



Spirituality: the key to individual transformation

When the sperm our father gave to our mother in a mutual surge of love and joy impregnated her waiting ovum, a fantastic process of transformation was set in motion, a process that is still continuing and the conclusion of which is still unknown to us, in its details.

The first birth

In that very moment, when the 23 chromosomes of that sperm and the 23 chromosomes of that ovum met, all our ancestors were present in the form of their DNA molecules, and the genetic information of their hereditary characteristics was ready to pass to that zygote from which we would later develop. It was just a flash, and those ancient presences were mysteriously blended into a new organism, the heir of all the past: our body.

While that zygote was being conceived in the material world, a new entity was born in the worlds of the Spirit, capable of knowing, loving, willing, and immortal like the world it belongs to: our soul. The soul is an individual spiritual entity since it is endowed with capacities and qualities unique to their combination. This spiritual entity is destined to direct the development of that zygote during the whole cycle of its transformations until it disintegrates. At the same time, the soul will employ that material body as an instrument through which it can become conscious of its own potential capacities and qualities, qualities which are a reflection of God's attributes, by actualizing them in the form of thoughts and feelings, deeds and behaviours that may be seen on the material plane of existence.¹

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¹ Some people deny the existence of the worlds of the Spirit and the existence and immortality of the soul. They say that there are no irrefutable rational proofs of such existence and immortality. And yet such proofs do exist. We all know them. We have read and studied them, and we have then decided to accept or refuse them. However, those of us who accepted these proofs were convinced not so much by their intrinsic persuasiveness, as by our own experience. Through experience we came to see the existence of the worlds of the Spirit and the existence and immortality of the soul as an harmonious fact within a broader conception of the universe and of life; sometimes

According to this concept, human life on earth is a process through which a soul knows its potential capacities and qualities as a spiritual entity by actualizing them through the material instrument of its body. It is a journey of the soul through the world of creation towards the goal of the whole consciousness, which it is capable of in the earthly stage of its existence. It is a hectic journey, rich in new experiences and continuous transformation.

The first capacity to be known and actualized by the soul is the power of attraction, typical of the mineral kingdom. The zygote, guided by the soul, begins immediately to combine the molecules put at its disposal by its maternal organism and employs them to form an embryo, following the genetic program of its chromosomes.

While the soul employs those molecules for its purposes, a further capacity of the material world becomes known and actualized, the power of growth typical of the vegetable kingdom.

As construction work proceeds and the embryo's sense and motion organs are formed, the soul also knows and actualizes the power of sense perception typical of the animal kingdom. And even in those early weeks of its development, as the attentive eye of prenatal echography has shown it, it knows and actualizes a further capacity, typical of the animal kingdom, the power of voluntary motion.

Those thirty-eight weeks of intrauterine life are critical to the soul's life. During those days, the soul gradually forms all the instruments it will employ to proceed in its process of self-knowledge outside the matrix, in the spacious earthly world waiting for it.²

At the end of those thirty-eight weeks, the body, by now completed by the soul in its fundamental structures and functions, is expelled from the world of the matrix and from that dark narrowness, it emerges into the luminous spaces of the earth.³

we even came to perceive the signs of those worlds and of the soul in the world of creation. We decided to accept those proofs. Therefore we see our conception both as a material and a spiritual event: in the world of creation a zygote is formed; in the worlds of the Spirit a soul; the former is the seat of material potentialities, the later the seat of divine or spiritual potentialities.

² We are reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's following words: 'If ye be seekers after this life and the vanities thereof, ye should have sought them while ye were still enclosed in your mother's wombs, for at that time ye were continually approaching them, could ye but perceive it' (*Gleanings* 127).

³ No conscious trace remains of that experience. It must have been a very difficult one. Somehow it could be compared to another event, as much dramatic and important: an event through which

Initially, that body seems to be little more than a young animal. However, from that little body, in a score of years, the soul will draw a physically adult human being. While that body is going through a series of important and radical, purely physical transformations, at the same time, the soul learns how to employ it to manifest a further capacity with which it is potentially endowed: the power of rational perception.

Rational perception

This power, typical of the human kingdom, does not exist in any other creature. It enables man to ‘investigate reality’ (Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 291) and ‘perceive what is true’ (ibid.), both in the inner and outer worlds. This power is innate in the soul as a potentiality, but for its fuller actualization, the guidance and cooperation of other human beings who share their experience with their younger fellow beings through education are required.

The cognitive asset acquired through the process of education includes the knowledge of both the outer and the inner worlds. The knowledge of the outer world concerns, in a broad sense, science and its practical applications, i.e. technology. As for the knowledge of the inner world, first of all, the soul knows its own body and all those behaviours required for specific physical goals to be achieved—preservation, reproduction and regulation. Common to humans and animals, these behaviours are usually termed instincts or, in the Bahá’í texts, ‘natural emotions’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 244). This is the material nature of man, sometimes defined in the Bahá’í texts as ‘natal self’ (ibid. 310).⁴ In this process, the soul learns control over its body and emotions, which is particularly precious for social life.

Through the power of rational perception, the soul becomes conscious, albeit in different degrees and ways, of the spiritual or divine aspect of its existence as well. Initially, this consciousness may be perceived as a ‘love of exaltation’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 188), a desire to ‘reach a greater world than the

the soul passes from the narrow limitations of the earthly world into the infinite expanses of the Placeless.

⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, in one of His Writings, refers to the natal self as ‘satanic self’ (*Seven Valleys* 11). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that in the Holy Writings ‘this lower nature in man is symbolized as Satan’, and explains that Satan is but ‘the evil ego within us, not an evil personality outside’ (*Promulgation* 287). Elsewhere He says: ‘Satan, or whatever is interpreted as evil, refers to the lower nature in man. This baser nature is symbolized in various ways’ (ibid. pp. 294-5).

world in which [one] is, and to mount to a higher sphere than that in which [one] is' (ibid.). This love of exaltation, which seems not to exist in the animal, is the simplest expression of what may be defined as man's divine or spiritual nature.

The conflicts of human nature

However, while the soul begins to perceive this love of exaltation, it continues to be pressed by its natural emotions and thus to perceive passion and desire typical of its material nature. Therefore, a tension arises in the soul between passion and desire, born from its material nature, and the love of exaltation, born from its divine or spiritual nature. In fact, passion and desire drive the soul towards the satisfaction of its instincts and, therefore, towards self-centred behaviours, basically connected with the plane of physical existence and conducive to inevitable conflicts with other souls. The love for exaltation, on the contrary, leads the soul to long, albeit obscurely, for an inner harmony with itself and the outer world. This harmony requires reverse qualities such as detachment from the self—or selflessness—and the material world.

The soul often perceives this tension between material and divine or spiritual nature as a feeling of inner disharmony, discontent, loneliness and vanity. At the same time, the soul's material nature dictates self-centred behaviours conducive to conflicts with other human beings, which aggravate that feeling. This condition of inner and outer conflict is so unpleasant in itself and its consequences that the soul wants to escape it.

The soul pursues this goal in different ways, according to its individuality and the ideas acquired through the educational process and from experience. In the personal sphere, often the path of amusement, in its archaic meaning of 'diversion of the attention (as from the truth or one's real intent)' (Webster 74), is instinctively chosen. The soul tries to divert its attention from that inner discomfort and to occupy its consciousness with other activities. In this regard, many activities may be used as amusement: not only play activities in the exact meaning of the word but also certain kinds of active works and even philosophical thoughts, in which a refuge is, more or less unconsciously, sought so that inner conflicts may be forgotten and comfort found. However, amusements, whatever they are, cannot solve conflicts; they can only postpone them. In the social sphere, sometimes the soul looks for meeting points, sharing of ideas, and centres of aggregation, such as family, nation, and political ideals, that may help overcome conflicts. However, such efforts invariably prove to be conducive to but limited results and not to satisfactory solutions to those problems.

The humanistic philosophies prevailing in the contemporary world maintain that man has in himself, mainly in his power of rational perception, all he needs to solve this as any other problem. They maintain that the development of the power of rational perception, i.e. intellectual development, is the highest stage of maturity a man can attain during his life and that this growth is all he has and needs so that he may gradually solve any problem. However, our society is characterized, on the one hand, by a significant development of the power of rational perception and, on the other, by widespread feelings of anxiety and restlessness, by strong tensions between individuals who seem to be confronted with enormous difficulties in their relations and communications. So much so that Fernando Savater, the Spanish philosopher, writes: ‘the only thing we agree about is that we do not all agree’ (*Etica per un figlio* 6).⁵ Given these facts, how can we believe intellectual maturity is the last stage in human development and, thus, the whole evolution? Will such a fascinating and rich adventure end in this disturbing disharmony and conflict or, at best, in the apathy of scepticism, the *carpe diem* of Epicureanism, and the ataraxia of cynicism? Will all these disquieting inner and outer tensions remain unsolved or ignored?

The second birth

Religions are unanimous in their answer to these questions. Beyond this significant development on the material and intellectual level, man can go through a further transformation, a transformation he can accomplish as far as he is ready consciously and willingly to struggle towards it: the attainment of spirituality, something that draws him closer and closer to a longed-for inner and outer harmony.

Spirituality is ‘the awakening of the conscious soul of man to perceive the reality of Divinity’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 142) made possible ‘through the breaths of the Holy Spirit’ (ibid.). It is the consciousness of the Divine that the soul can attain with the assistance of the Divine itself. It may also be defined as a deliberate and conscious process whereby the human soul becomes conscious, through the instrumentality of its body, of its own divine or spiritual nature, i.e. of the divine qualities with which it is endowed by birth, born as it is from the worlds of Spirit.⁶

⁵ Bahá’u’lláh’s following words come to mind: ‘No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united’ (*Tablets* 163-4).

⁶ This definition is very similar to William S. Hatcher’s definition: ‘Spirituality is the process of the full, adequate, proper, and harmonious development of one’s spiritual capacities, Unspirituality, by contrast, is either the lack of development of these capacities, their imbalanced or inharmonious

The acquisition of this consciousness, i.e. spiritual growth, implies a real and substantial transformation, a passage from an inferior to a superior plane of existence. Man is born from the world of creation: his first or material birth. Through his spiritual growth, he learns how to actualize on the physical plane of his existence the potential qualities of his divine or spiritual nature, which do not belong to this world but to the worlds of Spirit; thus, he learns how to live on that plane of existence, where it is as though he was born. Therefore, in the sacred texts, e.g. in the Gospels, man's spiritual transformation is often defined as second birth (cf. John 3: 1-8): an actual birth into the world of Spirit. Such a transformation cannot occur through mere human powers; an external contribution is required from the superior worlds of Spirit, just as the transformation of a seed into a tree requires the energies emanating from the sun, the mineral substances absorbed from the air and soil and the care of a farmer.

However, throughout history, man has been willing to believe himself capable of proceeding autonomously in his deliberate and conscious development. He believed himself to be self-sufficient and endowed with all the necessary qualities to proceed without any assistance in his growth. He identified his power of rational perception as the foremost of all these qualities. However, it seems that this persuasion is but wishful thinking. The limitations of that power are manifest, so much so in this historical period.

History demonstrates that the power of rational perception is not able to formulate comprehensive views of reality, elaborate standards of values, discover and understand metaphysical or spiritual reality, find compelling motivations for his struggle against the natural emotions of his natal self, to bestow upon man the required forces and energies so that he may conquer in himself the binding power of nature and manifest his potential divine or spiritual nature, or to conceive and create a society living and functioning according to the reality of that divine nature. In other words, man alone cannot make progress on the spiritual plane. He needs assistance from a superior plane of existence: Spirit.

development (e.g. the development of one to the exclusion of others), or else the false (improper) development and/or use of these capacities' ('The Concept of Spirituality' 2). For a deeper discussion of the theme of spirituality see the whole paper.

The guidance of the Manifestations of God

All religions explain that man receives this assistance from God Himself through the guidance of His Revelation. God proposes an essential and meaningful Covenant. If you, man, want to be assisted in your efforts towards the solution of your inner and outer, personal and collective conflicts, learn how to know and love the guidance of Revelation God Himself sends to you from the worlds of Spirit; then put in practice its counsels, following the guidance of this knowledge and using the power of your love. In this way, you will become aware of your potential spiritual qualities, i.e. your own divine or spiritual nature, by practical experience; you will learn how to live in a world of matter according to the laws of the worlds of Spirit, and thus, you will learn how to solve your conflicts. When you return to the worlds of Spirit, you will be ready to explore and discover the harmony of reality with your fellow beings.

Revelation is sent through spiritual Leaders who may be called Manifestations of God because They manifest to humankind as much of their Creator, the focal centre of the worlds of Spirit, as people can understand. History has handed down a record of some of these Manifestations. They founded the revealed religions: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh.⁷

The Manifestations of God guide man in his spiritual progress in two ways: on the one hand, They reveal a comprehensible description of reality and of the laws of the worlds of Spirit, whose knowledge is required that a person may live in those worlds; on the other, They bestow upon man the required spiritual forces so that the instruments of his material nature may be bent to the purposes of his divine or spiritual nature. This concept will be more readily understood through a simple metaphor. The worlds of Spirit can be compared to the world of matter and spiritual laws to the physical ones. A man must know the reality and the laws of the material universe so that he may adequately employ his own body. The matter is weighty; left by itself, it falls. Water does not permit breathing. Fire burns. Walking blindly is dangerous, and so on. It may seem obvious, but if a person were deprived of these simple notions, he could not survive. In the worlds of Spirit, it is just the same. Spirit is love; any soul unable to love experiences pain. Envy and jealousy deprive the soul

⁷ A deeper discussion of the concept of Manifestation of God as explained in the Bahá'í texts is beyond the scope of this article. J.R. Cole wrote at length about it in his 'The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings,' a perusal of which is suggested.

of the forces of the Spirit. Lying burns as a fire. A spiritually blind man, i.e., who ignores spiritual reality and laws, cannot advance in the worlds of Spirit.⁸

The Manifestations of God reveal to man this reality and these laws in such a way that man can understand them. The language used by the Manifestations of the past, while accomplishing Their task of assisting a still infant humanity in its difficult spiritual journey, has been interpreted throughout the centuries in such a way that today, it is an obstacle in some people's understanding of the spiritual verities. Those spiritual laws were presented as codes whose disobedience – 'sin' – involved the torments of hell. Today, we understand that such words have metaphorical meanings.

It is only an illusion that the Manifestations of God reveal oppressive codes; in reality, They utter words of love. They are careful parents who are willing to guide us along our difficult journey towards attaining the conscious maturity they wish for us and for which we have been created. In fact, our final and most important transformation – the spiritual one – is much easier if we follow the light of our awareness of the reality and the laws of the Spirit as revealed by Them.

A simple analogy will help us understand the forces required to bend the capacities and qualities of our material nature towards the superior purposes of our spiritual nature. Life is possible on the earth because of the energies continuously released by the sun, which are energies used by the earth's creatures for survival. Without those energies, our planet would be a desolate and empty place. In the spiritual worlds, the Manifestation of God is like a sun. Spiritual forces emanate from Him, which anyone can partake in by exposing himself to their beneficial influence. These are the powers of the Logos, the creative powers of the universe, described by

⁸ Recently Stephen R. Covey wrote in his bestseller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*: '... there are principles that govern human effectiveness--natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging and unarguably "there" as laws such as gravity are in the physical dimensions' (32). He says moreover: 'These principles are part of most every major enduring religion, as well as enduring social philosophies and ethical systems. They are self-evident and can easily be validated by any individual' (34). Then he goes to list some of those principles: 'fairness . . . integrity . . . honesty . . . human dignity . . . service . . . quality or excellence . . . potential . . . growth . . . patience, nurturance, and encouragement' (ibid.). Then he adds: 'I doubt that anyone would seriously consider unfairness, deceit, baseness, uselessness, mediocrity, or degeneration to be a solid foundation for lasting happiness and success. Although people may argue about how those principles are defined or manifested or achieved, there seems to be an innate consciousness and awareness that they exist' (35).

J. R. Cole in his ‘The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá’í Writings’. The awareness of the great gift vouchsafed upon humankind by the Manifestation, at the cost of His life, binds human hearts to the Manifestation in a feeling of gratitude and love, often called faith.⁹ This feeling is of great value and deep meaning in the struggle to overcome material nature and attain spiritual growth.

Thus, human life is a school: the teacher is the Manifestation of God, the text is the revealed book, the pupil is man, and the lessons are the facts themselves from which the soul can learn how to discover in itself the qualities required to meet those lessons according to spiritual laws. Very often, pain is the feeling of inadequacy experienced by the soul when confronted by a situation in which it has not yet learnt how to meet spiritually, and in this sense, it may be defined as a test. Further consequences of man’s spiritual immaturity are interpersonal conflict since human souls who have not yet learnt how to overcome selfishness through selflessness are likely to conflict with one another.

The attainment of spirituality is a gradual process. It requires, moreover, the acquisition of certain qualities that are conducive to the promotion and acceleration of the process itself. The mystic literature is rich in texts that aim to describe this process’s stages and explain these qualities.¹⁰ The Bahá’í Revelation offers in this respect many writings. Two books considered of fundamental importance will be briefly examined: The Seven Valleys for the journey and The Hidden Words for the qualities.

The spiritual journey

The understanding of the spiritual journey described in the Seven Valleys is necessarily commensurate with the distance the reader has covered. It is evident that we can understand only things we have experienced and that only the Manifestation of

⁹ In this regard ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: ‘the love that flows from man to God . . . is faith, attraction to the Divine, enkindlement, progress, entrance into the Kingdom of God, receiving the Bounties of God, illumination with the lights of the Kingdom. This love is the origin of all philanthropy; this love causes the hearts of men to reflect the rays of the Sun of Reality’ (*Paris Talks* 180).

¹⁰ As an example, we will mention *De Triplice Via* and *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* by St Bonaventura from Bagnorea, *Mount Carmel’s Ascension* by St John of the Cross, *The Seven Degrees of Spiritual Love* by John Ruysbroek in the West; *The Conference of the Birds (Mantiqu’-t-Tayr)* by Farídu’d-Dín ‘Attár, *The Book of Splendors (Kitábu’l-Lumá)* by Abú-Nasr as-Sarráj, *The Sea of Truth (Bahru’l-Haqqiqah)* by al-Ghazálí, in the East.

Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychologist of the school of psychosynthesis, studied this theme in his *Lo sviluppo transpersonale*.

God knows perfectly the whole journey. Therefore, whatever is said about this book is to be viewed in light of these considerations.

Our soul's spiritual journey seems to begin on a plane that may be defined as 'the plane of heedlessness' (Seven Valleys 5), where the traveller may be considered spiritually dead because he is unconscious of his divine nature. However, in each man's life, there is a morning when he experiences a feeling of incompleteness and discontent, which urges him to fly away from that unhappy condition towards a remote goal of longed-for serenity. That condition is poetically called the Valley of Search: the quest for the Absolute, longing for the Infinite, thirst for Beauty, need of Harmony, desire to escape from a growing inner darkness. It is a difficult situation, mainly because such strength is often lacking as it is born from the faith in a good and just Creator Who does not abandon His creatures and does not afflict them with unnecessary pain. Only the need for such a God is felt. Nevertheless, he who has already gone through that experience knows that inner pain is a blessing in disguise: it drives the spiritual wayfarer away from that state of spiritual death towards a not-far-off rebirth into the light of the Spirit.

How the first meeting with the Divine occurs is a personal and practical fact. The highest expression of the Divine upon the earth is the Manifestation of God. The seeker has to discover this Manifestation because it is from Him that the guidance and forces emanate, which the seeker needs to rise above that difficult level of his existence. For almost all human beings, that meeting is not physical; it is mediated through the words revealed by the Manifestation. These words are more than human words; they convey ideas of great value and deep meaning, infuse inner energies, exert a great power of attraction upon the soul and light the fire of love within it. All those who have experienced that meeting will forever preserve its remembrance; at that moment, a new balance is attained between knowledge, love, and will. The soul knows a perfect Object for which it conceives a great love that manifests itself as a desire to go closer and closer to it. It is the conversion: the transformation of the spirit, the second birth.

At that moment, it seems as though paradise has been attained. And it was attained, indeed: the soul has become aware of its spiritual nature and sees the goal towards which it must set off.¹¹ Some might misunderstand this new and initial

¹¹ Many authors mention the happiness experienced by the soul, whenever it rises to a plane of greater self-knowledge. For example, Rhett Diessner says: 'There is a tremendous sense of

awareness of the great Ideal he has met as the consciousness of his limited self.¹² Thus, he may think that he has already attained his goal (and perhaps some have attained it, cutting corners on his spiritual journey). However, this is usually only a beginning. The soul's potential perfections are glimpsed at that moment, and a deep desire is experienced to actualize them. The struggle to transfer those metaphysical archetypes into everyday materiality begins. Thus, the pangs of the Valley of Love are experienced. For it is not so easy to bend the self – that is, the material nature, with all its occasionally overbearing natural emotions – to the superior needs of the divine or spiritual nature that requires selflessness – that is, the denial of the limited natal self for the sake of the great Divine Self. It is the death of the self, described as the 'night of ... spirit' by St John of the Cross (*Opere* 350), as the 'night of the senses' by Thomas Merton (*New Seeds of Contemplation*), the 'strait . . . gate, and narrow . . . way which leadeth unto life' of the Gospel (Math. 7:14). For someone this process is quite challenging and toilsome, sometimes even painful.

However, this effort, blessed by the divine confirmations, leads the wayfarer to more serene horizons. In the Valley of Knowledge, the wayfarer learns to look at reality with his inner eye. In other words, he learns how to trace the signs of Divinity in inner and outer reality. Thus, he attains such a condition, which is defined as the Valley of Unity, whereby he joyfully submits to the will of God and accepts all its practical implications with radiant acquiescence. This condition is the Valley of Contentment, where the wayfarer is pleased with what is. In these circumstances, he discovers new meanings in the world of existence, new realities in his own and others' beings, and thus, he is filled with amazement. From this Valley of Wonderment,

freedom and power when someone has performed the psychological work to advance to a higher stage of social cognition' ('Selflessness: Congruences between the Cognitive-Developmental Research Program and the Bahá'í Writings' 10). And William S. Hatcher: 'Such an increment in self-knowledge has one immediate consequence: It instantly releases that part of our psychic energy which was previously bound up in defending and maintaining the false self-concept. The release of this binding energy is most usually experienced as an extremely positive emotion, a sense of exhilaration and of liberation. It is love' ('The Concept of Spirituality' 21).

¹² Roberto Assagioli writes: 'If the mind is not able to sustain enlightenment, or if it is inclined towards self-centredness, or presumption, that experience may be misunderstood. There is, so to say, "a confusion of levels". The difference between absolute and relative truth, between the "Self" and the "ego", is not recognized and the incoming spiritual energies may result in boosting the personal self and making it proud' (*Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques*) [my translation from the Italian text].

he soon attains such a condition that he becomes conscious of his utter nothingness before God. The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness is the last stage of the journey described in The Seven Valleys, but not its end. The journey proceeds further towards an unattainable Infinite.

One might think that this journey is like a physical one: once the intended distance is covered, it is ended. Nevertheless, after a deeper perusal of the Tablet, it becomes evident that this journey can be repeated over and over again, although at different levels of consciousness, as a helicoidal line unwinding its coils from a past infinite to a future Infinite, but rising to higher and higher planes.

While Bahá'u'lláh describes the journey itself, He also mentions some of the qualities needed so that its stages may be passed: detachment from the self and the world, justice, patience, ardour and labour in the Valley of Search;¹³ courage and the capacity of accepting and overcoming pain in the Valley of Love; truth and piety, patience and love in the Valley of Knowledge.

The qualities of the Spirit

The Hidden Words, which have been described as a work 'of unsurpassed preeminence among the . . . ethical writings of' Bahá'u'lláh (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 140), provide an insight into those qualities that are both the fruit and the prerequisites of this journey. A transformation is again suggested, leading the individual from the plane of the 'fleeting world' (from the Persian, no.41), described as 'the prison of the self' (ibid.), 'poverty', 'mortal and fleeting sovereignty' (from the Arabic, nos.13, 54), to the plane of 'everlasting life' (from the Arabic, no.63), the 'realm of the infinite' (from the Persian, no.1), the 'heights of certainty' (from the Persian, no.9) and of 'reunion' (from the Arabic, nos.34, 61), described as a condition of 'peace . . . rest . . . light . . . holiness' (from the Arabic, nos.8, 40, 50, 68).

However, although the goal is in 'the Placeless' (from the Persian, no.17), the life of this world is by no means abhorred. It is only required that it be viewed in its inner meaning: a school (cf. from the Persian, no.29) where the soul may gradually come to know the qualities of the worlds of Spirit with which it is potentially endowed, from the experience of daily living (cf. from the Arabic, no. 3).

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh wrote a further description of spiritual search and of its prerequisites in His Kitáb-i-Íqán (192-98).

The individual must learn how to detach himself from the material world so that he may love the worlds of Spirit and from the natal self so that he may love the Self of God. Detachment is described not as a mystical practice, renouncement, or indifference but as the choice of an object of love. In their ephemerality, neither the material world nor the natal self are worthy of a man's love. God alone is worthy of this love, an indispensable prerequisite for receiving such divine gifts (cf. from the Arabic, no.5) required for one's inner transformation and spiritual progress.

Love of God is described as love of His Manifestation on the earth, poetically defined in these aphorisms as 'Beloved' (from the Persian, no.12), 'Adored' (from the Persian, no.35) 'Friend' (from the Persian, no.29), 'veilless Beauty' (from the Persian, no.9), 'Pen of Glory' (from the Persian, no.7), 'dove of heaven' (from the Persian, no.13), 'nightingale of holiness' (from the Persian, no.15), 'immortal . . . divine Cup-bearer' (from the Persian, nos.58, 62).

This love is not a mere abstract feeling. It is a perennial quest for nearness to God (cf. from the Arabic, no.35) and for His 'pleasure' (from the Arabic, no.7), both of which are realized by observing His laws for His love's sake (cf. from the Arabic, no.38). The path towards nearness to God and His pleasure passes through the world and His creation (cf. from the Persian, no.43). The admonition of the Hidden Words is very clear: 'The basest of men are they that yield no fruit on earth' (from the Persian, no.81), while immediately afterwards Bahá'u'lláh avers: 'The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds' (from the Persian, no.82). Further He states: 'Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother Let deeds, not words, be your adorning' (from the Persian, no.5). These words allow no doubt: God's pleasure can be attained through learning how to live a life of detachment and of engagement and service for the sake of His love.¹⁴ Therefore, spiritual growth is not a sterile exercise of haughty

¹⁴ As for this apparent paradox of a life of detachment from this world and of engagement and service, Alessandro Bausani quoted in his lecture given during a meeting similar to the present one in Montreal in 1982 the following words by Bahá'u'lláh: 'Open thy spiritual wings and soar through all the spiritual kingdom with the swiftness of a lightning. Fling wide open the vision of thy eyes and regard the grace of the invisible world. If thou throwest mud into the water it sinks, but if thou depositest a rose into it, it remains like a crown floating upon it: i.e. *záhir* and *baqá* (exteriority and permanence) are better than *bátin* and *faná'* (interiority and annihilation). In other words weight is the cause of sinking, therefore thou must free thyself from the weight of

ascetics nor a process of narcissistic self-satisfaction. It is a road leading directly through service to the progress of all humanity.

The qualities required for this goal to be attained are manifold. The love of the Manifestation of God is, first of all, the love of His creatures. Therefore, this love is manifested through purity of intentions, justice, sincerity, righteousness, fidelity, humbleness, forbearance, capacity to forgive or even over-looking human faults, through not being envious or malicious, but generous and caring of others' pains and difficulties and willing to contribute to soothe and solve them. These qualities may be considered acquired when manifested through 'pure and holy' deeds (from the Persian, no.76). Therefore, they mostly imply a willingness to renounce one's 'pleasure' (from the Arabic, no.7) and accept suffering. Thus, it is necessary to be able to accept the tests of suffering (cf. from the Arabic, nos.49-53) with steadfastness and patience and to see them in their proper meaning: a means to demonstrate in practice, above all to oneself, one's detachment from the ephemeral and one's love of God.¹⁵ Very helpful in this inner struggle are prayer, whereby everything else is forgotten, communion with the Spirit of God is attained (cf. from the Arabic, no.16), strength and inspiration are attained, and a practical daily self-examination so that one's

possessions, and, like a rose, in this very bodily frame float through eternity upon the surface of earthly dominions' (Bahá'u'lláh quoted in Alessandro Bausani, 'Reflections on the Spiritual Dynamics of the Bahá'í Faith').

¹⁵ Rhett Diessner proposed a very interesting a definition of detachment from the self: 'Generally selflessness is viewed as altruism, in the form of putting others before one's self. This is an excellent meaning for the word selflessness. There is, however, another view that makes sense, particularly in light of the findings in the cognitive-developmental research program. This meaning has two dimensions: selflessness is relative to the stage of self a person is currently in, and selflessness is demonstrated while manifesting the virtues needed to advance between cognitive stages.

'In Kegan's (Evolving) description of the stages of "self" development, it is somewhat obvious that to move to a higher stage of self, one must leave behind a lower stage of self. This "leaving behind" is a form of "selflessness" . . . 'Those virtues which enhance stage transition are those abilities that could be summarized in the word selflessness' (9-10). He suggests that among those virtues may be listed 'Courage, honesty, a regard for truth, lack of prejudice, care and concern . . . love . . . "independent quest"' (ibid.).

Also Roberto Assagioli writes interesting words on this theme. In his *Lo sviluppo transpersonale* [Transpersonal development] he lists among the obstacles of spiritual developments not only fear, fear of pain, aggressivity and criticism, but also 'attachments'. He says that transpersonal development requires those obstacles to be overcome through a process he calls 'purification of the soul'. This process is indeed a form of detachment (cf. 130-61).

spiritual condition may be examined and practical plans for spiritual progress may be made (cf. from the Arabic, no.31).

As these qualities are acquired and perfected, selfishness and passion, fear and uncertainty grow less and peace, joy, certitude, and love grow in their place.¹⁶ A greater balance between physical, intellectual and spiritual potentialities is actualized, and conflicts decrease. The heart becomes pure in its determination to actualize this love of God in practical deeds. It acquires not only kindness – the capacity of loving – but also radiance that bestows upon it the light of a lamp of guidance.¹⁷ Such a man becomes one of those righteous ones described by Bahá'u'lláh: 'Wouldst thou seek the grace of the Holy Spirit, enter into fellowship with the righteous, for he hath drunk the cup of eternal life at the hands of the immortal Cup-bearer and even as the true morn doth quicken and illumine the hearts of the dead' (from the Persian, no.58). A balance is attained between the private sphere and public activity, in the reciprocity of influences and respect of both planes.¹⁸

Spiritual transformation: the challenge of the day

This path is undoubtedly a of great mysticism, but it is a mysticism sui generis, firmly rooted in everyday life. A man who treads this path advances towards holiness, but it is a holiness of this world. His transformation has practical consequences upon the vital sphere of the relations among human beings on the earth. Therefore, it profoundly affects the family, the private sphere, and social and political fields. A man who learns how to see the world and the self not as ends but as means for the

¹⁶ Such is the importance of love in view of spirituality the once 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in one of His talks that spirituality is 'love in action' (quoted in *Star of the West* 13:112).

¹⁷ In the inspiring words of Bahá'u'lláh: 'My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting' (The Hidden Words, from the Arabic, no.1).

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh offers His Hidden Words as 'the inner essence' (Introduction) of the words of 'Prophets of old' (ibid.), epitomized in the form of a short collection of aphorisms and invites His readers to practice them in their daily lives. He left, moreover, many other writings on the subject of spiritual qualities.

Among them, of particular interest are the last part of the so-called Tablet to Christians (Tablets 16-7), where the qualities of the soul in its relation with the Manifestation of God are described; and a letter written by Bahá'u'lláh to one of His sons (quoted in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 93-4), where the qualities of the soul in its relations with other souls are described.

attainment of qualities that, used in the service of humankind, will promote the progress of all humanity, is qualified to be an excellent citizen. A society comprised of individuals who are thus transformed, people ready to cooperate to build a new world order, is a society worthy of men as creatures made in the image of God and able to foster the spiritual progress and joy of all humans. This transformation is both the challenge and the key to solving the day's problems.

The culmination of the evolutionary process

We are reminded of a definition of men given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: 'intelligent beings created in the realm of evolutionary growth' (*Promulgation* 129). This definition stresses man's two fundamental characteristics: intelligence and capacity to grow. Guided to the Manifestation of God by his love for reality and his intelligence, man can grow not only on the physical and mental levels but also on the spiritual plane. Thus, he fulfils the purpose of his creation: to carry forward the majestic evolutionary process of the worlds of creation whose universal heir he is. The whole universe's great evolutionary process continues in the individual's microcosm. Through an evolutionary process, primal matter produces man's body as its fruit. A soul employs that body so that the qualities of the worlds of Spirit to which the soul belongs may be manifested in this world. Through this process, that soul contributes to the evolution of the macrocosm. While it gives consciousness to the divine qualities with which it is endowed, on the one hand, it cooperates with other human beings for the spiritualization of society. On the other, it contributes to the process of the return to God of the macrocosm itself.

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