

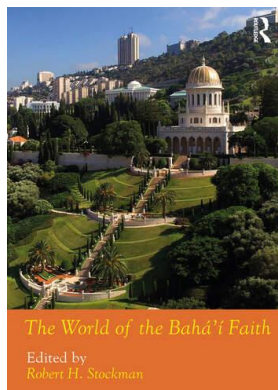
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## **The World of the Bahá'í Faith**

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## **Bahá'í Spirituality and Spiritual Practices**

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# BAHÁ'Í SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

*Christopher White*

## Introduction

In any survey of the Bahá'í community, it should not be forgotten that the Bahá'í Faith is fundamentally about a spiritual transformation pursued through practices of piety that include prayer, meditation, fasting, sacrificial service, and other forms of worship. Bahá'í scriptures that examine the process of spiritual transformation are numerous, covering both the inner work of journeying from self to God and the outer aspects of this process. 'Nearness to God is possible through devotion to Him, through entrance into the Kingdom and service to humanity,' 'Abdu'l-Bahá states; 'it is attained by unity with mankind and through loving-kindness to all; it is dependent upon investigation of truth, acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, service in the cause of universal peace and personal sanctification' (*Promulgation* 204–205). This passage calls attention to the range of attitudes and practices Bahá'ís need to cultivate—and in particular that the mystical path is always connected to serving others and building unity across lines of difference. The many dimensions of Bahá'í spirituality, both mystical and practical, inner and outer, are examined in several chapters in this volume, including 'Mysticism' and 'Devotional life'. (An additional chapter on consultation covers the relationship between the individual's spiritual path and how individuals grow through the deliberative practice Bahá'ís call consultation.) This chapter will focus more on how key Bahá'í devotional practices such as prayer, meditation, fasting, and daily scripture reading are conducted and how they contribute to the spiritual journey from self to God.

## Prayer: general comments

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of prayer to the Bahá'í Faith. While the requirements for prayer and other forms of worship are somewhat relaxed in comparison with the Islamic and the Bábí religions, the Bahá'í Faith upholds prayer and meditation as 'the best of [all human] conditions' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 202); as the source of the 'spiritual nourishment' needed for individual and social progress; and, because all human beings have been created to 'know and love' God, as one of the main ways to fulfil the purpose of human life (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives* 86–87). It comes as no surprise that daily prayer is required. Though Bahá'ís

can worship together in groups if they wish, there is only one prescribed congregational prayer (the prayer for the dead); prayer is generally considered an individual affair. Even the obligatory prayer, considered by Muslims to be more meritorious when said in congregation, is performed by Bahá'ís in private because it is in private that individuals can best focus their attention on their prayers and God. In general, then, Bahá'í teachings dwell on the interior aspects of praying—that is, on the importance of proper inner attitudes and dispositions. Human beings should pray to God because they want to express their love for Him or want to know and understand Him and His purpose for their lives, not because they fear His wrath or crave His grace.

Bahá'í teachings on prayer stress the importance of our inner intentions, especially inner feelings of sincerity, joy, and love. Reciting long prayers out of a sense of duty is discouraged. 'The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance', the Bahá'í scriptures state; 'its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved by God' (The Báb, *Selections* 77–78). Prolonged or lengthy prayers are not the ideal; prayers offered with joy and commitment are. After warning Bahá'ís not to let worship lead to pride or egotism, Bahá'u'lláh insists that 'should a person recite but a single verse from the Holy Writings in a spirit of joy and radiance, this would be better for him than reciting wearily all the Scriptures of God' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* para. 149). The point is similar: Simple, authentic prayers are best—not worship done out of social pressure, fear of God, or hope for a reward in this life or hereafter.

Bahá'í scriptures talk about prayer as a way to understand better and connect with the spiritual world, as a way to learn more about and follow more closely God's will, and as a way of overcoming our forgetfulness about both God and our spiritual nature. The path from self to God is sometimes described as a path of 'remembering'. To take one suggestive example, in the well-known Bahá'í collection *Prayers and Meditations* by Bahá'u'lláh, 'remember' and 'forget' and their variants appear 110 times in the prayers translated there by Shoghi Effendi. The word translated as 'remember' or alternately 'mention' of God is the Persian (and Arabic) term *dhikr*, a word well known to scholars of Islamic mysticism. For Muslim mystics or Sufis, *dhikr* stands for a range of spiritual practices intended to put believers in a constant state of divine awareness. *Dhikr* practices vary considerably, depending on the particular beliefs and practices of each Sufi order. In some orders, novices learn and repeat different formulae of divine names until the *dhikr* so permeates the student's being that he or she forgets everything else but God. *Dhikr* can be performed silently (*dhikr* of the heart) or out loud (*dhikr* of the tongue), in public or in private. God should be remembered at all times and in all places, for the believer who 'remembers God permanently is the true companion of God' (Schimmel 1975: 167–168). *Dhikr* in Islam can involve chanting, singing, and dancing. It seems that while many, if not most, of the specific Sufi *dhikr* practices were rejected or simplified in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, Bahá'u'lláh does retain the word *dhikr* to describe the discipline of worship. Prayer and other forms of worship, then, are practices of remembering God that bring on awareness of and gratitude towards God.

### **Obligatory prayer**

Though there are Bahá'í prayers for almost every occasion and for the cultivation of virtues such as patience, composure, and gratitude, there are three special obligatory prayers that have a unique place and status in the religion. The Bahá'í scriptures say these obligatory prayers are 'by their very nature of greater effectiveness' and 'endowed with a greater power than the non-obligatory ones' (Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Research Department, *Compilation 2:238*). Known colloquially as the short, medium, and long obligatory prayers, Bahá'ís must choose one of them

to perform each day. The short obligatory prayer is three sentences long and is said once a day anytime between noon and sunset. The medium-length prayer is fifteen sentences long and is said three times a day: morning, noon, and night. The long obligatory prayer is a few pages long and is said once a day at any time of day or night. Before performing any of the three obligatory prayers, Bahá'ís must rinse their hands and faces with water and turn to face the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh (which is located outside 'Akká, Israel). The medium and long obligatory prayers also incorporate simple bodily postures and gestures that accompany the verses. Preparing oneself for prayer by rinsing with water and facing in a certain direction are common practices of purification in world religions but are less known in the West.

What are some key themes in these important prayers? The short obligatory prayer captures important themes in a few sentences:

I bear witness O my God that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify at this moment to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

(*Bahá'í Prayers*, 4)

The first sentence of the prayer points to human nature as something divinely created and oriented towards understanding, loving, and worshipping God. ('Abdu'l-Bahá writes elsewhere that the impulse to pray is 'natural' to human beings.) The second sentence suggests a kind of paradoxical empowerment familiar to religious people worldwide—that when one stands humble before the divine, there is possible a surprising experience of empowerment, composure, and comfort. These same themes are repeated in the medium and long obligatory prayers as well.

The medium and the long obligatory prayers, however, incorporate several bodily postures and gestures. At different moments during these prayers, Bahá'ís, for example, will stand and reach up towards God, bend down, sit, or kneel and bow their heads to the ground. Bahá'í scriptures say these embodied acts are 'symbolic' aids that help believers 'fully concentrate when praying and meditating' (Research Department, *Compilation 2:237*). What might these postures and gestures symbolise? Perhaps a sense of humility is symbolised in a bow to the floor, an inner desire to feel pure is symbolised in the outer act of performing ablutions, a feeling of anticipating God's help is symbolised in an expectant gaze or upraised hands, or a sense of yearning is symbolised in a posture of reaching up towards God.

The Bahá'í Writings also point out that these acts aid concentration. The meanings of 'concentration' are interesting to ponder—'to bring or draw to a common centre or point of union; converge; direct toward one point; focus: to concentrate one's attention on a problem; to concentrate the rays of the sun with a lens' (dictionary.com). So these prayers, like ritual prayers in other traditions, coordinate body postures and spoken verses in order to pull attention together, facilitate concentration, and improve learning and memory. There is a kind of inner-outer circularity that is rehearsed in these prayers—one feels love towards God, one expresses that love by reaching out with one's hands, and finally that embodied action reinforces one's inner feeling. Recent scientific research in psychology and other fields has shown that the body plays a crucial role in shaping how we think, feel, and even believe.

### Repeating the Greatest Name of God

Bahá'ís also engage in a daily meditative practice of repeating the 'Greatest Name' of God, 'Alláh-u-Abhá' ('God is Most Glorious'), ninety-five times. Bahá'ís believe that God's Greatest

Name is *Bahá*, which means glory, splendour, light, brilliancy, beauty, excellence, goodness (Lambden 1993). There are several derivatives of the word *Bahá*, including *Abhá* (most glorious), *Alláh-u-Abhá* (God is the all-glorious), and *Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá* (O Thou Glory of Glories!), all of which are used in different ways in worship and prayer. The Greatest Name is a sacred word that 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells Bahá'ís to use regularly.

It should be fed upon by constant use in daily invocations, in trouble, under opposition, and should be the last word breathed. . . . It is the name of comfort, protection, happiness, illumination, love and unity. . . . The use of the Greatest Name and dependence upon it cause the soul to strip itself of the husks of mortality and to step forth free, reborn, a new creature.

(Lambden 1993)

The word and its derivatives appear thousands of times in different tablets and prayers. 'Alláh-u-Abhá' also is the Bahá'í greeting, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised Bahá'ís to hang calligraphy of the Greatest Name in their homes and wear its symbol on the little finger of the right hand (Lambden 1993).

Bahá'í views on the use and repetition of the Greatest Name tend to focus on it as an aid to mindfulness and God-consciousness. Someone once asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá if it was a good idea to wear a religious symbol, like a cross. He said (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London 93*),

You wear the cross for remembrance, it concentrates your thoughts; it has no magical power. Bahá'ís often wear a stone with the Greatest Name engraved on it: there is no magical influence in the stone; it is a reminder and companion. If you are about to do some selfish or hasty action, and your glance falls on the ring on your hand, you will remember and change your intention.

Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, while affirming the power and creativity of the Greatest Name, also rejected a magical approach to worship, indicating instead that the Greatest Name and other prayers were ways of fostering awareness and concentration (Saiedi 2010: 330). Repeating the Greatest Name will not magically bring healing or prevent misfortune. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, the Greatest Name, written and spoken, is a reminder and a companion.

### **Daily reading and study**

The Bahá'í Writings emphasise the importance of daily reading of scripture in order to cultivate knowledge of God; love of God; and peace, composure, and happiness. This kind of daily meditation on scripture is done in different ways. There are books that organise scriptural readings into topical areas for study. (One such book, *The Divine Art of Living*, has been in print more or less since the 1910s and has been revised and updated many times.) Some Bahá'ís create journals or quote books with their favourite quotations and use them for daily reflection. Others use books, apps, or emails that provide daily scripture readings. Many Bahá'ís also gather regularly in study groups ('study circles'), often with friends who are not Bahá'í, where they read through a set of workbooks on Bahá'í spiritual and moral principles and ways of using them in daily life. These study circles also have become an important aspect of Bahá'í spirituality and community life.

What kinds of topics do Bahá'ís reflect on during daily reading and study? The Bahá'í Writings contain many passages about how best to relate to others; develop meaningful relationships;

find purpose; develop attitudes of joy, gratitude, and trust in God; and overcome worry and anxiety. Daily meditations also are often about character and conduct. On these matters, the Bahá'í scriptures outline a high standard—many passages in the Writings enjoin believers to eschew all backbiting, fault finding, and gossip; cultivate habits of service, helpfulness, and friendliness; prefer 'other religionists above yourself'; avoid contention and argument; and advocate for oppressed peoples and groups. (There also are prohibitions against using alcohol or drugs and engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage.) Also, the Bahá'í Writings are notable for many passages on cultivating happiness and defeating negative emotions such as fear, worry, and anxiety. It is quite common for Bahá'í prayers, for example, to end with a few names of God that point to God's nature as loving and forgiving. For example, God is the 'Help in Peril', the 'Giver', the 'Most Generous', 'The Compassionate'.

The Bahá'í Writings also speak of faith in God as a source of confidence, power, and joy. Examples of this are easy to find:

Remember not your own limitations; the help of God will come to you. Forget yourself. God's help will surely come.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 38)

Rely upon God. Trust in Him. Praise Him and call Him continually to mind. He verily turneth trouble into ease, and sorrow into solace, and toil into utter peace.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 178)

Only in the remembrance of God can the heart find rest.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 96)

The bounty and power of God is without limit for each and every soul in the world.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Blomfield 1940: 161)

Rejoice in the gladness of thine heart that thou mayest be worthy to meet me and to mirror forth my beauty.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 36)

Let not thy hands tremble nor thy heart be disturbed, but rather be confident and firm in the love of thy Lord, the Merciful, the Clement.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets* 70)

The themes in these passages echo throughout the Bahá'í Writings.

## Fasting

Though it takes on different forms, fasting of one kind or another is present in almost all cultures around the world. In both ancient and modern times, fasting has been used to express devotion, cultivate penitence for past sins, prepare for holy days or life transitions (such as puberty or marriage), and produce a body/mind state of attentiveness or spiritual receptivity. Though fasting is sometimes understood as an ascetic practice for disciplining or punishing the body, this is not the case in the Bahá'í Faith. Notably lacking in the Bahá'í Writings is an emphasis on the body as a source of defilement and corruption. Bahá'u'lláh abolished the idea of 'unclean' things, including the notion that body parts or fluids can be impure, so this represents a change in thinking about fasting. Bahá'ís fast during the last Bahá'í month of the year, a nineteen-day period just before the spring equinox in March.

The Bahá'í view is that fasting uses body and mind to develop spiritual qualities and virtues.

Well is it with you, as you have followed the Law of God and arisen to observe the Fast during these blessed days, for this physical fast is a symbol of the spiritual fast. This Fast leadeth to the cleansing of the soul from all selfish desires, the acquisition of spiritual attributes, attraction to the breezes of the All-Merciful, and enkindlement with the fire of divine love.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in Research Department, ‘Importance’)

Once again, the idea is that the body becomes *a symbol*. The symbolic body helps us think about, reflect on, and learn key virtues and character traits.

How does the fasting body do this? First, the fasting body becomes a way to represent other forms of restraint, detachment, and selflessness. In the fast, believers both enact the struggle for selflessness and restraint and ‘picture’ it in their bodies. In this way, they can see, touch, and feel this spiritual discipline. So fasting involves a form of inner/outer cooperation—Inner attitudes are symbolised in embodied actions, embodied actions help stimulate inner attitudes—and the cycle continues. The inner/outer dynamic is suggested in Bahá'í prayers that have language that substitutes spiritual for material sustenance. The fast is a ‘river of life-giving waters’, a ‘pure beverage’ of God’s favour that helps believers ‘taste of God’s sweetness’ (*Bahá'í Prayers* 252, 255, 256). Other fasting prayers contain the same types of symbolic substitutions. ‘As I am abstaining from bodily desires and from all occupation with food and drink, even so purify and sanctify my heart from the love of anyone save Thyself’ ([www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/twelve-table-talks-abdul-baha/3#465793620](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/twelve-table-talks-abdul-baha/3#465793620)). Abstaining from food helps Bahá'ís learn about other forms of abstinence and restraint.

In the Bahá'í teachings, body, mind, and spirit are intimately related. Implicit in Bahá'í teachings concerning the control and refinement of the body—e.g., laws of chastity and cleanliness—and explicit in other passages is the recognition that the body and the spirit influence one another. ‘[T]he parts, members, and organs of the human body are interconnected’, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated, and ‘they mutually assist, reinforce, and influence each other’. Illustrating the connection between physical and spiritual, He continues, ‘[T]he eye sees and the heart is affected. The ear hears and the spirit is influenced’ (*Some Answered Questions*, [www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/11#802753808](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/11#802753808)). ‘The ear hears, and the spirit is influenced’—here, bodily sensations influence spiritual attitudes and dispositions. The relevance of this idea to fasting is obvious: What people do with their bodies influences spiritual growth.

## Conclusion

Two final elements of Bahá'í spirituality also involve both the inner spiritual and outer embodied parts of the self—community service and teaching the Faith to others. The religion practices a non-aggressive form of sharing the Faith with others in the context of specific scriptural prohibitions against both proselytising and narrow-minded dogmatism. Sharing or teaching the Faith to others usually takes place within the realm of personal or neighbourly relations, though at times and in certain places, the Bahá'í community has undertaken systematic large-scale teaching campaigns. The emphasis of the worldwide community in the last thirty years has been creating meaningful conversations at the local level about morality, spirituality, and community development. To this end, Bahá'í communities around the world sponsor neighbourhood classes for children, youth, and adults that are open to all and that incorporate both study and service.

Children's classes tend to focus on spiritual and moral development. Adult classes focus on spiritual and moral development, the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and building the skills needed to engage in community development projects at the grassroots level. The development projects that emerge out of these classes vary depending on the needs of the local and national community. They include projects related to sustainability, public health, sanitation, housing, agriculture, conflict resolution, and interfaith cooperation. Longer-term projects and support for social and economic development efforts worldwide are coordinated by a substantial Bahá'í non-governmental organisation (NGO) at the United Nations in New York.

In general, sharing the Faith with others, working cooperatively with others to 'advance civilization', and working earnestly at one's occupation can be considered worship in the Bahá'í Faith. 'All effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship', 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Paris Talks* 177) once said, 'if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity'. The Bahá'í Writings specifically say that any work done 'in the spirit of service' is worship—in fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (in Research Department, *Compilation on Bahá'í Education* 59) was once quoted as saying that such work 'is the highest form of worship'. Both He and His father, Bahá'u'lláh, emphasised the importance of not merely talking about being or doing good. One needed to work. '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' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 15–16). This active orientation to worship in the world is characteristic of the Bahá'í approach to spirituality.

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