

# About These Studies

The *Bahá'í Essentials*' studies were prepared to assist souls who have found faith in God and His Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh, to 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 communications from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice identify the subjects they deemed important for consolidating new believers. The subjects of study chosen for *Bahá'í Essentials* were derived primarily from their recommendations. (See "[References for Subjects of Study](#)" at [www.bahaessentials.com](http://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."<sup>1</sup> These studies help provide believers with the essentials necessary to ensure their love for Bahá'u'lláh remains forever nurtured.

Local Spiritual Assemblies are responsible for ensuring that each new believer is thoroughly deepened in the Faith. This material offers Assemblies a comprehensive collection of basic studies that can be presented to small groups at a convenient location or online. They can also be used for independent study.

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

## FACILITATORS and PARTICIPANTS

"[Suggestions for Facilitators](#)" and "[Suggestions for Independent Study](#)" are available for download at [www.bahaessentials.com](http://www.bahaessentials.com). A review of the applicable guide is unquestionably important prior to proceeding with the studies.

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 developed over many years. Some may recognize similarities to the Personal Transformation Program created in the United States in the seventies, in which verses from the Bahá'í Writings were read, key phrases were identified, ways to apply the wisdom in the verses were brainstormed, and a commitment to initiate new behaviors was made. The sharing exercise in these studies originates from the talking circle practiced by Native peoples of North America and other parts of the world. The repeated reading out loud of verses and asking questions directly from the verses, as done in early Ruhi studies, have been adapted for this specific process. An experiential learning approach is employed, similar to that used in Core Curriculum training, and is integrated with other adult learning techniques. This process allows for appropriate control and, when suitable, encourages creativity. The exploration of the meaning of Sacred Verses is guided by the learning process to avoid excessive analysis and endless speculation. Open discussion of how the Holy Verses personally influence participants is postponed to the sharing exercise, which offers each person a chance to share heartfelt "mystical feelings" or "spiritual sentiments" inspired by the Writings—an experience with many benefits. The writing exercise reinforces understanding of the basic truths related to the topic. The application exercise encourages participants to imagine and plan specific actions inspired by their study. A short reading at the end of each session helps reinforce the exercise goals and may expand on the information when appropriate.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Universal House of Justice, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 2007, p. 593.

## 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 a document prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre: “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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 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 merely a 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 provides numerous benefits. First, professional educators know that readers acquire a much better understanding of a passage when they read it out loud or even rewrite it. Additionally, those who hear it read and follow along gain a more conscious understanding of the verse's intent. Learning is significantly enhanced whenever more than one of the senses are involved in a learning experience. Reading a verse out loud provides certainty about its syntax, bringing clarity to the relationships among words and phrases.

## CONFIRMING UNDERSTANDING WITH WORD SUBSTITUTION

Historically, in religion, the study of Holy Scripture has required definitions of sacred verses and words to be explained by authorized representatives. When a participant asked for the definition of a word or phrase, the answer was typically provided 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 participant asks. This deserves careful attention because if questions about the definition of sacred words and verses are posed improperly, they can lead to inaccurate beliefs, a situation we want to minimize as much as possible.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Institute Training Programs*, prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre for the International Teaching Centre, June 1995, p. 14.

In this study, the definition of words is left neither to the facilitator's personal interpretation nor to the participant's speculation. In this step of the study, phrases, definitions, or synonyms are provided to temporarily substitute for various words in the selected quotation, helping the participant comprehend those 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.*"<sup>1</sup>

After reading a quotation out loud, participants 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 the sentence or phrase again that contains the word they selected, while substituting for that word its given phrase, definition, or synonym from the boxes. This is repeated with other words as desired by the participants. This process helps assure that the participant 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 lesson's context 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."<sup>2</sup> 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 the 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."<sup>3</sup>

Meanings of words change with time as dictionaries are compiled from the current usage of words in a population. The meanings of words in the early part of the twentieth century, as reflected in the dictionaries of that time, had more spiritual and religious overtones than those in dictionaries 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 the one referred to by the Guardian gives us a

---

<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950, 1970 printing), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), par. 137.1, p. 459.

<sup>3</sup> [Dictionary Used by the Guardian](#)

more accurate understanding of the intended meaning he had in mind 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*; *Webster's Shorter School Dictionary (1914)*; *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition; and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. A review of online definitions was also considered to help ensure compatibility with current English usage. Furthermore, an 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 often 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. `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "It is not the reading of the words that profits you; it is the understanding of their meanings."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as most public information materials are written for an audience with an average sixth-grade education, the words used in these substitute phrases, definitions, and synonyms are generally at an elementary school level. Sometimes, more advanced terminology was used when the author deemed it necessary 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 list too many meanings that can, and do, confuse many about 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....*"<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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 they find 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 studies 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.

---

<sup>1</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), par. 137.1, p. 459.

<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950, 1970 printing), p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), par. 57.5, p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, "Deepening." In *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice 1963-1990*, (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. I, no. 465, pp. 216-17.

## **ROUND OF SHARING**

This exercise offers a unique component of the learning process that a typical academic approach 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 analysis, individual participation is guided by the design of each exercise and by the facilitator. To ensure that each individual has an opportunity to express their heartfelt joys inspired by the Bahá’í Writings, a specific sharing exercise is included in each study. Most sharing is deferred to this specific time to help avoid cold analysis and to create a more equitable and trusting learning environment.

Excessive commentary is actively discouraged early in the session *to prevent any participant from dominating the discussion*. Any tendency to excessively share one’s perspectives on 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 people dominate the conversation and consultation, the group is 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 the sacred Writings affect them, it can arouse empathy in others, which is key to fostering loving relationships. The unique structure of this sharing experience developed for *Bahá’í Essentials* produces bonds of fellowship, love, and affection among participants that are 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 their understanding. This is not a test to evaluate or demonstrate participants’ skills or knowledge.

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.

## **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 highlights and explores one of the most remarkable aspects of human nature: the ability to imagine. In this exercise, all responses are valued, and participants should be encouraged to be creative. This is one way a group of souls can discover and cultivate new spiritual behaviors through the creative Word of God.

Those involved in adult education and training recognize the importance of committing to action after learning a new concept or principle. A conscious effort to turn information and knowledge into action is a crucial part of any learning experience. Writing down that commitment strengthens determination to make meaningful changes and helps identify the next step.

## **THE CLOSING READING**

The closing readings, stories, or prayers at the end of each study are meant to reinforce the basic truths, inspire action, and provide closure to the experience.