

The Mystic Cup: The Essential Mystical Nature of the Bahá'í Faith

by LeRoy Jones

Verily, verily, the dawn of a new Day has broken. The promised One is enthroned in the hearts of men. In His hand He holds the mystic cup, the chalice of immortality. Blessed are they who drink therefrom!
—The Báb to Mullá Ḥusayn and Mullá 'Alí

After years of waiting and searching for the Promised One, Mullá Ḥusayn found his heart's desire—a young merchant who called Himself the Báb. In their first meeting the Báb invited Mullá Ḥusayn to His residence and revealed His mission with proofs and testimonies, which Mullá Ḥusayn painstakingly scrutinized. But there was more. Mullá Ḥusayn described his encounter with the Báb:

I sat spellbound by His utterance, oblivious of time and of those who awaited me...the call of the Mu'adhhdh-in, summoning the faithful to their morning prayer, awakened me from the state of ecstasy into which I seemed to have fallen. All the delight, all the ineffable glories, which the Almighty has recounted in His Book as the priceless possessions of the people of Paradise—these I seemed to be experiencing that night.²

Hence, Mullá Ḥusayn depicted his state of captivated mystical ecstasy. Within days of this initial meeting Mullá Ḥusayn and fellow seeker Mullá 'Alí returned to the house of the Báb, wherein the Báb disclosed His mission to Mullá 'Alí who became His second follower. However, this second meeting was different. According to Nabíl, "...all argument had been set aside and nothing but the spirit of intense adoration and ardent fellowship prevailed."³ The words from the opening quote were revealed at this time in an atmosphere that was "vitalized by that celestial potency which emanated from His inspired utterance. Everything in that room seemed to be vibrating with this testimony."⁴ Enthralled, these two chosen apostles responded to this divine summons to partake of the "mystic cup."

Likewise fifteen more souls after Mullá Ḥusayn and Mullá 'Alí attained the presence of the Báb and were declared "Letters of the Living." One more remained to complete the number of these first faithful followers. The soon-to-be eighteenth Letter of the Living, Quddus, approached Mullá Ḥusayn and pleaded to attain the presence of the Báb. Mullá Ḥusayn restrained him, telling Quddus the time was not right. Hastening to the Báb, Mullá Ḥusayn described Quddus' persistence. The Báb replied, "Marvel not at his strange behaviour. We have in the world of the spirit been communing with that youth. We know him already."⁵ Nabíl asked, "...had not the mystic bond of the spirit linked their souls together?"⁶ Shortly thereafter Nabíl observed the Báb in prayer before the rising sun, "He seemed to be addressing, in mystic language, that shining luminary, and to be entrusting it with His message of yearning and love to His concealed Beloved."⁷ Thus we see the intensely mystical nature of the opening days of the Bábi Faith.

Over much of the last twenty-five years as a Bahá'í, I have read passages such as the above account of the first Bábis and wondered, "What has happened? Why do we now seem so far removed from these deeply spiritual roots?" Admittedly, these first followers were exposed to a tremendous release of spiritual power. However, after discovering more and more of the Bahá'í writings that involve the mystical, I became convinced that this is a greatly overlooked area of the Bahá'í Faith. This issue becomes particularly poignant when we consider that the Bahá'í Faith has, in this writer's estimation, one of the most powerfully moving and exquisitely beautiful bodies of mystical works ever produced. Bahá'u'lláh, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* repeatedly pulses into beautiful and poetic revelations of mystic reality. In the *Hidden*

Words spiritual nugget after spiritual nugget mightily reveals the previously hidden “mystic and wondrous Bride.”⁸ The ardent seeker quickly feels the magnificence and charm of *The Seven Valleys*. Even the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* alludes to the mystic nature of divine law as it unseals the “choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.”⁹

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to clarify from Bahá’í scripture what constitutes the fundamentals of the mystical experience and, second, to show that an overt, systematic focus on mysticism within this Bahá’í context is essential if the Bahá’í Faith is to make significant progress with personal transformation as well as moving toward the goal of a spiritually unified world. This is not an attempt to compare commonly held views of mysticism to the Bahá’í Faith, nor is it in any manner an endeavor to define what might be considered a comprehensive theology of Bahá’í mysticism. Rather this paper focuses on the mystical experience itself. This experience is best described as spiritual communion with the Manifestation of God and this communion is at the heart of the transformation process. I will attempt to use the Bahá’í writings to paint in broad brushstrokes a general picture of the mystical experience and the implications this raises regarding the future of the Bahá’í Faith. This discussion offers a fundamental understanding of the mystical experience in the hope that increasing numbers of Bahá’ís will engage in a more detailed and serious pursuit of what is involved in mystical endeavor. Even though this paper will raise many more questions regarding the mystical experience and its relation to Bahá’í theology and community life than it answers, one of its major purposes is to raise those very questions.

A brief clarification of a few of the ways that we encounter the word *mystic* in the Bahá’í writings may be prudent. We often see the word *mystic* used, but the words *mystical* and *mysticism* are rarely used. We must always keep in mind that the very nature of this subject defies definition—that which is mystic is mysterious, difficult to understand, ineffable. The Guardian uses the term “mystic feeling” and describes it as the experience “that unites man with God” and that this “spiritual communion” is the “core of religion” and is “best achieved through prayer.”¹⁰ I use this as the main point of reference for all other uses of the word. Most of us can relate to the sense of unity and connectedness, wonder and awe that occurs during prayer. Even though this feeling varies in intensity it is common and nearly universal. Since this experience is the core of religion it makes sense to use this passage as a sort of touchstone for other uses and understandings of the word.

When Shoghi Effendi writes of a mystic Source, he notes a Source that is mysterious.¹¹ We cannot understand the nature of this Source, but it may be that since the word is capitalized it signifies Bahá’u’lláh in one of His forms and we might assume that this is the spiritual Source with which we commune through prayer. Bahá’u’lláh writes of a “mystic transformation.”¹² This transformation leads to an ecstasy and a yearning for God, which once again suggests deep spiritual communion with the Manifestation. However, this level of communion can lead to a mystic awareness or “true knowledge”¹³ that brings us to a variation in meaning but is likely linked to the spiritual communion of which the Guardian wrote. These shades of meaning will hopefully become clearer through the course of this paper. Of course, it would be best to examine the original Persian and Arabic words, but that is perhaps beyond the scope of this paper and is certainly beyond the author’s current knowledge. It is worth noting, however, that when writing in English the Guardian used the word in various ways, which are helpful to us in elucidating its meanings.

One should also keep in mind that communion with the Manifestation is one of the ways we come to know God. Bahá’u’lláh says, “The supreme cause for creating the world and all that is therein is for man to know God.”¹⁴ A letter written on behalf of the Guardian relates this to the mystical, “There is, therefore, only one way to God and that is through the realization of his Manifestation or Prophet in that age.... The mystic path that the traveler should follow is therefore to the Prophet. By coming in contact with Him will he obtain peace.”¹⁵ In another letter he relates this to communion, “He [Manifestation]...is all we can ever know of...God. Therefore, we address ourselves in prayer and thought to Him, or through Him to that Infinite Essence behind and beyond Him.”¹⁶

Since this paper is written by a Westerner to a Western audience, any statements made regarding Bahá’ís only applies to the West, and the United States in particular. Even though the multiplicity of per-

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spectives within the Bahá'í Faith precludes simple generalization, there is a tendency among Bahá'ís in the U.S. to have little understanding of the subject. This propensity is coupled with the misappropriation of the word in general society, which tends to look upon the mystical as some mysterious or paranormal phenomenon with no necessary connection to religion. Also, some Bahá'ís dismiss mysticism as risky, psychic tinkering with the spiritual realm or as a dangerous pursuit of an elite and exclusive knowledge. In addition, among Bahá'ís there is some tendency to associate the word *mysticism* to the many schools of eastern mysticism. Even though there are some similarities, there is a significant difference between what the Bahá'í scriptures portray and what these many mystical disciplines depict as mystical endeavor. These differences would make fascinating and important studies, however, such work is beyond the reach of this paper. All of these issues are justifiable concerns and they raise important questions. However, it may be that we are allowing excessive caution in these areas to paralyze important efforts within the arena of legitimate mystical endeavor.

Consequently, among western Bahá'ís we see a general lack of awareness and little intuitive sense for what constitutes the mystical. Even though the situation has improved in recent years, even many deepened Bahá'ís have little idea what the word means. A comprehension of the terminology is not necessary for a mystical connection with Bahá'u'lláh. However, the problem is more complex. Seena Fazel, in his article, *Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith*, argues that the Bahá'ís could learn much from the mystical intensity of other religions. Mr. Fazel quotes a non-Bahá'í anthropologist who, after observing a service at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette noted:

What was read from each text destroyed the particularity of the tradition from which it was drawn, leaving, seemingly, but banal platitudes.¹⁷

There are many deeply spiritual devotions in the Bahá'í Faith, however, we should not ignore this perception particularly when noting another observation of Mr. Fazel's regarding Bahá'í scholar Jacques Chouleur, who is concerned that Bahá'ís in the West are reticent in regard to the mystical and community aspects, while preferring a focus on the social teachings.¹⁸ Mr. Chouleur notes those Bahá'ís who are working primarily for the social teachings:

The transfiguration of the earthly world by the implementation of the Bahá'í principles may be for them a doubtless exhilarating objective, but quite incomplete, insufficient if it is deprived of mysticism and contemplation.¹⁹

Complementing this emphasis on social concerns, the Universal House of Justice noted the infiltration of secular tendencies in our community in its May 19, 1994 letter to the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly.²⁰ Although the Universal House of Justice discussed the secular nature of Bahá'í administration in its relationship to the general Bahá'í community, it is likely these tendencies filter into all areas of Bahá'í life. Promoting social change as well as many other Bahá'í goals can easily become mostly secular enterprises. The Universal House of Justice quoted the Guardian in the May 19th letter as follows:

The friends must never mistake the Bahá'í administration for an end in itself. It is merely the instrument of the *spirit of the Faith*. This Cause...is designed to benefit the entire human race, and the only way it can do this is to reform the community life of mankind, as well as seeking to regenerate the individual.²¹ [emphasis mine]

Aligning our personal lives as well as our social and administrative efforts with this "spirit of the Faith" should be the paramount goal of all Bahá'ís. In our excessively materialistic society it is difficult to maintain a constant focus on the spiritual, which makes it easy to get caught up in the trends and tendencies of the broad culture. To overcome these effects a deep mystical relationship with Bahá'u'lláh is essential. This paper will show that the mystical is inextricably linked to this "spirit of the Faith" and that the Bahá'í Faith is first and foremost mystical. The success of our efforts in teaching, administration, community building, and social issues are contingent on developing the mystic feeling. The spiritual energy needed for personal and global transformation is dependent on both an individual and collective mystical connection to Bahá'u'lláh.

The analogy of the mystic cup, the chalice of immortality of which the Báb spoke, is a fine thread woven through the writings of Bahá’u’lláh.²² In the *Hidden Words*, Bahá’u’lláh incites, “Take...the chalice of immortal life...that thou mayest hearken unto the mystic voice,”²³ and “sweet is the holy ecstasy if thou drinkest of the mystic chalice.”²⁴ In the *Tablet of Carmel*, even Carmel is instructed, “Seize thou the Chalice of Immortality...and give thanks unto Him, inasmuch as He...transmuted thy grief into blissful joy.”²⁵ Pronouncements regarding the cup of certitude, the mystic wine, the celestial draught, and the draught of love are sprinkled throughout the sacred texts. These and many other similar phrases underlie the importance of this symbolic and mystical action—partaking of the wine of certitude that “transmutheth the souls of men.”

Bahá’u’lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, in describing the early followers of a previous Manifestation, is likely speaking of the same mystic cup as was the Báb, which endowed its partakers “with the grace of a new life”:

*These same people, though wrapt in...veils of limitation...as soon as they drank the immortal draught, from the cup of certitude, at the hand of the Manifestation of the All-Glorious, were so transformed that they would renounce for His sake their kindred, their substance, their lives, their beliefs, yea, all else save God! So overpowering was their yearning for God, so uplifting their transports of ecstatic delight, that the world and all that is therein faded before their eyes into nothingness.*²⁶

Drinking of the mystic cup, the cup of certitude, wrought a dramatic transformation in the lives of these early believers. Bahá’u’lláh calls it a “mystic transformation” as He continues:

*It is evident that nothing short of this mystic transformation could cause such spirit and behaviour, so utterly unlike their previous habits and manners, to be made manifest in the world of being. For their agitation was turned into peace, their doubt into certitude, their timidity into courage. Such is the potency of the Divine Elixir, which, swift as the twinkling of an eye, transmutheth the souls of men!*²⁷

The Divine Elixir, this mystical draught, effected a radical transformation—an overpowering yearning for God and a dramatic change in their “habits and manners.” Can we in today’s world also partake of the heavenly elixir? Or was it only available to followers at the time of the Manifestation—people who associated with Him while He was on earth—a period when great feats and strong endeavor was essential?

Perhaps the potency of the mystic draught was stronger at the time of the Báb’s and Bahá’u’lláh’s physical presence. However, Shoghi Effendi makes clear that this mystic power is always available:

That the cause associated with the name of Bahá’u’lláh feeds itself upon those hidden springs of celestial strength which no force of human personality, whatever its glamour, can replace; that its reliance is *solely upon that mystic Source with which no worldly advantage, be it wealth, fame or learning can compare*; that it propagates itself by ways mysterious and utterly at variance with the standards accepted by the generality of mankind, will, if not already apparent, *become increasingly manifest* as it forges ahead towards fresh conquests in its struggle for the spiritual regeneration of mankind. [emphasis mine]²⁸

Not only are these hidden springs of mystic power always available, but, their effects will “become increasingly manifest.” Apparently this mystical force, or at least its effects, will intensify with time and not diminish with Bahá’u’lláh’s physical departure. Most importantly, the Guardian informs us that the Cause relies “solely upon that mystic Source.”

Even the Universal House of Justice has encouraged Bahá’ís to develop the “mystic feeling” as recently as the Ridván 150 letter to the Bahá’ís of the World:

No less essential to nourishing this vitality [of faith] is the cultivation of a sense of spirituality, that mystic feeling which unites the individual with God and is achieved through meditation and prayer.²⁹

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The Universal House of Justice calls the mystic feeling “a sense of spirituality”—something we experience. They use the word cultivate as though it is something we must care for, nurture and develop.

In the following letter to an individual believer, the Guardian placed these same ideas in the context of a materialistic society.

...[t]he spirit of the age, taken on the whole, is irreligious. Man’s outlook upon life is too crude and materialistic to enable him to elevate himself into the higher realms of spirit. It is this condition, so sadly morbid, into which society has fallen, that religion seeks to improve and transform. For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God.³⁰

In the above quote the Guardian stated that the cause relies “solely on that Mystic source”³¹ and here he says the mystic feeling is the “core of religious faith.” Apparently there is nothing more fundamental and important than developing the mystical. This importance is underscored by Shoghi Effendi’s assertion that the way we can overcome the materialistic condition of society is through religion. Religion seeks to “transform” this condition. Since the core of religion is the “mystic feeling” we must assume that the mystic feeling is at the heart of the transforming process and that transformation is in some way an elevation to a higher spiritual level, “the higher realms of spirit” that our present crudeness prohibits us from experiencing. Shoghi Effendi proceeds by giving some evidence as to what the mystic feeling is.

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. It is not sufficient for a believer to merely accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality, which he can acquire chiefly by means of prayer.³²

The Guardian depicts the mystic feeling as “spiritual communion” and as “a sense of spirituality” and perhaps as “worship.” After describing the mystic feeling as the core of religion Shoghi Effendi now explains that, “It is not sufficient for a believer to merely accept and observe the teachings.” Belief and action are not enough. Bahá’u’lláh reinforces this concept in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* by noting, “One hour’s reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship.”³³ One must be in touch with the mystical core through “spiritual communion” and by cultivating a “sense of spirituality.”

Adib Taherzadeh, during a talk at the Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, said, “Teaching is not the problem. The problem is that we must develop a love for Bahá’u’lláh.”³⁴ What is a love for Bahá’u’lláh? The following portion of a letter advising a Local Spiritual Assembly, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, helps to clarify this:

[He]...should study more deeply the teachings, and meditate on what he studies. We liken God to the Sun, which gives us all our life. So the Spirit of God reaches us through the Souls of the Manifestations. We must learn to commune with Their Souls, and this is what the Martyrs seemed to have done, and what brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing. *This is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has at present, drifted so far from.*³⁵ [emphasis mine]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá ties this communion with the souls of the manifestations to love”:

*...drink deep of the mystic cup of heavenly love and know the rapture of being drawn ever closer unto the Realm of the All-Glorious.*³⁶ [emphasis mine]

Through this true mysticism, communing with the soul of the Manifestation, we drink deeply of heavenly love, which draws us closer and closer to our Beloved. Mr. Taherzadeh also said that once we establish this love for Bahá’u’lláh, teaching will be no problem—we would be unable to keep our mouths shut.³⁷ Likewise, effective administration, strong communities and all other Bahá’í goals will be more attainable. Returning to the previous letter of Shoghi Effendi we see this idea reinforced:

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 that has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment

prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá’u’lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing.³⁸

To avoid lifeless religion we must develop its mystic character. Transformation attained through the nourishment of spiritual communion generates spiritual virtues and powers. Our inner life, our mystic life, must be perfected and transformed. Above, Bahá’u’lláh noted a “mystic transformation.” The Universal House of Justice further discusses this concept of transformation:

It is not enough to proclaim the Bahá’í message, essential as that is. It is not enough to expand the rolls of Bahá’í membership, vital as that is. Souls must be transformed, communities thereby consolidated, new models of life thus attained. *Transformation is the essential purpose of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh*, but it lies in the will and effort of the individual to achieve it in obedience to the Covenant.³⁹ [emphasis mine]

What an intriguing relationship which exists between the “mystic feeling” and transformation! As the mystic feeling is the core of religious faith we see that transformation is “the essential purpose of the Cause.” One is described as the core, the other as the “essential purpose.” Previously we saw the Guardian note that religion seeks to transform our materialistic condition through its mystic core.⁴⁰ Transformation through the “true mysticism”—communing with the souls of the manifestations by dwelling in the love of God—is our real goal. How important for us to further our understanding of the relationship between these two fundamentals—mysticism and transformation!

‘Abdu’l-Bahá sheds further light on the relationship between Bahá’í mysticism and regeneration:

*I beg of God to strengthen these spiritual bonds as day followeth day, and make this mystic oneness to shine ever more brightly, until at last all shall be as troops marshaled together beneath the banner of the Covenant within the sheltering shade of the Word of God; that they may strive with all their might until universal fellowship, close and warm, and unalloyed love, and spiritual relationships, will connect all the hearts of the world. Then will all humankind, because of this fresh and dazzling bounty, be gathered in a single homeland. Then will conflict and dissension vanish from the face of the earth, then will mankind be cradled in love for the beauty of the All-Glorious.*⁴¹ [emphasis mine]

Notice that the Master explains that “spiritual bonds” will strengthen to make a mystic oneness shine. Also, fellowship, love, and spiritual relationships will connect all the hearts of the world. Only after all the hearts are connected with spiritual bonds that lead to a *mystic oneness* will humankind attain to true peace and harmony. Clearly, the spiritual heart is tied to the mystical. A deeper understanding of what is meant by “heart” will enhance our understanding of the mystical process.

Bahá’u’lláh is unmistakable on the importance of the heart. He says, “*My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart...*”⁴² Likewise, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* when Bahá’u’lláh addresses the true seeker, who “must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart.”⁴³

Before all priorities we must focus on the heart. After requesting that we cleanse our heart Bahá’u’lláh refers to the heart as, “the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God.” He then urges us to purge the breast [heart], “which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the beloved” and then to “sanctify” one’s soul.”⁴⁴

The spiritual heart is the seat of the revelation of inner mysteries—the place we gain true spiritual vision. It is the sanctuary of love and if not identical to the soul is inextricably linked to it—the locus of the soul—the point where true spiritual insight and the love of God can abide. The heart is the channel⁴⁵ between the spiritual and material world. The tarnished heart, therefore, cannot reflect the glory of God.

After admonishing us to cleanse our hearts, Bahá’u’lláh describes the results of a pure heart. When we have truly kindled a spirit of search through intense striving and devotion and reached a state of “fer-

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vid love, of rapture, and ecstasy” within the heart, we will attain a new level of awareness. Then 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 trumpetblast 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.”⁴⁶

The cleansing process leads to an awakening. Bahá’u’lláh as the mystic Herald gives us “a new eye, a new ear, a new heart and a new mind.” What are these new faculties? Returning to the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*:

*It is incumbent upon thee, by the permission of God, to cleanse the eye of thine heart from the things of the world, that thou mayest realize the infinitude of divine knowledge, and mayest behold Truth so clearly that thou wilt need no proof to demonstrate His reality, nor any evidence to bear witness unto His testimony.*⁴⁷

In the opening words of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* it says we must sanctify and cleanse our eyes.⁴⁸ In this passage Bahá’u’lláh speaks of cleansing the eye of “thine heart”—cleanse the spiritual eye and then with that “new eye” we will behold Truth clearly. So clearly that one will need no proof or evidence—our spiritual sight will be so acute that it will pass beyond the realm of words and logic—we will simply see.

In fact, at another place in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* Bahá’u’lláh notes:

*When the stream of utterance reached this stage, We beheld, and lo! the sweet savours of God were being wafted from the dayspring of Revelation, and the morning breeze was blowing out of the Sheba of the Eternal. Its tidings rejoiced anew the heart, and imparted immeasurable gladness to the soul. It made all things new, and brought unnumbered and inestimable gifts from the unknowable Friend. The robe of human praise can never hope to match Its noble stature, and Its shining figure the mantle of utterance can never fit. Without word It unfoldeth the inner mysteries, and without speech It revealeth the secrets of the divine sayings.*⁴⁹

More than likely the stream of utterance is the never ending Word of God that is continually renewed. This “stream of utterance” is able to unfold the mysteries without words and reveal the divine sayings without speech. “Human praise” cannot describe this stream of Revelation, nor can utterance fit its stature. Without Words what inner mysteries or divine sayings can be revealed? What does this mean? What kind of utterance describes without utterance? What words are revealed without words? At first glance it appears as some kind of circular gibberish. What is Bahá’u’lláh saying?

To help answer these questions let us examine another tablet wherein Bahá’u’lláh, instead of referring to a stream of utterance, refers to a stream of words:

*When the stream of words reached this stage, the sweet savours of true knowledge were shed abroad and the day-star of divine unity shone forth above the horizon of His holy utterance. Blessed is he whom His Call hath attracted to the summit of glory, who hath drawn nigh to the ultimate Purpose, and who hath recognized through the shrill voice of My Pen of Glory that which the Lord of this world and of the next hath willed. Whoso faileth to quaff the choice wine which We have unsealed through the potency of Our Name, the All-Compelling, shall be unable to discern the splendours of the light of divine unity or to grasp the essential purpose underlying the Scriptures of God, the Lord of heaven and earth.*⁵⁰

When this “stream of words” reaches a certain point, “true knowledge” is dispensed. What is this “true knowledge?” Rather than directly referring to a message beyond words we see “the shrill voice” of the Pen of Glory, which the attracted ones can hear. Next Bahá’u’lláh mentions those who “quaff the choice wine.” They will discern the “purpose underlying the Scriptures of God.” Notice, these are not the people who understand the words of the Scriptures, but those who discern the design “underlying” them; a purpose not within the Scriptures but fundamental to them—supporting and holding them. Once again

we see the idea of a message or purpose that transcends words and utterance. In fact it appears that this purpose is primary and that the actual written Book is somehow subsumed by this “essential purpose.” Could this be the “true knowledge?”⁵¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá sheds more light:

*It is my hope that you may put forth your most earnest endeavor to accomplish this end, that you may investigate and study the Holy Scriptures word by word so that you may attain knowledge of the mysteries hidden therein. Be not satisfied with words, but seek to understand the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the words.*⁵²

We are reminded of this notion when Bahá’u’lláh says, “Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.”⁵³ These hidden pearls of wisdom are likely the same as the mysteries noted in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, “Thus will these mysteries be unravelled, not by the aid of acquired learning, but solely through the assistance of God and the outpourings of His grace.”⁵⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reinforces the concept that the learning of words and ideas is incomplete. “The Jews read the Old Testament night and day, memorizing its words and texts yet without comprehending a single meaning or inner significance, for had they understood the real meanings of the Old Testament, they would have become believers in Christ, inasmuch as the Old Testament was revealed to prepare His coming.”⁵⁵ If we cannot gain true knowledge through learning what can we do? Bahá’u’lláh notes, “The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.”⁵⁶

As noted above, another important feature of the “mystic cup” is that its contents are frequently referred to as a choice wine. Bahá’u’lláh makes repeated references to a symbolic wine that leads one who partakes to true knowledge and understanding.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the concept that true knowledge involves an experience that goes beyond words is reinforced as Bahá’u’lláh makes reference to this wine’s inebriating effect.

*Were We to reveal the hidden secrets of that Day, all they that dwell on earth and in the heavens would swoon away and die, except such as will be preserved by God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. Such is the inebriating effect of the words of God upon Him Who is the Revealer of His undoubted proofs, that His Pen can move no longer.*⁵⁸

Bahá’u’lláh, while describing hidden secrets that would cause humankind to swoon and die, seems to say that those same hidden secrets would have such an inebriating effect on Him that it would stop the divine Pen. This would certainly tie in with the experiential nature of the mystical and would set forth the possibility that God’s word can instill a sort of altered consciousness in somewhat the same manner as alcohol or other mind altering drugs. In crude terms, what would be an overdose for a normal human was only inebriating for Bahá’u’lláh. Does this “inebriating effect” come in weaker doses? Examine the following excerpts from a prayer revealed by Bahá’u’lláh for the Bahá’í Fast:

For Thine ardent lovers Thou hast, according to Thy decree, reserved at each daybreak, the cup of Thy remembrance, O Thou who art the ruler of rulers! These are they who have been so inebriated with the wine of Thy manifold wisdom that they forsake their couches in their longing to celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy virtues....

*These are the ones, O my God, whom Thou hast graciously enabled to have fellowship with Thee and to commune with Him who is the Revealer of Thyself.*⁵⁹

Notice that these inebriated lovers arise to “commune” with Bahá’u’lláh. The spiritual addict flees his couch to experience the regenerating power of the love of God. As Bahá’u’lláh states in another passage, “by the fire of Thy love which drove sleep from the eyes of Thy chosen ones and Thy loved one.”⁶⁰

Further reinforcing the experiential nature, often in the words of Bahá’u’lláh we see references to achieving states of rapture and ecstasy. This Hidden Word reveals, “sweet is the holy ecstasy if thou

drinkest of the mystic chalice from the hands of the celestial Youth. Shouldst thou attain this station, thou wouldst be freed from destruction and death, from toil and sin.”⁶¹ In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* Bahá’u’lláh says of the true seeker, “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...and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.” We attain knowledge and certitude after reaching a state of ecstasy and rapture. Then the mystic Herald sounds the trumpet blast of knowledge which endows one with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart and a new mind.”⁶² Is this a knowledge of words and argument? Or, does this mystic Herald impart a certitude reserved for mystic knowers that transcends words?

Consider this picture: There are powerful hidden secrets within the word of God which have the potential to not only completely overcome humans, but which can also effect a kind of inebriation in the Manifestation. These hidden secrets are connected to the “wine of thy manifold wisdom,” which is likely similar to the wine of true understanding, and these “wines” cause this state of inebriation. When these hidden secrets are more modest in strength or kind their wine has a similar impact on people. These humans are “ardent lovers” who have somehow uncovered the “hidden secrets” which lead to this inebriation. And as the Guardian noted in the letter regarding the true mysticism, these lovers have been enabled to “commune with Him,” bringing them to a state of rapture and ecstasy. This mystical state of communion is experiential, lies beyond words and utterance, and is at the heart of a spiritual transformation, which imparts a measure of true understanding and certitude to the ardent lovers.

Even more compelling, the Guardian makes clear that mystic transformation is also essential to the evolution of society as a whole.

That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and the development of the fruit must, if we would correctly apprehend the utterances of Bahá’u’lláh, have its counterpart in the evolution of the organization of human society. A similar stage must sooner or later be attained in the collective life of mankind, producing an even more striking phenomenon in world relations, and endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide, throughout the succeeding ages, the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny.⁶³

Consider the implications of this paragraph. Not only is there an indefinable or mystic change that occurs in the individual, in effect, the Guardian is also saying that the Golden Age will occur only after society as a whole undergoes some kind of mystical metamorphosis.⁶⁴ Apparently this mystical connection is not simply for the individual but can somehow permeate an entire society in a spontaneous organic manner. Shoghi Effendi refers to this collective “mystic change” as the stage of maturity, which will provide the “chief incentive” for the eventual realization of humanity’s high destiny. Exactly what that means is can likely be grasped only after we better understand the mystic change of the individual. Regardless, if we consider this global renewal and liken it to the profound and pervasive “mystic transformation” which Bahá’u’lláh described in the individual,⁶⁵ one can only speculate on the wonders before humanity. Not to mention, even now, the Bahá’ís as a group expecting global transformation can ill afford to ignore a process that appears to be intimately connected to that change.

Shoghi Effendi goes on to say that this mystic change will eventually produce a striking phenomenon in society.⁶⁶ In a previous quote, after stating that the cause relies “solely on that mystic Source with which no worldly advantage can compare,”⁶⁷ he said, “that it propagates itself by ways mysterious and utterly at variance with the standards accepted by mankind.”⁶⁸ The Guardian emphasizes that Bahá’u’lláh has called into being “a new race of men.”⁶⁹ The Blessed Beauty in another passage proclaimed, “The world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this New World Order. Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized by the agency of this unique, this wondrous system—the like of which mortal eyes hath never witnessed.”⁷⁰

Is there an integral connection between the uniqueness of Bahá’u’lláh’s system and the mystical? After saying that we are solely reliant on the mystic Source, Shoghi Effendi says that the cause propagates itself in a manner that is not only mysterious but completely at variance with the norm.⁷¹ Complete reliance on a mystic Source would be very different from accepted processes of social development. The

Guardian’s phrase “a new race of men”⁷² leads one to consider the “mystic transformation”⁷³ that established totally new habits in the devout followers. Elsewhere, Bahá’u’lláh declares “a system the like of which mortal eyes hath never witnessed,”⁷⁴ then immediately broadcasts one of the more mystical concepts in His Revelation, “Immerse yourselves in the ocean of my words, that ye may uncover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.”⁷⁵

Undoubtedly there is a reliance on the mystical in the Bahá’í Faith, but how often do we consider the possibility that this reliance is of such magnitude that it dwarfs all other forces? Perhaps the uniqueness of Bahá’u’lláh’s system is that it will use this mystic Source far more than in any other dispensation. Perhaps in everything we do, whether it is teaching, administration, or working for social justice—the primary driving force, perhaps the only effective driving force, is our mystical connection to Bahá’u’lláh. Assuming this unique system depends completely on the mystical, is it too bold to ask, that without a connection to this mystic Source, do we have anything that other non-Bahá’í segments of society cannot provide? Recognizing that these prophecies of “new models of life,”⁷⁶ “a new race of men,”⁷⁷ and a system “the like of which mortal eyes hath never witnessed,”⁷⁸ are more likely connected to a mystic transformation than they are to the social principles of the Bahá’í Faith suggests that this mystic Source and the transformation it inspires is the undeniable foundation upholding the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh.

The theme of the mystic cup and its heavenly draught is interspersed through the Bahá’í sacred writings. Not only do we see the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Báha enjoining seekers to partake of a mystic cup or cup of certitude, but, there are numerous references to an immortal draught. Such a glorious picture unfolds as we ponder the promise the Báb offered to His followers, “Blessed are they who drink therefrom!”

After the first believers in our Faith were entranced by an invitation to drink of the mystic cup, Nabíl observed the Báb engaged in mystic communion with his Beloved and spoke of His use of a mystic language with Quddus who was far away. Bahá’u’lláh points to the early believers of another age who after imbibing from the “cup of certitude” underwent a “mystic transformation” in which “their agitation was turned into peace, their doubt into certitude, their timidity into courage.” Shoghi Effendi asserts that “the core of religious faith is the mystic feeling which unites man with God,” and that we are totally reliant on that “mystic Source.” The Universal House of Justice encourages us to cultivate the mystic feeling. ‘Abdu’l-Báha directs us to drink of the mystic cup of heavenly love so we can partake of the love engendered by the true mysticism. Even more interesting the Guardian writes of that “mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change,” which is associated with the maturity of the individual and which will have its counterpart in the transformation and coming of age of the entire human race. And this coming of age is underscored by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s projection of world unity engendered by an ever brighter “mystic oneness.”

The queries this discussion raises are manifold. Precisely where does mysticism fit in as we develop “new models of life?” What connection does this mystic feeling have to Bahá’í administration, community building and teaching? How can we expand our understanding of such things as mystic transformation, mystic language, mystic Source and all forms of spiritual communion? What can we do to cultivate this “mystic feeling” as the Universal House of Justice has encouraged? How does Bahá’u’lláh teach mysticism and what is involved in mystical endeavor as a Bahá’í? Complete answers to these and other questions are likely impossible at this early stage of Bahá’í development. However, if humankind is ever to get the solutions, we must now begin a serious investigation at all levels—as institutions and as individuals. The fruits inspired by a search through the mystical ocean of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation could provide crucial assistance with elusive goals like spiritual transformation, building strong communities, the perfecting of Bahá’í institutions, and for the ultimate goal of sweeping global change.

Furthermore, Bahá’u’lláh says,

*The purpose of the one true God, exalted be His glory, hath been to bring forth the Mystic Gems out of the mine of man—they Who are the Dawning-Places of His Cause and the repositories of the pearls of His knowledge.*⁷⁹

The Mystic Cup

These Mystic Gems, the manifestations of God, are our mystic teachers. We have many opportunities for material knowledge but the mystic knowledge comes only from Bahá'u'lláh. The Guardian noted that the mystic feeling is central to developing spiritual virtues and powers.⁸⁰ With these powers we will change the material world—not the other way around.

In a religion whose watchword is *unity* this is the ultimate unity. Shoghi Effendi described it as that “mystic feeling which unites man with God.”⁸¹ From this mystical unity all other unity flows. This unity teaches all unity.⁸² For it there is no substitute. Let us revisit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prediction regarding this mystic oneness:

*I beg of God to strengthen these spiritual bonds as day followeth day, and make this mystic oneness to shine ever more brightly, until at last...spiritual relationships, will connect all the hearts of the world. Then will all humankind, because of this fresh and dazzling bounty, be gathered in a single homeland. Then will conflict and dissension vanish from the face of the earth, then will mankind be cradled in love for the beauty of the All-Glorious.*⁸³ [emphasis mine]

Peace be upon him that inclineth his ear unto the melody of the Mystic Bird calling from the Sadrat’l-Muntaha! Glorified be our Lord the Most High.

—Bahá'u'lláh⁸⁴

Notes

- 1) Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 69.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 6) *Ibid.*
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 8) *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, Reprint 1979), p. 82.
- 9) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: The Bahá’i World Center, 1992), p. 21.
- 10) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’i News* 102, August 1936, p. 3 in *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, pp. 237, 238.
- 11) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters from Shoghi Effendi* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1974) pp. 51, 52.
- 12) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 6th ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 155.
- 13) *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Adib Taherzadeh, 1st ed. (Great Britain: W & J Mackay Limited, 1978), p. 105.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- 15) Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance* (India, 1994), p. 511, MARS for Windows by Crimson Publications.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 472.
- 17) “International Dialogue and the Bahá’i Faith: Some Preliminary Observations,” in *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá’i Theology*, ed. Jack McLean (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997), pp. 147, 148.
- 18) *Ibid.*
- 19) *Ibid.*
- 20) Universal House of Justice, Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’is of the United States dated May 19, 1994, paragraphs 27, 28.
- 21) *Ibid.*, par. 32.
- 22) References to a mystic cup and Chalice of Immortality: “No sooner had her voice reached that most exalted Spot than We made reply: “Render thanks unto thy Lord, O Carmel. The fire of thy separation from Me was fast consuming thee, when the ocean of My presence surged before thy face, cheering thine eyes and those of all creation, and filling with delight all things visible and invisible. ...Seize thou the Chalice of Immortality in the name of thy Lord, the All-Glorious, and give thanks unto Him, inasmuch as He, in token of His mercy unto thee, hath turned thy sorrow into gladness, and transmuted thy grief into blissful joy.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 15–16) “The Celestial Youth hath, in this Day, raised above the heads of men the glorious Chalice of Immortality, and is standing expectant upon His seat, wondering what eye will recognize His glory, and what arm will, unhesitatingly, be stretched forth to seize the Cup from His snow-white Hand and drain it.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 107) “Emerge from behind the veil, by the leave of thy Lord, the All-Glorious, the Most Powerful, and seize, before the eyes of those who are in the heavens and those who are on the earth, the Chalice of Immortality..The moment thou touchest the Cup with thy lips, the Concourse on high will acclaim thee saying, ‘Drink with healthy relish, O man that hast truly believed in God!’ and the inhabitants of the Cities of Immortality will cry out, ‘Joy be to thee, O thou that hast drained the Cup of His love!’” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, pp.148–149)

Lights of ‘Irfán

- 23) *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Persian Hidden Word no. 62
- 24) *Ibid.*, Persian Hidden Word no. 70
- 25) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, fifth printing, 1971), pp. 15-16
- 26) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 155.
- 27) *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 157.
- 28) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters from Shoghi Effendi* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 51, 52.
- 29) *Message of the Universal House of Justice: Introducing the Three Year Plan in The Three Year Plan* prepared by the National Teaching Committee of the Bahá'ís of the United States (Wilmette, Ill: 1993), p. 5.
- 30) Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í News* 102, August 1936, p. 3 in *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, pp. 237, 238.
- 31) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 51, 52.
- 32) *Bahá'í News* 102, p. 237.
- 33) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 238.
- 34) Speech by Adib Taherzadeh, Member of the Universal House of Justice, at the Bahá'í House of Worship, Wilmette, Illinois, Sept. 1997.
- 35) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, (United Kingdom, 1981) p. 406.
- 36) *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. (Trans. Committee at the Bahá'í World Center. [Chatham, Great Britain: W & J Mackay, 1978] pp. 149, 150.
- 37) Speech at the Bahá'í House of Worship, Wilmette, Illinois, Sept. 1997.
- 38) *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, p. 238.
- 39) Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message*, 1992
- 40) *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, p. 238.
- 41) *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 19, 20.
- 42) *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Arabic Hidden Word no. 1.
- 43) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 192.
- 44) *Ibid.*
- 45) *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 46) *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 47) *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 48) *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 49) *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 50) *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 105.
- 51) *Word* in this sense is similar to the use of *logos* in John Chapter 1 of the Bible. Here the Word or *logos* first resides in the heaven and then becomes flesh as Christ. We see hints of this in Bahá'í Scripture when Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the Manifest and Luminous Point. This Point is sent forth from the "horizon of His Will.... This Point is the focal center of the circle of Names and marketh the culmination of the manifestations of Letters in the world of creation. Through it have appeared indications of the impenetrable Mystery, the adorned Symbol, He Who standeth revealed in the Most Great Name—a Name which is recorded in the luminous Tablet and is inscribed in the holy, the blessed, the snow-white Scroll. And when the Point was joined to the second Letter (l) which appeareth in the beginning of the Mathani,(l) it traversed the heavens of exposition and utterance. Then the eternal Light of God shed its radiance, flared up in the midmost heart of the firmament of testimony and produced two Luminaries." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 101-102) Also, upon examining the first verse describing the "stream of utterance" it is not clear if Bahá'u'lláh is referring to the "stream" as causing this marvelous renewal or if it is the "sweet savours" coming from the Revelation. In the second passage it appears more likely that the stream of words reaches a certain stage and then the sweet savours of true knowledge powers this regeneration. Actually it makes little difference, the stream of utterance and the sweet savours may be exactly the same and if not they arise from the same source. However, when trying to unravel how utterance can reveal without words it likely makes more sense to have the sweet savours of the Revelation of true understanding disclosing a purpose that goes beyond words.
- 52) *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, compiled by Howard MacNutt, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 459.
- 53) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 85.
- 54) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 192.
- 55) *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 459.
- 56) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 211.
- 57) Some references to this wine: "...those that have quaffed the wine of knowledge and certitude..." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 161-162). "...drink the incorruptible waters of the river of knowledge, and to taste the wine of the mysteries of divine Unity" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 200) "It will...cause you to behold the things from which ye have been withheld, and will enable you to quaff His sparkling Wine." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 78) "...nourish me with the wine of Thy knowledge..." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 78)

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- 58) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 35.
- 59) *Bahá'í Prayers*, U.S. 1991 edition, pp. 247, 249.
- 60) *Prayers and Meditations*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, sixth printing 1974), p. 292.
- 61) *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Persian No. 70.
- 62) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 195-196.
- 63) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 163, 164.
- 64) *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, sixth printing, 1970), p. 324.
- 65) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 155.
- 66) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 164.
- 67) *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 68) *Ibid.*
- 69) *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi, (United States, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 16.
- 70) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K. 181.
- 71) *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 51, 52.
- 72) *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 16.
- 73) *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 151.
- 74) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K. 181, 182.
- 75) *Ibid.*
- 76) *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 406.
- 77) *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 16.
- 78) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K. 181, 182.
- 79) *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Trans. Shoghi Effendi. (Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) p. 13.
- 80) *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. 2, pp. 237, 238.
- 81) *Ibid.*
- 82) If, as the Guardian states, the mystic feeling is what unites man with God it is logical to assume that this unity with God is the essence of unity and that it is the ultimate foundation for any unity that we aspire to between humans.
- 83) *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 19, 20.
- 84) *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 257.

