

Environment and Spirituality

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Spiritual dimensions and practical action
The environmental example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá
The role of the individual

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The environmental example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

(One of the first colour photographs, Paris 1911)



In 1875... 'Abdu'l-Bahá rented an island created by two canals, diverted from the Na'mayn river to power two flour mills. On this island, 'Abdu'l-Bahá created an exquisite garden for His father.... Bahá'ulláh called the garden “Ridvan” - which means “paradise.”





He used to take a walk in the park along Riverside Drive. Often He went alone, and, knowing that the friends would like to accompany Him, He said, "I sleep on the grass. I come out of fatigue. My mind rests."



Along the way He commented on the greenness of the region and mentioned how much Bahá'u'lláh had enjoyed such scenes. Several times He asked the driver to stop, and the rest of the party stood and waited as He viewed the area.

(in New York)

When He had finished
He hurriedly left the
house and went again to
“His Garden.”

239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America - Allan L. Ward, 1979, p. 89



'Abdu'l-Bahá often walked in the morning and evening through Lincoln Park and through the zoo, taking the friends with Him and talking on the way.... From the zoo He led the friends toward the lake, sat on a bench...

239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America - Allan L. Ward, 1979, p. 54



...when some of the friends described places for sightseeing in America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked, “We love meetings of fidelity and not picturesque scenes.... If we wish to see places of interest and picturesque scenes we should do so when we go to pay visits or when we have to pass through such places and scenes.”

239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America - Allan L. Ward, 1979, p. 93



He visited the agricultural exposition, looking at the equipment for ploughing and irrigation, asking about their uses and prices, and surveying the displays of vegetables, grains and fruits. He bought some seeds to send to the Holy Land.

239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America - Allan L. Ward, 1979, p. 159

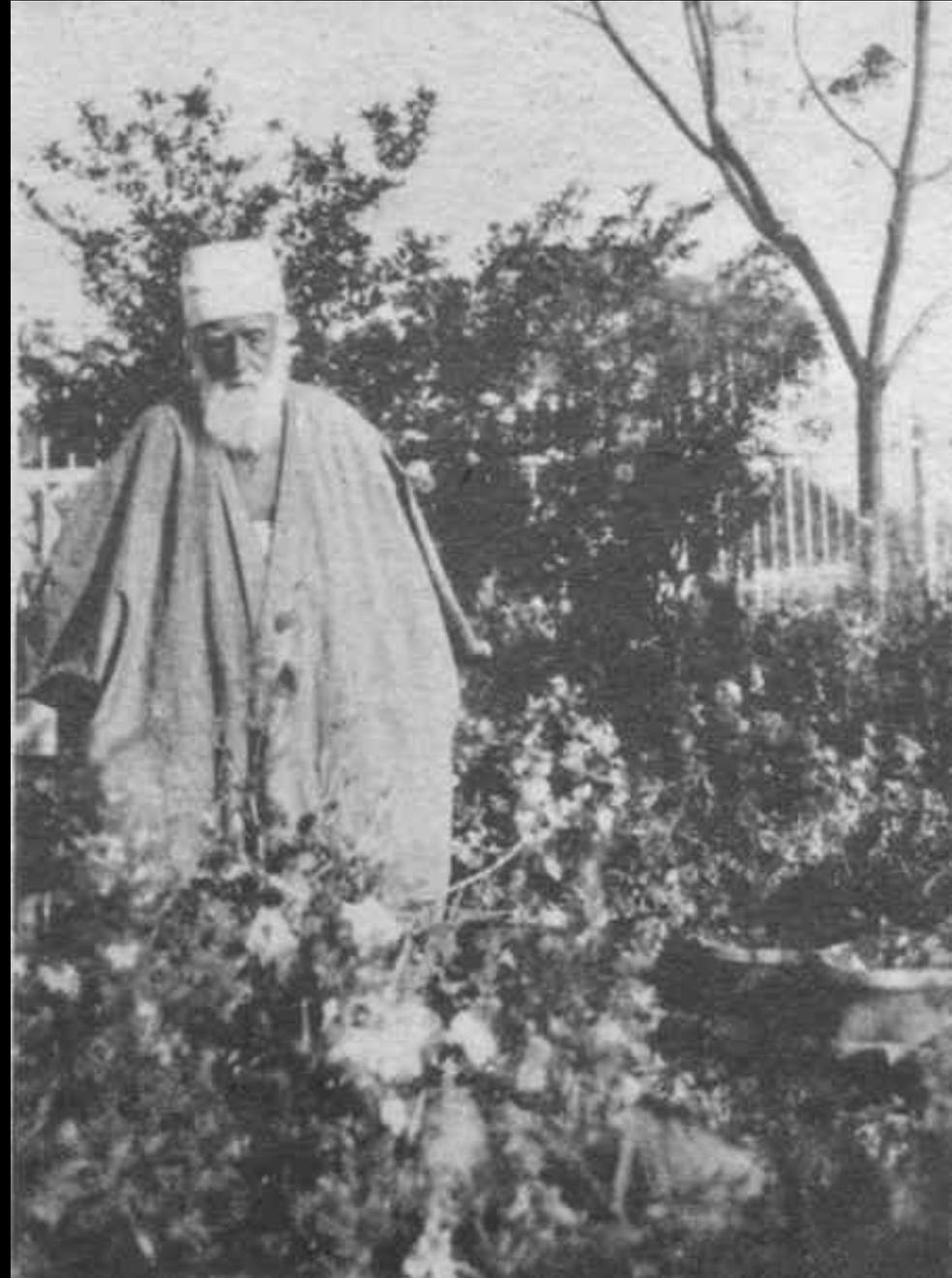


After morning prayers and tea 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His companions strolled around the beautiful grounds, surrounded by towering mountains.... 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "We have been in many places during this journey but we had no time to see the sights. We had not even a moment's rest. Today, however, we have had a little respite." As they came out and looked at the river and mountains, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said "May God have mercy on the tyrants who kept the Blessed Beauty in prison for forty years. Such scenes were loved by Him."

239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America - Allan L. Ward, 1979



So imperturbable was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's equanimity that, while rumors were being bruited about that He might be cast into the sea, or exiled to Fízán in Tripolitania, or hanged on the gallows, He, to the amazement of His friends and the amusement of His enemies, was to be seen planting trees and vines in the garden of His house, whose fruits when the storm had blown over, He would bid His faithful gardener, Ismá'íl Áqá, pluck and present to those same friends and enemies on the occasion of their visits to Him.



Who knows what memories stirred within Him as He stood before the thundering waters of Niagara, breathing the free air of a far distant land, or gazed, in the course of a brief and much-needed rest, upon the green woods and countryside in Glenwood Springs, or moved with a retinue of Oriental believers along the paths of the Trocadero gardens in Paris, or walked alone in the evening beside the majestic Hudson on Riverside Drive in New York, or as He paced the terrace of the Hotel du Parc at Thonon-les-Bains, overlooking the Lake of Geneva, or as He watched from Serpentine Bridge in London the pearly chain of lights beneath the trees stretching as far as the eye could see?

Shoghi Effendi (1957), *God Passes By*, pp. 292-293

In the small room on the roof where 'Abdu'l-Bahá slept and where he died, there was on his desk an illustrated booklet on the sequoias (redwoods) of California.

(personal observation on pilgrimage in 1960)



The way of freedom

How complex is the life of the present age and how much more complex we are making it daily! The needs of humanity seem never to come to an end. The more men accumulate the more they want. There is only one way of freedom and that is by shutting one's eyes and heart to all these things which distract the mind.

(Words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from the Diary of Ahmad Sohrab, September 21, 1913. *Star of the West*, Vol. 8 (April 9, 1917) no. 2, p. 17. Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Master: The Spiritual Teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Los Angeles, Kalimát Press, 2002)



A photograph of a cemetery. A gravel path leads from the bottom left towards a building in the distance. The sky is blue with large, white, fluffy clouds. Several trees of different shapes and sizes are scattered throughout the scene. In the foreground, there are some stone markers and a small, ornate lamp post. The overall atmosphere is serene and somewhat somber.

Spiritual dimensions and practical
action – the rôle of the individual

Our purpose in life

Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 72)

Voluntary Simplicity

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them.

(Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 193)

[The true seeker] should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 193-194)

How can we be more sustainable?

- make our lifestyles more sustainable, resisting the superficial attractions of the materialistic consumer society
- transform our values, giving priority to principles of justice, equity, generosity, moderation, service and unity in diversity
- draw motivation from the moral, ethical and spiritual principles common to the great religious traditions and most recently elaborated in the Bahá'í Faith
- understand how the lack of spirituality is behind the rising frustration, fear, hate, rejection and division threatening social catastrophes
- counter the forces of disintegration with stronger forces of integration, of solidarity and unity, starting with ourselves, our families, and in our own communities

Individual Actions

Our behaviour makes a big difference in the ways our lifestyle impacts the environment, particularly in three main sectors: energy use, transport and food.

Individual actions: energy

- Choose green energy without carbon emissions.
- Insulate your home.
- Lower the thermostat in winter.
- If you live in a hot climate, don't use air conditioning unless it is absolutely necessary and adjust the thermostat.
- Hang up your laundry to dry instead of using a clothes dryer.
- Before doing your laundry, wait until you have enough for a full load.
- Take short showers, since heating water uses energy.

Individual actions: energy

- Replace your incandescent bulbs by LEDs (Light Emitting Diodes)
- Turn off your computer, television, lights, etc. after use.
- Unplug chargers when not in use.
- Avoid standby mode in televisions and computers, turn them off.
- Reuse water bottles; use tap water, filtered if necessary, instead of buying bottled water.
- Reuse and recycle everything that you can.
- If you roof is in the sun, install solar panels.

Individual actions: transport

- Try to get around without a car: ride a bike, walk, take the bus or use carpooling or auto-sharing.
- Use and maintain public transport.
- Buy an electric, hybrid or low-consumption car if you cannot avoid using one.
- Do not let your car idle for long.
- Avoid unnecessary travel: do all your shopping in one trip rather than several short trips.
- Encourage your city to construct bicycle paths.
- Use a bicycle for frequent short trips.

Individual actions: food

- Reduce your meat consumption, especially beef, or become vegetarian or vegan.
- Prefer products low on the food chain, so fewer products of animal origin.
- Grow your own food.
- Participate in a community garden.
- Buy locally grown produce.
- Shop at an open market or the shop of local farmers.
- Buy organic food.
- Avoid excess packaging.
- Compost food and garden waste.

What can individuals do?

In general, it is sufficient to consume less and be fully aware of your impacts. Consider the life cycle of everything you have. That is, ask these questions: Where did it come from? Who made it, and in what conditions? What was the environmental cost? What was the impact on the people who conceived and made it? How did it travel to reach you? What will happen to it when it is broken or no longer useful, and is thrown away?

Questions for discussion

- How do we put into practice being content with little?
- What are the practical results of a spiritual life?
- How can we start individually and collectively to make a significant transformation in our lifestyle and ecological footprint?
- What will change in our personal lives and in society when we purposefully act to manage the Earth responsibly?
- Through what practical actions can we take less from the planet, and avoid depriving future generations?
- How can we teach this concept to our children?

A serene sunset scene over a calm body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a bright, shimmering path of light across the water's surface. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds, and the overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of palm trees frame the scene on both sides, adding a tropical feel.

Thank you

We can heal our relationship
with the environment
through spirituality