

The Concept of Spirituality

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INTRODUCTION

Human history has witnessed the birth, proliferation, and death of countless religions, belief systems, and philosophies. Though the generating impulse for each of these systems is undoubtedly related to numerous particular cultural and psychological factors, there runs through virtually all of them the common idea that man is not, in his naturally given human state, whole or complete. The concomitant to this belief is the idea that man must undergo some process of completion, some discipline of self-definition. Such a process is usually regarded by its exponents as the basic purpose of man's existence, for through it man is seen to acquire or develop what is essential and universal, and not merely accidental and local, within the range of human potentiality. By this process, he defines what he truly is by becoming what he most truly can be. The process is often described as one of "salvation", of being lifted above the condition of unregeneration (or spiritual death) to the plane of a superior reality.

The revealed religions have been major sources of such salvation concepts, spiritual philosophies, and spiritual disciplines. Historically, the revealed religions would seem to be united in affirming, each in its own particular way, that there is an objectively real spiritual dimension to the universe, and that this spiritual dimension of existence is for man the most fundamental and the most important aspect of reality. However, the revealed religions also appear, at least at first glance, to exhibit a disturbing degree of difference in their respective views of the exact nature of this spiritual reality and of how man should relate properly to it. Moreover, most of the traditional systems of religious belief appear now to have crystallized into rigid social patterns and dogmatic attitudes of thought and belief with which the modern ethos of rapid social and intellectual change seems incompatible.

The changes in modern-day society are being wrought primarily by a highly efficient, powerful, and established science which owes little or nothing to established religion. Whereas the religions, for the most part, continue to press harder and harder their mutually contradictory claims each to possess an absolute and unchanging truth which admits no compromise, science is based squarely on the idea that truth is relative and progressive, that what is useful and productive in the realm of ideas and techniques today may be obsolete and unproductive tomorrow. Thus, traditional religion has come to abhor and fear change while science thrives upon it.

Yet, science and technology have not given man the sense of wholeness he has so long been seeking, even though they have given him a vastly increased power to control and manipulate his physical environment. The sense of incompleteness and the conscious need for transcendence, for contact with some deep spiritual reality, are widespread in our society. Indeed, hardly at any other time of history or in any other culture has the sense of spiritual inadequacy been so acute as is currently the case in industrialized, high-technology, Western culture. But if contemporary man turns to religion for enlightenment, he too often finds dogmatism, which his mind cannot accept, or mindless emotionalism, which is not worthy of acceptance.

From the modern perspective, each of the great religions appears as a system which was largely successful in satisfying the spiritual and social needs of a certain people or culture during a previous era of history, but which is no longer adequate to meet the needs of humanity in the present critical period of history. Thus, modern man is caught in a serious dilemma with regard to fundamental spiritual questions. On the one hand, the highly efficient science he has so successfully developed serves in part to deepen his moral and spiritual needs—needs that science alone cannot satisfy.* On the other hand, most of the traditional religious forms, attitudes and concepts now appear obsolete and irrelevant.

This modern dilemma is addressed by several of the fundamental principles of the historically recent Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í principle of the unity of science and religion holds that religious truth, like scientific truth (or truth in general), is relative and progressive. It accepts unreservedly that "If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science they are mere superstitions and imaginations. . . ."** In particular, with regard to spiritual questions the Bahá'í Faith rejects a dogmatic approach: It affirms that there are spiritual realities governed by lawful relationships, and it invites each individual to assume a scientific attitude and to seek out and test for himself these spiritual truths.†

Concerning the great world religions, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that they all derive from one common source, namely, that one, ultimate, creative force responsible for the phenomena of the universe, that force we call God. Bahá'ís hold that the founding figures of those great religious systems (e.g., Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Zoroaster, Muhammad) were all chosen channels or true spokesmen for this unique God, and that differences in Their teachings are due primarily to the varying requirements of the cultures and ages in which these systems were originally promulgated. Other significant doctrinal differences among these systems, as they are currently elaborated, are attributed to inaccuracies and distortions gradually introduced by their followers in the course of their evolution as social systems after the death of their founders. †† However, the essential spiritual message of these systems is affirmed to be universal and common to all.

The Bahá'í Faith views itself as deriving from the most recent of these revelation events, as the latest chapter in the (unending) book of religion, so to speak. Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, put forth these and other teachings in a series of over 100 books and manuscripts written primarily between 1853 and His death in 1892. Thus, Bahá'ís feel that traditional religions are perceived by modern man as so unsatisfactory partly because some of their teachings are laden with culture-bound patterns and concepts (e.g., the dietary and penal laws of Judaism and Islám) and partly because of man-made distortions and corruptions which have crept in over the years. Religious dogmatism represents the arrogant attempt to transform a relative and partial conception of truth into an absolute and unchanging system, binding the whole of mankind for all human history. According to the Bahá'í understanding of the dynamics of God-created human nature, no such fixed system could ever be adequate for mankind. The Bahá'í system itself is viewed as responding to the needs of mankind in the present hour, but not for all future history.

Bahá'ís hold that the basic spiritual message common to the revealed religions is progressively elaborated and more fully articulated in each successive revelation. One would therefore expect that the Bahá'í Faith, if it is indeed the most recent divinely inspired articulation of spiritual truth to mankind, would contain a fuller elaboration and deeper expression of this truth.

I believe that such is the case, and in the following pages I have quoted liberally, and sometimes at length, from the Bahá'í Writings in an effort to convey to the reader some of the incredible spiritual riches they contain. Yet, all the ideas and opinions expressed herein should be strictly regarded as nothing beyond the attempt of one mind to grasp some of the deeper meanings latent in the profound Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. In an effort to limit the scope of this monograph to reasonable proportions and to achieve an orderly exposition, I have consistently focused on the concept of spirituality, that is, on an intellectual and logical understanding of spirituality. This work does not attempt in any way to be a manual for attaining spirituality but seeks only to gain, insofar as is possible, a clearer conception of what is implied in attaining it.

Of course, attaining any goal is easier when we have a clear conception of what its attainment involves. I have offered the present text for publication only in the hope that it may contribute in some measure to the common task we all have of trying to express our spiritual understanding to each other, especially as I have already richly benefited from the insights and reflections of so many in this regard.

* For example, powerful new techniques for manipulating such things as the human genetic endowment raise novel and acute ethical questions concerning their proper and responsible use.

** 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 240.

† The present monograph consists in a rather detailed discussion of certain aspects of the Bahá'í conception of these spiritual truths and realities, but with little or no attempt to explain the basis upon which such a conception rests. This latter task was the objective of a previous effort of the present writer, published as "The Science of Religion," Bahá'í Studies, vol. 2, rev. ed., 1980.

‡ Also, one should not forget that, except for the more historically recent of these systems (such as Islám), we have no direct access to the exact words or the pure form of the original teachings as given by the Founder. Moreover, the various interpretations which the theologians and thinkers have subsequently attached to those written records which do exist are conditioned and limited by various cultural factors and cannot, therefore, be regarded as surely authentic representations of the thought of the Founder.

I. THE NATURE OF MAN

1. The Basic Components of Man's Character

THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS articulate a model of human nature and functioning which sees man as the product of two basic conditions, the physical (material) and the spiritual (non-material). The physical dimension of man's existence derives from his genetic endowment, determined at conception, plus the interaction of this configuration with the environment. This interaction produces an internal, physical milieu which is unique to each individual, though sharing common features with all members of the human species. The spiritual dimension of man's nature derives from the existence of a non-material entity, the soul, which is individualized, it is explained, at the moment of conception. Just as the physical body of man has various physical capacities, so the soul has its capacities, called spiritual capacities of man. Among the most important spiritual capacities mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings as characteristic of man are those of the intellect or understanding, the heart or feeling capacity, and the will (the capacity to initiate and sustain action).

The interactions of the individual with his environment affect not only his body but his soul as well. They develop both the genetically given physical capacities and the initially given spiritual capacities. These interactions may be called learning or education, and they give rise to a third aspect of man's total character, an aspect that is both physical and spiritual.

In sum, there are three essential aspects of the character of man: his genetic endowment, which is surely physical; his soul and its capacities, which are purely spiritual; and education, which is both physical and spiritual.¹

In *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of these three basic aspects of man's character:

He [man] has the innate character, the inherited character, and the acquired character which is gained by education.

With regard to the innate character, although the divine creation is purely good, yet the variety of natural qualities in man come from the difference of degree; all are excellent, but they are more or less so, according to the degree. So all mankind possesses intelligence and capacities, but the intelligence, the capacity and the worthiness of men differ

The variety of inherited qualities comes from strength and weakness of constitution—that is to say, when the two parents are weak, the children will be weak; if they are strong, the children will be robust

But the difference of the qualities with regard to culture is very great, for education has great influence Education must be considered as most important, for as diseases in the world of bodies are extremely contagious, so, in the same way, qualities of spirit and heart are extremely contagious. Education has a universal influence, and the differences caused by it are very great.²

From this, and other similar passages in the Bahá'í Writings, it is clear that the innate character derives from the capacities of the soul while the inherited character derives from the individual's genetic endowment. Once fixed, these two elements of man's character remain unchanged, but the process of education enables man to develop these capacities either to a relatively high degree or to a relatively low degree, thus producing significant differences in character not attributable solely either to heredity or to innate spiritual capacity.

1. According to the Bahá'í conception, the soul of each individual is eternal while the body, composed as it is of elements, is subject to physical decomposition, i.e., death. Thus, the soul is the true source of the individual's consciousness, personality, and self. The soul does not depend on the body but rather the body is the instrument of the soul during the period of earthly existence when the soul and the body are linked together. The Bahá'í Writings also make unequivocally clear the Bahá'í belief that each human soul is not preexistent but is "individualized" at the moment of conception. Bahá'ís do not, therefore, believe in reincarnation—the doctrine that the same individual soul returns in different bodies to live different or successive earthly lives. It is explained rather that the soul's progress after the death of the physical body is towards God and that this progression takes place in other, purely spiritual (i.e. nonmaterial) realms of existence.

Of course, we cannot see the soul since it is not physical, but we can deduce its existence from the observable effects it produces. Roughly speaking, we can observe that the physical endowments of the higher apes, and, in particular, their central nervous systems, do not differ substantially from man's. Yet such beings seem incapable of the conscious, self-aware, deliberate intellection which characterizes man. At best, they seem capable only of "reactive" conditioned response rather than the imaginative, self-initiated thought of man, involving as it does long chains of deduction, and anticipation of and adaptation to imagined future events (i.e., hypotheses).

2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981), pp. 212-214.

2. Spirituality Defined

WE HAVE USED the word “capacity” in referring both to the spiritual and to the physical endowments of the individual. The word connotes a potential, something to be fulfilled or accomplished (and something that is capable of fulfillment and accomplishment). Indeed, it is clear that the individual, at his birth into this world, is capable of manifesting very few of the qualities possessed by the mature adult human being. We know, moreover, that unless the infant is properly cared for and provided with a host of support systems and a growth-inducing milieu, he will never exhibit such qualities. Life, then, is a growth process. Man begins the process as a little bundle of potential and proceeds, for better or worse, to develop his potential through the process of education (considered broadly as the sum of all environmental influences on the individual plus the individual’s reaction to these influences).

According to Bahá’í teachings, the very purpose of man’s life is the proper, harmonious, and full development of spiritual capacities. This is the most worthwhile possible goal since spiritual capacities, being part of the immortal soul (see note 1), will eternally endure while the body and its capacities will not. However, the body is the instrument of the soul’s development in this earthly life, and so physical health and development cannot be safely neglected but rather must be made to serve the primary goal of fostering the soul’s progress.

Bahá’u’lláh expresses this truth succinctly and powerfully:

Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth [The Manifestation or Prophet of God] every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the Prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men, and have evinced such power as is born of God and such might as only the Eternal can reveal.³

The process of developing one’s spiritual capacities is called spiritual growth or simply spirituality. We can thus formulate a working (operational) definition of the concept of spirituality as follows: 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 development (e.g., the development of one to the exclusion of others), or else the false (improper) development and/or use of these capacities.

With this definition of spirituality in mind, we can also formulate a working definition of Bahá’í morality: That which fosters and advances the process of spiritual development is good, and that which tends to inhibit it is bad. Every law, counsel or behavioural norm contained in the Writings of the Bahá’í Faith can be understood in large measure from this perspective.

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3. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 68.

3. The Duality of Human Nature

THE ONLY COMPONENT of man’s character capable of change is that which is acquired through education, where the latter term is understood broadly to mean the sum of all influences on the individual resulting from his encounters with and reactions to his environment. However, the human situation is such that not every influence, and most certainly not every one of our reactions to these influences, is conducive to spiritual progress. Thus, the process of spiritual growth involves learning how to make appropriate responses to various circumstances and how to initiate certain kinds of actions: spiritual growth is an educational process of a particular sort.

The experience of our life during the period when the body and the soul are linked is one of a tension between contradicting and opposing forces. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that this tension results from the duality of the physical and the spiritual in man’s nature. On the one hand, man’s body has legitimate physical needs which cry for satisfaction: food, shelter, companionship, and protection from threatening forces. However, in seeking to satisfy

these needs, man is easily led to be possessive, aggressive, and insensitive to the needs of others. On the other hand, man's soul also has intrinsic needs that demand satisfaction. These needs are metaphysical and intangible. They incite the individual to seek meaning and purpose in life and to establish the proper relationship with God, with himself, and with his fellow humans. Though this proper relationship may, and indeed must, be expressed through physical means, it also is essentially intangible. It involves submission to the will of God, the acceptance of our dependence on a power higher than themselves. It implies self-knowledge, the discovery both of our limitations and of our particular talents and capacities. And it requires recognition of and respect for the rights of others. This means that we realize and understand that all other men have needs similar to our own and that we accept all the implications of this fact in our relations with and actions towards others.

Of course, the Bahá'í Faith is certainly not the first belief system to recognize this duality in man's nature. But the Bahá'í view of this duality is significantly different from certain views frequently attributed to other belief systems, for the Bahá'í Faith does not superimpose an absolute (good-evil) value judgement upon the duality, viewing all things spiritual as good and all things material as bad. The Bahá'í Writings make clear that man can misuse his spiritual faculties just as easily as he can misuse his material ones. At the same time, the material faculties of man (indeed all of man's natural capacities) are viewed as God-given and therefore intrinsically (metaphysically) good. As moral categories, good and evil are relative terms: A given action on the part of an individual is relatively less good than another action if that other action would have been more favourable to the process of spiritual growth. Moreover, the Bahá'í Writings lead us to understand that God judges human actions only with regard to those actions which are truly logically possible for the individual in the given circumstances. To judge otherwise would be tantamount to requiring of man that which is beyond his capabilities or, paraphrasing words of Bahá'u'lláh, to tasking a soul beyond its power.⁴

In other words, only the direction of the spiritual growth process is given absolutely: it is towards the (unattainable) ideal of God-like perfection. But the process itself is lived relatively by each individual according to his spiritual and material endowments plus the free will choices he makes in dealing with the particular circumstances of his life. Since only God knows truly what these endowments and circumstances are for any individual, only God can judge the degree of moral responsibility of the individual in any situation.⁵

Here is the way that 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the essential and intrinsic goodness of all of man's capacities, material or spiritual:

In creation there is no evil; all is good. Certain qualities and natures innate in some men and apparently blameworthy are not so in reality. For example, from the beginning of his life you can see in a nursing child the signs of greed, of anger and of temper. Then, it may be said, good and evil are innate in the reality of man, and this is contrary to the pure goodness of nature and creation. The answer to this is that greed, which is to ask for something more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is used suitably. So if a man is greedy to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous and just, it is most praiseworthy. If he exercises his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, it is very praiseworthy; but if he does not use these qualities in a right way, they are blameworthy.

Then it is evident that in creation and nature evil does not exist at all; but when the natural qualities of man are used in an unlawful way, they are blameworthy.⁶

Thus, the main function of the body is to serve as an instrument of the soul during the time the immortal soul is linked to the mortal body. This period constitutes the first stage of an eternal growth process. The body's capacities, when properly used, contribute to the process of spiritual growth. These material capacities are no more intrinsically bad than the capacities of the soul itself. Both material and spiritual capacities become harmful if they are misused through false or improper development.

However, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá do stress the fact that the material capacities must be rigorously disciplined (not suppressed) if they are to serve their intended purpose as vehicles for spiritual growth. Since satisfying our physical needs can easily incite us to become aggressive towards others and insensitive to their needs, the individual must engage in a daily struggle with himself to maintain the proper perspective on life and its spiritual meaning.⁷

More will be said later about the nature of this daily spiritual discipline. The main point here is that the tension between the material and spiritual in man is a creative tension purposely given by God, a tension whose function it is constantly to remind the individual of the necessity of making an effort in the path of spiritual growth. Moreover, the existence of the physical body with its needs provides daily opportunities for the individual to dramatize through action the degree of spirituality he has attained and to assess realistically his progress.⁸

If man did not have the spiritual-material duality in his nature, he would be spared the unpleasant tension that often accompanies the struggle to take a step along the path of spiritual growth, but he would also be denied the opportunities for growth provided by this very duality.

4. See *ibid.*, p. 106.
5. This observation explains the time-honoured injunction expressed by virtually all religious prophets and thinkers that no man is capable of judging the spiritual or moral worth of any other individual. This has nothing to do with society's right to protect itself against antisocial behaviour whether perpetrated deliberately by morally insensitive individuals, or involuntarily by sick or misguided individuals.
6. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215.
7. Also, the Bahá'í Writings make totally clear the Bahá'í disbelief in the objective existence of Satan or of any such evil power or force (cf. *Some Answered Questions*, "The Nonexistence of Evil," pp. 263-264). It is explained that what man perceives as evil within himself is simply the absence of some positive quality (which lack is perhaps perceived in a particularly acute way if the individual suddenly finds himself in a situation where the missing quality would have been very useful). Similarly, strong or irrational urges are not, it is affirmed, the result of the action on us of some extrinsic evil force, but rather of subjective desires arising from within ourselves, possibly due either to a prior lack of proper discipline or to the existence of some deep need which we may have neglected to fulfil in a healthy way (or which has not, in any case, been properly fulfilled). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that improper development can pervert our intrinsically good, natural (God-given) capacities into negative and destructive acquired capacities: ". . . capacity is of two kinds: natural capacity and acquired capacity. The first, which is the creation of God, is purely good . . . but the acquired capacity has become the cause of the appearance of evil. For example, God has created all men that they are benefited by sugar and honey and harmed and destroyed by poison. This nature and constitution is innate, and God has given it equally to all mankind. But man begins little by little to accustom himself to poison by taking a small quantity each day, and gradually increasing it, until he reaches such a point that he cannot live without a gram of opium each day. The natural capacities are thus completely perverted. Observe how much the natural capacity and constitution can be changed until by different habits and training they become entirely perverted. One does not criticize vicious people because of their innate capacities and nature, but rather for their acquired capacities and natures." *ibid.*, pp. 214-215.
8. For example, since everyone knows what the physical sensation of hunger is like, anyone who willingly sacrifices his own physical well-being to help feed others commands a certain respect and communicates a spiritual reality to others in a way that far transcends preaching or philosophical discourse.

4. Metaphysical Considerations

WE HAVE SEEN how the Bahá'í concept of spirituality flows naturally and logically from a coherent concept of the nature of man and of God's purpose for man. It must be admitted, however, that a paradox seems to be at the heart of this process, or at least of our experience of the process during this earthly life. The paradox is that God has given man immediate and easy access to material reality while denying him such immediate access to spiritual realities. This seems a curious thing for God to have done if, in fact, the most important aspect of reality is the spiritual one and if our basic purpose in life is spiritual. If the spiritual dimension of man's existence is ultimately the most real, then why are we given immediate perception only of the less substantial portion of total reality? Why, in short, are we called upon by God to pursue a spiritual purpose while being immersed in a sea of materiality?

To many people, this basic perception of our human condition is not just a paradox but an outright contradiction. It is impossible, they say, that there could be a world of unseen and unobservable spiritual realities so much less accessible than the world of material reality: the most obvious explanation for the inaccessibility of spiritual reality is that it does not exist. Whether or not the paradox is stated this strongly, it remains the basic stumbling block to atheists, agnostics, materialists, and positivists of whatever philosophical stripe in their approach to spiritual questions. For, even if one becomes convinced that there is a significant, nonmaterial dimension to objective reality, the rationale for its having been deliberately hidden from immediate access by a God who nevertheless holds us responsible for relating properly to it remains obscure.

Fortunately for our attempts to grasp the deeper significance of the Bahá'í concept of spirituality, Bahá'u'lláh has explained in clear terms the divine purpose underlying this fundamental feature of the human situation. The explanation lies in the principle of 'separation and distinction' by which God wishes individual moral and spiritual

attainment to be the result of the individual's self-responsible and self-directed efforts. Bahá'u'lláh affirms unequivocally that God could certainly have rendered spiritual truth and spiritual reality as irrefutably evident and as immediately accessible to our spiritual senses as is material reality to our physical senses. But, had He done so, all men would have been forever bereft of one important experience: the experience of the state of spiritual deprivation. As the universe is now ordered, everyone can have the experience of moving from a position of relative doubt, insecurity, uncertainty, and fear towards a position of relative certitude, security, knowledge and faith.

On this journey, we learn important lessons which would otherwise be denied us. We value true spirituality the more for having experienced, to whatever degree, its lack, and we are grateful for the privilege of having participated in and contributed to the process of its attainment. All of this would not be possible if spiritual knowledge and perfection were simply our natural state of being from the moment of our creation.

Here is one passage in which Bahá'u'lláh explains the principle of separation and distinction:

The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence. . . . Whoso hath recognized the Day Spring of Divine guidance and entered His holy court hath drawn nigh unto God and attained His Presence. . . . Whoso hath failed to recognize Him will have condemned himself to the misery of remoteness, a remoteness which is naught but utter nothingness and the essence of the nethermost fire. Such will be his fate, though to outward seeming he may occupy the earth's loftiest seats and be established upon its most exalted throne.

He Who is the Day Spring of Truth is, no doubt, fully capable of rescuing from such remoteness wayward souls and of causing them to draw nigh unto His court and attain His Presence. "If God had pleased He had surely made all men one people." His purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward and perverse. Thus hath it been ordained by the all-glorious and resplendent Pen. . . .

That the Manifestations of Divine justice, the Day Springs of heavenly grace, have when they appeared amongst men always been destitute of all earthly dominion and shorn of the means of worldly ascendancy, should be attributed to this same principle of separation and distinction which animateth the Divine Purpose. Were the Eternal Essence to manifest all that is latent within Him, . . . none would be found to question His power or repudiate His truth. Nay, all created things would be so dazzled and thunderstruck by the evidences of His light as to be reduced to utter nothingness.⁹

From this passage, we can understand that the intangibility of spiritual realities is not an accident but rather a deliberate and fundamental aspect of God's purpose for man. Of course, if God had created us with no spiritual inclinations or perceptions whatever, if He had denied us immediate access to any part of reality, material or spiritual, or if He had created us with spiritual and metaphysical longings impossible of genuine fulfillment, we would be unable to succeed in our basic task. By starting the eternal spiritual growth process as spiritual-material hybrids, having immediate access to material reality and being endowed with significant physical and intellectual powers, we are able to learn the subtleties of spiritual development gradually. By experiencing first-hand the order and the lawfulness of the physical creation, we come to understand that the unseen spiritual realm is similarly ordered and governed by lawful, cause-and-effect relationships. At first intuitively, then explicitly and intellectually, and finally through genuine spiritual experience and inner development, we learn to participate consciously in this spiritual order of things. It becomes a day-to-day reality having an immediacy equal to and even greater than the immediacy of physical experience. Indeed, as Bahá'u'lláh explains, if we fulfill our responsibilities and learn our lessons well, we will be ready at the time of our physical death to pass easily into the purely spiritual realm. We will already have become familiar with its basic laws and modes of functioning and will therefore be prepared to take up our lives in that new realm and proceed with our growth process in a harmonious and satisfying manner:

The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying Their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.¹⁰

9. *Gleanings*, pp. 70-72.

10. *ibid.*, pp. 156-157. For a parallel discussion of some of these points see "The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality", by John S. Hatcher, *Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 3, 1977.

II. THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

1. Prerequisites for Spiritual Growth

SPIRITUALITY IS THE PROCESS of the proper development of man's innate spiritual capacities. But how does this process start and how is it carried on? What is the relationship between spiritual development and other kinds of development processes (e.g. formal schooling)? Why do there seem to have been so few people who have thus conceived the purpose of their lives and dedicated themselves to the pursuit of spirituality? Answers to these and other similar questions are given in the Bahá'í Writings, but we need to proceed systematically to gain perspective.

Clearly the prime condition for embarking on the process of spiritual development is the awareness that the process is useful, necessary, and realistically possible: the individual must become fully alert to the objective existence of the spiritual dimension of reality. Since such spiritual realities as God, the soul, and the mind are not directly observable, man has no immediate access to them. He has only indirect access through the observable effects that these spiritual realities may produce. The Bahá'í Writings acknowledge this situation and affirm that the Manifestation (or Prophet) of God is the most important observable reality which gives man access to intangible reality:

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace . . . hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence. These sanctified Mirrors, these Day-springs of ancient glory are one and all the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose.¹¹

In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said:

The knowledge of the Reality of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable, but the knowledge of the Manifestations of God is the knowledge of God, for the bounties, splendours and divine attributes are apparent in Them. Therefore, if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God; and if he be neglectful of the knowledge of the Holy Manifestations, he will be bereft of the knowledge of God.¹²

Thus, the Manifestations constitute that part of observable reality which most readily leads man to the knowledge and awareness of the spiritual dimension of existence. Of course, only those living in the lifetime of a Manifestation can observe Him at first hand, but His revelation and His Writings constitute permanent observable realities which enable us to maintain objective content in our beliefs, concepts and practices:

Say: The first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth.¹³

Elsewhere in the Bahá'í Writings, it is explained that everything in observable reality, when properly perceived, reveals some aspect of God, its Creator. However, only a conscious, willing, intelligent being such as man can reflect (to whatever limited degree) the higher aspects of God. The Manifestations of God, being the 'most accomplished, the most distinguished, and the most excellent'¹⁴ of men, endowed by God with transhuman spiritual capacities, represent the fullest possible expression of the divine in observable reality.

Thus, the first step in the path of spiritual growth is to become as intensely aware as possible of the reality of the spiritual realm of existence. The principle key to such an awareness is knowledge of the Manifestations of God.

Indeed, since the Manifestations constitute such a unique link between man and the unseen world of spiritual reality, knowledge of the Manifestations is the foundation of the whole process of spiritual development.¹⁵ This is not to say that real spiritual progress cannot take place before one recognizes and accepts the Manifestation.¹⁶ However, the Bahá'í Writings do affirm that in order to progress beyond a certain level on the path of spirituality, knowledge of the Manifestation is essential. Sooner or later (in this world or the next), knowledge and acceptance of the Manifestation must occur in the life of each individual.

The question naturally arises as to what step or steps follow the recognition of the Manifestation. Here again Bahá'u'lláh is quite clear and emphatic:

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Day Spring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof, hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.¹⁷

Thus, even though the recognition of the Manifestation is described as equal to “all good,” recognition alone is not a sufficient basis for spiritual growth. The effort to conform oneself to the standards of behaviour, thought, and attitude expressed by the various laws ordained by the Manifestation is also an intrinsic, inseparable part of the process.¹⁸

The idea that great effort is necessary to the prosecution of the spiritual growth process occurs throughout the Bahá'í Writings:

The incomparable Creator hath created all men from one same substance, and hath exalted their reality above the rest of His creatures. Success or failure, gain or loss, must, therefore, depend upon man's own exertions. The more he striveth, the greater will be his progress.¹⁹

Know thou that all men have been created in the nature made by God, the Guardian, the Self-Subsisting. Unto each one hath been prescribed a pre-ordained measure, as decreed in God's mighty and guarded Tablets. All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition.²⁰

. . . He hath entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation. The greater the effort exerted for the refinement of this sublime and noble mirror, the more faithfully will it be made to reflect the glory of the names and attributes of God, and reveal the wonders of His signs and knowledge. . . .

There can be no doubt whatever that, in consequence of the efforts which every man may consciously exert and as a result of the exertion of his own spiritual faculties, this mirror can be so cleansed . . . as to be able to draw nigh unto the meads of eternal holiness and attain the courts of everlasting fellowship.²¹

Personal effort is indeed a vital prerequisite to the recognition and acceptance of the Cause of God. No matter how strong the measure of Divine grace, unless supplemented by personal, sustained and intelligent effort it cannot become fully effective and be of any real and abiding advantage.²²

This last statement, from Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 until his death in 1957, makes clear that recognition of and faith in the Manifestation of God are not simply unidirectional “gifts” from God to man. Rather, both involve a reciprocal relationship requiring an intelligent and energetic response on the part of the individual. Nor is true faith based on any irrational or psychopathological impulse.²³

11. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1954), pp. 99-100.

12. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.

13. *Gleanings*, p. 105.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

15. In this regard, Bahá'u'lláh has said: “Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross. It is clear and evident that until a fire is kindled the lamp will never be ignited, and unless the dross is blotted out from the face of the mirror it can never represent the image of the sun nor reflect its light and glory.” *Gleanings*, p. 66. He goes on to point out that the necessary “fire” and “light” are transmitted from God to man through the Manifestations.

16. In one of His works, Bahá'u'lláh describes the stage leading up to the acceptance of the Manifestations as “the valley of search.” It is a period during which one thinks deeply about the human condition, seeks answers to penetrating questions, and

sharpens and develops one's capacities in preparation for their full use. It is a period of increasing restlessness and impatience with ignorance and injustice.

17. *Gleanings*, pp. 330-331.

18. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá stress that mankind has undergone a collective process of evolution by which it has now arrived at the threshold of maturity. God now requires more of man, in particular that he assume responsibility for the process of self-development: 'For in this holy Dispensation, the crowning of bygone ages, and cycles, true Faith is no mere acknowledgement of the Unity of God, but the living of a life that will manifest all the perfections implied in such belief.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Divine Art of Living* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 25.

19. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 81-82.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

22. Shoghi Effendi in *The Bahá'í Life* (Toronto: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, undated), p. 6.

23. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Bahá'í World Faith*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), pp. 382-383, where faith is defined to be conscious knowledge: "By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds." Of course, whenever man gains knowledge which contradicts his preconceived notions, he experiences inner conflict and may therefore initially perceive the new knowledge (and thus the new faith) as irrational in that it contradicts what he previously assumed to be true. But this initial perception is gradually overcome as continued experience further confirms the new knowledge, finally leading to an integration of the new with whatever was correct and healthy in the old. But this model of faith stands in significant contrast to the widely-held view that religious faith is essentially or fundamentally irrational (and blind) in its very nature.

2. The Nature of the Process

WE HAVE SEEN how the spiritual growth process may begin by acceptance of the Manifestation and obedience to his laws and principles. We need now to gain a measure of understanding of the nature of the process itself.

We have characterized spiritual growth as an educational process of a particular sort for which the individual assumes responsibility and by which he learns to feel, think, and act in certain appropriate ways. It is a process through which the individual eventually becomes the truest expression of what he has always potentially been.

Let us consider several further quotations from the Bahá'í Writings which confirm this view of the spiritual growth process.

Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.²⁴

Here the "duties" which God has prescribed for man are seen not as ends in themselves but rather as "tokens," in other words, as symbols for and means towards another, ultimate end. This end is characterized as being a particular kind of knowledge, here called self-knowledge.

In the following, Bahá'u'lláh speaks similarly of self-knowledge:

O My servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves—a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being.²⁵

One significant aspect of this passage is that true knowledge of self is identified with knowledge of God. That knowledge of God is identical with the fundamental purpose of life for the individual is clearly stated by Bahá'u'lláh in numerous passages. For example:

The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence. To this most excellent aim, this supreme objective, all the heavenly Books and the divinely-revealed and weighty Scriptures unequivocally bear witness.²⁶

Thus, while acceptance of the Manifestation of God and obedience to His ordinances is a necessary step which each individual must accomplish at some point in the spiritual growth process, these and other such duties are means to an ultimate end which is described as true self-knowledge. This quality of self-knowledge is equated with knowledge of God, and knowledge of God is considered by Bahá'u'lláh as constituting the essential reason for man's existence.

All of this would seem to say that religion, in the final analysis, represents a cognitive discipline of some sort. But what kind of cognitive discipline could involve the full development of all of man's spiritual capacities, and not just the mind? What kind of knowledge is meant by the true knowledge of self and how can such knowledge be tantamount to knowledge of God?

Bahá'u'lláh gives the key to answering these important questions in an explicit statement clearly describing the highest form of knowledge and development accessible to man:

Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man. Examine thine own self, and behold how thy motion and stillness, thy will and purpose, thy sight and hearing, thy sense of smell and power of speech, and whatever else is related to, or transcendeth, thy physical senses or spiritual perceptions, all proceed from, and owe their existence to, this same faculty. . . .

Wert thou to ponder in thine heart, from now until the end that hath no end, and with all the concentrated intelligence and understanding which the greatest minds have attained in the past or will attain in the future, this divinely ordained and subtle Reality, this sign of the revelation of the All-Abiding, All-Glorious God, thou wilt fail to comprehend its mystery or to appraise its virtue. Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development.²⁷

This passage seems to indicate that the ultimate form of knowledge available to man is represented by his total awareness of certain limitations which are inherent in his very nature or at least in the fundamental relationship between his nature and the phenomena of existence (including his own being and that of God). In particular, man must assimilate in some profound way the truth that the absolute knowledge of God and even of his own self lie forever beyond his reach. His realization of this truth is consequent to his having made a profound and accurate appraisal of his God-created capacities and potentialities. Thus, in the last analysis, true self-knowledge appears as a deep and mature knowledge of both the limitations and the capacities of the self. Let us recall that attaining to this knowledge is said to require strenuous effort on the part of man and to involve the development of `all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed.²⁸

To gain a broader perspective on this question, let us compare the self-knowledge described here with human knowledge in general, hoping that such a comparison will help us to understand more clearly what is particular to true self-knowledge. In general terms, a "knowing situation" involves a subjectivity (in this case that of man), some phenomenon which is the object of knowledge, and finally those means and resources which the subject can mobilize in order to obtain the understanding he seeks. If we agree to lump these last aspects of the knowing process under the general term "method," we arrive at the following schema:

knowing subject method → phenomenon

Quite clearly, the knowledge which is ultimately obtained from this process will depend on all three fundamental aspects of the knowing situation. It will depend on the nature of the phenomenon being studied (e.g., whether it is easily observable and accessible, whether it is complex or simple), on both the capacities and limitations of the knowing subject, and on the method used. In particular, the knowledge which results from this process will necessarily be relative and limited unless the knowing subject possesses some infallible method of knowledge. In this regard, it is important to note that the Bahá'í Writings stress repeatedly that human beings (other than the Manifestations) have no such infallible method of knowledge and that human understanding of all things is therefore relative and limited.²⁹

For example, in a talk given at Green Acre near Eliot, Maine in 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discusses the different criteria ‘by which the human mind reaches its conclusions.’³⁰ After a discussion of each criterion, showing why it is fallible and relative, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: ‘Consequently, it has become evident that the four criteria or standards of judgement by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate.’ He then proceeds to explain that the best man can do is to use systematically all of the criteria at his disposal.³¹

In another passage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms:

Knowledge is of two kinds. One is subjective and the other objective knowledge—that is to say, an intuitive knowledge and a knowledge derived from perception.

The knowledge of things which men universally have is gained by reflection or by evidence—that is to say, either by the power of the mind the conception of an object is formed, or from beholding an object the form is produced in the mirror of the heart. The circle of this knowledge is very limited because it depends upon effort and attainment.³²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then explains that the first kind of knowledge, that which is subjective and intuitive, is the special consciousness of the Manifestations: ‘Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired—that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.’³³

Here again we see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expresses the limited character of all human knowledge (in contrast to the unlimited knowledge of the Manifestations deriving from their special superhuman nature). In yet another passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts the matter thus:

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.

As our knowledge of things, even of created and limited things, is knowledge of their qualities and not of their essence, how is it possible to comprehend in its essence the Divine Reality, which is unlimited?

. . . Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality. This knowledge of the attributes is also proportioned to the capacity and power of man; it is not absolute.³⁴

It would seem clear from these and other similar passages from the Bahá’í Writings that whatever distinctive characteristics the true knowledge of self (or, equivalently, the knowledge of God) may have, it does not differ from other forms of knowledge with regard to degree of certainty. It is not less certain than other forms of knowledge since all human knowledge (including the knowledge of God and of ‘created and limited thing’) is relative and limited. Nor does it differ from these other forms of knowledge by being more certain, as is clear from the passage above and from the passages of Bahá’u’lláh previously cited.³⁵

However, if we compare knowledge of God with other forms of knowledge, not from the point of view of degrees of certainty, but rather from the standpoint of the relationship between man as knowing subject on the one hand, and the phenomenon which is the object of study on the other, we can immediately see that there is a tremendous difference. In all sciences and branches of knowledge other than religion, the object of study is a phenomenon which is either inferior to man in complexity and subtlety (in the case of physics and chemistry) or on a level with man (in the case of biology, psychology, and sociology). In either case, for each of these sciences the human knower is in a position of relative dominance or superiority which enables him to manipulate to a significant degree the phenomenon being studied. We can successfully use these phenomena as instruments for our purposes. But when we come to knowledge of God, we suddenly find ourselves confronted with a phenomenon which is superior to us and which we cannot manipulate. Many of the reflexes and techniques learned in studying other phenomena no longer apply. Far from learning how to manipulate God, we must learn how to discern expressions of God’s will for us and respond adequately to them. It is we who must now become (consciously acquiescing) instruments for God’s purposes.³⁶

Viewed in this perspective, the distinctive characteristic of knowing God, as compared with all other forms of human knowledge, is that the human knower is in a position of inferiority with respect to the object of knowledge. Rather than encompassing and dominating the phenomenon by aggressive and manipulative techniques, man is now encompassed by a phenomenon more powerful than himself.

Perhaps, then, one of the deep meanings of the true knowledge of self (which is equivalent to the knowledge of God) that we are here confronted with the task of learning novel, and initially unnatural, patterns of thought, feeling,

and action. We must retrain ourselves in a wholly new way. We must not only understand our position of dependence on God, but also integrate that understanding into our lives until it becomes part of us, and indeed until it becomes us, an expression of what we are.

In other words, the full, harmonious, and proper development of our spiritual capacities means developing these capacities so that we may respond ever more adequately, and with increasing sensitivity and nuance, to the will of God: The process of spiritual growth is the process by which we learn how to conform ourselves to the divine will on ever deeper levels of our being.³⁷

From this viewpoint, conscious dependence upon God and obedience to His will is not a capitulation of individual responsibility, a sort of helpless “giving up,” but rather an assumption of an even greater degree of responsibility and self-control. We must learn through deep self-knowledge, how to be responsive to the spirit of God.

The ability to respond to God in such a whole-hearted, deeply intelligent and sensitive way is not part of the natural gift of any human being. What is naturally given to us is the capacity, the potential to attain to such a state. Its actual achievement, however, is consequent only to a persistent and strenuous effort on our part. The fact that such effort, and indeed suffering, are necessary to attain this state of spirituality makes life often difficult.³⁸ But the fact that it is truly possible makes of life a spiritual adventure a hundredfold more exciting than any other physical or romantic adventure could ever possibly be.

George Townshend, a Bahá'í renowned for the spiritual quality of his personal life, has given a description of this state of spiritual-mindedness. One senses that Townshend's statement is based on deep personal experience as well as intelligent contemplation:

When the veils of illusion which hide a man's own heart from himself are drawn aside, when after purgation he comes to himself and attains self-knowledge and sees himself as he truly is, then at the same moment and by the same act of knowledge he beholds there in his own heart His Father who has patiently awaited His son's return.

Only through this act of self-completion, through this conclusion of the journey which begins in the kingdom of the senses and leads inward through the kingdom of the moral to end in that of the spiritual, does real happiness become possible. Now for the first time a man's whole being can be integrated, and a harmony of all his faculties be established. Through his union with the Divine Spirit he has found the secret of the unifying of his own being. He who is the Breath of Joy becomes the animating principle of his existence. Man knows the Peace of God.³⁹

One of Bahá'u'lláh's major works, *The Book of Certitude*, is largely devoted to a detailed explanation of the way in which God has provided for the education of mankind through the periodic appearance in human history of a God-sent Manifestation or Revelator. At one point in His discussion of these questions, Bahá'u'lláh gives a wonderfully explicit description of the steps and stages involved in the individual's progress towards full spiritual development. This portion of *The Book of Certitude* has become popularly known among Bahá'ís as the “Tablet to the True Seeker,” although Bahá'u'lláh does not Himself designate the passage by this or any other appellation.

In general terms, a “true seeker” is anyone who has become aware of the objective existence of the spiritual dimension of reality, has realized that spiritual growth and development constitute the basic purpose of existence, and has sincerely and seriously embarked on the enterprise of fostering his spiritual progress. It is quite clear from the context of the passage that Bahá'u'lláh is primarily addressing those who have already reached the stage of accepting the Manifestation of God and obeying His commandments.

Bahá'u'lláh begins by describing in considerable detail the attitudes, thought patterns, and behaviour patterns that characterize a true seeker. He mentions such things as humility, abstention from backbiting and vicious criticism of others, kindness and helpfulness to those who are poor or otherwise in need, and the regular practice of the discipline of prayer and of meditation. He concludes this description by saying “These are among the attributes of the exalted, and constitute the hall-mark of the spiritually-minded When the detached wayfarer and sincere seeker hath fulfilled these essential conditions, then and only then can he be called a true seeker.”⁴⁰ He then continues by describing both the quality of effort necessary to the attainment of spirituality and the state of being which this attainment secures to the individual:

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. At that hour will the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of negligence. Then will the manifold favours and outpouring grace of the holy and everlasting Spirit confer such new life upon the seeker that he will find himself

endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind. He will contemplate the manifest signs of the universe, and will penetrate the hidden mysteries of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to the stations of absolute certitude. He will discover in all things the mysteries of divine Revelation and the evidences of an everlasting manifestation.⁴¹

Nor should the achievement of such a degree of spiritual development be considered an ideal, static configuration from which no further change or development is possible, as the following two passages from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá make clear:

As the divine bounties are endless, so human perfections are endless. If it were possible to reach a limit of perfection, then one of the realities of the beings might reach the condition of being independent of God, and the contingent might attain to the condition of the absolute. But for every being there is a point which it cannot overpass—that is to say, he who is in the condition of servitude, however far he may progress in gaining limitless perfections, will never reach the condition of Deity. . . .

For example, Peter cannot become Christ. All that he can do is, in the condition of servitude, to attain endless perfections . . .⁴²

Both before and after putting off this material form, there is progress in perfection but not in state. . . . There is no other being higher than a perfect man. But man when he has reached this state can still make progress in perfections but not in state because there is no state higher than that of a perfect man to which he can transfer himself. He only progresses in the state of humanity, for the human perfections are infinite. Thus, however learned a man may be, we can imagine one more learned.

Hence, as the perfections of humanity are endless, man can also make progress in perfections after leaving this world.⁴³

24. Gleanings, pp. 4-5.

25. Ibid., pp. 326-327.

26. Ibid., p. 70. See also note 9.

27. Ibid., pp. 164-165.

28. Ibid., p. 68, previously quoted in Section 1.2

29. It is interesting that modern science and modern scientific philosophy take essentially the same view of human knowledge. I have elsewhere treated this theme at some length (see *Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 2, "The Science of Religion," 1980), but will not enter into the discussion of such questions here.

30. He explicitly mentions sense experience, reason, inspiration or intuition, and scriptural authority.

31. The quoted passages are from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 253-255.

32. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.

33. Ibid., pp. 157-158.

34. Ibid., pp. 220-221.

35. Some mystics and religious philosophers have contended that our knowledge of God is absolute and for that reason superior to the relative and limited knowledge obtained by science. Such thinkers offer mysticism as an alternative discipline to science. It is important to realize that the Bahá'í Faith does not lend support to such a view. In particular, concerning the inherent limitations of the individual's intuitive powers, however disciplined and well-developed. Shoghi Effendi has said:

With regard to your question as to the value of intuition as a source of guidance for the individual; implicit faith in our intuitive powers is unwise, but through daily prayer and sustained effort one can discover, though not always and fully, God's Will intuitively. Under no circumstances, however, can a person be absolutely certain that he is recognizing God's Will, through the exercise of his intuition. It often happens that the latter results in completely misrepresenting the truth, and thus becomes a source of error rather than of guidance . . .

Moreover, the Bahá'í Writings clearly recognize that the human mind has a capacity for self-generated illusion which, if not recognized by the individual, can lead him into serious error:

You yourself must surely know that modern psychology has taught that the capacity of the human mind for believing what it imagines, is almost infinite. Because people think they have a certain type of experience, think they remember something of a previous life, does not mean they actually had the experience, or existed previously. The power of their mind would be quite sufficient to make them believe firmly such a thing had happened.

(This latter passage is also by Shoghi Effendi and both statements are quoted in a letter written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual Bahá'í.)

36. In particular, the Manifestations of God represent objective and universally accessible expressions of God's will. Humanity's interaction with the Manifestations provides an important opportunity to experience completely a phenomenon which man cannot manipulate or dominate. The Manifestations likewise provide a challenge to each individual's capacity to respond adequately to the divine will.
37. Another important dimension of spirituality is service to the collectivity. The development of one's spiritual and material capacities makes one a more valuable servant. More will be said about this in a later section.
38. Concerning the necessity of such suffering in the pursuit of spirituality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said: "Everything of importance in this world demands the close attention of its seeker. The one in pursuit of anything must undergo difficulties and hardships until the object in view is attained and the great success is obtained. This is the case of things pertaining to the world. How much higher is that which concerns the Supreme Concourse!" *Divine Art of Living*, p. 92.
39. George Townshend, *The Mission of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1952), pp. 99-100.
40. *The Book of Certitude*, p. 195.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196. Bahá'u'lláh's reference in the passage to "absolute certitude" might be perceived at first as contradicting the strong statements regarding the limitations on human knowledge which we have earlier quoted. However, this superficial perception is relieved when we reflect that "certitude" refers to a (psychological) state of being whereas the notion of "degree of certainty" (and in particular the question of whether knowledge is relative or absolute) is concerned rather with the criteria of verification available to man as knowing subject. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh would seem to be saying that man can attain to a sense of absolute certitude even though his criteria of verification, and thus his knowledge, remain limited. Also, it is clear that such phrases as "the eye of God" should be taken metaphorically and not literally. This metaphor, together with other such phrases as "new life" and "absolute certitude," convey a strong sense of the discontinuity between the respective degrees of understanding possessed by the individual before and after his attainment of true self-knowledge.
42. *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 230-231.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

3. The Dynamics of the Spiritual Growth Process

AFTER CONTEMPLATING Bahá'u'lláh's description of the state of being resulting from the attainment of true self-knowledge, it would be only natural to wish that this state could be achieved instantaneously, perhaps through some supreme gesture of self-renunciation, or whatever. However, the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith make it plain that this is not possible. By its very nature, true spirituality is something which can only be achieved as the result of a certain self-aware and self-responsible process of development.

'Abdu'l-Bahá often responded to Bahá'ís who felt overwhelmed by the task of refining their character by stressing the necessity of patience and daily striving. "Be patient, be as I am," He would say.⁴⁴ Spirituality was to be won "little by little; day by day."⁴⁵ And again:

He is a true Bahá'í who strives by day and by night to progress and advance along the path of human endeavor, whose most cherished desire is to live and act as to enrich and illuminate the world, whose source of inspiration is the essence of Divine virtue, whose aim in life is so to conduct himself as to be the cause of infinite progress. Only when he attains unto such perfect gifts can it be said of him that he is a true Bahá'í.⁴⁶

This last passage in particular would seem to indicate that one of the signs of an individual's maturity is his acceptance of the gradual nature of the process of spiritual growth and of the necessity for daily striving. Indeed, psychology has established that one important measure of maturity is the capacity to delay gratification, i.e., to work for goals whose attainment is not to be had in the short term. Since spirituality is the highest and most important goal anyone can possibly have, it is natural that its achievement should call forth the greatest possible maturity on the part of the individual.⁴⁷

In a similar vein, Shoghi Effendi has said that the Bahá'ís:

. . . should not look at the depraved condition of the society in which they live, nor at the evidences of moral degradation and frivolous conduct which the people around them display. They should not content themselves merely with relative distinction and excellence. Rather they should fix their gaze upon nobler heights by setting the counsels and exhortations of the Pen of Glory as their supreme goal. Then it will be readily realized how numerous are the stages that still remain to be traversed and how far off the desired goal lies—a goal which is none other than exemplifying heavenly morals and virtues.⁴⁸

In describing the experience of the individual as he progresses towards this goal, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said: "Know thou, verily, there are many veils in which the Truth is enveloped; gloomy veils; then delicate and transparent veils; then the envelopment of Light, the sight of which dazzles the eyes. . . ."⁴⁹ Indeed, one of Bahá'u'lláh's major works, *The Seven Valleys*, describes in poetic and powerfully descriptive language the different stages of spiritual perception through which an individual may pass in his efforts to attain to the goal of spirituality.⁵⁰ In the *Tablet of Wisdom*, Bahá'u'lláh says simply: "Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday."⁵¹ Elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh has urged man to live in such a way that each day his faith increases over the previous day. All of these passages strongly reinforce the notion that spirituality is to be won only through a gradual process and is not to be attained by any once-and-for-all act of faith.

We want now to understand the dynamics of this process. How do we even take one step forward? Also, we need to understand how a gradual process can produce a change as radical as that described by Bahá'u'lláh in the passage quoted in the previous section (see note 41).

The answer to this last consideration is that the rate of change produced by the process is not constant. In technical language, the process is exponential and not linear. To say that a growth process is linear means that the rate of growth is unchanging. In an exponential process, on the other hand, the rate of growth is very small in the beginning but gradually increases until a sort of saturation point is reached. When this point is passed, the rate of growth becomes virtually infinite, and the mechanism of the process becomes virtually automatic. There is, so to speak, an "explosion" of progress.⁵² As we examine the dynamics of the process of spiritual development we will see precisely how the exponential nature of the process can be concretely understood. Let us turn, then, to an examination of these dynamics.

The main problem is to understand how the various capacities of the individual—mind, heart, and will—are to interact in order to produce a definite step forward in the path towards full development. Basic to our understanding of this obviously complex interaction are two important points that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both stress regarding the growth process. The first is that no one faculty acting alone is sufficient to produce results.⁵³ The second point is that there is a hierarchical relationship between these faculties in which knowledge is first, love is second, and will is third. Let us discuss each of these points in turn.

As we have seen in Section I on the nature of man, each individual has certain basic, innate spiritual capacities, but in a degree and in a proportion which are unique to him. Moreover, the initial development of these innate capacities takes place under conditions over which the individual has very little control (e.g., the conditions of the family into which he is born, the social and physical surroundings to which he is exposed). An important consequence of this universal, existential situation is that each one of us arrives at the threshold of adulthood having developed a more or less spontaneous and unexamined pattern of responses to life situations. This pattern, unique to each individual, is an expression of his basic personality at that stage of his development.⁵⁴

Given the limited and relative nature of our innate spiritual capacities as well as the conditions under which they will have developed up to this point in our lives, our personal response pattern will necessarily involve many imbalances, immaturities and imperfections. Moreover, because of the largely spontaneous and unselfconscious nature of our pattern, we will be unaware of many aspects of it. Thus, our attainment of true self-knowledge will involve our becoming acutely aware of the internal psychic mechanisms of our response pattern. We must take stock of both the strengths and the weaknesses of our pattern and make deliberate efforts to bring it into harmony, balance, and full development. We must also begin to correct false or improper development.

This is the beginning of a transformation or growth process for which we assume responsibility. Until this point in our lives, our growth and development has been primarily in the hands of others. Though we have collaborated in the process with some degree of consciousness, nevertheless the major part has been beyond our control and indeed beyond our awareness. We have been the relatively passive recipients of a process to which we have been subjected by others. Now we must become the agents and prime movers of our own growth process. This self-directed process is a continuation of the previously unconscious one, but it represents a new and significant stage in our lives.

This new, self-directed growth process is going to take time. Moreover, it is sometimes going to be painful, and in the beginning stages at least, very painful. The new, more balanced functioning for which we begin to strive will appear at first to be unnatural since the spontaneous pattern we will have previously developed is the natural expression of our (relatively undeveloped and immature) selves.

In fact, one of the major problems involved in starting the process of spiritual growth is that we initially feel so comfortable with our spontaneous and unexamined mode of functioning. This is why it often happens that an individual becomes strongly motivated to begin the spiritual growth process only after his spontaneous system of coping has failed in some clear and dramatic way.

The realization that failure has occurred may come in many different forms. Perhaps we are faced with a ‘test,’ a life situation that puts new and unusual strain on our defective response system and thus reveals to us its weakness. We may even temporarily break down, i.e., become unable to function in situations which previously caused no difficulties. This is because we have become so disillusioned by our sudden realization of our weakness that we put the whole framework of our personalities into doubt. Perceiving that things are wrong, but not yet knowing just how or why, we suspend activity until we can gain perspective on what is happening.⁵⁵

Or, the perception of the inadequacy of our spontaneous system of functioning may result from our unanticipated failure at some endeavour. We are then led to wonder why we anticipated a success that we were unable to deliver.⁵⁶

The frequency with which the perception of inadequacy and the consequent motivation to change is born through fiery ordeal has led some to build a model of spiritual growth in which such dramatic failures and terrible sufferings are considered to be unavoidable and necessary aspects of the growth process. The Bahá'í Writings would appear to take a middle position on this question. On the one hand, they clearly affirm that tests, difficulties, and sufferings are inevitable, natural concomitants of the spiritual growth process. Such painful experiences, it is explained, serve to give us deeper understanding of certain spiritual laws upon which our continued growth depends.⁵⁷ On the other hand, many instances of human suffering are simply the result of careless living and are therefore potentially avoidable. Bahá'ís are taught to pray to God for preservation from violent or extreme tests. Moreover, the Bahá'í Writings strictly forbid asceticism and any other similar philosophies or disciplines which incite the individual actively to seek pain or suffering in the path of spiritual growth. The growth process itself involves enough pain without our seeking more through misguided or thoughtless living. But the deep sufferings and dramatic setbacks are potentially there for everyone who feels inclined to learn the hard way.⁵⁸

Of course, even dramatic failures and sufferings may sometimes not be enough to convince us of our weaknesses and immaturities. We may put up various ‘defenses,’ i.e., we may resist seeing the truth of the matter even when it is plain to everyone but ourselves. We engage in such strategies of self-illusion primarily when, for whatever reason, we find some particular bit of self-revelation unusually hard to take. If we do not learn the lesson from the situation, we may blindly and adamantly persist in the same behaviour or thought patterns which continue to produce new and perhaps even more painful situations. We are then in a ‘vicious circle’ in which our resistance to accepting the truer picture of reality actually increases with each new bit of negative feedback. Regarding such vicious circle situations, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said:

Tests are a means by which a soul is measured as to its fitness, and proven out by its own acts. God knows its fitness beforehand, and also its unpreparedness, but man, with an ego, would not believe himself unfit unless some proof were given to him. Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness.⁵⁹

Let us sum up. We start the process of conscious spiritual development by becoming aware of how we function at our present level of maturity. We assess as realistically as possible the level of intellectual, emotional, and behavioural maturity we have attained at present. As we perceive imbalanced development, underdevelopment, or improper development, we begin the job of correcting the perceived inadequacies.

It is at this stage, in particular, that the Bahá'í view of the nature of man becomes so important in fostering our spiritual growth and progress.⁶⁰ Suppose we perceive, for example, that we have a tendency to be very willful, aggressive, and dominant in our relations with others. From the Bahá'í viewpoint, we would not consider the

negative features of this pattern as inherently evil or sinful or as arising from some evil part of ourselves, a part which must be despised and suppressed. We are free to recognize the positive potential of this aspect of our character. After examination, we might find that we have not sufficiently developed our feeling capacity and are, therefore, sometimes insensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Or perhaps we often act impulsively and need to develop also our understanding capacity so as to act more reflectively and wisely. Or again, we might find that our mode of relating to others represents an attempt to satisfy in an illegitimate way some need within us (a need for security or self-worth perhaps) that we have not succeeded in meeting legitimately. We will then understand that we have been engaging in an improper (and unproductive) use of will and must, therefore, set about redeploying our psychic forces in a more productive manner. As we gradually succeed in doing this, we will satisfy our inner need legitimately and improve our relationships with others at the same time.⁶¹

In other words, the model of human spiritual and moral functioning offered by the Bahá'í Faith enables us to respond creatively and constructively once we become aware that change is necessary. We avoid wasting precious energy on guilt, self-hatred, or other such unproductive mechanisms. We are able to produce some degree of change almost immediately. This gives us positive feedback, makes us feel better about ourselves, and helps generate courage to continue the process of change we have just begun.

We now come to the important question of the mechanism by which we can take a step forward in the path of spiritual progress. What we need to consider is the hierarchical relationship between knowledge, love, and action.

44. *The Dynamic Force of Example* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 50.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

46. *Divine Art of Living*, p. 25.

47. This point of view on spirituality is in sharp contrast with the viewpoint found in many contemporary cults and sects which stress instant gratification and irresponsibility in the name of honesty and spontaneity.

48. *The Bahá'í Life*, p. 2.

49. *Divine Art of Living*, p. 51.

50. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, rev. ed., 1954).

51. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa, Israel: compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, 1978), p. 138.

52. In an exponential process, the rate of growth at any given stage of the process is directly proportional to the total growth attained at that stage. Thus, as the process develops and progress is made, the rate of progress increases. An example would be a production process such that the total amount produced at any given stage is double the total amount produced at the previous stage (imagine a reproduction process in which bacteria double each second, starting with one bacterium). Since the double of a large number represents a much greater increase than the double of a small number, doubling is an example of an exponential law of progress.

53. Bahá'u'lláh has stressed that the merit of all deeds is dependent upon God's acceptance (cf. *A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas of Bahá'u'lláh*, [Haifa, Israel: the Universal House of Justice, 1973], p. 52), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said that "good actions alone, without the knowledge of God, cannot be the cause of eternal salvation, everlasting access, and prosperity, and entrance into the Kingdom of God." *Some Answered Questions*, p. 238. On the other hand, knowledge without action is also declared to be unacceptable: "Mere knowledge of principles is not sufficient. We all know and admit that justice is good but there is need of volition and action to carry out and manifest it." 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Foundations of World Unity* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1945), p. 26. At the same time, love and sincere good intentions alone are also insufficient for spiritual progress, for they need to be guided by knowledge and wisdom and expressed through action. Moreover, without true self-knowledge we may sometimes mistake physical attraction or self-centred emotional need as love and act upon it with negative results.

54. At this point in our development, it is difficult if not impossible to know how much of our mode of functioning is due to our innate qualities and how much is due to the cumulative influence of external conditions. Thus, our spontaneous response pattern may be a reasonably authentic expression of our true selves or it may contain significant distortions. It is only by moving on to the next stage of self-aware, self-directed growth that we can gain insight into this question.

55. If a person has been fortunate in the quality of spiritual education he has received during his formative years, his spontaneous system of functioning may be very good indeed compared with others in less fortunate circumstances. If his spiritual education has been especially good, he will have already learned and understood the necessity of assuming the responsibility for his own spiritual growth process (and will have already begun to do so as an adolescent). In such cases as these, the individual will not need any test or dramatic setback in order to awaken him to spiritual realities of which he is already aware. Indeed, the Bahá'í Writings explain that the very purpose of the spiritual education of children and youth is to lead them to such an understanding of spiritual realities that, upon reaching adulthood, they will be naturally equipped to take charge of their own lives and spiritual growth processes. Spiritual education of this quality is extremely rare (in fact virtually nonexistent) in our society today, but the Bahá'í Writings contain many principles and techniques for the spiritual education of children and affirm that the application of these principles will, in the future, enable the majority of people to attain the age of adulthood with a clear understanding of the dynamics of the spiritual growth process. Though this state of affairs will not eliminate all human suffering (in particular suffering which comes from physical accident or certain illnesses), it will eliminate that considerable proportion of human suffering which is generated by the sick, distorted, and destructive response patterns and modes of functioning widespread in current society.
56. The answer may be that our expectations were unreasonable to begin with. In this way, failure to obtain some particular external goal can lead to success in gaining valid knowledge and insight into our internal processes, thus fostering spiritual growth. Indeed, there is very little that happens to us in life that cannot be used to give us new self-insight and hence contribute to fulfilling the basic purpose of prosecuting the spiritual growth process. It sometimes happens that a person whose spontaneous level of functioning is quite weak and defective is soon led to discover this fact while a person whose spontaneous level of functioning is rather high (due to favourable circumstances in early life or to exceptional natural endowments) persists for many years in his spiritually unaware state, making no spiritual progress whatever. In this way, the person whose spontaneous level of functioning is weak may take charge of his growth process much sooner than others and thereby eventually surpass those with more favourable natural endowments or initial life circumstances.
57. Regarding the spiritual meaning and purpose of suffering, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said: "Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine mercy for our own perfecting ... The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering . . . suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness . . . Through suffering (one) will attain to an eternal happiness which nothing can take from him ... To attain eternal happiness one must suffer. He who has reached the state of self-sacrifice has true joy. Temporal joy will vanish." *Divine Art of Living*, pp. 89-90.
58. Naturally, it is heartening to see examples of murderers, thieves, rapists, or drug addicts who turn themselves around and become useful members of society and occasionally morally and intellectually superior human beings. But one can also deplore the fact that people with such potential and talents must waste so many years and cause so much suffering to themselves and others before realizing their potential.
59. Quoted in Daniel Jordan, *The Meaning of Deepening* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), p. 38.
60. Of course, if our parents and educators have also had the Bahá'í viewpoint of the nature of man, this will have contributed to our development during our formative years. However, our future growth and development will depend on whatever attitudes and viewpoints we personally maintain. Nevertheless, we will continue to be significantly affected by our interactions with others and therefore by the attitudes and viewpoints which they have. More will be said about this point in a later section.
61. This hypothetical example serves to stress an important point concerning the Bahá'í view of human nature. To say that human nature, in both its material and spiritual aspects, is good means that all of man's natural needs and urges are God-given. Since Bahá'ís also believe that God's purpose for mankind is positive and beneficial, it follows that there is a legitimate, God-given (and truly satisfactory) way of meeting every natural internal human need (see the quotation in note 6). Such a view contrasts sharply with the idea that some of man's basic urges are intrinsically evil and/or inherently socially (and self) destructive. The Bahá'í view of man certainly recognizes that the perversion of a natural capacity or need can lead to virulent social, psychological, moral and spiritual ills, and that dealing with people or groups so afflicted can be extremely difficult. Nevertheless, in effecting a cure even of these terrible spiritual pathologies, it is helpful to realize that the process is based on teaching (and learning) detachment from the false pattern and attachment to the healthy one rather than the purely negative attempt to suppress unacceptable behaviour.

4. Knowledge, Love, and Will

A CLOSE EXAMINATION of the psychology of the spiritual growth process as presented in the Bahá'í Writings indicates that the proper and harmonious functioning of our basic spiritual capacities depends on recognizing a hierarchical relationship among them. At the apex of this hierarchy is the knowing capacity.

First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding. His purpose in conferring such a gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory. This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation. Next in rank, is the power of vision, the chief instrument whereby his understanding can function. The senses of hearing, of the heart, and the like, are similarly to be reckoned among the gifts with which the human body is endowed. . . .

These gifts are inherent in man himself. That which is preeminent above all other gifts, is incorruptible in nature, and pertaineth to God Himself, is the gift of Divine Revelation. Every bounty conferred by the Creator upon man, be it material or spiritual, is subservient unto this.⁶²

In the last chapter of *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates even further on this theme. He explains that right actions and moral behaviour are not in themselves sufficient for spirituality. Alone, such actions and behaviour constitute “. . . a body of the greatest loveliness, but without spirit.”⁶³ He then explains: “. . . that which is the cause of everlasting life, eternal honour, universal enlightenment, real salvation and prosperity is, first of all, the knowledge of God.”⁶⁴ He continues, affirming: “Second, comes the love of God, the light of which shines in the lamp of the hearts of those who know God; . . .”⁶⁵ and “The third virtue of humanity is the goodwill which is the basis of good actions . . . though a good action is praiseworthy, yet if it is not sustained by the knowledge of God, the love of God, and a sincere intention, it is imperfect.”⁶⁶

In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expresses the primacy of knowledge with respect to action as follows: “Although a person of good deeds is acceptable at the Threshold of the Almighty, yet it is first ‘to know’ and then ‘to do’”. Although a blind man produceth a most wonderful and exquisite art, yet he is deprived of seeing it. . . . By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds.”⁶⁷ In yet another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the steps towards the attainment of spirituality:

By what means can man acquire these things? How shall he obtain these merciful gifts and powers? First, through the knowledge of God. Second, through the love of God. Third, through faith. Fourth, through philanthropic deeds. Fifth, through self-sacrifice. Sixth, through severance from this world. Seventh, through sanctity and holiness. Unless he acquires these forces and attains to these requirements he will surely be deprived of the life that is eternal.⁶⁸

In the above passages, and in many others not quoted, the hierarchical ordering of spiritual faculties is the same: Knowledge leads to love which generates the courage to act (i.e., faith) which forms the basis of the intention to act (i.e., motive and good will) which in turn leads to action itself (i.e., good deeds). Of course, the knowledge which starts this psycho-spiritual chain reaction is not just any kind of knowledge, but the knowledge of God which is equivalent to true self-knowledge.

As we begin to take charge of our own spiritual growth process, one of the main problems we face is that our existing perception of ourselves—of what we are and of what we should be—is bound to be distorted and inadequate in various ways, for his self-perception (or self-image) is the very basis of the spontaneous response pattern we have inherited from our childhood and early youth. Indeed, our mode of functioning at any given stage of our development is largely just a dramatization of our basic self-image; it is the projection of this self-image onto the various life situations we encounter. Thus, our self-image is, in many ways, the key to our personalities.

To say that our self-image is distorted means that it does not correspond to reality, the reality that is within us. Perhaps we have an exaggerated image of ourselves, believing we have talents and abilities we lack in reality. We may, at the same time and in other ways, underestimate ourselves, carrying an unrealistically negative concept of our capacities.

In any case, to the degree that our self-concept is false we will experience unpleasant tensions and difficulties as we become involved in various life situations. The false or unrealistic parts of our self-image will be implicitly judged by our encounter with external reality. We will sense this and begin to perceive, at first vaguely and uncomfortably but then more sharply, that something is wrong. Even though this feedback information from external reality may be from neutral sources and devoid of any value-judgemental quality, we may nevertheless perceive it as

a threat or even an attack. If the feedback is not neutral but comes, say, in the form of blatantly negative criticism from others, our sense of being threatened will certainly be much greater.

Moreover, we will perceive the source of these threats as being somewhere outside ourselves. It will not naturally occur to us that the source lies rather within ourselves in the form of an illusory and unrealistic self-concept. Therefore, our instinctive reaction to the negative feedback information will be to resist, to defend our self-image and to strive to maintain it. In defending our self-image, we believe we are defending our selves because we do not view ourselves as a mosaic of true and false, real and unreal. We see only the seamless, undifferentiated whole of 'I' or 'me.' The result is that we begin to bind up more and more of our psychic energies in the defence of our self-image. We confuse egotistic pride, which is our attachment to our limited and distorted self-concept, with self-respect and honour, which are expressions of the deep spiritual truth that we are created in the image of God with an intrinsic value given by Him and without any essentially evil or sinful part.

The 'binding energy' involved in our defence of our self-concept is frequently experienced as various negative emotions like fear, rage, jealousy, or aggression. These emotions are all expressions of our attempt to locate the source of our irritation outside ourselves in objective, external reality. We are also liable to experience considerable anxiety as we cling more and more desperately to whatever false part of ourselves we cannot relinquish. Clearly, the greater the pathology of our self-image and the greater our attachment to it, the stronger will be our sense of being threatened and attacked, and the greater will be the amount of psychic energy necessary to maintain and defend the false part of our self-image.

At this point, an increase in self-knowledge will be represented by some insight into ourselves which enables us to discard a false part of our self-image. This act of self-knowledge is the first stage in the mechanism involved in taking a single step forward in the process of spiritual growth. 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. We have a truer picture of our real (and therefore God-created) selves, and we have a new reservoir of energy which is now freed for its God-intended use in the form of service to others.

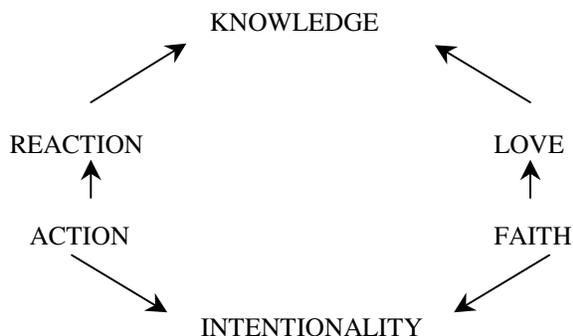
Following this release of energy will be an increase in courage. We have more courage partly because we have more knowledge of reality and have therefore succeeded in reducing, however slightly, the vastness of what is unknown and hence potentially threatening to us. We also have more courage because we have more energy to deal with whatever unforeseen difficulties may lie ahead. This new increment of courage is an increase in faith.

Courage generates within us *intentionality*, i.e., the willingness and the desire to act. We want to act because we are anxious to experience the sense of increased mastery that will come from dealing with life situations which previously appeared difficult or impossible but which now seem challenging and interesting. And we are also eager to seek new challenges, to use our new knowledge and energy in circumstances we would have previously avoided. And, most importantly, we have an intense desire to share with others, to serve them and to be an instrument, to whatever possible extent, in the process of their spiritual growth and development.

Finally, this intentionality, this new motivation, expresses itself in concrete action. Until now everything has taken place internally, in the inner recesses of our psyche. No external observer could possibly know that anything significant has taken place. But when we begin to act, the reality of this inner process is dramatized. Action, then, is the dramatization of intentionality and therefore of knowledge, faith, and love. It is the visible, observable concomitant of the invisible process that has occurred within us.

We have taken a step forward in our spiritual development. We have moved from one level to another. However small the step may be, however minimal the difference between the old level of functioning and the new, a definite transition has taken place.

Whenever we act, we affect not only ourselves but also our physical and social environment. Our action thereby evokes a reaction from others. This reaction is, of course, just a form of the feedback information mentioned above. But the difference is that our action has now been the result of a conscious and deliberate process. We know why we acted the way we did. Thus, we will perceive the reaction in a different way, even if it is negative (our good intentions certainly do not guarantee that the reaction will be positive). We will welcome the reaction because it will help us evaluate our actions. In short, the reaction to our actions will give us new knowledge, new self-insight. In this way, the cycle starts again and the process of taking another step along the path of spiritual growth is repeated. We represent this by the following diagram:



As is the case with any new discipline, so it is with learning spiritual growth. Our first steps forward are painfully self-conscious and hesitant. We are acutely aware of each detail, so much so that we wonder whether we will ever be able to make it work. We are elated at our first successes, but we tend to linger on the plateaus, becoming sufficiently motivated to take another step only when negative pressures begin to build up intolerably, forcing us to act.

Yet, as we pursue the process, we become more adept at it. Gradually, certain aspects become spontaneous and natural (not unconscious). They become part of us to the point of being reflex actions. The feedback loop resulting from our actions becomes more and more automatic. The rate of progress begins to pick up. The steps merge imperceptibly. Finally, the process becomes almost continuous. In other words, the rate of progress increases as we go along because we are not only making progress but also perfecting our skill at making progress.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said:

It is possible to so adjust one’s self to the practice of nobility that its atmosphere surrounds and colours every act. When actions are habitually and conscientiously adjusted to noble standards, with no thought of the words that might herald them, then nobility becomes the accent of life. At such a degree of evolution one scarcely needs try any longer to be good—all acts are become the distinctive expression of nobility.⁶⁹

A process in which the rate of progress is proportional to the amount of progress made is exponential. (see note 52). Thus, an analysis of the mechanism of the spiritual growth process allows us to understand why this process, though remaining a gradual one, is exponential: It is because we perfect the process of growing spiritually as we grow, thereby increasing the rate at which growth occurs.

The above diagram, and the detailed analysis of each stage of the mechanism involved in the hierarchical relationship between knowledge, love, and will, should not lead us to forget the other fundamental point, namely that all of our spiritual faculties must function together at each stage of the mechanism. In order to gain self-insight, we must will to know the truth about ourselves, and we must be attracted towards the truth. When we act, we must temper our actions with the knowledge and wisdom we have already accumulated at that given point in our development.

Moreover, when we begin the process of conscious, self-directed spiritual growth we do not start from absolute emptiness but rather from the basis of whatever knowledge, love, faith, and will we have developed at that point in our lives. Thus, the spiritual growth process is lived and dramatized by each individual in a way which is unique to him even though the basic mechanism of progress and the rules which govern it are universal.

62. *Gleanings*, pp. 194-195.

63. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 300.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

67. *Bahá’í World Faith*, pp. 382-383.

68. *Divine Art of Living*, p. 19.

69. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, Vol. 17, p. 286.

5. Tools for Spiritual Growth

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF the process of spiritual growth and its dynamics does not guarantee that we will be successful in our pursuit of spirituality. We stand in need of practical tools to help us at every turn. The Bahá’í Writings give a clear indication of a number of such tools. In particular, prayer, meditation and study of the Writings of the Manifestations, and active service to mankind are repeatedly mentioned. For example, in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi it is stated:

When a person becomes a Bahá’í, actually what takes place is that the seed of the spirit starts to grow in the human soul. This seed must be watered by the outpourings of the Holy Spirit. These gifts of the spirit are received through prayer, meditation, study of the Holy Utterances and service to the Cause of God . . . service in the Cause is like the plough which ploughs the physical soil when seeds are sown.⁷⁰

Some of the points mentioned briefly in the above passage are amplified in the following statement from the same source:

How to attain spirituality is indeed a question to which every young man and woman must sooner or later try to find a satisfactory answer. . . .

Indeed the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is the lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind that people in general do no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence. There is not sufficient demand for things that we call spiritual to differentiate them from the needs and requirements of our physical existence. . . .

The universal crisis affecting mankind is, therefore, essentially spiritual in its causes . . . the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá’u’lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. . . . The Bahá’í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide.⁷¹

With regard to meditation, the Bahá’í Writings explain that it has no set form and each individual is free to meditate in the manner he finds most helpful. Statements by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describe meditation as a silent contemplation, a sustained mental concentration or focusing of thought:

Bahá’u’lláh says there is a sign (from God) in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time—he cannot both speak and meditate. . . .

Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves.⁷²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá leaves no doubt concerning the importance of meditation as a tool for spiritual growth:

You cannot apply the name “man” to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts.

Through the faculty of meditation man attains to eternal life; through it he receives the breath of the Holy Spirit—the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation.⁷³

And Bahá'u'lláh has said that "One hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship."⁷⁴

The Bahá'í Writings suggest that the words and teachings of the Manifestations provide a helpful focus for meditation. Also, while giving considerable freedom to the individual concerning prayer, they likewise suggest that the prayers of the Manifestations are especially useful in establishing a spiritual connection between the soul of man and the Divine Spirit. Prayer is defined as conversation or communion with God:

The wisdom of prayer is this, that it causes a connection between the servant and the True One, because in that state of prayer man with all his heart and soul turns his face towards His Highness the Almighty, seeking His association and desiring His love and compassion. The greatest happiness for a lover is to converse with his beloved, and the greatest gift for a seeker is to become familiar with the object of his longing. That is why the greatest hope of every soul who is attracted to the kingdom of God is to find an opportunity to entreat and supplicate at the ocean of His utterance, goodness and generosity.⁷⁵

'Abdu'l-Bahá has elsewhere explained that the spirit in which one prays is the most important dimension of prayer. A ritualistic mumbling of words or a mindless repetition of syllables is not prayer. Moreover, the Bahá'í Writings enjoin the spiritual seeker to make of his whole life, including his professional activities, an act of worship:

In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are counted as worship. The man who makes a piece of notepaper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God. Briefly, all effort put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. Thus is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer. . . .⁷⁶

Thus, it is the spirit and motive of service to others which makes external activity a tool for spiritual progress. In order to pursue the goal of spirituality, one must therefore maintain a persistently high level of motivation. Prayer, meditation, and study of the Words of the Manifestations are essential in this regard:

The first thing to do is to acquire a thirst for spirituality, then Live the Life! Live the Life! Live the Life! The way to acquire this thirst is to meditate upon the future life. Study the Holy Words, read your Bible, read the Holy Books, especially study the Holy Utterances of Bahá'u'lláh. Prayer and Meditation, take much time for these two. Then will you know the Great Thirst, and then only can you begin to Live the Life!⁷⁷

Thus, while the quality and maturity of one's relationship to others remain the best measure of spiritual progress and growth, acquiring the capacity for such mature relationships depends essentially on an intense inner life and self-development. Moreover, the individual's actions are experienced both by himself and by others, whereas inner life is experienced only by the individual and is thereby more properly "his." The sense of "that mystic feeling which unites Man with God" becomes to the spiritual seeker the most precious of experiences. It is that part of spirituality which lies at the centre of his heart and soul.

In this inner dimension, spirituality becomes a sort of dialogue between the human soul and the Divine Spirit as channeled through the Manifestation. It is within this subjective but nevertheless real dimension of inner spirituality that one finds all the passion, the exaltation of spirit, as well as the terrible but somehow precious moments of despair, of utter helplessness and defeat, of shame and repentance. It is here that one learns with the deeply certain knowledge only personal experience can bestow, that the ultimate category of existence, the absolute and transcendent God who guides and oversees our destiny, is an infinitely loving and merciful Being.

70. Excerpt from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in *The Bahá'í Life*, p. 20.

71. Excerpt from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in *Directives from the Guardian* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust), pp. 86-87.

72. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), pp. 174-175.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

74. *Book of Certitude*, p. 238. These strong statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerning meditation should not, however, be taken as implying an absolute faith in man's intuitive powers. See note 35.
75. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Divine Art of Living*, p. 27.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
77. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Bahá'í Magazine*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1928.

III. THE COLLECTIVE DIMENSION OF SPIRITUALITY

1. The Social Matrix of Individual Growth

UNTIL NOW IN OUR DISCUSSION, we have viewed the process of spiritual growth as being primarily an individual one, a process which effects changes within the individual and in his behaviour towards his social and natural environment. However, it is obvious that individual spiritual growth does not and cannot take place in a vacuum. It takes place within the context of a given society that is bound to have a profound influence on the individual in his pursuit of spirituality. Indeed, there are many intricate, subtle, and complex interactions between any society and each of the individuals composing it. These interactions produce reciprocal influences that operate on different levels of behaviour, life experience, and consciousness. It is therefore more accurate to view the spiritual growth process as an organically social one having several identifiable but related components. Some of these are: (1) an individual component, which has been the main focus of our discussion in the previous sections, (2) a collective or global component, involving the evolution of society as a whole, and (3) an interactive component, involving the relationship between the individual and society. In this section, the global and interactive dimensions of the spiritual growth process will be briefly examined.

The Bahá'í Writings make clear that, just as the individual has a basically spiritual purpose to his existence, so society also has a spiritual *raison d'être*. The spiritual purpose of society is to provide the optimal milieu for the full and adequate spiritual growth and development of the individuals in that society. In the Bahá'í view, all other aspects of social evolution, such as technological innovations, institutional structures, decision-making procedures and the exercise of authority, group interactions, and the like, are to be judged positive or negative according to whether they contribute to or detract from the goal of fostering a favourable milieu for spiritual growth.

Such a concept of society and its meaning is certainly a radical departure from the commonly held view that society serves primarily as a vehicle for economic activity to provide for the conditions of material existence. However, the inherent limitations of this common viewpoint become readily apparent when one reflects that nature itself already provides the basic conditions for material existence. Therefore, providing such conditions can hardly be the fundamental purpose of human society, for society then becomes redundant at best and possibly harmful.

Of course, economic activity is an important part of society's function since a certain level of material well-being and stability provides opportunities for spiritual growth. A social milieu in which large segments of the population are starving or living in other such extreme conditions is hardly a milieu which is favourable to the full and adequate spiritual development of its members, although spiritual growth can take place under such conditions. Also, a just, well-organized, and efficient economy can serve to free man, at least partially, from boring and excessive labour and thus provide time for higher intellectual and artistic pursuits.

Another spiritual implication of economic activity is that it requires intense human interaction and therefore provides many of the challenges and opportunities necessary to stimulate spiritual growth among its participants. It is in the market place that questions of justice, compassion, honesty, trust, and self-sacrifice become living reality and not just abstract philosophy. We therefore cannot safely neglect the 'outer' dimension of society in the name of our basic preoccupation with spiritual growth. Indeed, if the prevailing structures and behavioural norms of society are such as to inhibit or discourage spiritual growth, the individual will be impeded in his personal growth process. The occasional moral hero will succeed in spiritualizing his life against all odds, but the vast majority will eventually succumb to the prevailing negative influences.

Also, one of the important characteristics of personal spiritual maturity is a highly developed social conscience. The spiritually-minded individual has become intensely aware of the many ways he depends on society and has a keen sense of social obligation. Society thus benefits from the spiritualized individuals within its fold because of the unselfish quality of their service to the collectivity, and because their particular talents and capacities are relatively well-developed. At the same time, the individual spiritual seeker's relative dependence on society fosters his humility, and the energy and effort he contributes towards the solution of social problems helps prevent the (necessary) attention he gives to his inner spiritual struggles from leading to an unhealthy degree of self-preoccupation. Bahá'u'lláh has said that the individual in the pursuit of spirituality should be anxiously concerned with the needs of the society in which he lives and that "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."⁷⁸

78. *Gleanings*, p. 215.

2. Unity

IN OUR DISCUSSION OF the principles governing individual spiritual growth, we have seen that certain attitudes and behaviour patterns are conducive to spiritual growth whereas others are not. In the same way, certain social norms and types of social structures are conducive to the spiritual growth process whereas others are not. One of the fundamental features of the Bahá'í Faith is that its teachings include detailed prescriptions regarding social structures and their relationship to spiritual growth. Broadly speaking, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that those social and economic structures which favour co-operation and unity are conducive to the spiritual growth process while those structures based on competition, conflict, power-seeking, and dominance-seeking hierarchies are destructive to the growth process. The unity taught by Bahá'u'lláh is not simply a formal juxtaposition of disparate parts, but an organic unity based on a spiritual quality of relationship between groups and among individuals working within a given group. Nor is it a uniformity or homogeneity, but a "unity in diversity," a unity in which the particular qualities of the co-operating components are respected in a way that enables these qualities to contribute to the unity of the whole rather than detracting from it as so often happens in the case of social structures based on competition and dominance-seeking.

The Bahá'í focus on unity, and the attention which the Bahá'í Writings give to the social and collective dimension of the spiritual growth process probably represent the most original contributions of the Bahá'í Faith to the collective spiritual consciousness of mankind, for the individual dimension of the spiritual growth process has been a part of every revealed religion. Indeed, some revelations, for example those of Jesus and Buddha, have focused almost entirely on the individual. Other revelations, such as those of Moses and Muhammad, have treated the social dimension to a greater degree, giving laws governing the behaviour of groups as well as that of individuals. However, in the case of the Bahá'í Faith, we see for perhaps the first time in religious history the spiritual growth process in its full collective dimension.

3. Social Evolution; World Order

IN THE BAHÁ'Í VIEW, the whole of mankind constitutes an organic unit which has undergone a collective growth process similar to that of the individual. Just as the individual achieves his maturity in stages, gradually developing his abilities and enlarging the scope of his knowledge and understanding, so mankind has passed through different stages in the as yet unfinished process of achieving its collective maturity. According to Bahá'u'lláh, each occurrence of revelation has enabled mankind to achieve some particular step forward in its growth process. Of course, every revelation has contributed in a general way to man kind's spiritual awareness by restating and elaborating those eternal spiritual truths which are the very basis of human existence. But Bahá'u'lláh affirms that, besides this general and universal function common to all revelations, there is a specific function by which each revelation plays its particular and unique role in the spiritual growth process. Here are some of the ways that these two dimensions of revelation are described in the Bahá'í Writings:

The divine religions embody two kinds of ordinances. First those which constitute essential or spiritual teachings of the Word of God. These are faith in God, the acquirement of the virtues which characterize perfect manhood,

praiseworthy moralities, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences; in brief the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics. This is the fundamental aspect of the religion of God and this is of the highest importance because knowledge of God is the fundamental requirement of man. . . . This is the essential foundation of all the divine religions, the reality itself, common to all. . . .

Secondly: Laws and ordinances which are temporary and non-essential. These concern human transactions and relations. They are accidental and subject to change according to the exigencies of time and place.⁷⁹

God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.⁸⁰

These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity . . . If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. . . .

The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.⁸¹

Bahá'ulláh associates His "particular revelation" with the transition from adolescence to adulthood in the collective life of mankind. He affirms that the social history of mankind from its primitive beginnings in the formation of small social groups until the present day represents the stages of infancy, childhood, and adolescence of mankind. Mankind now stands poised on the brink of maturity, and the current turbulence and strife in the world are analogous to the turbulence of the ultimate stages of preadulthood in the life of the individual.

The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood.⁸²

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'ulláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. . . . Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. . . . It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. . . .

It represents the consummation of human evolution—an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations.

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'ulláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.⁸³

Because Bahá'ulláh conceived His fundamental mission to be that of realizing world unity, His teachings contain detailed proposals for the establishment of institutions and social forms conducive to that end. For example, He proposes the establishment of a world legislature and a world court having final jurisdiction in all disputes between nations. He proposes the adoption of a universal auxiliary language, of universal obligatory education, of the principle of equality of the sexes, and of an economic system which would eliminate the extremes of poverty and wealth. All of these institutions and principles He sees as essential to building a society that encourages and promotes the full spiritual growth of its members.

The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and world culture—all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era—should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.⁸⁴

Bahá'u'lláh gave the term ‘world order’ to the new system He envisaged. Bahá'ís believe that the establishment of this new world order is ultimately the only answer to the quest for spiritual growth. For if the stability, harmony, and morally progressive character of human society are not assured, the individual's goal of achieving spiritual development will be frustrated and his basic purpose in life thereby undermined.

The change in focus which results from this global perspective on the spiritual growth process is succinctly and clearly expressed by Shoghi Effendi:

. . . the object of life to a Bahá'í is to promote the oneness of mankind. The whole object of our lives is bound up with the lives of all human beings; not a personal salvation we are seeking, but a universal one. . . . Our aim is to produce a world civilization which will in turn react on the character of the individual. It is, in a way, the inverse of Christianity which started with the individual unit and through it reached out to the conglomerate life of men.⁸⁵

79. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Faith For Every Man* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972), p. 43.

80. *Gleanings*, pp. 79-80.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52.

82. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing trust, 1955), p. 202.

83. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

85. Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *The Spiritual Revolution* (Thornhill, Ontario: Canadian Bahá'í Community, 1974), p. 9.

4. The Bahá'í Community

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE and behavioural norms of present-day society are largely those we have inherited from the past. For the most part, they have not been consciously chosen by the collectivity through some deliberate process, but rather have evolved in response to various temporary and sometimes contradictory exigencies. They most certainly have not been chosen according to the criterion of fostering spiritual growth.

Especially in the industrialized West, but even in more technologically primitive societies, the currently existing social forms are largely based on competition and on dominance-seeking hierarchies. Such social forms tend to promote disunity, conflict, aggressive behaviour, power-seeking behaviour, and excessive preoccupation with purely material success. The following passage from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh powerfully conveys the destructive effects mankind has suffered as a result of these social forms and behaviour patterns:

And amongst the realms of unity is the unity of rank and station. It redoundeth to the exaltation of the Cause, glorifying it among all peoples. Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world hath been laid waste. It hath become desolate. Those who have quaffed from the ocean of divine utterance and fixed their gaze upon the Realm of Glory should regard themselves as being on the same level as the others and in the same station. Were this matter to be definitely established and conclusively demonstrated through the power and might of God, the world would become as the Abhá Paradise.

Indeed, man is noble, inasmuch as each one is a repository of the sign of God. Nevertheless, to regard oneself as superior in knowledge, learning or virtue, or to exalt oneself or seek preference, is a grievous transgression. Great is the blessedness of those who are adorned with the ornament of this unity and have been graciously confirmed by God.⁸⁶

Given Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation that unity is the necessary social basis for spiritual growth, it follows that we are now living in a society which is largely indifferent and in many ways detrimental to the spiritual growth process. Indeed, the historical events of the twentieth century and the moral quality of our day to day lives provide powerful confirmations of this hypothesis. The social structures of present-day society are vestiges of past forms which may

have been helpful in stimulating certain kinds of growth during previous stages of mankind's spiritual evolution but which have now outlived their usefulness.

This situation obviously poses a deep problem to any individual who is serious in his pursuit of spiritual growth. Even if one accepts Bahá'u'lláh's model of world order and is willing to strive to bring it about as the best hope for mankind, how is one to pursue successfully the spiritual growth process in a milieu that is so unconcerned with it?

The answer the Bahá'í Faith offers to this dilemma is the Bahá'í community. Bahá'u'lláh has not only offered a vision and a hope for the future, He has established a living community which already functions on the basis of the unity principles. This community is conceived as a prototype or an embryo of the future world society. By relating properly to this community and participating in it, the individual finds himself capable of developing his spiritual capacities in a significant way, even if the enveloping society-at-large remains indifferent to the growth process. Bahá'ís view the Bahá'í community established by Bahá'u'lláh as a precious and necessary tool for this transition period from the old to the new social order. At the same time, the growth and development of the Bahá'í community are part of the progressive establishment of the world order itself. Moreover, the Bahá'í community functions as an entity and as a constructive force within the larger community to stimulate the movement of society as a whole towards unity.

The individual's participation in the Bahá'í community is not passive. There is no priesthood, clergy, or ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Bahá'í Faith. Spiritual growth is a self-initiated, self-responsible process, and the individual's participation in the Bahá'í community in no way diminishes his responsibility for his personal development.

In order to understand more clearly how participation in the Bahá'í community fosters spiritual development, let us focus for a moment on the spiritually negative features of modern-day society. It is in the contrast between the Bahá'í community, based on unity and co-operation, and the larger society based on competition and dominance-seeking, that we can gain insight into the interactive dimension of the spiritual growth process.

It is the essence of the relationship between the individual and the society to which he belongs that the individual is strongly motivated to succeed according to the prevailing norms of success in the given society. Security, status, material well-being, social acceptance, and approval are the main things the individual seeks from society, and success in satisfying societal norms yields these rewards. Society wants the individual's productive effort, his collaboration and support in the realization of collective goals. Society applies both incentives and threats to induce the individual to accept social norms and goals.

To say that an individual accepts the norms and goals of a society means that he uses his understanding capacity to learn the skills necessary for success. He must also cultivate those emotional patterns, attitudes, and aspirations which characterize socially successful individuals in the given society. Finally, he must act in a way conducive to success. Such a pattern of behaviour will involve producing certain goods or services as well as a certain kind of relationship with other members of the society.

The norms of modern industrialized society largely revolve around material success through competition, dominance-seeking and power-seeking. The goal is usually a high level of economic productivity coupled with a high ranking and status in the social hierarchy. To succeed, the individual must learn those skills and techniques which enable him to best others in competitive struggle and to obtain power over them. He must learn how to manipulate, control, and dominate others. The knowledge which is useful to these ends is often diametrically opposed to the kind of knowledge involved in spiritual growth. We have earlier seen that the self-knowledge which is equivalent to the knowledge of God amounts to knowing how to submit to the will of God: The individual must learn how to be the conscious instrument of a force that is his moral and spiritual superior. Thus, virtually all the skills he develops in the pursuit of social success in a power-oriented society will be useless and, in fact, detrimental to his spiritual growth. The spiritually sensitive individual in modern society is therefore faced with a dilemma. He will either become a split personality, trying to be spiritual part of the time and to manipulate others for the remainder, or else he will ultimately have to choose between the two goals of social success and spiritual progress.⁸⁷

It is not only the development of the knowing capacity that is falsified by the pursuit of success in competition, but the heart's feeling capacity as well. One must continually give priority to one's own needs and desires and become increasingly insensitive to the needs of others. Genuine compassion towards and love for other individuals undermines the will to dominate because such empathetic emotions lead one to identify with and to experience the feelings of the dominated one.

The giving and receiving of love is a reciprocal or symmetric relationship. It is a positive and satisfying experience for both parties. Dominance, however, is asymmetrical, yielding positive emotions and a sense of exhilaration for the dominant one, but generally negative, depressed, angry and self-deprecating emotions for the one dominated. It is therefore logically and psychologically impossible to seek to dominate someone whom we genuinely love, since the empathetic emotions of love allow us to feel the unpleasant emotions of being dominated,

and this experience undermines our willingness to become the conscious agent of producing such negative emotions in one we love and respect.

In other words, we cannot be successful in competitive struggle with others without hurting them, and we cannot deliberately hurt others if we love them. It is thus easy to see how a person who dedicates himself to success in competitive struggle with others will increasingly become alienated both from himself and from others. His heart will become atrophied and hard. The development of his feeling capacity will be stunted and distorted.

The will capacity is also misused in the pursuit of power and dominance. The force of the will is turned outward towards others and used against them rather than being turned inward towards self-mastery and self-dominance. The will is used to oppose others, to limit their field of action, rather than being applied to develop the internal capacities of the self in the pursuit of spirituality and excellence.

Excellence represents self-development, the flowering of the self's capacities and qualities. It involves comparisons between our performance at different instances and under various circumstances (so-called 'self-competition'). But competition and power-seeking are based on comparisons with the performance of others. Such comparisons usually lead either to mediocrity, arrogance, undeveloped potential and unrealistically low, self-expectations or else to depression, jealousy, aggressive behaviour and unrealistically high self-expectations, depending on the capacities of those with whom we choose to compare ourselves. Neither of these is conducive to excellence.

In pursuing power, we tend to manipulate others, to use them as means to our ends. This is the very opposite of serving others and of acting towards them in such a way as to contribute to their spiritual advancement—the proper, God-intended expression of the will in action. In fact, unselfish service to society and true self-development go hand-in-hand, for a high degree of development makes us secure in our identity. It gives us inner peace and self-confidence. Moreover, we have more to give others, and our service is therefore more valuable and more effective.

Thus, spirituality and the pursuit of excellence reinforce each other while power struggle and competition are inimical to both. The pursuit of dominance may stimulate some development on the part of the "winners," but such development is often at the expense of others and of society as a whole. And even for the winners, it frequently produces an unstable, artificial, and unbalanced kind of development.

A society based on unity, co-operation and mutual encouragement allows everyone to pursue spirituality and excellence while contributing significantly to the society itself. Just as love is satisfactory to both giver and receiver, so unity is beneficial both to society and to the individual members of the society. Such is the interactive dimension of the spiritual growth process.

Unity, co-operation, and mutuality constitute the norms and goals of the Bahá'í community and form the basis of its institutions. Therefore, all the spiritual benefits which derive from a society based on unity principles accrue to those who participate in the Bahá'í community. There is, first of all, the association with people who are also committed to the process of self-aware, self-initiated spiritual growth. Since no two people have exactly the same experiences or have attained to an identical level of development in all areas of their lives, the individual participant receives much stimulation and help from others. When facing a spiritual crisis in his personal life, he can usually find those who have already faced a similar crisis and can give helpful advice and loving encouragement. He therefore overcomes many difficulties which, under other circumstances, might have discouraged him to such an extent that he would have abandoned the struggle for spiritual growth. He consequently attains a much higher level of development than would have been the case had he been deprived of such helpful associations and fellowship.

At the same time, the mutuality and reciprocal nature of association based on unity means that the relationship with the community is not unidirectional: the individual is not a passive recipient of spiritual advice from experts, but has opportunities to contribute to the growth of others and of the community. His own qualities, experiences, and opinions are respected and valued by others. He is constantly being called upon to sacrifice purely selfish interests in the path of service. This acts as a check on pride and arrogance. Since sincerely motivated service to others is the real fruit of the spiritual growth process, the individual is provided almost daily with concrete situations which enable him better to evaluate the level of spiritual development he has attained.

The spiritual seeker in contemplative isolation can easily fall victim to the subtle pitfall of spiritual pride. Preoccupied with his perception of his internal mental processes, he can quickly acquire the self-generated illusion that he has reached a high degree of spiritual development. Constant and vigorous participation in a hard-working community can help to dispel such conceits.

Participation in the Bahá'í community enables one to acquire certain specific skills that cannot be easily acquired elsewhere. For example, the basis of group decision-making in the Bahá'í Faith is consultation, a process involving a frank but loving expression of views by those involved on a basis of absolute equality. Consultation represents a subtle and multifaceted spiritual process, and time and effort are required to perfect it. Similarly, the electoral

processes in the Bahá'í community involve many unique aspects which will not be discussed in the framework of this paper.

Another important dimension of the Bahá'í community is its diversity and universality. One is called upon to associate intimately with people of all social, cultural, and racial backgrounds. In society at large, our associations tend to be based on homogeneity: We associate with people with whom we feel the most comfortable. If most of our associations are on this basis, it will be difficult for us to discover our subtle prejudices and illusory self-concepts. Our friends will be those who are congruent with the false as well as the true aspects of our personality. The immense diversity within the Bahá'í community makes the discovery of prejudice and self-deceit much easier.

Thus, the Bahá'í Faith views the spiritual growth process as both collective and individual. The collective dimension involves the principles by which human society can be properly structured and ordered so as to optimize spiritual and material well-being and provide a healthy growth milieu for all individuals within it. The individual bears the primary responsibility for prosecuting his own growth process and for working to create a unified and healthy social milieu for everyone. This involves working towards the establishment of world unity. In particular, it involves active participation in the ongoing life of the Bahá'í community which, though forming only a part of society as a whole, already functions on the basis of the unity principles and seeks to implement them progressively in society.

86. Quoted in a letter from the Universal House of Justice published in *Bahá'í Canada*, June-July 1978, p. 3.

87. Success in the pursuit of dominance must be distinguished from success in the pursuit of excellence. Striving for excellence is highly encouraged in the Bahá'í Writings. That the two pursuits are different, and that competitive struggle with others is not necessary to attain excellence, are important spiritual and psychological insights.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

IN THE BAHÁ'Í CONCEPTION, spirituality is the process of the full, adequate, proper, and harmonious development of the spiritual capacities of each human being and of the collectivity of human beings. These spiritual capacities are capacities of a nonphysical, indivisible and eternally lasting entity called the soul. The soul of each individual, with its particular characteristics, is formed at the moment of the conception of the physical body. The process of spiritual development is eternal, continuing in other dimensions of existence after the death of the physical body. The body and its physical capacities serve as instruments for this process of spiritual growth during the period of earthly life when the body and soul are linked together.

All of man's initially given capacities, both physical and spiritual, are good and potentially helpful to the spiritual growth process. However, there is a certain tension between the body's physical needs and the metaphysical needs of the soul. Physical needs and desires must therefore be disciplined (not suppressed) if they are to contribute to the process of spiritual development in an effective way. Through the misuse or improper development of his initially given capacities, man can acquire unnatural or inordinate capacities and needs inimical to the spiritual growth process.

Among the basic spiritual capacities to be developed are the understanding or knowing capacity, the heart or feeling capacity, and the will, which represents the capacity to initiate and sustain action. The beginning stage of the process of spiritual development in childhood is one in which the individual is primarily the passive recipient of an educational process initiated by others. As the individual attains the full development of his physical capacities in adolescence, he becomes the active and self-responsible agent of his own growth process.

The goal of the development of the knowing capacity is the attainment of truth, which means that which is in conformity with reality. The ultimate reality to be known is God, and the highest form of knowledge is the knowledge of Him. God is the self-aware and intelligent force (Creator) responsible for man and his development. This knowledge of God takes the form of a particular kind of self-knowledge which enables the individual to become a conscious, willing, and intelligent instrument for God and for his purposes.

The goal of the development of the heart capacity is love. Love represents the energy necessary to pursue the goal of spiritual development. It is experienced as a strong attraction for and attachment to God and the laws and principles He has established. It also expresses itself as an attraction to others and in particular to the spiritual

potential they have as beings like ourselves. Love thereby creates within us the desire to become instruments for the growth process of others.

The goal of the development of the will capacity is service to God, to others, and to ourselves. Service is realized by a certain kind of intentionality (good will) which is dramatized through appropriate action (good works). All of these basic capacities must be developed systematically and concomitantly, or else false or improper development (unspirituality) will result.

Our condition during the period of earthly life is one in which we have direct access to material reality but only indirect access to spiritual reality. The proper relationship to God is therefore established by means of recognizing and accepting the Manifestations or prophetic figures Who are superhuman beings sent by God for the purpose of educating and instructing mankind. These Manifestations are the link between the visible world of material reality and the invisible, but ultimately more real world of spiritual reality. Acceptance of the Manifestations and obedience to the laws They reveal are seen to constitute an essential prerequisite for the successful prosecution of the spiritual growth process.

The human race constitutes an organic unit whose fundamental component is the individual. Mankind undergoes a collective spiritual evolution analogous to the individual's own growth process. The periodic appearance of a Manifestation of God is the motive force of this process of social evolution. Human society is currently at the stage of the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood or maturity. The practical expression of this yet-to-be-achieved maturity is a unified world society based on a world government, the elimination of prejudice and war, and the establishment of justice and harmony among the nations and peoples of the world. The particular mission of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is to provide the basis for this new world order and the moral impetus to effect this transition in the collective life of mankind. Relating effectively to this present stage of society's evolution is essential to the successful prosecution of the spiritual growth process in our individual lives. Participation in the world-wide Bahá'í community is especially helpful in this regard.

Such, in its barest outlines, is the process of individual and collective spiritual growth as found in the Bahá'í Writings. Undoubtedly, what remains to be discovered and understood in the vast revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is infinitely greater than what we can now understand and greater still than what we have been able to discuss in the present article. But the only intelligent response to this perception of our relative ignorance is not to wait passively until such future time as these deeper implications will have become evident, but rather to act vigorously and decisively on the basis of our limited understanding. Indeed, without such a response to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, we may never arrive at the point where we will be able to penetrate the more subtle and deeper dimensions of the spiritual growth process.

No true knowledge is purely intellectual, but spiritual knowledge is unique in the breadth of its experiential dimension: it must be lived to become part of us. Nowhere does this truth appear more clearly than in the succinct and powerful coda to Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words:

I bear witness, O friends! that the favour is complete, the argument fulfilled, the proof manifest and the evidence established. Let it now be seen what your endeavours in the path of detachment will reveal.⁸⁸

88. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954), pp. 51-52.