

Knowledge, Volition, and Action

The Steps to Spiritual Transformation

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Bahá'í Publishing Trust
Wilmette, Illinois 60091

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Fifth Printing 1980

ISBN 0-87743-071-3

Printed in United States of America

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Introduction

Bahá'u'lláh has said that religion is dying out in every land.¹ One of the most striking evidences of the truth of that statement is the abdication of responsibility for one's own life on the part of an ever-increasing number of people. To be no longer in charge of determining one's destiny is to adopt a passive attitude towards life—an attitude devoid of self-discipline, initiative, volition, and attainment. The inevitable consequence is a yielding to the pressures of the old order and conformity to behavior patterns which hasten its downfall.

Religion dies out when man forgets God's purpose for him. Without a sense of that purpose, there can be no vision of spiritual destiny, no motivation to live in the present in ways that guarantee a spiritual life in the future, no reason to resist the corrupting temptations of a collapsing civilization. The rebirth of religion, therefore, means an infusion of God's purpose for man into the affairs of men. Fundamentally, this is what the Bahá'í Faith does as it spreads throughout the world; it provides the means through which each individual follower of Bahá'u'lláh can gain knowledge of God's purpose for man in this day and, in collaboration with all of the Bahá'ís throughout the world, translate that purpose into action which will ultimately lead us to the Most Great Peace.

¹ *"The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land"* Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 200.

A true Bahá'í cannot be passive about his Faith. Bahá'u'lláh states that *"It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action."*¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*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 so 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. For in this holy Dispensation, the crowning glory of bygone ages, and cycles, true Faith is no mere acknowledgment of the Unity of God, but the living of a life that will manifest all the perfections and virtues implied in such belief.*²

If we are serious about becoming true Bahá'ís, if this is one of our most important objectives, then we must have knowledge of God's purpose for man, the will to plan our lives around it, and the capacity to act. Without knowledge, volition, and action, no spiritual transformation can occur, for 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us:

*The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming there is no execution or accomplishment.*³

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 250.

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *The Bahá'í World, Bahá'í Year Book, 1925–1926*, vol. 1, p. 12.

³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 157; and *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 101.

1. Knowledge of God's purpose for man

To become actively engaged in directing the spiritual transformation of our own lives, conscious knowledge of God's purpose for man is essential. The transformation process is carried forward by action and reaction based on this knowledge. Since many of our habits and natural tendencies may be more congruent with patterns of the old world order than with the new, and may directly contravene Bahá'í law, many of our actions and reactions will require deliberate and conscious effort to apply this knowledge. Conscious knowledge of God's purpose for man provides a basis for making decisions that lead to spiritual growth and for choosing courses of action which consolidate the spiritual foundations of our lives.

We find the explanation of God's purpose for man in this Age in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'u'lláh declares that we were created to know and to love God and that we have been endowed with the capacity to reflect every one of the names and attributes of God.¹ He further states that we were "*created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.*"² 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that our purpose in life is to acquire virtues³—the attributes of God translated into human behavior. Shoghi Effendi confirms that the object of

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 65.

² *idem*, p. 215.

³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 177.

our lives should be “to promote the oneness of mankind.”¹ Indeed, he says that the oneness of mankind is the pivot around which all of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings revolve.²

Armed with a conscious knowledge of God's purpose for man,³ it is possible for us to take a positive and active role in determining our own spiritual destinies. The quality and effectiveness of this role will be dependent upon the depth of our knowledge and our capacity to make the decision to act and then to act.

¹ Shoghi Effendi, in Rúhíyyih Khánum, *The Priceless Pearl*, pp. 161 & 376.

² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 42.

³ For a fuller discussion of God's purpose for man, see Daniel C. Jordan, *The Meaning of Deepening*.

2. The role of volition in spiritual transformation

Taking charge of our spiritual destinies—directing the process of becoming our true selves—cannot, in the last analysis, be delegated to others. Coming to a clear realization of that fact is essential to spiritual transformation. Bahá'u'lláh has written:

*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. Your own acts testify to this truth.*¹

When this realization is made and fully accepted, we will stop trying to find excuses for our lack of direction or action and cease hunting for people or conditions on which to lay the blame for dissatisfaction with our spiritual state. Energy need no longer be put into these fruitless activities.

Parents, educators, counselors, and therapists, disregarding verification in experience, find it difficult to accept that mere knowledge of what we should do will not enable us actually to do it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that knowledge alone does not produce appropriate action:

Mere knowledge of principles is not sufficient. We all know and admit that justice is good but there is

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 149.

*need of volition and action to carry out and manifest it. For example, we might think it good to build a church but simply thinking of it as a good thing will not help its erection. The ways and means must be provided; we must will to build it and then proceed with the construction.*¹

A pilgrim to ‘Akká reports that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained the relationship between knowledge and will in this way:

*Will is the centre or focus of human understanding. We must will to know God, just as we must will in order to possess the life He has given us. The human will must be subdued and trained into the Will of God. It is a great power to have a strong will, but a greater power to give that will to God. The will is what we do, the understanding is what we know. Will and understanding must be one in the Cause of God. Intention brings attainment.*²

The capacity to will something—volition—is a reflection of the “ideal and heavenly force” within man:

*Nature is without volition and acts perforce whereas man possesses a mighty will. ... it is evident that man is more noble and superior; that in him there is an ideal power surpassing nature. He has consciousness, volition, memory, intelligent power, divine attributes and virtues of which nature is completely deprived, bereft ... therefore man is higher and nobler by reason of the ideal and heavenly force latent and manifest in him.*³

What are some of the tangible manifestations of the will at work? It is important for us to know what they are so that when we are experiencing them we may have the confirmation that we are making use of that “ideal and heavenly force” in accordance with God’s purpose for man.

¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 121; *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 26.

² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in Julia M. Grundy, *Ten Days in the Light of Acca*, p. 31.

³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 178; and *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 70.

Setting goals

Among the most important of the tangible manifestations of volition is setting goals for oneself—“high resolves and noble purposes”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to them:

*... man’s supreme honor and real happiness lie in self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral quality, in immaculacy of mind.*¹

It is obvious that if no goals are set, there is nothing around which to organize our behavior. Being without goals, without resolve, betrays a totally passive orientation to our Faith. The lack of goals precludes fighting our own “spiritual battles”; it precludes spiritual transformation; ultimately, it frustrates God’s purpose for man.²

Perseverance and patience

Striving is another tangible manifestation of the will at work, for practicing virtues requires effort. Without practice, habits cannot be formed; and it is the formation of spiritual habits which consolidates spiritual transformation. Bahá’u’lláh tells us to:

*Strive that ye may be enabled to manifest to the peoples of the earth the signs of God, and to mirror forth His commandments.*³

Striving for the sake of striving, however, cannot establish spiritual habits; rather, we must strive for a specific goal until it is achieved. This type of striving—perseverance—is a basic manifestation of volition. It is

¹ ‘Abdul-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 19.

² The Universal House of Justice, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986*, pp. 42–43; and *Wellspring of Guidance*, pp. 37–38, links fighting one’s own “spiritual battles” with Shoghi Effendi’s admonition that “‘One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh.’”

³ Bahá’u’lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26.

one of the major characteristics required if God's purpose for man is to be reflected in our lives:

*The companions of God are, in this day, the lump that must leaven the peoples of the world. They must show forth such trustworthiness, such truthfulness and perseverance, such deeds and character that all mankind may profit by their example.*¹

Persevering means more than keeping at something for a certain amount of time; it means not giving up in the face of difficulties and trials that may be encountered along the way. Almost anything worthy of achievement will require perseverance through hardships. The capacity to pursue an objective even in the face of great hardships is another facet of volition:

*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.*²

In the following passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá particularizes the role of endeavor and perseverance in achieving world peace:

A few, unaware of the power latent in human endeavor, consider this matter as highly impracticable, nay even beyond the scope of man's utmost efforts. Such is not the case, however. On the contrary, thanks to the unfailing grace of God, the loving-kindness of His favored ones, the unrivaled endeavors of wise and capable souls, and the thoughts and ideas of the peerless leaders of this age, nothing whatsoever can be regarded as unattainable. Endeavor, ceaseless endeavor, is required. Nothing short of an indomitable determination can possibly achieve it. Many a cause which past ages

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 19.

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. II, p. 265.

*have regarded as purely visionary, yet in this day has become most easy and practicable. Why should this most great and lofty Cause—the day-star of the firmament of true civilization and the cause of the glory, the advancement, the well-being and the success of all humanity—be regarded as impossible of achievement? Surely the day will come when its beauteous light shall shed illumination upon the assemblage of man.*¹

Responding to hardships with patience is yet another manifestation of the will in operation:

*Whosoever, O my Lord, is impatient in the tribulations befalling him in Thy path, hath not drunk of the cup of Thy love nor tasted of the sweetness of Thy remembrance.*²

Control of action and resisting temptation

Striving to do certain things is not the only action which requires volition and self-discipline. Refusal to do other things, or ceasing to do them, is a significant manifestation of volition. Indeed, man's capacity to resist temptation or to discontinue vices distinguishes him from the animal. This reflection of volition marks him as a spiritual being:

*Nature is without volition and acts perforce whereas man possesses a mighty will. ... Man can voluntarily discontinue vices, nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts.*³

*We, verily, have commanded you to refuse the dictates of your evil passions and corrupt desires, and not to transgress the bounds which the Pen of the Most High hath fixed, for these are the breath of life unto all created things.*⁴

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 66–67.

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 136.

³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 178; and *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 70.

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 331.

In essence, then, volition has two fundamental manifestations or functions in spiritual transformation. One is striving and persevering to achieve specific goals that are congruent with God's purpose for man. The other is resisting temptation, discontinuing vices, and controlling impulses and desires that are unspiritual. Volition—will—is needed if we are to direct our lives in ways that will enable us to acquire virtues and, simultaneously, to resist all temptations to break Bahá'í laws.

3. The role of self-disciplined action in spiritual transformation

Bahá'u'lláh has stated that *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.”*¹ This translation will depend upon *“converting satanic strength”* into *“heavenly power.”*² It is deeds—action—and not words that count. Spiritual transformation is not possible without action. Thought, prayer, meditation, and study of the sacred scriptures are all very important; but if no spiritual goals are set and no action is taken to achieve them, no spiritual transformation will take place. The reality of spiritual attributes can be perceived only in action. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*Love manifests its reality in deeds, not only in words—these alone are without effect. In order that love may manifest its power there must be an object, an instrument, a motive.*³

*The wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice.*⁴

Not any action will do; whatever action we decide upon must reflect God’s will and facilitate achievement

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 250.

² idem, p. 200.

³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 35.

⁴ idem, p. 16.

of His purpose for man. Hence, action must be congruent with knowledge of God's purpose and will require submission of the human will to the will of God. Only then can action result in spiritual transformation.

Once action is initiated, we can very easily become lost in the action itself, thereby becoming inattentive to whether it continues to express God's purpose for man. We therefore need to make an ongoing assessment of our actions to see whether they conform to the will of God and, if they do not, to modify them by conscious and deliberate effort;

O SON OF BEING!

Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.¹

Two important capacities are prerequisite to our being in charge of our spiritual destinies. One of these is the capacity to see a discrepancy between our actions and God's purpose for man. The other is the ability to modify our actions to make them reflect this purpose. This is where self-discipline, the ability to take oneself in hand and correct a situation, plays a critical role.

It is the spiritual responsibility and obligation of each Bahá'í to develop this type of self-discipline. Our fellow believers cannot provide us with it, nor can the administrative institutions of the Faith develop spiritual qualities for us, though they can guide and encourage us as individuals. If we deviate greatly from God's purpose for man in a way that affects the Bahá'í community, Bahá'í institutions will help to correct the situation. Nevertheless, only the individual can decide to deal with the inner source of a problem in his own spiritual life.

Persevering in our efforts to act in accordance with God's purpose for man, without excessive dependence on

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Arabic No. 31, p. 11.

others or on Bahá'í institutions, has important consequences for the quality of our lives. Such self-disciplined action brings with it a sense of self-worth. It also builds confidence in our capacity to fight our own "*spiritual battles*".

Handling our own spiritual struggles is an important way of strengthening ourselves and, at the same time, of helping the Faith. Spiritual Assemblies can counsel individuals and help to resolve serious problems. But they cannot fight our spiritual battles for us. When we ask Bahá'í institutions to do this, we are diverting their energies away from their appointed tasks. The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í World Community, has written that "all can pray" and "fight their own spiritual battles" and that if we do it will help us to grow.¹

Fighting our own "spiritual battles" also increases our ability, through the dynamic force of example, to assist others to take charge of their own processes of transformation. Perhaps the most important consequence of such perseverance is the effect it has upon our relationships with others. It helps us to become less possessive, exploitative, manipulative, and dependent, and freer to love and to serve. Through loving and serving we become, in turn, more worthy of love; and the love we attract helps to confirm and reinforce all of our efforts at self-discipline. Thus, a cycle of spiritual transformation is set in motion, which, when sustained by a continual immersion in the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's words and an active participation in the building of the new World Order, guarantees continued spiritual growth and development.

O CHILDREN OF ADAM!

Holy words and pure and goodly deeds ascend unto the heaven of celestial glory. Strive that your deeds may be cleansed from the dust of self and hypocrisy

¹ The Universal House of Justice, September 1964, *Messages from The Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, p. 43; and *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 38.

*and find favor at the court of glory; for ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored One, accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity. This is the day-star of wisdom and of divine mystery that hath shone above the horizon of the divine will. Blessed are they that turn thereunto.*¹

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Persian No. 69, p. 46.

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