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This Worshipful Meditation

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Strive, O people, that your eyes may be directed towards the mercy of God...

Bahá'u'lláh

WITH THE WORDS, “*Let all experience the spiritual enrichment brought to their souls by this simple act of worshipful meditation*” the Universal House of Justice, in their letter of December 1999, universally applied the law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas related to the daily recitation of Alláh-u-Abhá ninety-five times. This spiritual discipline, which provides us with a means to uplift, illumine and transform our souls, and through them the world around us, must surely be regarded as one of the great gifts of Bahá'u'lláh to humanity in this Dispensation.

The work of the Meditation Pilot Project, which has focused largely around this type of meditation, has created an awareness of the benefits that can be had through sharing perspectives as co-learners on this great journey of spiritual discovery. With this in mind, some of the evolving insights identified so far with the project are shared here, and may be found helpful.

The nature of the practice

The term “meditation” used by The House of Justice identifies this spiritual practice with similar ones used by the followers of all the major Faiths. In the Islamic world from which Bahá'u'lláh appeared this practice was known as *dhikr*, and through the regular, repetitive use of a verse of the Qur'án the aspirant would seek to purify and make more receptive their consciousness to God's favours.

In this context ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written,

“Consider how a pure, wellpolished mirror fully reflects the light of the sun, no matter how distant the sun may be. The more pure and sanctified the heart of man becomes, the nearer it draws to God, and the light of the Sun of Reality is revealed within it. This light sets hearts aglow with the fire of the love of God, opens in them the doors of knowledge and unseals the divine mysteries so that spiritual discoveries are made possible.”⁽¹⁾

According to this, as well as turning the mirror of our hearts to the Spiritual Sun, we also have to polish it from what Bahá'u'lláh refers to as “*the obscuring dust of acquired knowledge*”⁽²⁾ and “*worldly desires*”⁽³⁾ that it can better receive and reflect the Light. So what might be the reasons that all the major religious movements have used this form of devotional practice to help with this polishing? The following may provide a helpful perspective on this.

Cultivating inner stillness

Taking forward the analogy of the mirror and the sun, if we think of a pond it is in some ways like a mirror, and when the water is still it can reflect the image of the sky and the plants around its edge, and be warmed by the sun. Also within it beautiful fishes and plants can live.

If we think of our soul as being like this pond it too has, in our case, the capacity to receive and reflect understanding, and potentially contains beautiful qualities such as love, courage, compassion, and so on.

If we wanted to see what was in a pond we wouldn't get a stick and poke around in it, for that would create waves and stir up sediment that would obscure our vision, but when we want to look into our inner self and meditate that is what we tend to do. The waves and sediment are our already stirred up thoughts and emotions, and the stick is our ego's active efforts to be in control of the investigation, which only makes matters worse. If we can learn just to hold the stick of our mind's intention still for long enough, the thoughts and emotions will settle down and we will become astonished by the spiritual realities reposing within.

Unfortunately it is not normal for most of us to be able to focus our attention for more than a few seconds before sounds from the world around us, or thoughts and feelings from the world within us, hamper our attempts at concentration. Meditation techniques that use some form of repetition as part of their practice are trying to help us with this challenge. They teach us to become stiller inside, and develop our focus, by just concentrating repeatedly for a few seconds at a time. Holding the stick still, even for a short while, over and over again, allows the disturbance in the pond to settle.

Having tried it we know that even this is not easy, but there are some things we could consider that should make it easier for ourselves.

Becoming attuned

As mentioned earlier, in Islam the term *dhikr* refers to the practice of recitation which Dr Wendi Momen throws interesting light upon in her book, *Meditation*:

“The purpose of *dhikr* is polishing the mirror of the heart from all defilement. A form of the practice of *dhikr*, which Sufis use to achieve this polish, can also be found in the Bahá'í Writings. Indeed, the daily repetition of Alláh-u-Abhá while sitting ‘turned to God’ can be seen in this light.”

In English *dhikr* translates as “remembrance”, but it means more than just remembering. As is emphasised in the following quotations, the repetition should be with a longing of the heart, that is endeavouring to attune itself to the spiritual realm, and not just a recitation of words.

“Inspire then my soul, O my God, with Thy wondrous remembrance, that I may glorify Thy name. Number me not with them who read Thy words and fail to find Thy hidden gift which, as decreed by Thee, is contained therein, and which quickeneth the souls of Thy creatures and the hearts of Thy servants.”⁽⁴⁾

“Cause me to taste, O my Lord, the divine sweetness of Thy remembrance and praise. I swear by Thy might! Whosoever tasteth of its sweetness will rid himself of all attachment to the world and all that is therein, and will set his face towards Thee, cleansed from the remembrance of any one except Thee.”⁽⁵⁾

“Strive, O people, that your eyes may be directed towards the mercy of God, that your hearts may be attuned to His wondrous remembrance, that your souls may rest confidently upon His grace and bounty.”⁽⁶⁾

Though not the only meaning for the term “remembrance” it is interesting to consider that this is one of the meanings, and that this form of devotional practice, using recitation, can be a source of great bounty to our souls. It is surely worthy of consideration and reflection that Bahá'u'lláh has given us the recitation of the Greatest Name as a “mantra” for our regular practice.

Developing our practice

One way we could make our practice of reciting the Greatest Name more effective then, is

having the right attitude before we even start. We can do this by reminding ourselves of its great value to us, and then by finding a heartfelt reason for why we are actually doing it; for instance, because we need more clarity, or peace, or compassion, or whatever, in our minds and hearts today. Doing this brings us into the here and now and helps prevent our practice becoming an unconscious ritual, and when we do drift off into a daydream this personal affirmation can be a useful tool to use again for re-focusing us.

Next, commit ourselves, as Bahá'u'lláh revealed, to “*Forget all save Me and commune with My Spirit ...*”⁽⁷⁾ and wholeheartedly dedicate the short period of our meditation for the nourishment of our souls. (We know that doing it in less than ninety-five seconds before we run for the bus, or whatever, just isn't sound practice.)

Moving onto the recitation, with this type of devotional practice we are repeatedly turning the mirror of our hearts towards the spiritual sun. Attuning is the way Bahá'u'lláh describes this process, which suggests making adjustments to our attitude, polishing away self, until we become receptive to the Divine. A helpful attitude would be one of trust, that we know the inner sun will shine, and humility, that we cannot force it, any more than we have the power to hurry away the clouds in the sky. So we sit there patiently, waiting for the sun to break through, with thoughts stilled, our hearts re-affirming our need and God's greatness with each invocation.

Once we feel the sun break through the clouds and its golden rays fall upon us, we open like flowers to them, and fall in love with their warmth. The more we fall in love with that Source of comfort and strength we feel within us, the more we become embraced and enraptured by it. Rather than actively invoking, we are now passively receiving – our hearts expressing gratitude with each recitation.

Even though we can be aware that this form of practice is a source of great blessing for us, it would surely be unrealistic to expect ourselves to have sufficient focus to perform it without loss of concentration. When we repeatedly fall short it would be more helpful to recognise that we are trying to grow spiritually, and it should be a positive, nourishing experience. So if we become distracted we should never get frustrated as this is completely counterproductive. It would be like thrashing the pond with our stick, in the analogy; everything would just get stirred up.

When we do get distracted by sounds around us or thoughts from within there is a skill that can be very helpful to practice.

1. notice what's distracted us
2. focus on it briefly and identify what it is (noise, memory, daydream)
3. then without any frustration whatever about having got distracted again, return to the heartfelt recitation of the Greatest Name, and just be grateful we are able to recite it mindfully even once. As Shoghi Effendi wrote, “... *we must be infinitely patient with our own poor selves.*”⁽⁸⁾

Regular, effective practice

One of the other major considerations is that whatever we practice we get good at, whether its beneficial or harmful to us, so making our practice effective and not an unconscious ritual is really important. Otherwise we are just programming ourselves with an unhelpful frame of mind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá assures us that we all have the faculty of meditation so we can all meditate if we make the effort, but to really benefit and release more of the wonderful potential latent within us we have to practice regularly, and effectively.

When we do practice regularly this will likely involve a new routine and we can expect to meet resistance from old patterns of thinking and an ego resistant to change. Learning to become aware of influences from within that give rise to excuses that seek to discourage us from meditating is going to be part of our regular work. Focusing on the positive aspects of practice, rather than having an inner battle is one way to deal with it. As Bahá'u'lláh revealed,

“We cherish the hope that through the loving kindness of the All-Wise obscuring dust will

we cherish the hope that through the loving kindness of the All-wise obscuring dust will be dispelled and the power of perception be enhanced.”⁽⁹⁾

All this is, of course, just one perspective. We are all developing our own now, and it can be really fascinating to hear of the creative ways others manage to “attune” themselves to the Divine using this “worshipful meditation”. Sharing ideas about the practical considerations of when and where to do it can also be helpful.

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 147
2. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 264
3. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 65
4. Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 82
5. Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 82
6. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 297
7. Bahá’u’lláh, *Arabic Hidden Words*, no. 16
8. Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 222
9. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 35

Recommended Reading:

Prayer, Meditation and the Devotional Attitude, UHJ compilation no. 11. Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981.

Meditation, Wendi Momen. George Ronald.

Unlocking the Gate of the Heart, Lasse Thoresen. George Ronald, 1998. In particular p. 149 et seq.

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