



The Sufi Stages of the Soul in Bahá'u'lláh's The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys

The Seven Valleys is the answer Bahá'u'lláh wrote between 1856 and 1862 to a letter sent to him by Shaykh Muḥíyi'd-Dín, judge of Khaniqayn,¹ who was a Sufi leader and one of His admirers. From Bahá'u'lláh we learn that the judge had mentioned in his letter his 'death in God', his 'life through Him' and his 'love for the beloved of God and the Manifestations of His Names and the Dawning-Points of His Attributes' and that he appeared 'to be well-grounded in mystic truth'.² Bahá'u'lláh replies to him through an epistle, where 'He describes the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence'.³ This epistle is a jewel not so much for its formal and literary preciousness but for the inspiring power of its words and the depth and novelty of its contents. For these qualities 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that 'It is a guide for human conduct'⁴ and Shoghi Effendi wrote that it 'may well be regarded as [the] greatest mystical composition'⁵ of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Four Valleys, a work of lesser dimensions, is the written answer to the learned Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Raḥmán-i-Karkúkí, the leader of the mystical Qádiríyyih order, which counted 'at least a hundred thousand devout followers',⁶ and was himself a devoted admirer of Bahá'u'lláh. Robert L. Gulick, in his introduction to the English edition of the two epistles, suggests that the Four Valleys

Momen, Moojan, ed. *The Bahá'í Faith and the World Religions. Papers presented at the Irfan Colloquia*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, pp. 89-105; <https://irfancolloquia.org/religions/>.

1. An Iraqi town near the Persian border.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 3, 42.
3. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 140.
4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 244.
5. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 140.
6. *ibid.* p. 122.

. . . sets forth four ways in which the Unseen is seen, the four stages of the human heart, and the four kinds of mystic wayfarers in quest of the Intended One, the Praiseworthy One, the Attracting One, the Beloved.⁷

At the end of the Seven Valleys Bahá'u'lláh writes that He does not consider the seventh Valley 'which is the station of life in God - as the furthestmost state of mystic knowers (*'árifán*), and the farthest homeland of the lovers (*'áshiqán*)'.⁸ He says that there are another four stages 'which would be recounted should a kindred soul be found'.⁹ May we consider the Four Valleys as this promised description? Shoghi Effendi wrote: 'Seven Valleys and Four Valleys should be regarded as independent Tablets, as they were revealed to different persons.'¹⁰ These words could imply that the four stages described in the Four Valleys are not the 'four stages' (*chihár rutbih*)¹¹ of the heart mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh at the end of the Seven Valleys. But they also could be a simple warning to western-minded people, quite unfamiliar with the language of Muslim mysticism, not to understand the two epistles according to one and the same model and thus not to interpret the four stages of the Four Valleys as the next four stages after the seven stages of the Seven Valleys. Therefore, we suggest that the Four Valleys is the description of the 'four stages of the heart' mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh and that at the same time, since it is an independent tablet, it explains themes also explained in the Seven Valleys in a different perspective.¹²

It has been recently suggested that the first three Valleys of the Four Valleys are a description of three aspects of the spiritual path to be trod by any human being, so that he may acquire knowledge of God, as realization of the self. Thus these three different kinds of wayfarers described by Bahá'u'lláh may be seen as three different aspects of any human being in his process of learning how to use his inner capacities

7. Robert L. Gulick, Jr., Preface to Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. xiii.

8. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 41/134.

9. *ibid.*

10. Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *ibid.* p. vi.

11. *ibid.* p. 41/134.

12. Taherzadeh writes in this regard: 'This, too, is an epistle in which Baha'u'llah describes the journey of the wayfarer to his ultimate goal . . . Although Bahá'u'lláh's approach in this epistle is somewhat different from *The Seven Valleys*, basically it conveys the same truth.' (Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 1, p. 104)

of willing, knowing and loving respectively, while pursuing the purpose of his life: the knowledge of God. And these three Valleys may be viewed as descriptions of what is required for these inner capacities to be developed and of what happens while they grow within the hearts of the seekers. It has been suggested moreover that the fourth Valley may be the description of the station of the Manifestation of God.¹³

Although the two epistles ‘should be regarded as independent Tablets’, still their style is very similar. It is the typical Sufi style, characterized by an abundance of metaphors, allegories and quotations from the Qur’an,¹⁴ the Hadith¹⁵ and literary works, such as, for instance, the poems of Jalalu’d-Din Rumi, Faridu’d-Din ‘Attar, Muslihu’d-Din Sa’di and Hafiz, as well as learned references to traditional stories and legends. Also the philosophical concepts to which they refer are those of the Sufis. But at the same time totally new mystical concepts are exposed without the least trace of provocation or condemnation against the ancient Sufi ideas – so much so that they may pass unnoticed. Therefore a deeper understanding of the content of the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys requires that we keep in mind not only Sufi ideas about the various subjects but also the concepts which Bahá’u’lláh taught in His other writings.

This paper intends to explore the stages of the soul¹⁶ as described in the two epistles in the light of Sufi concepts and other explanations of these concepts we find in the Bahá’i writings. But because the Bahá’i writings teach that it is impossible to have a full knowledge of the reality of the spiritual worlds, and moreover because, at such an early stage of the Bahá’i dispensation, very few of the Bahá’i writings are available, our comments should be considered as rudimentary and incomplete.

The Sufi Stages of the Soul

In the 10th century AD, the Brothers of Purity (*Ikhwán aṣ-Ṣafá*) gave the following definition of the soul (*nafs*):

13. Cf. Julio Savi, ‘Will, knowledge, and love as explained in Bahá’u’lláh’s Four Valleys’.

14. The verses of the Qur’an are quoted from Rodwell’s English translation, unless specified otherwise.

15. Sayings and facts traditionally ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad and, in Shi’i Islam, to the Imam ‘Ali.

16. The English word soul translates the Arabic *nafs*, the Persian *ján* and sometimes the Arabic *rúh*, which is also translated as spirit.

It is a celestial essence, of light (*nûrâniyya*), living, conscious, active, sensitive, intelligent, which does not die, but eternally subsists, in joy or pain.¹⁷

This definition could have been written by a western philosopher. And yet Sufis also ascribe to the word *nafs* quite different meanings, which are founded on the Qur'an, specifically in verses 12:53, 75:2 and 89:27–30. The following comments by the Andalusian Sufi Abú'l-'Abbás ibn al-'Árif (d.1141) are an example of the Sufi interpretations of these verses:

. . . previously the soul, in its initial stage, instigated to do evil (*ammâra bi-l-sû'*) . . . Then it became a self-accusing soul (*lawwâma*) . . . and whoever repents of his sins is like unto him who did not commit any sin. Finally it became a soul at rest (*muṭma'inna*) through the remembrance of God (*dhikr Allâh*): 'for without doubt in the remembrance of God do hearts find satisfaction' (Qur'an 13:28, Yusuf Ali's translation) . . .¹⁸

In these words three stages of the moral development of the soul on the earth may be identified. The first stage is described in Qur'an 12:53. Here Joseph, whom Potiphar's wife has just freed from her accusation of raping her, confirms his innocence. But, in his perfect purity of heart, he adds:

Yet I hold not myself clear, for the heart is prone to evil (*inna an-nafsu 'l-ammâra bi's-sû'*), save theirs on whom my Lord hath mercy; for gracious is my Lord, Merciful.

Muslim theologians infer from this verse that there is in man an element of evil, the seat of passion and lust, which they call *an-nafs al-ammâra*, literally, 'the imperative

17. Épîtres 617, quoted in Chebel, *Dictionnaire des symboles musulmans*, p. 290.

18. Ibn al-'Arîf, *Sedute mistiche (Maḥâsin al-majâlis)*, p. 139.

soul', the passionate soul which is prone to evil. It corresponds to Plato's concupiscible soul and to the biblical 'flesh'.¹⁹ The Qur'an says:

But as to him who shall have feared the majesty of his Lord, and shall have refrained his soul from lust (*wa nahá an-nafs 'an al-hawá*), verily, Paradise – that shall be his dwelling-place.²⁰

And a Tradition says: 'The worst enemy you have is [the *nafs*] between your sides.'²¹

Therefore, according to the Sufis, the passions of the concupiscible soul, which they sometimes identify with Satan (*shaytán*), should be checked. The struggle against the *nafs* is considered to be the 'Greatest Holy War' (*al-jihád al-akbar*). The spiritual path begins from this inner struggle. In fact, the human soul has a divine origin. 'I am celestial,' it says in Rumi's words.²² Therefore it also feels an inner yearning which sometimes drives it on the paths of the spirit:

The desire of the body for green herbs and running water is because its origin is from those;

The desire of the soul is for Life and for the Living One, because its origin is the Infinite Soul.

The desire of the soul is for wisdom and the sciences; the desire of the body is for orchards and meadows and vines.

The desire of the soul is for ascent and exaltedness; the desire of the body is for gain and the means of procuring fodder.²³

This struggle against the soul implies that its quality be put at the service of God. Sufis explain this concept through a story of Muhammad's life, described by Schimmel:

19. As to the soul in this stage of its moral development, Bausani writes that 'in mystical Islamic tradition . . . the soul is often contemptuously called "that bitch of the soul" (*sag-i-nafs*), a fact that usually astonishes the novice who reads these texts for the first time.' (Bausani, 'Cuore, cervello, mistica, religione. Opinioni di un Bahá'í', *Saggi*, pp. 176–7)

20. Qur'an 79:40–1

21. Quoted in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 112.

22. Rumi, *Mathnawí* 3:4435

23. *ibid.* 3:4436B39

When asked how his *shayṭân* behaved, he [Muhammad] answered: ‘*Aslama shaṭānî*; my *shayṭân* has become a Muslim and does whatever I order him’, i.e. all his lower faculties and instincts had been turned into useful tools in the service of God.²⁴

These words bring us to the second stage of the moral development of the soul, described in Qur’an 75:2:

Or that I swear by the self-accusing soul (*an-naḥs al-lawwāma*).

Muslim theologians infer from this verse that when the soul becomes conscious of its disobedience to the Qur’an’s advice to refrain from lust, it becomes a self-accusing soul (*an-naḥs al-lawwāma*). Some scholars, such as Yusuf Ali, consider this stage of the soul as similar ‘to Conscience, except that in English usage Conscience is a faculty and not a stage in spiritual development’.²⁵ Others see it as similar to Plato’s irascible soul. The last stage of the moral development of the soul is described in Qur’an 89:27B30:

Oh, thou soul which art at rest (*muṭma’inna*),
Return to Thy Lord, pleased (*raḍiyya*) and pleasing Him (*marḍiyya*):
Enter thou among my servants,
And enter thou my Paradise.

This stage is commented upon by Ibn al-‘Arif:

Did you see how that which was not in them worthy of entering in Paradise has been extinguished (*fanâ*), whereas that which never ceased to exist has subsisted (*baqâ*)?²⁶

24. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 113.

25. Yusuf Ali, in *The Holy Qur’an*, p. 1649, n5810.

26. Ibn al-‘Arîf, *Sedute mistiche (Maḥâsin al-majâlis)*, p. 140.

Therefore the Sufi path may also be viewed as a journey whereby the soul goes through a process of transformation, so that the stage of the soul commanding to evil (*an-nafs al-ammára bi's-sú*) may transcend through the stage of the blaming soul (*an-nafs al-lawwáma*), and higher and higher stages of development may be realized until it reaches the stage where the soul becomes at peace (*muṭma'inna*).

The Sufis also described other stages of the soul beside these three, for example the animal soul (*an-nafs al-ḥayawániyya*), common to animals and human beings, which is an inferior stage to *an-nafs al-ammára*. Shah mentions 'seven stages of preparation' through which the soul goes while treading the path of spiritual perfection:

1. *Nafs-i-ammara* (the depraved, commanding *nafs*)
2. *Nafs-i-lawwama* (the accusing *nafs*)
3. *Nafs-i-mulhama* (the inspired *nafs*)
4. *Nafs-i-mutma'inna* (the serene *nafs*)
5. *Nafs-i-rádiyya* (the fulfilled *nafs*)
6. *Nafs-i-mardiyya* (the fulfilling *nafs*)
7. *Nafs-i-safiyya wa kamila* (the purified and complete *nafs*).²⁷

The terms *an-nafs al-ammára*, *an-nafs al-lawwáma* and *an-nafs al-muṭma'inna* have already been explained. As for *an-nafs al-mulhama*, which is the inspired *nafs*, the term *mulhama* comes from *ilhám*, which is the divine inspiration given to believers and is different from the inspiration given to the Prophets, which is defined *waḥí*. As for *an-nafs ar-rádiyya*, which is the fulfilled or contented *nafs*, the Egyptian Sufi Dhu'n-Nún (796-859 AD) wrote that '*Riḍá* is the joy of the heart in the bitterness of the divine decree'.²⁸ As for *an-nafs al-marḍiyya* (the fulfilling or accepted *nafs*), *marḍiyya* means pleasing unto God. Both the words *rádiyya* and *marḍiyya* may be found in Qur'an 89:28. *An-nafs aṣ-ṣáfiyya wa kámila* is the purified and complete *nafs*. As for the meaning of *ṣáfiyya*, Rumi writes:

27. Shah, *The Sufis*, p. 445.

28. Quoted in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, p. 126.

The pure one (*Ṣâfî*) is plunged in the Light of the Glorious (God), he is not the son of any one, (he is) free from ‘times’ and ‘states.’²⁹

As for the meaning of *kámila*, *al-insán al-kámil* is for the Sufis the perfect man, the perfect manifestation of all the names and the attributes of God. He is the Holy One, ‘the mirror in which are reflected all the Divine Names and Qualities’.³⁰ In him the individual is dead as self and is reborn as true Self because he has undergone a deep inner transformation which endowed him with a total consciousness of his own innermost spiritual reality. Such a man is the master of himself as well as of the cosmos. In the words of the Sufi *Shaykh* al-‘Arabí al-Darqáwí (1737B1823):

The soul is an immense thing; it is the whole cosmos, since it is the copy of it. Everything which is in the cosmos is to be found in the soul; equally everything in the soul is in the cosmos. Because of this fact, he who masters his soul most certainly masters the cosmos, just as he who is dominated by his soul is certainly dominated by the whole cosmos.³¹

The Stages of the Soul in the Seven Valleys and in the Four Valleys

Six of the seven stages of the soul described by Shah have been mentioned by Bahá’u’lláh in one of his tablets. He writes:

Much hath been written in the books of old concerning the various stages in the development of the soul (*nafs*), such as concupiscence (*ammára*), irascibility (*lawwáma*), inspiration (*mulhama*), benevolence (*muṭma’inna*), contentment (*ráḍiyya*), Divine good-pleasure (*marḍiyya*), and the like; the Pen of the Most High, however, is disinclined to dwell upon them.³²

29. Rumi, *Mathnawí* 3:1434

30. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, p. 35.

31. Darqáwí, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, p. 21. See also the following verse ascribed to the Imam ‘Ali and quoted by Bahá’u’lláh in the Seven Valleys: ‘Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form \ When within thee the universe is folded?’ (Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 34)

32. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 82, p. 159. For the Persian text refer to *Muntakhabátí Az Áthár-i Ḥaḍrat-i-Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 107.

From these words we can infer that Bahá'u'lláh did not ascribe great importance to all these Sufi stages.³³ Therefore it is important for us to try to understand his own teachings about the soul and its development. Obviously, the best source to which we can turn to find good explanations of his teachings are the tablets written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. One of these tablets in which such explanations may be found is published in *Makátib-i- 'Abdu'l-Bahá*.³⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions 14 stages of the spirit.³⁵ The first three stages are inferior to the human soul:

1. The cohesive mineral (*jamádiyya ma 'daniyya*)
2. The growing vegetable (*námiyya nabátiyya*)
3. The sensible animal (*hayvaniyya ḥassásiyya*)
4. The fourth stage is the human (*nasútiyya insániyya*) soul. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the human soul is characterized by the power of speech (*nafs an-náṭiqā*) – a locution which also conveys the connotation of rationality and thus has also been translated as rational soul. The human soul is subjected both to divine and satanic influences. And while the human soul struggles to

33. Some of the reasons why Baha'u'llah did not attach great importance to these Sufi metaphysical teachings may be inferred from His own words. In the Seven Valleys He refers to them as 'conflicting utterances of the mystics'. (*Seven Valleys*, p. 26) And thus we may infer He disliked them because of the endless and conflicting discussions which they provoked among the mystics. In another passage of the Seven Valleys He writes 'that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision' (ibid. p. 18) and later He invites His correspondent to 'forget them all, that [he might] learn from the Master of Love in the schoolhouse of oneness, and forsake the inner land of unreality for [his] true station'. (ibid. p. 28) From these words we may infer that all the Sufi divisions into stages, or any other sorts of categories, are only the result of an intellectual effort to communicate inner experiences to others. Thus, on the one hand, a whole experience is cut into pieces so that others may understand it; on the other, whoever reads such an explanation understands it according to his own spiritual level. The result is that those explanations cannot be a precise description of reality. Therefore great care should be taken not to misunderstand them as reality itself.

34. cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátib-i- 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 62–102. I am grateful to Dr. Moojan Momen, who kindly shared with me his provisional translation of this Tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a translation which I widely consulted while writing this paper.

35. cf. ibid. vol. 1, p. 65.

overcome the satanic influences and to yield to the divine ones, it goes through several stages. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that in each stage the human soul is described by a certain term. He lists them as follows:

5. The abased soul (*ammára*)
6. The self accusing soul (*lawwáma*)
7. The inspired soul (*mulhama*)
8. The assured soul (*muṭma’inna*)
9. The contented (or well-pleased) soul (*ráḍiyya*)
10. The accepted (or pleasing) soul (*marḍiyya*)
11. The perfect soul (*kámila*)
12. The soul of the Kingdom of God (*malakútiyya*)
13. The soul of the Dominion (*jabarútiyya*)
14. The Divine Spirit or Soul (*láhútiyya qudsiyya*)

If we study the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys in the light of the explanations given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this tablet, we can attempt a comparison between the stages described by Bahá’u’lláh with the stages of the soul explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the stages of the soul mentioned by the Sufis.

The Seven Valleys can be seen as the description of the itinerary of the soul from the stage of the abased soul (*ammára*) (Qur’an 12:53) to the stage of the soul of the Kingdom (*malakútiyya*). We suggest moreover that the last three stages described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his tablet – the soul of the Kingdom (*malakútiyya*), the soul of the Dominion (*jabarútiyya*) and the Divine Spirit or Soul (*láhútiyya qudsiyya*) – could be identified with stages of the soul described by Bahá’u’lláh in the Four Valleys.

When Bahá’u’lláh mentions in the Seven Valleys ‘the abode of dust’ (*makan-i-khákí*),³⁶ or ‘the plane of heedlessness’ (*makán-i-ghaflat*)³⁷ or ‘the darkness of illusion’ (*ẓulmat-i-ḍalálat-i-havá*, literally the darkness of the errors of passion),³⁸ he seems to refer to a condition whereby the soul is subjected to the material aspects of its own nature, here metaphorically described as ‘dust’ (*khák*) or ‘passion’ (*havá*).

36. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 4/95.

37. *ibid.* p. 5/96.

38. *ibid.* p. 11/102.

In this condition the soul is utterly unaware (*gháfil*) of its high spiritual station and thus it is subjected to its own passions. This seems to be the condition of the soul prone to evil (*an-nafs al-ammára*) of the Islamic scriptures. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that in this stage the soul is in the depth of degradation and the lowest grades of animal passions, therefore it becomes hardened by the coldness of the material world and neglectful of the warmth of the divine worlds.³⁹

The condition of the soul in the Valley of Search is characterized by an inner restlessness and discontent. The soul is aware of its abasement and struggles so that it may attain higher levels of consciousness and spirituality, which are symbolized as ‘the beauty of the Friend’ (*jamál-i-dúst*).⁴⁰ ‘Cleansing the heart’⁴¹ and ‘sacrificing all things’⁴² are the first steps that must be taken in this Valley. The condition of the soul in this Valley seems very similar to the condition of the Islamic self-accusing soul (*an-nafs al-lawwáma*). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that in this stage the soul becomes occasionally aware of its abasement and forgetfulness and thus it becomes remorseful. This is the reason why it is called self-accusing soul.⁴³

In the Valley of Love the soul has found ‘a trace of the traceless Friend, and [inhaled] the fragrance of the long-lost Joseph from the heavenly messenger’.⁴⁴ And thus it begins ‘to be dissolved in the fire of love’.⁴⁵ So great is this love of the soul for ‘the long-lost Joseph’ at long last found again that the soul is ready to do anything so that it may come closer to its Beloved One. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained in one of His American talks that ‘nearness to God necessitates sacrifice of self, severance and the giving up of all to Him. Nearness is likeness.’⁴⁶ This is what the soul does while going through the Valley of Love. The soul is still attached to its material nature. But its love helps it to withstand that attachment, and to follow the laws of the spirit to which the soul is increasingly attracted. And thus the soul can gradually take on the qualities of the spirit and advance towards its Beloved. This condition seems

39. cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, p. 87.

40. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 5/96.

41. cf. *ibid.*

42. cf. *ibid.* p. 7.

43. cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 87–8.

44. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 7B8.

45. *ibid.* p. 8.

46. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 148.

very similar to the condition of the Islamic inspired soul (*an-nafs al-mulhama*).⁴⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes in detail the condition of the soul struggling to rise from the lowly circumstances of the stages of the abased and self-accusing soul towards higher stages of assurance and gratitude. He writes that in this stage the soul is assisted by divine confirmations and inspired by the Book. If the soul obeys the divine commandments recorded in the Book, it receives the divine confirmations and finally will be enabled to distinguish between its own evil and good deeds.⁴⁸ It seems evident that the soul described in this stage is an inspired soul because it has found the source of its inspiration in the holy books.

In the Valley of Knowledge the soul has been purified through the divine confirmations and its own efforts and thus it has acquired the capacities of a previously unknown spiritual perception. Through these capacities the soul can see new, and previously unknown, aspects of reality in itself and in the world. It is the condition of the Islamic *an-nafs al muṭma’inna*, the soul which is assured and serene because it can see ‘the end in the beginning’.⁴⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the soul is described in this stage as an assured soul because it has become awake to the remembrance of its Lord, has forgotten all its vain imaginations, has recognized the signs of God in the worlds of God and in itself, has become full of love for the Manifestation of God and has become steadfast, constant and peaceful.⁵⁰

In the Valley of Unity (*avval-i-maqám-i-tawḥíd*, literally, ‘the first station of unity’)⁵¹ the soul has learnt how to look ‘on all things with the eye of oneness’

47. The cleansing power of love was well known to the Sufis. The Sufi poet Rúzbihán Baqlí (d. 1209) writes about love: ‘When the soul is educated by human love and has become firm-footed in the innermost secret of love, and the heart is polished by the fire of love from the satanic and base insinuations, then “the soul which commands evil” becomes “peaceful” beneath the strokes of the violent wrath of love.’ (*Abhar al- ‘āshiqîn*, *Le jasmine des fidèles d’amour*, para. 203; quoted in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, p. 291)

48. Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Makátib-i- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 88B9.

49. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 15. This concept was familiar among the Sufis. Rumi writes: ‘Mu__afá (Mohammed), the Pole and the Emperor and the Sea of Purity, has told us truly, \ That what the ignorant will see in the end the wise see from the first step. \ If matters are hidden and secret at the beginning, the wise man sees at first, while that obstinate one (sees) at last.’ (*Mathnawí* 3:2196B8)

50. Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Makátib-i- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 89B90.

51. Bahá’u’lláh *Seven Valleys*, pp. 17/108–9.

(*nazar-i-tawhíd*).⁵² Thus it is satisfied with the will of God. This condition seems very similar to the condition of the Islamic fulfilled or well-pleased soul (*an-nafs ar-rádiyya*), which is pleased with whatsoever God ordains. There is a great similarity between the words of Bahá'u'lláh describing the Valley of Unity and the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá describing the condition of the contended soul. Bahá'u'lláh writes that

In this station [the seeker] pierceth the veils of plurality, fleeth from the worlds of the flesh, and ascendeth into the heaven of singleness. With the ear of God he heareth, with the eye of God he beholdeth the mysteries of divine creation.⁵³

And while 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the well-pleased soul, He says that in this stage the will of the soul has vanished and disappeared in the will of God, i.e. its will has become God's will. Therefore the soul rises above the plane of duality.⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh writes in his *Súriy-i-Ra'ís*:

Know . . . that the life of man proceedeth from the spirit, and the spirit turneth to wheresoever the soul directeth it . . .

Know, also, that the soul is endowed with two wings: should it soar in the atmosphere of love and contentment, then it will be related to the All-Merciful, and should it fly in the atmosphere of self and desire, then it will pertain to Evil one; may God shield and protect us and protect you therefrom, O ye who perceive! Should the soul become ignited with the fire of the love of God, it is called benevolent and pleasing unto God, but should it be consumed with the fire of passion, it is known as the concupiscent soul.⁵⁵

From these words we may infer that it is at this stage in its evolution that the soul 'turns' its back on the material world and its face towards God. And thus we also

52. *ibid.* p. 18/109.

53. *ibid.* p. 17.

54. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 91–2.

55. Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons*, p. 154.

understand why the Valley of Knowledge is described as ‘the last plane of limitation’ (*ákhir maqám-i-tahdíq*)⁵⁶ and the following Valley is called ‘the first station of unity’.

In the Valley of Contentment (*istighná*, literally self-sufficiency) the soul has become endowed with even subtler capacities of spiritual perception. Therefore it ‘burneth away the veils of want . . . [and] from sorrow turneth to bliss, from anguish to joy’.⁵⁷ It is very similar to the Islamic fulfilling or well-pleasing soul (*an-nafs al-marḍiyya*). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that in this stage the soul is dressed in the raiment of submission and contentment.⁵⁸

In the Valley of Wonderment (*ḥayrat*) the soul ‘is lost in awe at the works of the Lord of Oneness’.⁵⁹ It seems that in this stage the ‘animal condition’ (*rutbiy-i-ḥayvání*) has been destroyed and ‘the meaning of humanity’ (*ma’aní insání*) has ‘come to light’.⁶⁰ Therefore the condition of the soul in this Valley seems similar to the condition of the Islamic perfect soul (*an-nafs al-kámila*). Its perfection is manifest in its capacity of beholding ‘at every moment . . . a wondrous world, a new creation’ and of being ‘lost in awe at the works of the Lord of Oneness’.⁶¹ Because of these capacities the soul is approved and accepted at His threshold and therefore it is considered to be perfect.

As to the stage of the perfect soul, a number of Sufi masters seem to have an idea which is quite different from that found in the Bahá’i teachings. They maintain that whoever attains the highest degree of perfection is the Perfect or Universal Man (*al-insán al-kámil*). But according to the Bahá’i teachings no human being can attain this station as described by the Sufis. The qualities of the Perfect Man are typical only of the Manifestations of God.

In the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness the soul has attained the stage of ‘the dying from self (*faná az nafs*) and the living in God (*baqá bi’lláh*)’.⁶² Of this stage of the soul Bahá’u’lláh writes:

56. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 17/108.

57. *ibid.* p. 29.

58. cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, p. 92.

59. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 32.

60. *ibid.* p. 34/127.

61. *ibid.* p. 32.

62. *ibid.* p. 36/129.

This is the plane whereon the vestiges of all things are destroyed in the traveller, and on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness, and the meaning of ‘All on earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord . . .’⁶³ is made manifest.⁶⁴

The same verse of the Qur’an is quoted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his tablet when explaining the grades of the spirit and describing the condition of the soul which has become worthy to enter into the Kingdom of God (*an-nafs al-malakútiyya*). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions in the same context also another verse of Qur’an:

Oh thou soul who art well assured, Return to thy lord well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him. Enter thou among My servants, And enter thou My paradise.⁶⁵

It is interesting to note that in the Four Valleys Bahá’u’lláh writes that the First Valley is

. . . the plane of the soul who is pleasing unto God. Refer to the verse:

O thou soul who art well assured,
Return to thy Lord well-pleased, and pleasing unto Him.

which endeth:

Enter thou among My servants,
And enter thou My paradise.⁶⁶

Is it possible to infer from this coincidence of quotations that the stage of the seeker who makes his spiritual path through the First Valley of the Four Valleys is the same as the station of the soul of the Kingdom described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his tablet?

63. Qur’an 55:26, 27

64. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 37.

65. Qur’an 89:27–30.

66. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 50.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions also the soul of the Dominion (*an-nafs al-jabarútiyya*) and the Divine Spirit or Soul (*an-nafs lahútiyya qudsiyya*). Is it possible to identify these two stages mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with any of the stages of the soul described by Bahá’u’lláh in the Four Valleys? We have already suggested that the station of the seeker who has reached ‘the goal of the Intended One’⁶⁷ of the First Valley of the Four Valleys may be the same as the station of the soul of the Kingdom described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. We suggest also that the station of the seeker who has reached ‘the dwelling of the Praiseworthy One’⁶⁸ in the Second Valley may be the same as that of the soul of the Dominion (*an-nafs al-jabarútiyya*) described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and that the station ‘of those who have reached to the beauty of the Beloved One’⁶⁹ may be the same as the station of the Divine Spirit or Soul (*an-nafs al-láhútiyya*) mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Bahá’u’lláh describes the Second Valley as ‘the station of primal reason which is known as . . . the Most Great Pillar (*rukni-i-a’zam*)’.⁷⁰ In his tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the station of the soul that has ascended to the station of the divine Empyrean Dominion (*Jabarút*) is the *Sadratu’l-Muntaha*, which is very similar to ‘the Most Great Pillar’ identified by Bahá’u’lláh with the goal of the wayfarer going through the Second Valley. And thus it may be that the station of the soul that has reached the goal of the Second Valley described by Bahá’u’lláh in the Four Valleys and the station of the Soul of the Dominion described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are the same thing.

As for the Fourth Valley and the Divine Spirit or Soul (*an-nafs al-láhútiyya*) mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says of this grade of the soul that it is hidden behind the greatest mysteries, that no human intellect can understand it. He says moreover that this is the Supreme Reality, the Centre of the Circle of Existence, the Origin of all things. It seems clear that He is describing the reality of the Word of God, which is also the reality of the Manifestation of God. Bahá’u’lláh says of the Fourth Valley that no one will ever ‘comprehend even a letter thereof’.⁷¹ And moreover, ‘this station is the apex of consciousness and the secret of divine

67. *ibid.*

68. *ibid.* p. 52.

69. *ibid.* p. 57.

70. *ibid.* p. 52/144.

71. *ibid.* p. 58.

guidance'.⁷² And also: 'The exalted dwellers in this mansion do wield divine authority in the court of rapture, with utter gladness, and they do bear a kingly sceptre . . . and they sit in the Empyrean of Might within the Lofty Pavilion.'⁷³ These words also seem to refer to the station of the Manifestation of God.

The Meaning of the Stages of the Soul in the Bahá'í Writings

There are certain differences between the stages of the soul as described by the Sufi masters and as described in the Bahá'í writings.

For the Sufis, the spiritual path is covered by degrees, which are sometimes compared to the steps of a ladder. Each step is a particular manner of being, acquired by the seeker as a result of his striving towards perfection and as a fruit of divine assistance. To have reached a certain degree or station (*maqám*) means to have a total and definitive (intellectual and spiritual) knowledge of that station. There is a sequence of *maqámát* (stations) which are permanently achieved one after the other, in a precise order, and a certain station cannot be achieved if all inferior stations have not been previously experienced, surpassed and left behind.

In contrast, Bahá'u'lláh writes in *Gems of Divine Mysteries* (*Javáhiru'l-Asrár*), one of his writings that in some ways resembles *The Seven Valleys*, that 'should one who hath attained these stations [the City of Immortality] and embarked upon these journeys fall prey to pride and vainglory, he would at that very moment come to naught and return to the first step without realizing it.'⁷⁴ Thus the spiritual journey of man, as described by Bahá'u'lláh, does not appear as a strict sequence of stations, following one another in one and the same direction like the stages of an earthly journey, but as a sequence of inner experiences which can be lived again and again with increasing depth and growing intensity. Human progress is, moreover, strictly subordinated to the divine grace, so much so that

. . . the severed wayfarer – if invisible confirmation descend upon him
and the Guardian of the Cause assist him – may cross these seven stages
in seven steps, nay rather in seven breaths, nay rather in a single breath,

72. *ibid.* p. 57.

73. *ibid.* pp. 60–1.

74. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, p. 74.

if God will and desire it. And this is of ‘His grace on such of His servants as He pleaseth’.⁷⁵

Therefore, if the wayfarer will not persevere, if he will not be humble and self-effaced, he may fall down from heights of inner experience and wealth to depths of spiritual heedlessness and remoteness. Nevertheless, like an infant who is taking his first steps, his yearning to proceed in his journey will drive him to rise and try again, while, God willing, the light will be growing brighter in his heart.

Moreover the different grades of the soul described by Bahá’u’lláh and explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá may be seen as perfect models our souls strive to attain but will never attain in their perfection because a human being cannot be perfect, not even in one of his attributes. Perfection belongs only to the Manifestations of God. Therefore the qualities of the abased soul will always persist in our inner realities, till the end of our days on the earth. Shoghi Effendi said very clearly:

The only people who are truly free of the ‘the dross of self’ are the Prophets, for to be free of one’s ego is a hall-mark of perfection. We humans are *never* going to become perfect, for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter.⁷⁶

But also our soul will continue to reproach itself because it is aware of its own imperfections and thus it will make an effort to overcome those imperfections and to move towards the stage of the inspired soul. Through the divine assistance and its own efforts, our soul will progress towards the stages of the accepted and perfect soul and thus, God willing, become worthy of entering the Kingdom of God and the Empyrean Heaven.

In conclusion, we might say that in the two epistles the soul seems to be described as a spiritual entity, created by God and intended to express, through a material body, its qualities in the material world. The soul will fulfil the goal of its existence through its own efforts and the help of God. Therefore the soul is not

75. Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 40B1.

76. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 8 January 1949, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 389, p. 114.

described as an evil entity which should be purified from its evil attributes but as an evolving spiritual entity. No human soul will become a perfect manifestation of divine attributes, as Sufis seem to claim. This station belongs only to the Manifestations of God.

The Bahá'í Spiritual Pathway

All these explanations about the different grades of the soul may give a wrong impression about the mystical aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. One may think that the Bahá'í writings teach that spiritual goals may be attained through inner efforts based on prayer, meditation and detachment from the material world; and thus that the Bahá'í spiritual pathway is not very different from the way (*ṭarīqat*) of the Sufis. But if we refer to other Bahá'í writings – even those which were written in the so-called Baghdad period – this impression will be soon corrected.

In the same years that Bahá'u'lláh was writing the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, he wrote also the Hidden Words. If the two former epistles describe the pathway whereby the spiritual seeker may emerge 'from the abode of dust' and make his way 'to the heavenly homeland',⁷⁷ the latter describes what he should do in order to cover this journey. In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh warns:

O My Brother! Hearken to the delightful words of My honeyed tongue, and quaff the stream of mystic holiness from My sugar-shedding lips. Sow the seeds of my divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart.⁷⁸

These words may be perceived only as a poetical admonition to faithfulness. And yet they seem also to describe a spiritual itinerary. The first step is to 'hearken to the delightful words of [His] honeyed tongue' so that the thirsty souls may be satisfied. The second step is to 'sow the seeds of [His] divine wisdom in the pure soil of [the] heart'. The third is to acquire 'certitude'. Only then will 'the hyacinths of [His]

77. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 4.

78. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian no. 33.

knowledge and wisdom' 'spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of [the] heart'. These words may also be seen as a concise description of the whole spiritual path described in the Seven Valleys.

As to what seekers should do to please God, again Bahá'u'lláh writes in his Hidden Words:

O Son of Being! Walk in My statutes for love of Me and deny thyself that which thou desirest if thou seekest My pleasure.⁷⁹

O My Friends! Walk ye in the ways of the good pleasure of the Friend, and know that His pleasure is in the pleasure of His creatures.⁸⁰

Three concepts are here explained. The first is that God Himself should be the highest object of the seeker's love. The second is that the seeker should manifest this love for God in his daily life through his inward and outward obedience to His laws. The third is that this obedience should be expressed in human relations. In other words, if the seeker wants his soul to obtain the good pleasure of God (that is, if he wants his soul to go through the stages of *an-nafs al-muṭma'inna*, *an-nafs ar-ráḍiyya*, *an-anfs al marḍiyya*, etc.), he must act towards himself and his fellow men according to the divine laws. Therefore, although the Bahá'i spiritual path is an inner path, still its outer or practical aspects are of vital importance. 'The basest of men are they that yield no fruit on earth.'⁸¹

The Bahá'i spiritual pathway has been very clearly outlined in an important letter of the Universal House of Justice:

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:

79. *ibid.* Arabic no. 38.

80. *ibid.* Persian no. 43.

81. *ibid.* Persian no. 81.

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.
- . . . the House of Justice wishes to stress [these points], because they represent the path towards the attainment of true spirituality that has been laid down by the Manifestation of God for this age.⁸²

These words uttered by the Supreme Body of the Bahá'í Faith, which clearly describe the Bahá'í spiritual path, set the abstract stages of the soul as described in the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys into a more practical and useful context. Through them our reflections on such abstract concepts as the grades of the soul in the Sufi world and in the Bahá'í writings may be brought out of the realm of useless thoughts into the arena of useful actions.

82. From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1 September 1983, in *Lights of Guidance*, nos. 1835–6, pp. 540–1.

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