which throughout history has been called God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahman or the 'Great Spirit', as an 'Unknowable Essence' whose nature and reality is beyond the grasp of human comprehension. This 'Unknowable Essence' has existed eternally, outside the realm of time and space, with neither beginning nor end, and completely independent of the laws of our universe. Like a master painter who holds absolute control over his painting and paints it as he desires, the Creator of the universe holds complete dominion over His creation and controls it according to His will. Just as the painting has no access to the world of its painter, neither can man's heart nor mind ever have access to the realm of his Creator. '*He is, and hath ever been,*' Bahá'u'lláh wrote, '*veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in*

His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.'²

And yet, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that this 'Unknowable Essence' we call God has created the universe and everything in it in order to be known. Indeed, the very purpose for which man has been brought into being, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, is that he may enter into a relationship with his Creator - a relationship characterised by knowledge and love. '*The purpose of God in creating man,*' He writes, '*hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence.*'³ Speaking about this relationship, Bahá'u'lláh's Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, said that there are four kinds of love, all of which originate from God.

The First Love

The first kind of love is the love of the Creator for His creation, that is, the love which God has for humanity. In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh, speaking in the voice of God, writes, '*O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.*'⁴ This love is the motive force that has caused the universe and all its beings to come into existence. It is the power that sustains the laws of nature and carries forward the evolution and development of all life. It is this love that causes the sun to radiate its light and heat, the clouds to send down their rain and the trees to produce their

¹ Lawh-i-Hikmat, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 138

² Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XIX, p. 47

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXIX, p. 70

⁴ The Hidden Words, Part 1 No. 4

fruit. And as well as providing the means for our physical development, this love also provides for our spiritual growth. It touches our lives in a myriad different ways - through unique personal experiences which propel our own growth, through the unexplainable coincidences of life that awaken us to spiritual reality, and, in its greatest expression, through the revelation of Divine Teachings which are given to humanity as a gift from God through the Intermediaries of His Prophets. We may call this first kind of love 'Grace'.

The Second Love

The second kind of love is the love of the creation for its Creator, that is, the love which God wants humanity to have for Him. This love is the attraction of the human heart towards the attributes of God - towards truth, beauty, justice and all things noble. It is the natural longing of every soul to attain spiritual fulfilment through communion with its Maker. Again in *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh writes, '*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.*'¹ Since God does not impose His love upon us, it is only by willingly opening up our hearts to Him and loving Him that we can receive and enjoy the love He has for us. This second kind of love we may call 'Faith' and its importance can scarcely be stressed enough. Indeed, so important is the love of man for God that Bahá'u'lláh

refers to it as '*the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation*'² and He enjoins upon His followers to recite, in private, once a day, the statement: '*I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.*'³

This leads us to a striking paradox: if the purpose of our lives is to know and to love our Creator, and if our Creator is an 'Unknowable Essence', inaccessible to human mind and heart, how then can we come to know Him? How can the painting, so to speak, know and love the Painter? The answer lies in a phenomenon which Bahá'u'lláh calls the 'Manifestation of God'.

The Manifestation of God

As has been mentioned, the love of God touches our lives in many ways but the greatest manifestation of God's love for man is the revelation of Divine Teachings - teachings which promote humanity's spiritual growth - through those extraordinary and mysterious figures known as Prophets. These figures, who Bahá'u'lláh refers to as 'Manifestations of God', appear among humanity from age to age and act as pure channels through which the grace of God flows into our world. '*Since,*' He says, '*there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation... He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.*'⁴

¹ The Hidden Words, Part 1 No. 5

² Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 65

³ Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, CLXXXI, p. 314

⁴ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 66

The Prophet or 'Manifestation of God' lives among us as flesh and blood, but His soul, unlike ordinary human beings, is the perfect expression of every noble quality. Like a polished mirror reflecting the light and heat of the sun, the Manifestation of God is a perfectly pure Soul, reflecting the attributes of God in their utmost splendour. And although the Manifestation of God is not the Unknowable Essence of God, He is, within the limitations of human reality (within the painting, so to speak), the most perfect Being with which a human soul can enter into a relationship: He is God revealed to man. Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'As a token of His mercy... and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself... They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory.'*¹

We cannot know the Unknowable Essence of God. To truly know and love God, therefore, is to know and love His attributes - to love truth and beauty, knowledge and wisdom, compassion and mercy, justice and grace. And since the Manifestation of God is the perfect embodiment of all of God's attributes,

to know and to love God means to know His Manifestation and to enter into a relationship with Him.

Within this relationship the Manifestation of God educates humanity about spiritual reality and provides a creative impulse for the advancement of civilization. He reveals to mankind the Will of God, ordains laws to secure the peace and well-being of society, and brings teachings to promote the spiritual growth of all human beings. *'Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth,'* Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'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.'*²

As human civilization advances to increasing levels of complexity, the application of Divine Teachings to the life of humanity becomes accordingly more complex. For example, the application of justice in the context of a modern global society requires more complex measures than those required in a primitive tribal community. *'The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions,'* Bahá'u'lláh says, *'can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require.'*³ Furthermore, as civilization advances and man's understanding of scientific reality increases, so too does his capacity to understand spiritual reality. For this reason, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the Manifestation of God 'returns' from age to age to transmit to

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh XXI, p. 49

² Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh XXVII, p. 66

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh CVI, p. 213

humanity Divine Teachings in accordance with the requirements of the time, and to manifest God's attributes in our world with increasing levels of intensity and magnitude. *'All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might,'* He says, *'hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.'*¹ Each of the Founders of the Great World Religions, Bahá'u'lláh regarded as a Manifestation of God. Thus, in the Bahá'í Teachings, Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh Himself are all revered as Manifestations of the same Divine Spirit connecting man with God and carrying forward human civilization. *'All the Prophets of God,'* He wrote, *'abide in the same tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech, and proclaim the same Faith.'*² *'...any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world.'*³

The appearance of the Manifestation of God is the greatest expression of God's love for man. *'It is,'* Bahá'u'lláh says, *'God's supreme testimony, the clearest evidence of His truth, the sign of His consummate bounty, the token of His all-encompassing mercy, the proof of His most*

*loving providence, the symbol of His most perfect grace.'*⁴ And the carrying out of the Teachings of the Manifestation of God constitute the highest expression of man's love for God. This 'second love' - the love of man for God - is summarised in the opening paragraph of Bahá'u'lláh's *Most Holy Book*. He writes, *'The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Day Spring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof, hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.'*⁵

'Observe My commandments,' Bahá'u'lláh writes in that same Book, *'for the love of My beauty.'*⁶

The Third Love

The third kind of love is the love of the creation for the creation, that is, the love which God wants human beings to have for each other. This love is attained, in its truest form, through man's recognition of the Manifestation of God. As a man's love for God's

¹ The Hidden Words, Part 1 No. 67

² Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 104

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXXIV, p. 79

⁴ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XCV, p. 195

⁵ Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 1

⁶ Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 4

Manifestation grows, so too does his love for God's creation, above all for his fellow man. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said of this kind of love, *'This love is attained through the knowledge of God, so that men see the Divine Love reflected in the heart. Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul, and finding this point of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love.'*¹ This third kind of love, which emerges as a natural by-product of Faith, we may call 'Unity'.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also spoke about a common notion of love between human beings which, although upheld in many modern societies as ideal, is in reality weak and changeable, and which, rather than leading to true unity, often leads to estrangement and disunity. Of this phenomenon, He said: *'But the love which sometimes exists between friends is not (true) love, because it is subject to transmutation; this is merely fascination. As the breeze blows, the slender trees yield. If the wind is in the East the tree leans to the West, and if the wind turns to the West the tree leans to the East. This kind of love is originated by the accidental conditions of life. This is not love, it is merely acquaintanceship; it is subject to change. Today you will see two souls apparently in close friendship; tomorrow all this may be changed. Yesterday they were ready to die for one another; today they shun one another's society! This is not love; it is the yielding of the hearts to the accidents of life. When that which has caused this 'love' to*

*exist passes, the love passes also; this is not in reality love.'*²

On the contrary, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that true loving unity between human beings comes about through the love of each individual for the Manifestation of God, that is, through Faith. *'Love the creatures for the sake of God,'* He said, *'and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy.'*³

The Fourth Love

The fourth kind of love is the love of God for His own Self, that is, the love of the Creator for His own attributes reflected in His creation like an image in a mirror. In one of His Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty.'*⁴

¹ Paris Talks, p. 180

² Paris Talks, p. 181

³ The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 93

⁴ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 65

In the Torah it is written, '*God created man in His own image*'¹ for in man lies the potential to reflect all of the attributes of God such as love, wisdom, justice and generosity. The purpose of the Manifestations of God is to unlock this potential and to foster the creative development of these attributes. Bahá'u'lláh states, '*The Purpose of the one true God, exalted be His glory, in revealing Himself unto men is to lay bare those gems that lie hidden within the mine of their true and inmost selves.*'²

This fourth kind of love - the love of God for His own attributes - represents the ultimate purpose of God's creation - that the creation itself may become a reflection of its Creator.

In the unfoldment of this purpose, every human being throughout the ages has a role to play and a contribution to make. Whatever that role may be is up to each individual to discover for himself. '*The whole duty of man in this Day,*' Bahá'u'lláh writes, '*is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him. Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle. The portion of some might lie in the palm of a man's hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and of others even a gallon-measure.*'³ No one can claim to know the role of anyone else, nor should we compare our own capacity to that of others. We must simply strive, through our own personal effort, to fulfil our capacity, and use our

gifts, talents and abilities to contribute to the betterment of the world and to the happiness of the human race.

'*Every age hath its own problem,*' Bahá'u'lláh states, '*and every soul its particular aspiration.*'⁴ '*That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.*'⁵

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXXII, p. 287

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, V, p. 8

⁴ Lawh-i-Mánikchí-Sáhib, paragraph 4, Tabernacle of Unity, p. 5

⁵ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXVII, p. 250

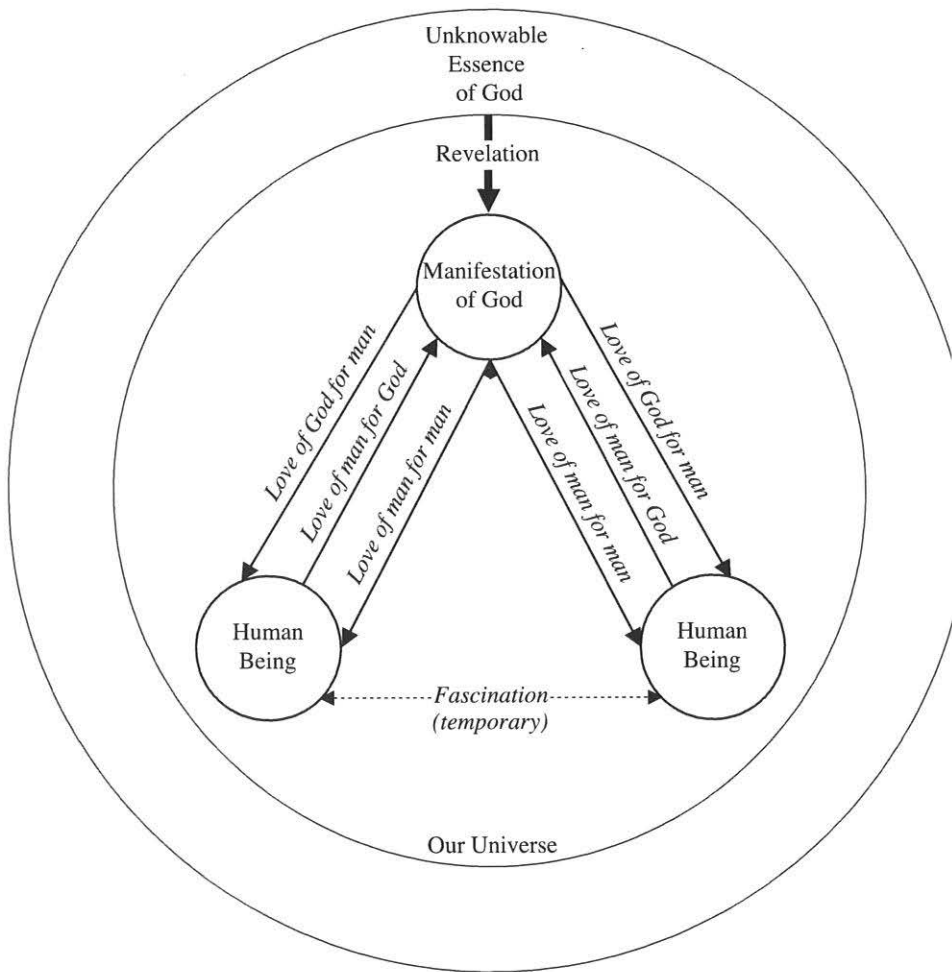


Diagram 1. Illustration of the love relationships between God and humanity with the Manifestation of God as the central point in these relationships.

PART 2

The Relationship Between The Body and The Soul

In today's world, there is a widespread school of thought in which the human being is considered to be an entirely material entity. In this view, even the apparently non-material aspects of a human being, such as the mind, the intellect, the imagination etc, are regarded merely as the results of chemical processes originating in the brain and body. To this school of thought, 'Abdu'l-Bahá poses the question, *'Where then can one find in man this mind that resides in him and whose existence is beyond doubt? Were you to examine the human body with the eye, the ear, or the other senses, you would fail to find it, even though it clearly exists.'*¹ 'Space,' He says, *'is a quality of material things and that which is not material does not partake of space... Intelligence does not partake of the quality of space, though it is related to man's brain. The intellect resides there, but not materially. Search in the brain, you will not find the intellect.'*²

To what source, then, can we attribute the mind of man? Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the human being has both a material aspect (the body) and a spiritual aspect (the soul). He tells us that the human mind, along with all its powers and capabilities, has its origin in the soul and not in the physical body. The relationship between the soul and the body is like that of the sun shining on a mirror. The mind, although

associated with the brain, emanates from the soul as the sun's rays emanate from the sun.

The Outward and Inward Powers

From the moment we are born, we begin receiving information from our environment through the instruments of our bodily senses. Through our sense of sight we perceive images; through our sense of hearing, sounds; through our sense of smell, fragrances; through our sense of taste, foods; and through our sense of touch, tangible things. In the relationship between the body and the soul, the brain functions as a transmitter and receiver of this information. All the information we receive from our environment is transmitted, through the instrumentality of the brain, from the body to the soul.

Just as the human body has its outer powers or senses, the human soul has its inner powers. In the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the human soul is regarded as possessing three fundamental powers - the cognitive powers (those associated with the intellect), the affective powers (those associated with the heart) and the power of volition. The cognitive powers are the powers of thinking, understanding, imagination and memory; the affective powers include feelings, intuition and motivation; while the power of volition constitutes our free will.

¹ Some Answered Questions, Ch. 67, p. 241

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy, p. 128

The faculty through which information is conveyed between the body and the soul 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as the 'common faculty' since it acts as a common connection between the body and the soul. To illustrate the relationship between the outer and inner powers, He gives the following example: *'For instance, sight, which is one of the outward powers, sees and perceives this flower and conveys this perception to the inward power of the common faculty; the common faculty transmits it to the power of imagination, which in turn conceives and forms this image and transmits it to the power of thought; the power of thought reflects upon it and, having apprehended its reality, conveys it to the power of comprehension; the comprehension, once it has understood it, delivers the image of the sensible object to the memory, and the memory preserves it in its repository.'*¹

Whenever new information is received, the soul's cognitive powers evaluate that information while its affective powers form an emotional response to it. The power of volition then formulates a decision and transmits that decision through the common faculty, manifesting the will of the soul in the action of the body. The tongue speaks, the hand writes, the feet walk. This entire process - the receipt of information by the bodily senses; the transmission of that information, through the common faculty, from the body to the soul; the evaluation of that information by the cognitive and affective powers; the formulation of a

decision by the power of volition; the transmission of that decision, through the common faculty, from the soul to the body; and the manifestation of the soul's will in the action of the body - all this happens in a fraction of a second.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has said that *'the outward is the expression of the inward.'*² Our inner life - the life of our soul - manifests itself in our outer life, that is, our actions in the world. If our thoughts and feelings are negative and depressed, we may walk with our heads down. If, on the other hand, our thoughts and feelings are joyful and confident, our body will radiate those qualities and our decisions will reflect them. All our actions in this life, therefore - from the unconscious nuances of our posture to the major moral decisions we make - are manifestations of our inner life.

Unconsciously, this relationship between the body and the soul may cause us to have certain habits of behaviour of which we are totally unaware. In moments of decision-making we are often caught in the midst of an internal battle between our own cognitive and affective powers. For example, the eye sees an object and, although the intellect might recognise its harmfulness, the heart desires it. The affective powers being a far stronger force than the cognitive, it is often our emotions rather than our intellect that win this battle. Mature decision-making, then, comes about through the development of harmony between the

¹ Some Answered Questions, Ch. 56, p. 210

² Some Answered Questions, Ch. 81, p. 283

cognitive powers, the affective powers and the power of volition.

Within this 'dialogue' between body and soul, certain factors may sometimes interfere. Regarding physical and mental illness, Bahá'u'lláh wrote that *'the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power.'*¹ Damage to the brain may impede the functioning of various powers of the soul such as memory or comprehension. Even certain foods and substances that are detrimental to the brain can obstruct the transmission and receipt of information between the body and the soul, causing our concentration to be sluggish or our emotions unclear. *'A sound mind,'* 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, *'cannot be but in a sound body.'*²

For very practical reasons, the use of anaesthetic in medicine is precisely for this purpose. Anaesthetic deliberately shuts down certain parts of the brain so that the soul will not experience pain when the body is interfered with. When damage is done to the body, the soul experiences pain and directs the body to

change its circumstances. To demonstrate this, imagine placing your hand on a hot stove. Your sense of touch perceives an overload of heat, your brain transmits this information to your soul, your soul experiences pain and sends a message to your body to remove your hand from the stove. In a fraction of a second, your hand flies off the stove. Were we to place the hand of a dead body on the same hot stove, the situation would be quite different. The hand will be damaged, the flesh will be burned, but the soul, no longer associated with the body, experiences no pain, and therefore, no instruction will be transmitted to the body to remove its hand from the stove.

To summarise, the material body is the form through which the soul functions while living in this material world. It is for this reason that respect is shown towards the body of a deceased person. By showing respect towards the body, we are, in fact, showing respect towards the invisible soul which functioned through it. Death, Bahá'u'lláh teaches, is simply the separation of the soul from the body.

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXX, p. 153

² Bahá'í World Faith, p. 337

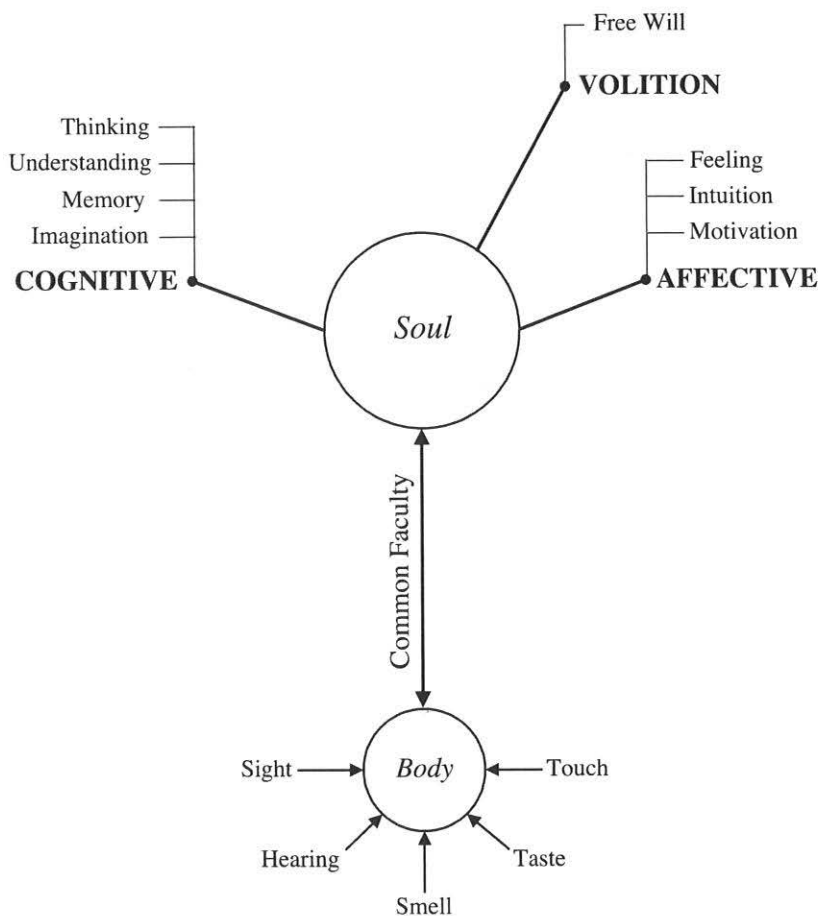


Diagram 2. The Outward and Inward Powers.

The Spiritual and The Material

In the physical world, the sun is the source of all life and its rays shine upon all things. Each thing receives the sustenance it needs from that light, and has a greater or lesser capacity to reflect it. A lump of coal reflects almost no light, a gemstone reflects a portion of light in beautiful colours, while a polished mirror has the capacity to reflect all the light that shines on it.

In the same way, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that the Spirit of God, shining like the rays of the sun, is the cause of the existence of all things, and each thing, to a greater or lesser degree, reflects that Spirit. So essential is this Spirit to the existence of all beings that Bahá'u'lláh says, *'Were the Hand of Divine power to divest of this high endowment all created things, the entire universe would become desolate and void.'*¹

When we observe the world around us, we behold a universe characterised by seemingly infinite diversity and endless levels of sophistication. In spite of the vast diversity it contains, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the world we live in can be classified into four distinct 'kingdoms'.

At the simplest level, we see the kingdom of the minerals - the building blocks of the universe. All the entities of the mineral kingdom come into existence through the attraction and cohesion of elements. Were the minerals to be deprived of this cohesive power, all things would disintegrate and

cease to exist. This basic power of cohesion we may call the 'mineral spirit'.

Next, we see the 'vegetable' kingdom, with all its leaves, branches, flowers and fruits, coming forth out of the soil. The members of the vegetable kingdom exist through the same power of cohesion we witnessed in the minerals but they are distinguished by a more sophisticated capacity - the power of growth - and were they to be deprived of this power, they could not truly be called plants. This power of growth we may call the 'vegetable spirit'.

Expanding our gaze, we see a variety of creatures running, flying and swimming among the minerals and plants. It is the animal kingdom. The animals, like the minerals and plants, exist through the cohesion of elements and the power of growth. But what defines them as animals is their capacity for sense perception, movement and a limited range of cognitive and affective powers. Minus these powers, the animal would cease to be an animal. This power of the senses we may call 'the animal spirit'.

Finally, emerging from the background of the animal kingdom, we see the distinct world of the human kingdom. Here we find a creature whose body exists through the cohesion of elements, who grows, moves and has all the senses of the animal, but who is gifted with a unique power of which all the other kingdoms are deprived, a power which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, is responsible for all of history's scientific discoveries,

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XCIII, p. 183

technological advancements and creative innovations, and without which, man would be no different to an animal. It is *'the power of discovery'*¹ - the human spirit.

The human being, the most sophisticated being in the world of nature, exists in a unique position. His body functions through the animal spirit and belongs to the material world. His soul, however, functions through the human spirit which, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, is immaterial and belongs to the spiritual world. *'Man is,'* Abdu'l-Bahá says, *'in the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality.'*² What places man in such a unique position (apart from all his intellectual and creative powers) is his free will. The animal kingdom, to which his material body belongs, operates according to the 'law of the jungle' - its members must either kill or be killed. But the animals are driven by instinct - not choice - and therefore their actions cannot be considered as evil. When man, however, freely chooses to live according to the law of the animal kingdom instead of his own kingdom, he debases himself and deprives himself of the higher potentialities of his own spirit.

'In man,' Abdu'l-Bahá says, *'there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the*

*world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature.'*³

Nothing that God has created is inherently evil. In fact, Abdu'l-Bahá clearly states, *'All that God created He created good.'*⁴ But He has designed for us the arena of the spiritual and the material so that we may choose, through our own free will, the path to God. Evil is the result of man's choice, through his own free will, to turn away from the very Spirit that sustains his own existence. Evil is, therefore, the absence of good, as darkness is the absence of light and poverty the absence of wealth. It has no real existence in itself.

Becoming a Spiritual Being

In the first phrase of the Short Obligatory Prayers, Bahá'u'lláh identifies the two fundamental needs of the human soul: *'to know'* and *'to worship'*. These two needs correspond to the functions of the cognitive and affective powers respectively. The human being, therefore, has an innate desire to

¹ Some Answered Questions, Ch. 36, p. 144

² Some Answered Questions, Ch. 64, p. 235

³ Paris Talks, p. 60

⁴ Some Answered Questions, Ch. 74, p. 264

⁵ *'I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.'*

worship. *'God has given man a heart,'* 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, *'and the heart must have some attachment.'*¹ What we choose to worship is left to our own free will, but worship something we must. In ancient times, human beings created idols out of wood or stone, or a whole pantheon of mythical gods to love and fear. In modern times we make idols out of pop-stars, celebrities and perhaps above all, money. All these things, however, belong to the material world and are therefore perishable. And with their perishing comes the dissatisfaction of the heart. *'[T]he heart,'* 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues, *'is never at rest and never finds real joy and happiness until it attaches itself to the eternal. How foolish the bird that builds its nest in a tree that may perish when it could build its nest in an ever-verdant garden of paradise.'*² Our transformation from a material being into a spiritual being comes about by detaching our heart from the material world and attaching it to the eternal.

The Manifestation of God is the embodiment of all that is spiritual and eternal. He exists through the Holy Spirit, and is, in Bahá'u'lláh's words, *'a mirror of God, reflecting naught else but His Self, His Beauty, His Might and Glory.'*³

Like a light on a dimmer switch, gradually increasing in intensity, every Manifestation of God has brought to humanity *'a fresh measure of the light of*

*God'*⁴ and carried it forward to a new point of progress in its spiritual evolution. And every Manifestation of God has directed the hopes of His followers towards that Day when the Word of God will hold absolute supremacy over all creation - The Day of God.

From the moment He declared His Mission in 1863 until His Ascension in 1892, Bahá'u'lláh unabashedly proclaimed that the promised Day of God had now come and that He Himself was the Supreme Manifestation of God prophesied throughout history by the Manifestations of the past. So bold were His claims that they staggered the minds of His contemporaries and invoked the outrage of His opponents. *'I am the One,'* He claimed in His Tablet to Czar Alexander II, *'Whom the tongue of Isaiah hath extolled, the One with Whose name both the Torah and the Evangel were adorned.'*⁵ And in another Tablet, He writes, *'I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.'*⁶

Why, we might well ask, would One who claimed to possess such extraordinary powers allow Himself, over a period of forty years, to be

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy, Ch. 3, p. 136

² Ibid.

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXX, p. 74

⁴ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXXIV, p. 81

⁵ Tablet to Czar Alexander II, paragraph 164, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 86

⁶ Lawh-i-Máníkchí-Şáhíh, paragraph 14, Tabernacle of Unity, p. 9

shackled in chains so heavy as to leave scars on His body for the rest of His life, to be imprisoned in a vermin-infested underground dungeon and to be exiled from His homeland, never to return? Bahá'u'lláh explains in His own words: *'The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness. This is of the mercy of your Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful. We have accepted to be abused, O believers in the Unity of God, that ye may be exalted, and have suffered manifold afflictions, that ye might prosper and flourish.'*¹ Bahá'u'lláh suffered so that we might benefit from His example - that we might learn to face our own hardships with patience, courage and faith, and that we might recognise the fleeting nature of the material world and attach our hearts to God.

The moment the human soul recognises the truth of the Manifestation of God and attaches its heart to Him, it embarks on the journey of becoming a spiritual being. At that moment, a new spirit is born which occupies an even higher station than the intellectual powers of the human spirit. It is a spirit of love described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as *'the origin of all philanthropy'*² and designated by Bahá'u'lláh as *'the fruit of man's earthly*

*existence'*³. It is the second kind of love - the love of man for God, the Spirit of Faith.

The Word of God

When the Spirit of Faith is born through the soul's recognition of the Manifestation of God, the true purpose of the cognitive and affective powers begins to unfold. We shall now examine that purpose.

Through our cognitive powers we gain an understanding of our condition in the world. For instance, the affective power suffers a feeling of hunger, and through the use of the cognitive power, we understand our need for food. The affective power suffers coldness and the cognitive recognises our need for shelter and clothing. All the sciences and technological developments designed to meet the needs of our physical lives are the result of our cognitive powers. The needs of our physical lives have no moral value, neither good nor bad; they are simply neutral and must be provided for. But what of our spiritual lives? How do we provide for the needs of our soul and ensure the healthy growth and development of our newly-born Spirit of Faith?

The Manifestation of God is the Mouthpiece and Representative of God in our world and, as such, He speaks and acts with absolute infallibility. He is, in Bahá'u'lláh's words, *'The All-Knowing*

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XLV, p. 99

² Paris Talks, p. 180

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CLXV, p. 345

Physician’ who *‘bath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy.’*¹ Whereas the soul of an ordinary human being comes into existence at the moment of conception, and gradually, throughout its life, acquires a degree of knowledge and understanding, the soul of the Manifestation of God is preexistent: He enters this world with innate knowledge already possessed in His existence prior to His conception in the womb of His mother. In a tablet revealed by The Báb and addressed to *‘Him Who Will Be Made Manifest’* (Bahá’u’lláh), The Báb alludes to the existence He shared with Bahá’u’lláh in another realm before either of Them were born into our world. And Bahá’u’lláh, addressing The Báb in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, refers, in mystical language, to a ‘School’ They entered *‘ere the earth and the heavens were brought into being.’*²

The Manifestation of God thus comes into our world with an understanding of spiritual reality unattainable by ordinary human beings. *‘No man, however acute his perception,’* Bahá’u’lláh writes, *‘can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained.’*³

The Teachings of the Manifestation of God are, therefore, a ‘prescription’ designed to meet the needs of the human soul. He gives us the knowledge of all those things that are conducive to

our spiritual growth (‘godly’) – such as prayer, fasting and service to humanity – and the laws He ordains serve to protect us from all those things that obstruct it (‘ungodly’). Any action that opposes the standards of the Word of God can be considered as an obstruction to our spiritual growth and a hindrance to true human happiness.

But beyond this, the words of the Manifestation of God have a deeper function. The cognitive powers of the human soul function through the symbolic medium of language. Just as every letter of the alphabet acts as a symbol representing a particular sound, so every word represents particular meanings, and attached to those meanings are feelings. Examine, for instance, your own emotional response to words such as ‘love’ or ‘compassion’. On the other hand, words such as ‘hate’ or ‘kill’ will surely evoke a very different emotional response. Language, therefore, acts as the link between our cognitive and affective powers.

When we read and reflect upon the Word of God with an open mind and heart, His words, through their unique power and beauty, create in us an emotional response which draws our hearts towards Him. *‘Every word,’* Bahá’u’lláh says, *‘that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame.’*⁴ As the intellect becomes cognizant of the beauty and perfection

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, CVI, p. 213

² Selections From the Writings of the Báb, p. 6-8

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, XXXIV, p. 80

⁴ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, LXXIV, p. 141

of the Manifestation of God, the heart is filled with feelings of joy, wonder and love. It is for this reason that Bahá'u'lláh tells us in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *'Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.'*¹ And even more specifically, He commands, *'Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all.'*² The purpose of reading the Word of God everyday is to keep our hearts connected to our Creator.

The Arena of Spiritual Growth

This attraction of the human heart to its Creator must sooner or later express itself in action. Otherwise, it will inevitably fade away and the affective powers will return to a state of attachment to the material world. In order to effect real spiritual growth, we must, through the power of volition, *'strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.'*³ The moment we begin putting the teachings of the Manifestation of God into practice, we enter the arena of spiritual growth. It is an arena of tests and trials and only in the process of passing through these tests and trials can we experience growth in any real sense.

Entering this arena may be likened to placing an iron into a fire. As long as it is outside of the fire, the iron remains cold, hard and dark. But once it enters the fire, it begins to change. It is purged of its impurities and its qualities become hot, soft and luminous, that is, it takes on the qualities of the fire. Indeed, the more the iron sacrifices its own qualities of coldness, hardness and darkness for the qualities of the fire, the hotter, softer and more luminous it becomes. So it is with the human soul. When we begin to put the Divine Teachings into practice, we enter into the fire of the love of God, a fire that cleanses us of our imperfections and brings about a transformation in our qualities. It is a painful process, for as we pass through tests and difficulties, we must learn to let go of old ideas and attachments which we once held dear. But the more we sacrifice ourselves for the fire of the love of God, the greater becomes our connection to God, and with that connection, our joy.

In short, the more deeply we understand the Word of God through our cognitive powers, and the more actively we strive to carry out His Teachings through our own volition, the greater the feelings of joy, love and bliss we will experience. And the more our hearts are filled with the love of God, the less room there is in them for hateful feelings or harmful motives.

¹ *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 182

² *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 149

³ *Lawh-i-Maqsúd*, paragraph 9, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 166

When the relationship between the body and the soul ends and we leave this world for the next, we take with us the knowledge and understanding we have gained through the use of our cognitive powers and we carry in our hearts the love of God which we have cultivated through our affective powers. We cannot take with us any feelings of hate, envy, jealousy or any other feelings pertaining to our lower nature, for these feelings are merely the absence of the love of God - they are as poverty compared to wealth. Our wealth in the next world is the love of God we have cultivated and the spiritual qualities we have developed while living in this world.

The Mystery of God

Bahá'u'lláh bequeathed to humanity a legacy of over a hundred volumes of sacred writings, laying the foundation for a new civilization and giving to the world a new vision of what it means to be human. But perhaps the greatest gift He gave to humanity was the Person who He Himself had raised and educated - His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who He called 'The Mystery of God'.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was not a Manifestation of God but neither was He an ordinary human being. In all the annals of human history and in all the ages to come, never before has there existed and never again will there exist a figure such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá - a human soul who possessed the powers of a Manifestation of God.

'Abdu'l-Bahá shared with all human beings the three fundamental powers of the human soul: the cognitive powers, the affective powers and the power of volition. Through His volition, He manifested His will; through His cognitive powers, He possessed knowledge of the godly and knowledge of the ungodly; and through His affective powers He possessed all the feelings of love and joy associated with the spiritual life. But herein lies the mystery of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: the affective powers of His soul were incapable of feeling hate, jealousy, envy and the like. The heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was so perfectly wedded to God that no room remained in it for anything but love.

In the Person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh gave to the world a living example of a Man whose heart was wholly attached to God. And although no ordinary human being can ever reach the spiritual perfection of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His example gives us a direction in which to face and a horizon to walk towards.

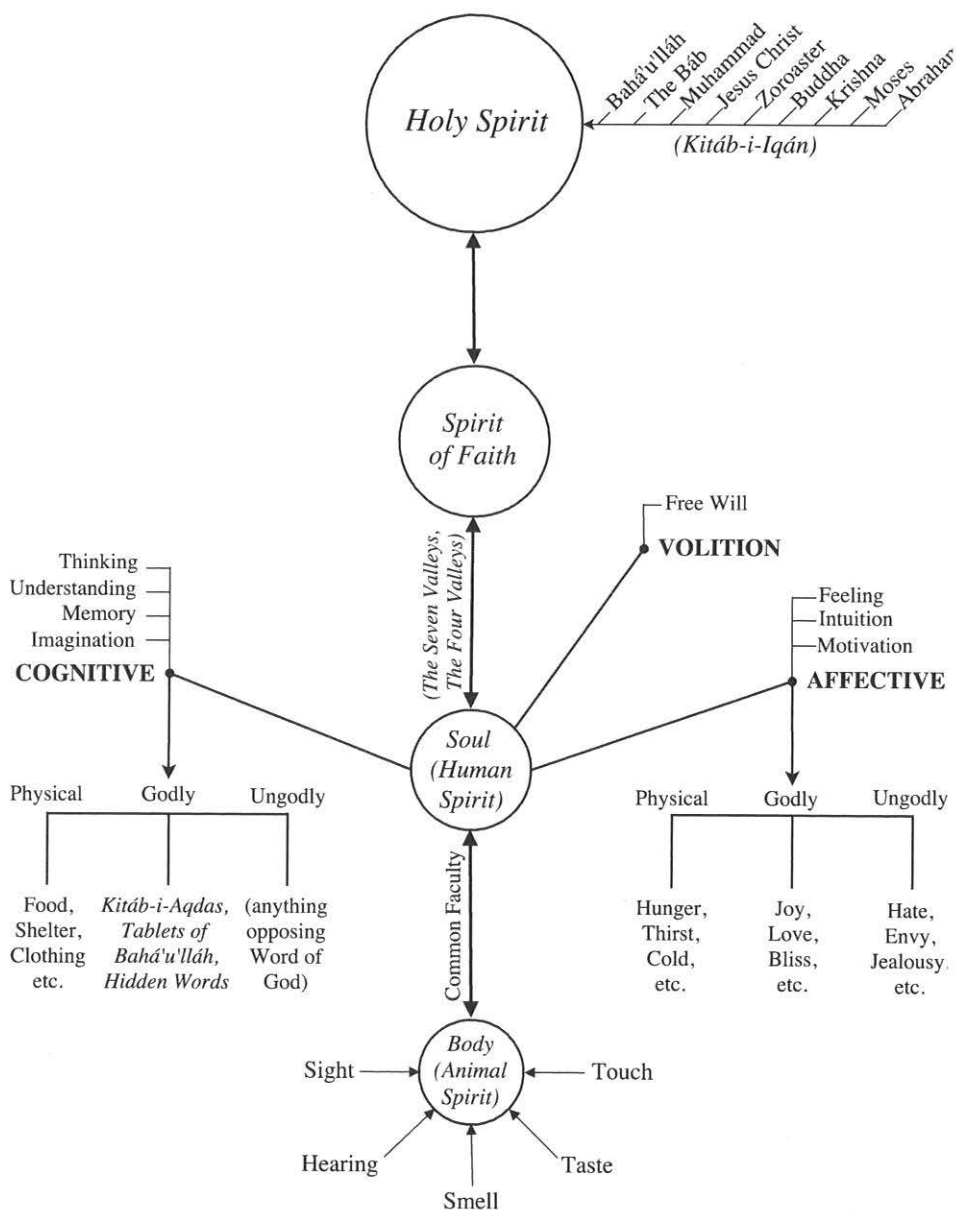


Diagram. 3. The relationship between the body and the soul.

PART 3

The Ultimate Journey

When a child is conceived in the womb of its mother, it grows and develops in preparation for its life in this world. While in the womb, the child has no understanding of the world it will soon enter but its growth is automatic and, without any effort, it prepares what it needs for its future life. When it is born into this world, it enters a new arena. Here, it begins the development of its cognitive and affective powers, gaining knowledge and understanding, forming various attachments of the heart, and acquiring spiritual qualities to whatever extent it chooses. But having passed through this world from birth to death, what becomes of the soul? To what world does it then pass? As is so often the case, an observation of the natural world can assist us greatly in our understanding.

As we have observed, the natural world can be 'graded' into four distinct 'kingdoms' - the mineral, vegetable, animal and human - each kingdom possessing increasing levels of sophistication and capacity. The members of these kingdoms exist alongside each other, influencing and interacting with each other, but the members of a lower kingdom can never comprehend the reality of the kingdoms above them. *'The mineral, vegetable, and animal realms,'* 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, *'are each incapable of understanding any creation beyond their own. The mineral cannot*

*imagine the growing power of the plant. The tree cannot understand the power of movement in the animal, neither can it comprehend what it would mean to possess sight, hearing or the sense of smell... The animal cannot realize the intelligence of a human being, he only knows that which is perceived by his animal senses.'*¹ In short, the higher is aware of the lower but the lower has no understanding of the higher.

This leads to an important question. Just as the lower kingdoms cannot perceive the reality of our own human kingdom, is it not possible, therefore, that there are kingdoms whose nature and reality is above and beyond the perception of man? Bahá'u'lláh, like the Founders of the Great World Religions before Him, emphatically affirmed that such is the case. Those kingdoms which are beyond the perception of man while he lives in this world are the spiritual worlds of God and it is to those worlds that the soul passes after its separation from the body. *'The world beyond,'* Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother.'*²

The Worlds of God

All the Manifestations of God have taught that the human soul is immortal, and Bahá'u'lláh affirms that every soul, after its separation from the body, lives on in the spiritual worlds of God, retaining its own knowledge, memories,

¹ Paris Talks, p. 24

² Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXI, p. 157

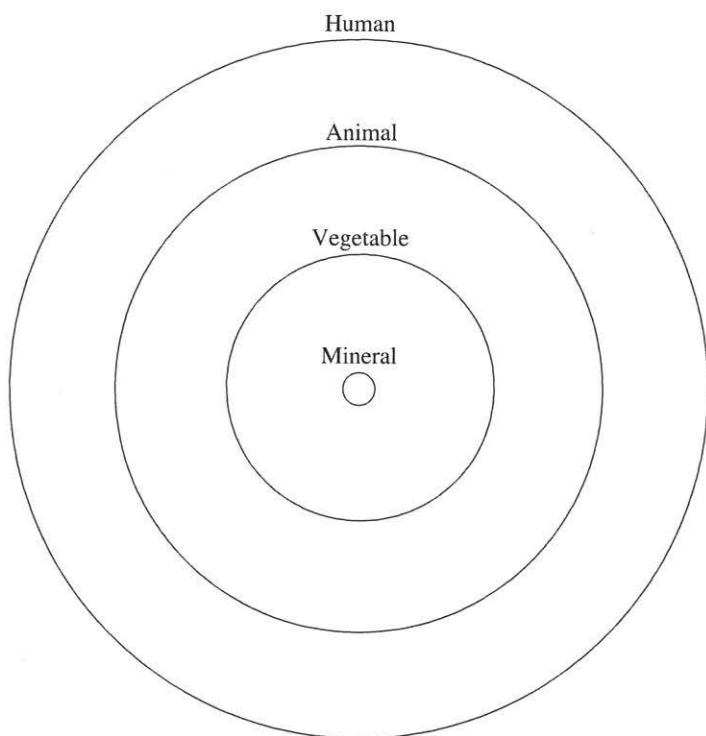


Diagram 4. Illustration of the various kingdoms of the physical world.
*'The mineral, vegetable, and animal realms are each incapable of understanding
any creation beyond their own.'*
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá

qualities and individuality. In one of His Tablets, He writes, *'Know thou of a truth that the worlds of God are countless in their number and infinite in their range.'*¹ When the soul departs from the body at death, it will occupy a world which is appropriate for the level of spiritual development it attained during this life.

In response to a question about the condition of the soul after death, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, *'Thou hast asked concerning the spirits of men. They are not at all annihilated. They are immortal. But the spirits of heavenly souls will find eternal life, that is, they will attain to the highest and most great stations of perfection. But the spirits of the heedless souls although they are immortal 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 existence and life yet, in comparison with man, it is entirely non-existent and deprived of life. When man is transformed, translated, from life to death, his comparative station will be that of the mineral existence.'*²

The spiritual condition to which the soul has attained in this life will determine its condition in the worlds of God. A human being who has passed through this life, acquiring neither knowledge nor love of God, contributing no service to his fellow man and neglecting the development of

his spiritual qualities, is, in comparison with a soul who has recognised its Creator and carried out His Teachings, like a stone compared to a human. Between these states, infinite grades exist. *'They that are of the same grade and station,'* Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'are fully aware of one another's capacity, character, accomplishments and merits. They that are of a lower grade, however, are incapable of comprehending adequately the station, or of estimating the merits, of those that rank above them.'*³

As a mercy from God, however, every soul, no matter how wretched a condition it may be in, is permitted to make progress through His worlds. The destiny of every soul is to attain the Presence of God, and it is God's will that every soul should fulfil its destiny. Every world of God, therefore, is a world of continued progress, discovery, contribution and work. Just as we grow and develop through our deeds in this world, we also grow and develop through our deeds in the next world. *'The spiritual world,'* 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, *'is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven.'*⁴ As there are arts and sciences to be discovered in this world, so there are arts and sciences to be discovered in the worlds beyond; as there are schools and universities to attend in this world, so there are schools and universities to attend in the next; and as there is work

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXIX, p. 151

² Star of the West, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 38

³ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXVI, p. 170

⁴ The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 9

to be done in this world, so there is work to be done in the next. And although free will does not exist in the worlds of God (for free will indicates a choice between good and evil, and one cannot choose to do evil where evil does not exist), nevertheless, effort is required for progress. We might think of each of the worlds of God like a classroom. The student must make all the effort he can in order to graduate from one class to the next. And although his progress is dependent upon his own effort, ultimately it is the teacher who will decide when the student has understood his lessons and is ready to ascend to a higher class. In the soul's journey through the worlds of God, it is God who decides when the soul is ready to progress to a higher world.

All the worlds of God are different. Indeed, they are *'infinite in their range'*. Every world consists of its own elements, and the soul, in each world, functions through a form made of the elements of that world. While living in this physical world, the soul functions through the physical form of the body and it is by our physical attributes that we know and recognise each other. Likewise, in each of the worlds of God, the soul will function through a form made of the elements of that world. In those spiritual worlds, however, it is by our spiritual qualities that we will know each other. The soul itself can never be seen - only the form it functions through - for the soul, Bahá'u'lláh states,

*is '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.'*¹

In order to progress from one world to the next, the soul must leave behind the elements of one world and adopt the elements of the next, just as we must leave behind the elements of our material body when we leave the material world. In other words, the soul must undergo a death every time it ascends to a higher kingdom. We see this principle operating in the kingdoms of the physical world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, *'[W]hen the atom entered into the composition of the tree, it died to the mineral kingdom, and when consumed by the animal, it died to the vegetable kingdom, and so on until its transference or transmutation into the kingdom of man... Death therefore is applicable to a change or transference from one degree or condition to another.'*² If a soul has lived this life in a very unenlightened state, it will be necessary for that soul to traverse unnumbered worlds and undergo countless deaths before it attains the Presence of God.

The Kingdom of Eternal Life

In The Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'O Son of Man! The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore, free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life and worthy to meet Me. Thus*

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXII, p. 157

² Bahá'í World Faith - Abdu'l-Bahá Section, p. 263

*may death not come upon thee, neither weariness nor trouble.*¹

The less spiritually developed the soul is on its departure from this world, the more worlds it will have to traverse and the more deaths it will have to undergo before it fulfils its destiny. Those souls, however, who have recognised the Manifestation of God, attached their hearts to Him and faithfully carried out His teachings, these have understood the purpose of their existence, and, as such, have no need to traverse those unnumbered worlds of *'imperfection, concealment and ignorance'*² (worlds sometimes referred to as 'Purgatory'). These souls enter a kingdom which is distinguished from all the kingdoms below it. It is the realm of *'the highest and most great stations of perfection'*³ where the Souls of the Manifestations of God reside, and whose inhabitants, once they enter it, are untouched by death. It is the kingdom of eternal life, the Abhá Kingdom.

In one of His Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh writes, *'When the soul attaineth the Presence of God it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation.'* Only by freeing ourselves from *'idle fancies'* and entering into His *'court'*, can we assume a *'form'* that is *'fit for everlasting life'* and death ceases to come upon us. Speaking of the condition of the souls who have reached the Abhá Kingdom, Bahá'u'lláh writes,

*'Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station.'*⁴

The inhabitants of the Abhá Kingdom are not distant from us any more than we in this world are distant from the child in the womb of its mother. Neither are they merely spectators passively observing us from the next world. On the contrary, the higher the station a soul occupies in the worlds of God, the greater the influence it exerts on all the worlds beneath it. Just as the higher kingdoms of the physical world exert their influence on the kingdoms below them, those souls who have reached the heights of the Abhá Kingdom, exert an influence on this world in ways which we can scarcely perceive. *'The light which these souls radiate,'* Bahá'u'lláh says, *'is responsible for*

¹ The Hidden Words, Part 1 No. 63

² Star of the West, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 38

³ Ibid.

⁴ Arabic, 'Most Glorious'

⁵ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXI, p. 156

*the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto heaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Through them the clouds rain their bounty upon men, and the earth bringeth forth its fruits. All things must needs have a cause, a motive power, an animating principle. These souls and symbols of detachment have provided, and will continue to provide, the supreme moving impulse in the world of being.*¹

How, then, can we attain such a 'resplendent station' and reach such a glorious destination? What fuel can propel us and what map can show us the way? Our fuel is the love of God and our map, the Word of God. The 'second love', the love of man for God and obedience to His Teachings, as expressed by Bahá'u'lláh in the opening paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, is the 'key' to the Abhá Kingdom:

'The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Day Spring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof, hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It becometh every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the

*world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration.'*²

To aid us in carrying out the Teachings of God, The Universal House of Justice, the Supreme Governing Body of the Bahá'í Faith, has offered the following practical guidance:

'Bahá'u'lláh has stated quite clearly in His Writings the essential requisites for our spiritual growth, and these are stressed again and again by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His talks and Tablets. One can summarize them briefly in this way:

1. The recital each day of one of the Obligatory Prayers with pure-hearted devotion.
2. The regular reading of the Sacred Scriptures, specifically at least each morning and evening, with reverence, attention and thought.
3. Prayerful meditation on the teachings, so that we may understand them more deeply, fulfil them more faithfully, and convey them more accurately to others.
4. Striving every day to bring our behaviour more into accordance with the high standards that are set forth in the Teachings.
5. Teaching the Cause of God.
6. Selfless service in the work of the Cause and in the carrying on of our trade or profession.³

¹ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXI, p. 157

² Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 1

³ Essential Requisites for Spiritual Growth, written on behalf of The Universal House of Justice, 1984



Diagram 5. Illustration of the various worlds the soul must traverse on its journey.
'...the worlds of God are countless in their number and infinite in their range.'
 - Bahá'u'lláh

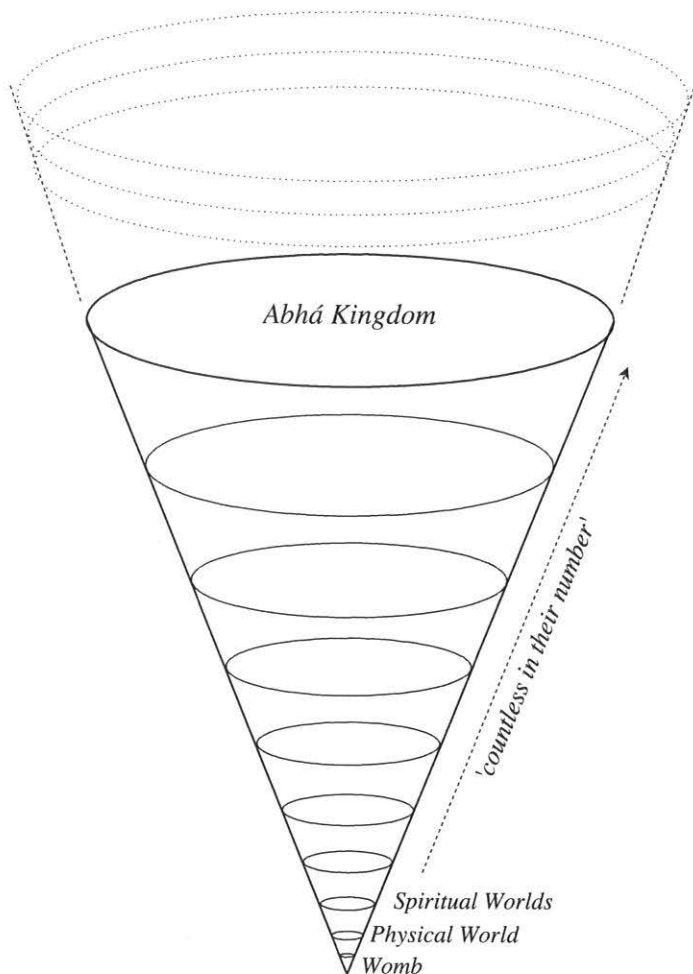


Diagram 6. Alternate view of the various worlds the soul must traverse on its journey.

'...the worlds of God are countless in their number and infinite in their range.'

- Bahá'u'lláh

The Tree of Eternity

The Abhá Kingdom is the Kingdom where Bahá'u'lláh resides. It is there that the soul enters the Presence of God and fulfils its destiny. We might be tempted, therefore, to conclude that the Abhá Kingdom represents the end of our journey. But Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that *'the worlds of God are countless in their number and infinite in their range.'* Referring to His wife, Ásíyih Khánum, as His *'perpetual consort in all the worlds of God'*, Bahá'u'lláh alluded to the fact that He Himself would traverse worlds beyond the Abhá Kingdom, worlds, He said, *'whose vastness is as that of heaven and earth'*.¹ From such a statement, we may conclude that there are worlds to be traversed and purposes to be fulfilled even beyond the Abhá Kingdom.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that, just as the earth goes through its annual cycle, the whole of creation goes through 'universal cycles' of extremely long duration, during which *'Manifestations appear with splendor in the realm of the visible until a great and supreme Manifestation makes the world the center of His radiance. His appearance causes the world to attain to maturity, and the extension of His cycle is very great. Afterward, other Manifestations will arise under His shadow, Who according to the needs of the time will renew certain commandments relating to material questions and affairs, while remaining under His*

shadow.'² In the Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'u'lláh describes Himself as a *'Nightingale'* singing *'upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity.'*³ Such an image offers a humbling perspective. The universal cycle we live in began with the Prophet Adam and its Supreme Manifestation is Bahá'u'lláh, the purpose of Whose Mission is none other than the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, and the influence of Whose Revelation is to last for no less than 500,000 years, during which future Manifestations will arise under His shadow every thousand years or so, to renew the Divine Teachings and carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. And yet, all this is but a 'twig' on the 'Tree of Eternity'. What, we might ask, of the other 'twigs'?

In one of His Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh states, *'Verily I say, the creation of God embraceth worlds besides this world, and creatures apart from these creatures.'*⁴ And in another, He writes, *'Know thou that every fixed star hath its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute.'*⁵ Every one of these worlds represents a 'twig' on the 'Tree of Eternity', each serving a function in the ultimate purpose of God.

God is One, and His purpose is that His creation may also become as one - that all His creatures throughout all His worlds may become as *'the leaves of one branch'* and *'the fruits of one tree'*.⁶ This

¹ Quoted in The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh Vol. 1 by Adib Taherzadeh, Ch. 2, p. 15

² Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 189

³ Some Answered Questions, Ch. 41, p. 161

⁴ Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'í Prayers, p. 209

⁵ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXIX, p. 152

⁶ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXII, p. 163

⁷ Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXXII, p. 288

ultimate purpose - the unification of all creation - is the consummation of the fourth kind of love, the love of God for His own Self. This love, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, *'is the transfiguration of His Beauty, the reflection of Himself in the mirror of His Creation. This is the reality of love, the Ancient Love, the Eternal Love. Through one ray of this Love all other love exists.'*¹

It is the privilege of every human soul to be a part of this ultimate purpose, however great or small that part may be. Our individual journey - through this world and the worlds of God - is like a single thread woven in the infinite tapestry of God's creation.

The Ultimate Journey

When we prepare for a journey, we make a list and ensure that we have packed everything we require. We do not bring with us things that serve no purpose for our journey. At the same time, while we are preparing, we enjoy the pleasures and comforts available to us, knowing that they are temporary and with an understanding that we will soon leave them behind.

Our life in this world is the preparatory stage for our journey through the worlds of God. In one of His talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the preparation we must make for the next world, with the way the child in the womb prepares for its life in this world:

'In the beginning of his human life man was embryonic in the world of the matrix... The forces and powers necessary for this world

were bestowed upon him in that limited condition. In this world he needed eyes; he received them potentially in the other. He needed ears; he obtained them there in readiness and preparation for his new existence. The powers requisite in this world were conferred upon him in the world of the matrix so that when he entered this realm of real existence he not only possessed all necessary functions and powers but found provision for his material sustenance awaiting him. Therefore, in this world he must prepare himself for the life beyond. That which he needs in the world of the Kingdom must be obtained here. Just as he prepared himself in the world of the matrix by acquiring forces necessary in this sphere of existence, so, likewise, the indispensable forces of the divine existence must be potentially attained in this world.

*What is he in need of in the Kingdom which transcends the life and limitation of this mortal sphere? That world beyond is a world of sanctity and radiance; therefore, it is necessary that in this world he should acquire these divine attributes. In that world there is need of spirituality, faith, assurance, the knowledge and love of God. These he must attain in this world so that after his ascension from the earthly to the heavenly Kingdom he shall find all that is needful in that eternal life ready for him.'*²

Like the child in the womb of its mother preparing what it needs for its life in this world, we in this world must prepare what we need for the next. The very purpose of our lives in this world is to prepare our souls for this, the ultimate journey.

¹ Paris Talks, p. 180

² The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 225-226

*'We have proved that nothing is completely worthy of our heart's devotion save reality, for all else is destined to perish. Therefore the heart is never at rest and never finds real joy and happiness until it attaches itself to the eternal. How foolish the bird that builds its nest in a tree that may perish when it could build its nest in an ever-verdant garden of paradise. Man must attach himself to an infinite reality, so that his glory, his joy, and his progress may be infinite. Only the spirit is real; everything else is as shadow. All bodies are disintegrated in the end; only reality subsists. All physical perfections come to an end; but the divine virtues are infinite... Therefore let us yearn for the kingdom of God, so that our works may bear eternal fruit. Otherwise the flower will be lost. Attach your hearts to Bahá'u'lláh. He is the eternal glory. Then from day to day you will become more enlightened; day by day your efforts will increase; day by day your work will become universal, and day by day your horizons will broaden until in the end they will embrace the universe.'*¹

*'O Son of Being! Thy Paradise is My love; thy heavenly home, reunion with Me. Enter therein and tarry not. This is that which hath been destined for thee in Our kingdom above and Our exalted dominion.'*²

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy, Ch. 3

² The Hidden Words, Part 1 No. 6

Three Major Barriers Between The Soul and Its Creator

(The following is an excerpt from 'The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh' by Mr. Adib Taherzadeh, reprinted here with kind permission from George Ronald Publisher Ltd.)

There are many barriers interposed between man and his Creator. In one of His Tablets¹ Bahá'u'lláh states that there are three barriers between man and God. He exhorts the believers to pass beyond these so that they may attain His Presence. The first barrier is attachment to the things of this world, the second is attachment to the rewards of the next world, and the third is attachment to the Kingdom of Names. These formidable barriers must be removed before man can draw near to God; it is for this purpose that God has sent His Messengers throughout the ages.

The First Barrier: Attachment to The Physical World

A believer becomes attached to the things of this world when he allows his material, intellectual and selfish interests to take precedence over the interests of the Cause of God. This does not mean that he has to forego his personal interests, but rather to use them in promoting his spiritual pursuits, and not to allow earthly things to come between him and God.

Since attachment to this world is a great barrier which prevents man from fulfilling his part in the Covenant of God, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have exhorted their followers in many of their Tablets to become detached from earthly desires, to turn instead to God and obey His commandments.

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. Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust. Wherefore, O My servants, defile not your wings with the clay of waywardness and vain desires, and suffer them not to be stained with the dust of envy

¹ Má'idíy-i-Ásamání, vol IV, p.26

and hate, that ye may not be hindered from soaring in the heavens of My divine knowledge.¹

This concept of detachment from material things is often misunderstood and is taken to mean renouncing the world. Many people think that the way to detachment is to shut oneself away in a monastery, lead an ascetic life, or live as a mendicant, careless of one's personal affairs and responsibilities.

None of these practices conform with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In His second Tablet² to Napoleon III, Bahá'u'lláh, addressing the Christian monks, admonishes them in these words:

O CONCOURSE of monks! Seclude not yourselves in churches and cloisters. Come forth by My leave, and occupy yourselves with that which will profit your souls and the souls of men. Thus biddeth you the King of the Day of Reckoning. Seclude yourselves in the stronghold of My love. This, verily, is a befitting seclusion, were ye of them that perceive it. He that shutteth himself up in a house is indeed as one dead. It behoveth man to show forth that which will profit all created things, and he that bringeth forth no fruit is fit for fire. Thus counselleth you your Lord, and He, verily, is the Almighty, the All-Bounteous. Enter ye into wedlock, that after you someone may fill your place. We have forbidden you perfidious acts, and not that which will demonstrate fidelity.³

Attachment to this world may be described as anything which becomes a barrier between God and man, depriving the individual from drawing near to his Maker. It is clear from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that God has created this world for man alone. For instance, in *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh declares:

O SON OF DUST! All that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart...⁴

This means that the world and all that is therein is created for man. God wants him to benefit from its wealth, to exploit its resources wisely and in harmony with nature, to work and possess all the good things he can earn, and to enjoy all the legitimate pleasures that life bestows upon him. But at no time must he allow the things of this world to possess him and rule over his heart and soul.

Indeed, in this Dispensation Bahá'u'lláh has ordained work rendered in the spirit of service to mankind as worship of God. He enjoins upon man the duty of working for the betterment of the world and the building of a new world older on this planet. In one of His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh has revealed these exalted words:

Should a man wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no

¹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CLIII, para.6

² See *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3

³ *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 95

⁴ *The Hidden Words*, Persian no. 27

harm can befall him, if he alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God, for God hath ordained every good thing, whether created in the heavens or in the earth, for such of His servants as truly believe in Him. Eat ye, O people, of the good things which God hath allowed you, and deprive not yourselves from His wondrous bounties. Render thanks and praise unto Him, and be of them that are truly thankful.¹

One may be wealthy, yet detached from material things. Man can achieve this if he lives his life in accordance with the teachings of God. In one of His Tablets² Bahá'u'lláh states that the good things of this world and its beautiful products are all the manifestations of the attributes of God. To possess them will not become the cause of attachment to material things, provided the individual does not fix his affections upon them, not allow himself to be possessed by them, because this world and all that is therein are like unto a passing shadow and transitory.

To appreciate the true meaning of detachment, let us examine the nature of a human being. We note that the animal nature in man makes him selfish. The instinct for survival drives him to find food, clothing and shelter for himself. He pursues comfort, wealth and well-being, and has an insatiable appetite for collecting any beautiful and pleasurable object that comes his way. All these, as well as his emotional, spiritual and intellectual pursuits are aimed at benefiting his own self. He is

the master of his own life, a pivot around which circle all his material possessions as well as his intellectual pursuits. One day he finds the Cause of God, recognizes its truth, falls in love with it, and then he adds it, like his other possessions, to his collection. He remains the master figure in the centre and all his possessions, including the Faith, revolve around him and serve his interests. Such a person is attached to the things of this world, for he allows his own interests to take precedence over the interests of the Cause, and his own ego to rule over his spiritual side. He puts his religion on a par with his other pursuits and selfishly expects to benefit from it just as he benefits from his other possessions.

On the other hand, genuine detachment from earthly things is achieved when the individual makes the Cause of God the pivot of his life, so that all his personal and material possessions may revolve around his Faith. In this case, he can benefit from his material possessions without being attached to them. And since the Cause of God is the prime motivating influence in his life, he will never act against the teachings of his Faith. Every step he takes in his daily activities will be in harmony with the commandments of God. When a person reaches this exalted position, the interests of the Faith take precedence over his personal interests. And when he arises to serve the Cause of God, he will be ready to meet the challenge whatever the cost.

¹ Quoted by Shoghi Effendi, "The Advent of Divine Justice," p. 28

² Má'idíy-i-Ásamání, vol VIII, p.29

Such a person has reached the summit of detachment.

Becoming detached from the things of this world is often a painful process and involves sacrifice. But when the believer gives up something dear to him for the sake of the Cause of God, mysterious forces will be released which will cause the Faith to grow. To offer up one's time, to labour for the establishment of the Faith in a locality, to give up the comforts of home and to go as a pioneer to foreign lands, to offer up one's substance for the promotion of the Cause, to be persecuted for one's faith, and even to give one's life at the end — all these sacrifices are meritorious in the sight of God and will undoubtedly bring victory to His Cause, provided one's motives are pure and sincere. That is the essential condition of loyalty and steadfastness in the Covenant of God — purity of motive. Without it one's deeds are not acceptable by God. Bahá'u'lláh testifies to this truth in these words:

O CHILDREN OF ADAM! Holy words and pure and goodly deeds ascend unto the heaven of celestial glory. Strive that your deeds may be cleansed from the dust of self and hypocrisy and find favor at the court of glory; for ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored One, accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity. This is the daystar of wisdom and of divine mystery that hath shone above the horizon of the divine will. Blessed are they that turn thereunto.¹

*The Second Barrier:
Attachment to The Next World*

As to the second barrier: we note in the Holy Writings that the purpose of the creation of man is that he may know God. One of the traditions of Islam states that in the beginning God was a 'Hidden Treasure', but desired to be discovered and recognized. He created man for this purpose. And now man has found God and turned to Him. Returning to the Short Obligatory Prayer which Bahá'u'lláh revealed for His followers to recite each day, we read: 'I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee...'

Man, therefore, is created to serve his Lord and worship Him with a pure heart, hoping to attain His good pleasure. The purpose is not that he receive reward for his actions. Man's deeds are thus praiseworthy in the sight of God when they are performed solely for His love and for no other reason. To this Bahá'u'lláh testifies in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: 'Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.'² In fact, when a believer turns to the Manifestation of God with true love, he cannot help but leave aside his personal interests. His attraction to the Manifestation is such that he will offer up everything to his Lord and will seek no benefits for himself.

¹ The Hidden Words, Persian no. 69

² Synopsis and Codification, p. 12

If a man's actions are motivated by the thought that he may reap a reward for himself in the next world, then this is attachment, and a barrier between himself and God. To be detached means to do everything for the sake of God and to seek no recompense.

*The Third Barrier:
Attachment to The Kingdom of Names*

As to the third barrier: There are many references in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh to the 'Kingdom of Names'. God, in His own essence, is exalted above attributes. However, in all His dominions and within each of His words, both spiritual and physical, He reveals the kingdom of His attributes. Every created thing manifests the names and attributes of God. In the spiritual world, these attributes are manifest with such intensity that man will never be able to comprehend them in this life. In the human world, however, these attributes appear within the 'Kingdom of Names' and man often becomes attached to these names.

In many of His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers not to become the bond-slaves of the Kingdom of Names. The well-known Islamic saying, 'The Names come down from heaven', has many meanings. In this world every one of God's attributes is clad with a name, and every such name reveals the characteristics of that attribute. For instance, generosity is an attribute of God, and it manifests itself in human beings. However, a person who has this attribute often becomes proud of it and

loves to be referred to as generous. When his generosity is acknowledged by other people, he becomes happy, and when it is ignored, he is unhappy. This is one form of attachment to the Kingdom of Names. Although this example concerns the name 'generosity', the same is true of all the names and attributes of God manifested within the individual. Usually man ascribes these attributes to his own person rather than to God and employs them to boost his own ego. For instance, a learned man uses the attribute of knowledge to become famous and feels gratified and uplifted when his name is publicized far and wide. Or there is the individual whose heart leaps with feelings of pride and satisfaction when he hears his name mentioned and finds himself admired. These are examples of attachment to the Kingdom of Names.

Human society at present exerts a pernicious influence upon the soul of man. Instead of allowing him to live a life of service and sacrifice, it is highly competitive and teaches him to pride himself on his accomplishments. From early childhood he is trained to develop his ego and to seek to exalt himself above others, in the ultimate aim of achieving self-importance, success and power.

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh aims to reverse this process. The soul of man needs to be adorned with the virtues of humility and self-effacement so that it may become detached from the Kingdom of Names.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the true Exemplar of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, demonstrated this form of detachment by His actions. He never in the course of His life wished to exalt His name, not did He seek publicity for Himself. For instance, He had an immense dislike of being photographed. He said, '...to have a picture of oneself is to emphasize the personality...'. During the first few days of His visit to London, He refused to be photographed. However, as a result of much pressure by the newspaper reporters, and persistent pleas by the friends to be allowed to take His photograph, 'Abdu'l-Bahá acquiesced in order to make them happy.

The exalted titles conferred upon Him by Bahá'u'lláh are indicative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lofty station. Yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá never applied them to Himself. Instead, after the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, He took the title of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá) and urged the believers to call Him only by this name. True servitude at the threshold of Bahá'u'lláh was all He prized. These are some of His words as He describes with utter self-effacement the reality of His station:

My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion... No name, no title, no mention, no commendation have I, nor will ever have, except 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest

yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory.'

One of the distinguishing features of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic world order is that it does not harbour egotistical personalities. Bahá'u'lláh has conferred authority on its institutions, whether local, national or international, but the individuals who are privileged to serve on them are devoid of any authority. Unlike men who wield power in the world today and seek to acquire fame and popularity, members of Bahá'í institutions cannot but manifest humility and self-effacement if they are to remain faithful to Bahá'u'lláh. Those who do not succeed, through immaturity or lack of faith, in living up to these standards are indeed attached to the Kingdom of Names and become deprived of the bounties of God in this age.

To sever oneself from the Kingdom of Names may prove to be the most difficult task for a Bahá'í, and the struggle may indeed last a lifetime. If a man can only realize that his virtues are not intrinsically his own, but rather are manifestations of the attributes of God, then he is freed from the Kingdom of Names and becomes truly humble. Such a man will bestow divine perfections upon the world of humanity. This is the loftiest station that God has destined for man. To the extent that a believer succeeds in severing himself from these three forms of attachment, will he be fulfilling his part in the Covenant of God.

¹ Quoted by Shoghi Effendi in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh" p. 139

To achieve this exalted goal man needs to recognise the station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age and then observe His commandments with clear vision, mature reflection and a prayerful attitude. This can be achieved through deepening one's knowledge of the Faith and in serving His Cause. It is then that the heart will become the recipient of the knowledge of God, and will attain certitude in its faith. It is then that obedience to the teachings of the Faith becomes wholehearted, as the individual grasps the significance of God's commandments, and comes to understand their wisdom, their excellent and their necessity. It is then that his thoughts, his vision, his aspirations, his words, and his deeds will all be in harmony with the Covenant of God. And it is then that his soul will acquire spiritual qualities and virtues. This is the ultimate outcome of obedience to the Covenant, which will enable the soul to progress in the spiritual worlds of God.

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