

UNLOCKING THE GATE OF THE HEART

Author: Lasse Thoresen

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Lasse Thoresen's *Unlocking the Gate of the Heart* is a unique contribution to Bahá'í literature. It is the first "how-to" book detailing a systematic step-by-step method of achieving spiritual transformation. The author modestly offers the work to "assist the individual to improve his own spiritual condition and to strengthen his ability to know and to serve God" (xii).

The title acknowledges the theological notion that we are a mystery to ourselves and that self-knowledge and the unfoldment of our God-given potential can only be achieved by an act of conscious will.

Thoresen divides the book into two unequal parts. The shorter, first part establishes the context for spiritual evolution by setting forth "Man's Place in the Universe." Quotations from the Bahá'í Writings are used to construct a logical framework for our creation and the need of every soul for a relationship with its Creator that can only be facilitated through a divinely ordained Manifestation such as Bahá'u'lláh. Of course, prayer and meditation are two key means by which individual souls communicate with their Creator.

Part 1 goes on, through chapters on "The Unity of God," "The Word of God—The Creative Word," "Soul, Spirit, Mind and Body," and "The Worlds of God," to elucidate the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation as it relates to the evolution of human spirit sociologically and personally. Thoresen skillfully achieves a smooth flow of thought by knitting together his voluminous quotations with his own succinct commentary.

Part 2, "Spiritual Exercises," comprises the greater part of the work. Six prerequisites for spiritual growth and development, as outlined by the Universal House of Justice, are offered as the means of laying a foundation for spiritual growth, as is the House of Justice's admonition "that there can be no rigid formula" for the achievement of that growth.

After some preliminary discussion of the importance of the spiritual exercises of prayer and meditation, Thoresen offers his own perspective on the elusive subject of meditation. He breaks meditation into five phases, which, he points out, closely parallel the steps of Bahá'í consultation. Much of the book—pages 82 through 272—takes the reader through these five phases of meditation, which Thoresen gives as: (1) Preparation, (2) Acquisition, (3) Personal Engagement, (4) Inspiration, and (5) Action. Each phase is itself broken into smaller sub-steps of explicit activity. Phase I, for example, consists of:

1.0 About the Phase of Preparation

1.1 Spiritual Exercise: Purification [ablutions, etc.]

1.2 Spiritual Exercise: Working Through the Events of the Day [accounting for one's actions, introspection, letting go of worries]

- 1.3 Spiritual Exercise: Using the Greatest Name in Purifying Our Thoughts Before Prayer [recitation of Alláh-u-Abhá ninety-five times]
- 1.4 Spiritual Exercise: Meditation on Nature [analogical lessons of Nature as spiritual guides]
- 1.5 Spiritual Exercise: A Relaxation Exercise [muscle relaxation and breathing exercises]

Each phase is structured and systematized to correlate closely with the Bahá'í Writings. Thoresen advises the reader in advance that he will assign four categories to his meditation exercises. These include those exercises that are explicitly prescribed in the Bahá'í Writings, those that are mentioned in the Writings, those that are implied in the Writings, and those that are not mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings. He is careful to avoid any notion of setting up a rigid body of prescribed practice, stipulating that "The exercises and suggestions found in this book are meant only as aids and inspiration and have no authority of their own."

Four appendices round out the book: on "Chanting Prayers," "More about the [Bahá'í] Fast," "More about the Greatest Name," and "Holding Deepening Weekends on Prayers and Meditation." Thoresen reveals his vocation as a composer in Appendix I as he offers specific direction in the ways of delivering prayers according to pitch, tone, alternating notes, phrasing, ornamentation, scale and mode, modulation, and so on—even going so far as to write musical notes to accompany the words.

It is regrettable that the book has no index when the means to create even rudimentary indexes using computer software are so readily available today.

Unlocking the Gate of the Heart calls to mind the classic work of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), whose *Spiritual Exercises* (1552) inspired the foundation of the Society of Jesus, known more commonly as the Jesuits. Loyola's handbook is a guide through four weeks of meditations focused mainly on the life of Christ. Loyola drew primarily upon the inspiration he received during severe self-imposed austerities. His book inspired annual "retreats" which are still undertaken by today by Catholics.

Lasse Thoresen has compiled a sound, carefully reasoned guide to spiritual transformation that is firmly grounded in the Bahá'í Writings. For anyone looking for a model of how to begin the process of spiritual growth and development, it occupies a unique niche in Bahá'í literature.

DUANE TROXEL