

human existence has any meaning. Bahá'u'lláh described God's purpose for man in the following way:

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

Life should be seen as an eternal process of joyous spiritual discovery and growth: in the beginning stages of earthly life, the individual undergoes a period of training and education which, if it is successful, gives him or her the basic intellectual and spiritual tools necessary for continued growth. When individuals attain physical maturity in adulthood, they become responsible for their further progress, which now depends entirely on the efforts they themselves make. Through the daily struggles of material existence, people gradually deepen their understanding of the spiritual principles underlying reality, and this understanding enables them to relate more effectively to themselves, to others, and to God. After physical death, the individual continues to grow and develop in the spiritual world, which is greater than the physical world, just as the physical world is greater than the world we inhabit while in our mother's womb.

This last statement is based on the Bahá'í concept of the soul and of life after physical death. According to the Bahá'í teachings, the true nature of human beings is spiritual. Beyond the physical body, each human being has a rational soul, created by God. This soul is a nonmaterial entity, which does not depend on the body. Rather, the body serves as its vehicle in the physical world. The soul of an individual comes into being at the moment the physical body is conceived and continues to exist after the death of the physical body. The soul (also called the spirit) of the individual is the seat or locus of his or her personality, self, and consciousness.

The evolution or development of the soul and its capacities is the basic purpose of human existence. This evolution is towards God and its motive force is knowledge of God and love



for Him. As we learn about God, our love for Him increases; and this, in turn, enables us to attain a closer communion with our Creator. Also, as we draw closer to God, our character becomes more refined and our actions reflect more and more the attributes and qualities of God.



Bahá'u'lláh taught that this potential to reflect the attributes of God is the soul's essential reality. It is the meaning of human beings being created "in the image of God." The divine qualities are not external to the soul. They are latent within it, just as the color, the fragrance, and the vitality of a flower are latent within the seed. They need only to be developed. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

*Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He [God] hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favour, so enduring a bounty.*

The Bahá'í writings refer to the gradual evolution or development of the individual soul as "spiritual progress." Spiritual progress means acquiring the capacity to act in conformity with the Will of God and to express the attributes and spirit of God in one's dealings with one's self and with other human beings. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the only true and enduring happiness for human beings lies in the pursuit of spiritual development.

A person who has become aware of his or her spiritual nature and who consciously strives to progress spiritually is called a "seeker" by Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh described some of the qualities of the true seeker:

*That seeker must, at all times, put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, must detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords. He must never seek to exalt himself above any one, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vain-glory, must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence and refrain from*

*idle talk. For the tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century.*

*That seeker should, also, regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quenbeth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul. He should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire. He should treasure the companionship of them that have renounced the world, and regard avoidance of boastful and worldly people a precious benefit. At the dawn of every day he should commune with God, and with all his soul, persevere in the quest of his Beloved.... He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself, nor promise that which he doth not fulfill....*

*Our purpose in revealing these convincing and weighty utterances is to impress upon the seeker that he should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness.*

*These are among the attributes of the exalted, and constitute the hallmark of the spiritually-minded.... When the detached wayfarer and sincere seeker hath fulfilled these essential conditions, then and only then can he be called a true seeker.*

Bahá'u'lláh explained that the fundamental, spiritual role of religion is to enable people to achieve a true understanding of their own nature and of God's will and purpose for them. The spiritual teachings sent down by God through the Messengers or Manifestations of God serve to guide us to a proper comprehension of the spiritual dynamics of life. These principles enable us to understand the laws of existence. Moreover, the very efforts we must make to conform to the teachings of the Manifestations serve



to develop our spiritual capacities. For example, when one makes an effort to rid oneself of prejudice and superstition in response to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the result is an increased knowledge of and love for other human beings, and this, in turn, helps the individual to live life more effectively.

Bahá'u'lláh stressed that, without the coming of the Manifestations and their revelation of God's laws and teachings, we would not be able to grow and develop spiritually. The spiritual meaning of life would remain hidden from us, even if we made great efforts to discover it. This is why revealed religion is seen by Bahá'ís as the necessary key to successful spiritual living.

Speaking of the Manifestations, and Their influence on human spiritual development, Bahá'u'lláh said:

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

Since religion has a social dimension, Bahá'ís feel that prolonged withdrawal from the world and from contact with society and one's fellow human beings is usually not necessary or helpful to spiritual growth (although a temporary withdrawal from time to time may be legitimate and healthy). Because we are social beings, our greatest progress is made through living in association with others. Indeed, close association with others in the spirit of loving service and cooperation is essential to the process of spiritual growth.

Bahá'u'lláh related God's purpose for us to the two aspects of religion, the spiritual and the social:

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

In other words, humankind's social development, if properly carried out, should be a collective expression of our spiritual development. All human beings, Bahá'u'lláh states, *"have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth."*

In summary, the spiritual reason for our life on earth is to provide us with a training ground; our life is a period of growth during which we focus on the development of our innate spiritual and intellectual capacities. Because these capacities are faculties of our immortal soul, they are eternal, and we must make great efforts to develop them. But such efforts are worthwhile, since the soul is the only part of us which endures. Whatever promotes our spiritual development is good, and whatever hinders it is bad.

SOURCE: Bahá'í Topics,  
An Information Resource of the Bahá'í International Community  
<http://info.bahai.org/article-1-4-0-6.html>

### Bahá'í Prayer

*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'u'lláh

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# Bahá'í Faith

## The Purpose of Life

What does the Bahá'í Faith see as the purpose of human existence?

Many people live their lives without ever reflecting on life itself or its meaning for them. Their lives may be full of activities. They may marry, have children, run a business, or become scientists or musicians, without ever obtaining any degree of understanding of why they do these things. Their lives have no overall purpose to give meaning to separate events, and they may have no clear idea of their own nature or identity, of who they really are.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that only true religion can give purpose to human existence. If there were no Creator, if humans were simply chance products of a thermodynamic system, as many in the world today assert, there would be no purpose in life. Each individual human being would represent the temporary material existence of a conscious animal trying to move through his or her brief life with as much pleasure and as little pain and suffering as possible.

It is only in relation to the Creator, and the purpose which that Creator has fixed for His creatures, that