

To Sponsoring Institutions and Facilitators

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The *Bahá'í Essentials*' studies were prepared to assist souls who have found faith in God and His Manifestation Bahá'u'lláh obtain a comprehensive introduction to Bahá'í life. Completion of these studies helps believers become fully familiar with the fundamental verities of the Faith, its purposes and organization, as well as the disciplines, laws, behaviors and attitudes necessary for a supported, protected, and sustained life of spiritual growth and development as a Bahá'í. Many of the communications of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice identify the subjects of study they deemed important for consolidating new believers. The subjects of study chosen for *Bahá'í Essentials* were derived solely from their recommendations. (See "References for Subjects of Study" at www.bahaessentials.com) "True consolidation," the Universal House of Justice has written, "is to ensure that the love of Bahá'u'lláh and devotion to His Faith are firmly rooted in the hearts of the believers." These studies help provide believers with the essentials necessary to ensure their love for Bahá'u'lláh remains forever nurtured.

Local Spiritual Assemblies are charged with the responsibility to see that that each new believer is thoroughly deepened in the Faith. This material provides Assemblies a comprehensive collection of basic studies which can be provided for small groups at a convenient location or online. They can also be used for independent study.

As a service to one's community any individual can sponsor a group study in their home, online or in someone else's home, while keeping their Assembly fully informed of their activity.

FACILITATORS

A "Facilitator's Guide" and a "Guide for Independent Study" are provided as downloads at www.bahaessentials.com. A review of the applicable guide is unquestionably important prior to facilitating a study.

Facilitator's notes are clearly identified and provided in each section of every study as well. They are there to help the facilitator and the participants move through the study with ease and order.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

The learning process used in these studies has been long in development. You may identify similarities with the Personal Transformation Program developed in the United States in the seventies, where verses from the Bahá'í Writings were read, key phrases identified, brainstorming ways to apply the wisdom gained from the verse employed followed by a commitment to initiate new behavior in one's life. The sharing exercise used in these studies finds its origin in the talking circle practiced by Natives of the American continent and other places in the world. The repeated reading aloud of verses and asking questions that are to be answered directly from the verses, as done in the early Ruhi studies, has been modified and adapted to this specific process. An experiential learning process is employed, similar to that used by the Core Curriculum training, while applications of other techniques for adult learning have been incorporated as well. With the implementation of this learning process, control is applied where needed and creativity is enhanced when applicable. Exploration of the meaning of the Sacred Verses is guided by the learning process so that excessive analysis and endless speculation of meaning can be restrained. Open discussion of the personal affects of the Holy Verses is thereby postponed to the sharing exercise, which provides an opportunity for each participant to share that heart-felt "mystical feeling" generated by the Writings, an exercise providing numerous benefits. The writing exercise provides the opportunity to reinforce the learning of the fundamental verities of the subject under study. The

application exercise affords an occasion for the participants to imagine and plan for specific action and behavior as inspired by the study experience. The short reading at the end of each study serves to consolidate the purposes of the exercises and/or expand on the information when deemed appropriate.

SELECTION OF QUOTATIONS

Quotations used for study in *Bahá'í Essentials* were selected only from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and letters written on his behalf, and the Universal House of Justice, which, as explained by the Guardian, is authorized to “elucidate” on the Bahá'í Teachings. The importance of using the Sacred Writings (specifically from the three Central Figures) to study the Bahá'í Teachings is emphasized and explained in the *Institute Training Programs*, prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre for the International Teaching Centre, June 1995, which states: “Emphasis on the study of the Sacred Writings stands out as the single most important aspect of a successful program. ... Through the use of the Creative Word and participative methods of learning, those who coordinate or facilitate institute activities will find that they are touching wellsprings of love, devotion and commitment in the participants. Where the Creative Word and participative methods are employed, the programs of the institute become attractive to the population, and the number of participants usually increases and does not dwindle. In such programs, it is unnecessary, then, to depend upon repeated emotional appeals as a motivational technique, because more profound sentiments and spiritual susceptibilities are constantly evoked and nurtured. ... The use, then, of the Creative Word, the atmosphere of love and fellowship, a spiritual and disciplined environment free of subtle psychological pressures, well-integrated and balanced program content, and the use of participative methods: all these elements help make an institute an effective instrument for the development of true understanding in the believers.” Clearly, these same considerations are necessary for any quality study experience.

The criteria for selecting quotations for study were the same for each lesson. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, pertaining to each subject of study, were reviewed to identify the fundamental verities or basic truths related to the objective of the study. Quotations for each study were then selected that best illustrated more than one fundamental verity or best presented one of the basic truths related to the objectives. The Universal House of Justice has instructed publishers to see that *compilations* of the Bahá'í Writings be ranked in order beginning first with Bahá'u'lláh and proceeding with the Báb, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, letters written on his behalf and then the Universal House of Justice. The selections used in these studies are not a mere compilation of quotations, but are intentionally presented in a specific order considered best for learning the fundamental verities cited in the objectives. There are numerous quotations to choose from, however, to keep the course time under two hours, it was imperative to restrict the amount of material. The quotations chosen identify and explain the fundamentals best in the author's estimation.

READING OUT LOUD

The first step in each study, after reading the introduction and objectives, is an oral reading of the quotation. Reading the quotations out loud at least twice provides numerous benefits. First, it is well known by professional educators that the reader acquires a much better understanding of a passage when reading the verse out loud or even re-writing the selection. Additionally, those who hear it read, and follow along, acquire a more conscious understanding of the intent of the verse. Learning is significantly enhanced whenever more than one of the senses are involved in an experience. Reading a verse out loud more than once allows for certainty of syntax: that is, the relationship of words and phrases become more clear.

CONFIRMING UNDERSTANDING WITH WORD SUBSTITUTION

Historically in religion, study of Holy Scripture has required the definition of the words of Sacred Verses be explained by authorized representatives. When a student asked for the definition of a word or a phrase it was commonly described by an authority figure whose answer was usually final. Even in our Faith it is common for Bahá'í teachers, and sometimes even other participants, to explain what a word or verse means when a student asks. This deserves notable attention and care because if questions about the definition of sacred words and verses are described improperly, it can lead to the establishment of inaccurate beliefs, a situation we want to minimize as much as possible.

In this study process the definition of words is left neither to the personal interpretation of the facilitator, nor to the possible speculation of the student. In this step of the study process, phrases, definitions, or synonyms are provided to temporarily substitute for various words in the selected quotation to help the participant comprehend the definition of words more accurately, and thereby better understand the verse. Bahá'u'lláh reminds us: “...*the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man.*” (KI, p. 172)

After reading a quotation out loud, students are asked if they would like a better understanding of any word in the verse. If so, they are instructed to refer to that word in the boxes below each quotation and read the substitute phrase, definition or synonym out loud. Then, they are asked to read again the sentence containing the word they selected, while **substituting** for that word its given phrase, definition or synonym. This is repeated with other words as desired by the students. This process helps assure that the student acquires a valid understanding of the words in the Sacred Verses.

Substituting a word or phrase in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings can cause concern for some. However, this is *just an exercise* to better understand the definition of a word, in context with the verse and other writings related to the topic, and not an attempt to interpret the deeper implications of what the Writings “mean”. The substitute phrases, definitions, and synonyms used in these studies were carefully selected to remain consistent with the context of the lesson, and to best explain or reveal the fundamental verities or basic truths under investigation. This exercise is one attempt to apply the directive of `Abdu'l-Bahá when he wrote: “It is my hope that you may put forth your most earnest endeavor to ... 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.” A correct comprehension of the definition of words used in a verse enhances the participant's ability to “understand the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the words.”

Since most of the Bahá'í Writings available to us are translated in a style used by Shoghi Effendi, it was important to remain as true as possible to his intended meaning of a word when providing substitute phrases, definitions and synonyms, and to stay consistent with the definitions as they were understood during the time of his education and later used in his translation of Bahá'í Writings from Arabic and Persian into English. The Guardian was educated at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon during the early part of the twentieth century. Since it was an American college, I assume, but with no concrete evidence, they probably used *Webster's Dictionary*, which was predominant in American colleges at that time. He did attend Oxford University for approximately a year and a half, where it is safe to assume the *Oxford English Dictionary* was preferred. The author received advice from Hand of the Cause of God Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum in a communication from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice that the English dictionary to which the beloved Guardian habitually referred was the unabridged version of “*Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*,” Second Edition, published in 1934 by G. and C. Merriam Company. “Reference to this specific edition of this dictionary,” she advised, “is obviously, very important when gauging the exact meaning intended by Shoghi Effendi in the use of certain words.”

Meanings of words change with time as dictionaries are compiled from current usage of words in a population. The meaning of words during the early part of the twentieth century, as reflected by the dictionaries of that time, had more spiritual and religious overtones than those published today. This reflects, no doubt, the move away from spirituality and religion during the latter half of the twentieth century. Using a dictionary consistent with that referred to by the Guardian gives us a more accurate understanding of the intended meaning he was considering when translating. For these reasons the primary dictionary used to ensure accuracy in writing substitute phrases, definitions, and synonyms in these studies, was the same version preferred by the Guardian. Additional dictionaries referred to include: *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, First Edition; *Webster's Elementary Dictionary*; *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition; and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. Furthermore, extensive review of words used in varied contexts in the Bahá'í Writings was undertaken so that continuity and relativity of meaning could be better understood.

When words from the Bahá'í Writings had an obvious symbolic intent, or were figurative in nature, the author utilized either the definition of these symbolic terms as illustrated by one of the Central Figures of the Faith, or used the figurative definition as described in *Webster's Dictionary*.

The word substitution exercises in these studies are, therefore, just for the purpose of clarifying and simplifying words so that the **obvious** intent may be conveyed. For as 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "It is not the reading of the words that profits you; it is the understanding of their meanings." Furthermore, as most public information materials are written for an audience with an average sixth grade education, words used in these substitute phrases, definitions, and synonyms are generally written on an elementary school level. Sometimes more advanced terminology was used when it was thought necessary by the author as the only way to remain true to the exact definition.

Another reason for supplying a substitute phrase, definition, or synonym for given words in these studies, rather than just having participants look up words in a dictionary, is that dictionaries often give too many meanings that can, and do, confuse many as to the intent of a Bahá'í verse. Reading through the numerous meanings of several words from a verse can lead to greater confusion than to clarity, unless care is taken to remain true to context and consistent with other Bahá'í Writings related to the topic. Bahá'u'lláh did write: "*We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings...*" And related to this 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "...the Words of God have innumerable significances and mysteries of meanings — each one a thousand and more." Neither of them seems to be talking about the common definition of words. Their Writings make it clear that the "meanings" to which they refer are those spiritual implications portrayed in the Word of God.

FINDING VALUE

This exercise is simple, yet has considerable worth in learning the fundamental verities of the Faith. The participants are asked to begin an active search for gems of truth by stating each basic fact or truth that can be found in the quotation about the given subject. It's an exercise in a fundamental Bahá'í principle: independent investigation of truth.

This step is unique to this learning process and to most religious study because the participants are allowed to investigate the sacred Scriptures for themselves without unnecessary interpretation by a clergy member or another authorized individual. This was encouraged by the Guardian when written on his behalf: "...it is necessary that they [new believers] should deepen their knowledge of the teachings. They should learn to *study the words for themselves* and both grasp their significance and also become imbued with their spirit." (COC, Vol. I, pp. 216-17, #465)

This independent search for truth, with its consequential self-discovery, makes for better learning and retention than giving the participant a list of facts. Exploration gives joy and enthusiasm to the spirit while learning listed facts can be lifeless and boring.

ROUND OF SHARING

This exercise offers a unique component to the learning process that a typical academic approach to learning often lacks. The Universal House of Justice has discouraged a “cold analyzing” approach to learning, while advocating “participatory” methods. All the exercises in these studies employ participatory methods. However, to avoid cold analyzing, individual participation is guided by the design of each exercise and by the facilitator. To assure that each individual does have an opportunity to express his or her heart-felt joys inspired by the Word of God, a specific sharing exercise is included in each study. Most sharing is deferred to this specific time to help avoid cold analyzing and to create a more equitable and trusting learning environment. Excessive commentary is actively discouraged early in the session *so that no participant dominates the discussions*. Any tendency to excessively share one’s perspectives of the meaning or application of words, phrases, or verses, or the frequent answering of questions raised by others, is moderately suppressed by the process. If this activity is not contained, it can take up considerable time and be distracting to the group. Those who are reserved and hesitant to share their thoughts and feelings also have much to offer. However, if one or two dominate the conversation and consultation, it leaves the group deprived of the more desirable all-inclusive input. Structuring the learning process as it is here helps create a more equitable and trusting learning environment, enabling more individuals to benefit from the group experience.

When participants feel safe enough to share their feelings about how they are affected by the Word of God, it can arouse empathy in others that is key to producing loving relationships. The unique structure of this sharing experience developed for *Bahá’í Essentials*, has a distinct way of producing bonds of fellowship, love and affection among the participants that is indispensable to a good group learning experience.

SOME QUESTIONS (A WRITING EXERCISE)

This exercise consists of questions to be answered in writing. Its purpose is to reinforce learning of the fundamental verities under study and sometimes to convey necessary information to the participant that was not present in the quotations. Furthermore, it allows the participant an opportunity to check his or her accuracy of understanding. This is not a test for evaluating or demonstrating skills or knowledge of participants.

Reviewing the answers immediately after completing this exercise enhances learning and helps assure retention of essential concepts. Answers to the questions are located at the end of each study.

The questions in these studies are general in nature. Facilitators may choose to include additional questions that are culture or age-specific to make the experience more relevant to the participants.

APPLICATION EXERCISE

In this step of the study process the participants are asked to imagine how the Bahá’í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. This activity evokes and reveals one of the most outstanding features of the human reality: the ability to imagine. In this exercise all responses are valuable and participants should be encouraged to be creative. This is one way a group of souls can discover and develop new spiritual behaviors from the **creative** Word of God.

Those involved in the education and training of adults have repeatedly witnessed the value of making a commitment to action after learning a new concept or principle. A commitment to make conscious efforts to translate information and knowledge into action is a vital component of any learning experience. Writing out that commitment creates even stronger resolve to make meaningful changes.

THE CLOSING READING

The closing readings, stories or prayers located at the end of each study are there to reinforce the learning of the fundamental verity, to inspire action, and/or to give closure to the experience.