

Detachment

1

'O Friends! Abandon not the everlasting beauty for a beauty that must die, and set not your affections on this mortal world of dust.'¹ *Bahá'u'lláh*

'O My Servant! Free thyself from the fetters of this world, and loose thy soul from the prison of self. Seize thy chance, for it will come to thee no more.'² *Bahá'u'lláh*

'He that seeketh to be a helper of God in this Day, let him close his eyes to whatever he may possess, and open them to the things of God.'³ *Bahá'u'lláh*

'Verily, the thing that deterreth you, in this day, from God is worldliness in its essence.'⁴ *Bahá'u'lláh*

'And as the human heart, as fashioned by God, is one and undivided, it behoveth thee to take heed that its affections be, also, one and undivided.'⁵ *Bahá'u'lláh*

'Whoso in the world overcomes this base unruly craving, from him sorrows fall away, like water-drops from a lotus-leaf.'⁶

Dhammapada

'When all desires are in peace . . . the mind, withdrawing within, gathers the multitudinous straying sense into the harmony of recollection . . .'⁷ *Gita*

'Behold the universe in the glory of God . . . Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal; set not your heart on another's possession.'⁸ *Isa Upanishad*

'I know that treasures pass away and that the Eternal is not reached by the transient.'⁹ *Katha Upanishad*

'The essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord, to enter His Presence, behold His Countenance, and stand as witness before Him.'¹⁰ *Bahá'u'lláh*

'Two paths lie in front of man. Pondering on them, the wise man chooses the path of joy; the fool takes the path of pleasure.'¹¹

Katha Upanishad

2

'If we suffer, it is the outcome of material things, and all the trials and troubles come from this world of illusion.

'For instance, a merchant may lose his trade and depression ensues. A workman is dismissed and starvation stares him in the face. A farmer has a bad harvest, anxiety fills his mind. A man builds a house which is burnt to the ground and he is straightway homeless, ruined, and in despair.

'All these examples are to show you that the trials which beset our every step, all our sorrow, pain, shame and grief, are born in the world of matter: whereas the spiritual Kingdom never causes sadness. A man living with his thoughts in this Kingdom knows perpetual joy. The ills all flesh is heir to do not pass him by, but they only touch the surface of his life, the depths are calm and serene.'¹²

'Abdu'l-Bahá

3

En route to Fort Tabarsí

As soon as Mullá Husayn had determined to pursue the way that led to Mázinarán, he, immediately after he had offered his morning prayer, bade his companions discard all their possessions. 'Leave behind all your belongings,' he urged them, 'and content yourselves only with your steeds and swords, that all may witness your renunciation of all earthly things, and may realize that this little band of God's chosen companions has no desire to safeguard its own property, much less to covet the property of others.' Instantly they all obeyed, and unburdening their steeds, arose and joyously followed him. The father of Badí' was the first to throw aside his satchel which contained a considerable amount of turquoise which he had brought with him from the mine that belonged to his father. One word from Mullá Husayn proved sufficient to induce him to fling by the roadside what was undoubtedly his most treasured possession, and to cling to the desire of his leader.¹³ *Nabíl*

The Bábís in the Síyáh-Chál

One day, there was brought to Our prison a tray of roasted meat which they informed Us the Sháh had ordered to be distributed among the prisoners. 'The Sháh,' We were told, 'faithful to a vow he made, has chosen this day to offer to you all this lamb in fulfilment of his pledge.' A deep silence fell upon Our companions, who expected Us to make answer on their behalf. 'We return this gift to you,' We replied, 'we can well dispense with this offer.' The answer We made would have greatly irritated the guards had they not been eager to devour the food we had refused to touch. Despite the hunger with which Our companions were afflicted, only one among them, a certain Mírzá Husayn-i-Mutavallíy-i-Qumí, showed any desire to eat of the food the sovereign had spread before us. With a fortitude that was truly heroic, Our fellow-prisoners submitted, without a murmur, to endure the piteous plight to which they were reduced. Praise of God, instead of complaint of the treatment meted out to them by the Sháh, fell unceasingly from their lips – praise with which they sought to beguile the hardships of a cruel captivity.

Every day Our gaolers, entering Our cell, would call the name of one of Our companions, bidding him arise and follow them to the foot of the gallows. With what eagerness would the owner of that name respond to that solemn call! Relieved of his chains, he would spring to his feet and, in a state of uncontrollable delight, would approach and embrace Us. We would seek to comfort him with the assurance of an ever-lasting life in the world beyond, and, filling his heart with hope and joy, would send him forth to win the crown of glory. He would embrace, in turn, the rest of his fellow-prisoners, and then proceed to die as dauntlessly as he had lived. Soon after the martyrdom of each of these companions, We would be informed by the executioner, who had grown to be friendly with Us, of the circumstances of the death of his victim, and of the joy with which he had endured his sufferings to the very end.¹⁴ *Bahá'u'lláh*

For younger children

Whilst children are small they are often fiercely possessive about the things they own. When teaching about detachment, try to direct their thoughts to the fact that physical possessions do not last – they

break, get lost, wear out, and so on; but spiritual possessions like love, kindness, trustworthiness last forever and ever. The following stories will help you illustrate this.

Fujita

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá came to America, H. S. Fujita was a medical student at the University of Michigan. Like his famous forerunner who was short of stature, he climbed a sycamore tree to see the Master pass by. 'Come down, Zachias, for this day I would sup with thee,' called the flute-like voice of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Fujita relinquishing every human tie followed Him back to Mount Carmel to become a helper in the household.' Fujita, who passed away quite recently, spent most of his time, since that day in 1912, in the Holy Land.¹⁵ *Honnold*

Bahá'u'lláh and the Egyptian Merchant

Bahá'u'lláh spent many years of His life in prison because people did not understand Him. But finally He was allowed to live in a house outside the walls of the old city of 'Akká. Now there was a merchant in Egypt who longed to visit Bahá'u'lláh, so he wrote and asked if he might come. Bahá'u'lláh told him that he could make a visit only when he no longer owed money to anyone.

The merchant had an important business. His caravans crossed the desert laden with riches. He was quite wealthy, but he also owed a great deal of money to different people. If he paid back all this money, he would not be nearly so rich. But he felt that this did not matter, for more than anything else in the world he wanted to see Bahá'u'lláh. So he began to pay his debts. It took him five years to pay everything. And when he had finished, he had only enough money left to take care of his family while he was away and to pay for a steamer ticket. He could not even pay for a bed on the boat. He would have to sleep on the deck.

But he was very happy when he got on the boat. He did not even worry when his shawl, which would help keep out the winds at night, slipped into the water and disappeared. He was on his way to see Bahá'u'lláh and nothing else mattered.

On the day when the boat was to arrive in Haifa, Bahá'u'lláh sent a man with a horse and carriage to meet the merchant. He told this

servant that He was expecting a very noble guest. So the servant went to the boat and looked for someone who appeared very rich and grand. He found no such person, so he drove back to Bahá'u'lláh and told Him that the visitor had not come.

But Bahá'u'lláh knew better. He knew that the servant had not recognised His guest. So this time He sent 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Master went to Haifa and He found only a shabby, sad-looking little man sitting quietly on a bench. He hurried to his side and welcomed him.

The merchant had been disappointed that no one had met him and thought Bahá'u'lláh had forgotten all about him. Now here was 'Abdu'l-Bahá and he felt very ashamed for thinking that Bahá'u'lláh had failed him.

The Master suggested that they drive to 'Akká. But the merchant said he could not go yet. He must first pray and beg God's forgiveness for his lack of faith. He had not a single penny and he could not let 'Abdu'l-Bahá pay for a room at a hotel, so they decided to spend the night praying on the little bench.

'Abdu'l-Bahá unbuttoned His long, wide cloak and wrapped it around them both. He put His arm around the merchant. And so they sat and prayed together all through the night.

In the morning they drove to 'Akká. Now the merchant felt that his heart was at last pure enough to come to Bahá'u'lláh and talk with Him about God. He must have felt rich indeed. He was rich in the love of God. It did not matter that he was a poor man without money. *Adapted from M. H. Ford*

Lucky Hans

Hans had served his master for seven long years. 'My time is up now,' he said to his master. 'Give me my wages, for I want to go home to my mother.'

'You have served me well and faithfully,' replied his master. 'Your reward shall be as good as your service.' With these words he gave Hans a huge lump of gold as big as his head. Hans pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket, wrapped up the lump of gold, lifted it on his shoulder, and set out for home.

The way was long and exhausting. His eyes lit up when he suddenly saw a man on horseback, trotting merrily along, at ease with the world. 'How wonderful it must be to ride!' he exclaimed.

'There you sit, just as if you were in an armchair. You don't stub your toes against stones, you save your shoe leather, and you cover the ground at a fine rate.'

The horseman heard his words, and pulled up. 'Hullo, Hans!' he called. 'If that's what you think, why are you walking?'

'I have to,' Hans explained sadly. 'I have this heavy old lump to carry around with me. It is pure gold, it's true, but it is so heavy that I cannot stand upright.'

'I know,' said the horseman. 'Let us make an exchange. I will give you my horse, and you give me your lump.'

'Delighted!' cried Hans. 'But I must warn you that you will soon be tired out with carrying it.'

So the horseman dismounted and took the bundle. He helped Hans upon the horse and put the reins in his hands. 'If you want it to go faster,' he explained, 'you simply click your tongue and say, "Hup, hup".'

Hans was very pleased with himself as he sat on the horse's back and rode along without having to exert himself at all. After a while he thought he would like to go faster, so he clicked his tongue and cried, 'Hup, hup'. At once the horse broke into a brisk canter, and before Hans knew what was happening he flew over the horse's head and landed in a muddy ditch. The horse would have run away, had it not been caught by a farmer who was passing by, driving a cow before him. After making sure that no bones were broken, Hans stood up and said sulkily, 'A fine game, this riding, when the horse does its best to break your neck! That's the last time you'll ever catch me riding a horse!'

'Well,' said the farmer, 'if it suits you, I shall be pleased to exchange my cow for your horse.' Hans agreed gladly, and the farmer leapt into the saddle and rode off.

Hans drove the cow quietly along, and thought how lucky he had been. As long as I have bread, he said to himself, I can have bread with butter and cheese on it as often as I want! If I am thirsty, all I have to do is to milk the cow. What else could I possibly ask for?

When he came to a wayside inn he halted and ate all the food he had with him, and bought a small glass of beer for a few pence. Then he drove his cow on towards his mother's village.

As midday approached the heat became more and more oppressive, and Hans found himself crossing a wide heath. He grew so hot and thirsty that he stopped to milk the cow in order to quench his

thirst. He tethered her to a tree trunk and, as he had no bucket, he laid his leather cap on the ground beneath her. But no matter how hard he tried, not a single drop of milk appeared. He was so clumsy that the poor beast lost patience with him and gave him a powerful kick on the head with her hind leg, which sent him sprawling on the ground.

For a few moments Hans did not know where he was, but luckily for him a butcher chanced to pass that way, pushing before him a young pig in a wheelbarrow. 'What's the trouble, Hans?' he called. Hans told him what had happened and the butcher gave him a drink from his water-bottle. 'That cow will never give you much milk,' he said. 'She is far too old and is fit only for ploughing or for meat.'

'Who would have thought it?' said Hans, rubbing his head. 'I suppose I could use her for meat, but I don't like beef! It is too dry for me. But a young pig like yours, that would taste fine, and you could have sausages, too.'

'Listen, Hans,' said the butcher. 'If you like, I will help you by exchanging my little pig for your old cow.'

'Many thanks indeed for your generosity,' cried Hans, and he handed over his cow, leading the pig away in exchange.

He continued on his way, well contented with his lot. Whenever anything happened to annoy him, something always turned up to put matters right. Before long he met a young fellow who was carrying a plump goose under his arm. Hans told him all about his good fortune, and how he had made so many favourable exchanges. The young fellow told him that he was taking the goose to a christening feast. 'Just feel how heavy it is!' he said, holding it up by the wings. 'I've been fattening it for eight weeks. It will make a tasty roast.'

'Yes,' said Hans, weighing the goose in his hands. 'It's quite heavy. But so is my pig.'

Meanwhile the young fellow was looking about suspiciously and shaking his head doubtfully at the pig. 'You know,' he said 'the mayor of our village has just had a pig stolen, and I'm afraid - I'm very much afraid - that it's the one you have here. He has sent people out to look for it, and it would be a sad thing for you if you were caught. They would certainly lock you up in the dungeon.'

Poor Hans was scared out of his wits. 'What can I do?' he cried. 'Would you exchange your goose for my pig?'

'Well,' said the lad, 'it's a little risky, but I hate to think of you

getting into trouble.' So he set the goose down, seized the pig, and made off quickly down another track.

Freed of his worries, Hans took the goose under his arm and plodded on towards his mother's cottage. 'Another good exchange!' he said to himself. 'I shall have a wonderful roast and plenty of goose dripping for my bread for several months, and I shall have all the beautiful soft feathers besides. I think I will make a pillow with the feathers so that I shall be able to sleep comfortably at nights. How pleased my mother will be!'



As he walked through the last village on his way home, he came across a grinder with his grindstone on a barrow. As he turned the grindstone, the grinder sang,

'I sharpen scissors and knives all day
My stone drives all the rust away.'

Hans paused to watch him at work. 'You seem to have a very happy job.'

'Yes indeed,' replied the grinder. 'This trade is a great money-spinner. A good grinder will find money whenever he puts his hand in his pocket. But where did you buy that fine goose?'

'I didn't buy it,' said Hans, 'I exchanged my pig for it.'

'And your pig?'

'Oh, I was given that in exchange for my cow.'

'And the cow?'

'I was given that in exchange for my horse.'

'And the horse?'

'I exchanged my lump of gold for that—a lump as big as my head.'

'And the gold?'

'That was my wages for seven years' service.'

'You seem to have done very well for yourself,' he said. 'How

would you like to hear the money jingle in your pocket every time you stand up or sit down?’

‘How could I do that?’ asked Hans.

‘By becoming a grinder, like me. All you need is a grindstone – the rest is easy. You could have mine, if you like. It is a little worn, so I will let you have it in exchange for your goose, if you like.’

‘Will you really?’ said Hans. ‘I am the luckiest person in the whole world. What shall I have to worry about, if I have money whenever I put my hand in my pocket?’ So he handed over his goose, and took the grindstone.

‘And here,’ said the grinder as he picked up a heavy boulder from the roadside, ‘is another useful stone, which you can use for hammering straight all your bent nails. Take this too, and look after it well!’

Hans picked up his two stones, and went happily on his way. His eyes sparkled with joy. ‘I must have been born under a lucky star,’ he said. ‘Everything I could possibly wish for seems to come true!’

He had been on his feet all day, and by this time he was tired. He was also beginning to feel very hungry, for he had eaten all his food in his joy at having the cow. Soon he was stumbling along a few yards at a time, pausing every few minutes to rest. His two stones weighed him down painfully, and he thought how good it would be if only he did not have to carry them. He crawled at a snail’s pace to a spring by the side of the track to take another rest and refresh himself with a drink of cool water. He laid his stones carefully by the edge of the spring so that they would not be damaged as he sat down, and then he bent to drink. But as he stretched he knocked against the stones and they fell into the spring with a great splash.

When he watched them sink right to the bottom, Hans jumped for joy, and then knelt with tears in his eyes to thank God for delivering him from his troublesome burden, which was all that had prevented him from being perfectly happy.

‘There’s no one under the sun as lucky as I,’ he cried. With a light heart and free of every burden, he ran lightly on his way and was soon home in his mother’s cottage. *Folk Tale*

- A. How can we be detached and still live a 'normal' life in this world? Should we live like a 'holy' man in the forest away from the real world?

'By the world is meant that which turneth you aside from Him Who is the Dawning-Place of Revelation, and inclineth you unto that which is unprofitable unto you.'¹⁶ *Bahá'u'lláh*

- B. What sort of things do you think could turn you away from God?
- C. Consider very carefully what things are profitable to you in the long run, throughout eternity, and what people think are valuable for a shorter length of time.
- D. Do we only need to be detached from material things?
'As a solid rock is not shaken by the wind, even so the wise are not ruffled by praise or blame.'¹⁷ *Dhammapada*
- E. Must we also be detached from love?
'He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.'¹⁸ *Bahá'u'lláh*
- F. How can love lead us to make mistakes?
- G. Is it human love or divine love that God asks us to be detached from?