

An Instrument Tempered in the Crucible of Experience: Training Institutes and Habits of Thought

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The Universal House of Justice in its letter of 28 December 2010 addressed to the Continental Boards of Counsellors laid out a body of inspired guidance for the Friends. In this document there is a section that describes certain ways and habits of thinking. In the words of the House of Justice “Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Baha’i life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Baha’i activity.”^[1] As the Friends study this infallible guidance we should ask ourselves what are such tendencies, how do they start, what reinforces them, and how can we free ourselves from them. This article explores some of these issues.

Many of the things that we say or do are related to our perception of reality. And of course our words and actions also help bring about that perception. For instance, if we think of someone as being our enemy, then we act towards them accordingly. In fact the fastest way to make someone else to become our enemy is to think of them as our enemy. On the contrary if we think of other people as essentially noble beings, as mines “rich in gems of inestimable value”^[2] then our words and actions towards them will be informed by this worldview. This dynamic is also applicable to our view of ourselves. Many of the things that we say or do are equally related to our self-perception. It is here then that our thoughts really matter. Abdu’l-Baha said that “The reality of man is his thoughts.”^[3]

So we might want to ask how our thoughts are formed. We can think of our thoughts as a reflection of our soul in the mirror of our material existence. Certainly our biological composition, our inherited nature and the electro-chemical activities in our central nervous system has something to do with our thoughts. In particular if this instrument is not properly balanced or functional then we experience impairment in our thoughts. Hallucination is one such example. But beyond nature, nurture has a profound impact on our thoughts. From childhood we are taught to think happy thoughts. The prayers that we memorize and the songs that we sing have effects on how we think. Through the education that we receive, first in 12 years of formal schooling, and then through several more years of college and professional training we are taught a particular way of looking at the world and analyzing its contents. Through our experiences of life, our encounters with our fellow Baha’is, in the matrix of the community, and in our relationships with the institutions, life teaches us lessons that shape our modes of thinking. Beyond these physical and social dimensions there is the spiritual reality and it is sure to have significant impact on our thoughts. And finally our actions are intimately connected with the development of our thinking abilities.

The word culture is a rich and complex word, but for our purpose we can take it to refer to certain ways of being and doing, of thinking and acting, that form our habits. So we are exhorted to develop certain habits of thought until they become habitual to us, and we can say that such is one element of culture among the Baha'is, and to overcome the opposite tendencies. In particular the educational system that is promoted in most universities is materialistic in its assumptions. There is a long history of how this particular worldview came about, which we will not go into, but suffice it to note that it promotes precisely the three tendencies that are mentioned by the House of Justice, and which we are exhorted to overcome. We will examine these three tendencies separately.

We are advised to “remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing – this, without feeling the least degree of superiority, without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society.”^[4] This then defines our posture and attitude as we try to “consort with all men... in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship”^[5], contributing to the advancement of society, and being fully engaged in all our interactions.

The first of the three habits relates to the topic of wholeness. Centuries ago when science was much less advanced philosophers and thinkers were able to consider many aspects of every situation, according to the available knowledge. Gradually as science moved forward, it was no longer possible for one person to know or to think about all the relevant subjects, and specialization emerged. Today not only there is division of labor, but also division by discipline. This is of course necessary. Many of us have been trained to break up a problem into many parts, and begin to analyze each part, solving one issue at a time. Successful engineering design or medical diagnosis depends very much on this ability to separate any given whole into its constituent parts. While this analysis is important, there are healthy limits to it. We need to go back and look at the whole issue from a comprehensive angle.

What may have happened through decades of analytical thinking is that a tendency has developed to see each problem from views of specialists. Many people realize the limitations of this practice and create interdisciplinary studies. But these just become another part, another fragment. Excessive reliance on division has created fragmentation in our thinking. For some people the whole structure of their mind may be made of disconnected fragments, and of course they are unaware of this. Fragmented minds ask fragmented questions, and get fragmented answers, which only serves to present a fragmented view of reality, thus only confirming the original problem. Such minds often unwittingly impose their own structure on reality.^[6] The House of Justice advised us to “strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages”^[7], and that “difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments.”^[8]

In clarifying this guidance the House of Justice goes on further to encourage us “to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify

distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize.”^[9] We can be confident that such a salutary transformation will not take place over night, but that this is something that we need to practice over a long time, because, as the House of Justice states “this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans.” A natural question then arises as where and how should we practice this art of learning. To answer this question the infallible Head of the Faith shows the way: “We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.”^[10]

The training institute is an organizational structure, that offers an educational program starting from ages 5 or 6 for children and continues with junior youth spiritual empowerment program for those from 12 to 14 years old. When a person reaches the age of 15 he or she would want to register in a study circle and begin exploration of spiritual reality in a mode of study that is “wedded to action”.^[11] Many can complete their studies, together with practices and paths of service before they are 17. It is here, during this period, that we lay the foundation of holistic thinking. Some may wonder why the sections in institute Books have no headings. Could it be that it encourages the participants to tolerate a measure of ambiguity, to consider the full thought, to avoid the temptation to reduce and summarize? Of course each person is free to make their own notes about the section, to make up headings, to draw pictorial representations, and to often come back and reflect about the deep meanings of the passages. But this is entirely different than pre-packaged summaries, which end up as hopeless reductionism anyway. There is also the training institute emphasis on learning concepts rather than a focus on transmitting information. No doubt from your own experience you know the many other ways in which these courses encourage working with full and complex thoughts.

The second tendency that we consider is the “tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, none exists.”^[12] When reading the sacred Text it may appear that certain statements contradict one another. We must remember that there may be differences in context, or that the same reality is being looked at from different angles. Such differences should not be regarded as contradictions. We should look for meaning that removes the apparent differences, and not try to magnify them. The Text is to be regarded as a whole that is self-consistent. Another consideration is that when we read certain statements from Abdu’l-Baha or from the beloved Guardian we should realize that on some occasions these statements provide interpretations for all time, but on many other occasions these are merely an application of a certain principle that is valid only at that time for the specific circumstances to which it was addressed. There can never be any contradictions on fundamental principles among the various statements of the Head of the Faith.

Addressing this tendency to see dichotomies the House of Justice writes that “It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another.”^[13] It further quotes this statement written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: “We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to

each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two.”^[14]

Examples of subject matters are “expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service”^[15]. In all of these areas the training institute teaches us to avoid false dichotomies. For instance in each cluster the friends engage in cycles of action that typically include approximately two weeks of expansion followed by two months of consolidation. While there are overlapping activities and processes, this pattern creates a balance and avoids endless discussions about priorities. If the friends feel that they need more emphasis on consolidation of the new believers, they will remedy this shortcoming immediately in the next cycle. They will not be hesitant to take action, and they have no fear of failure, since any mistakes will only last one cycle of three months duration. Far more importantly the same group of friends who are carrying out the program of growth are analyzing the strength or weakness of their program, and the same set of Books used to train the teachers are also used to deepen the knowledge, skills and spiritual insight of seekers and new believers alike.

Similarly, *Teaching the Faith*, Book 6 of the training institute, describes both “individual action and collective campaigns” as part of service to the cluster. Those who are more inclined to engage in collective campaigns will look to sections of this book that describes this dynamic, while those who are more inclined to teach individually will also look to the same Book. In the words of the House of Justice: “How encouraged we have been to note that many of the misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has grown.”^[16]

This tendency to see things as either-or is quiet common in society at large. It often leads to people taking a position and holding to it in rigid ways. This malady afflicts the political system of many countries as evident in the news. During the last few decades a few thinkers have noticed this difficulty, referring to it as an anxiety and uneasiness in both scientific endeavors and philosophical enquiries, what is termed as a “grand and seductive Either/Or”.^[17] The Bahá’í community using institute courses works to reduce this tendency in the next generation of young people, and the Universal House of Justice attests to this: “It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware that the diverse elements of a programme of growth are complementary. The tendency to see activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so common in society at large, is being avoided by the community.”^[18] And the institutions are advised to “cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.”^[19]

The final tendency is to think in terms of events and activities. We can overcome this tendency by developing a habit of thinking and talking in terms of processes. If we consider the life span of an individual, there certainly are some events of significance, such as birth, marriage and death. But in reality the stuff of life are all those things that happen in between. While it is customary, particularly in the West, to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, true happiness does not come from such occasions. Rather the quality of life, the process of education, the process of growth, the supportive environment in home, family and community, the opportunity to serve others – these constitute the real purpose and meaning of life. We try to model this in study circles. It is not when a particular class begins or ends, it is not how many courses you have done, or how many you have tutored, or what rank or position you occupy in the scheme of coordination, but rather the process of learning, the posture of humble service, the ongoing practices and acts of service, and the joy of accompaniment, delighting in achievements of others, that define the work of the training institute.

Some of the characteristics of the work of the training institutes can be seen in the use of the word circle instead of class, tutor instead of teacher, and collaborator instead of student. Maybe in certain contexts teachers may want to deposit facts and information on the minds and hearts of students, which are considered to be like a blank slate.^[20] But collaborators take charge of their own learning and are accompanied by tutors as they try to improve the material and spiritual conditions of their own neighborhoods. These present very different processes. Institute materials rely on the Word of God, are essentially, even deceptively, simple, focus on concepts rather than information, repeat essential concepts often, and explore practical applications and implications of the Teachings. The development of the training institute in each cluster is itself an organic process, experiencing periods of crisis and victory. But in all circumstances the development of institute is a process of study that is “wedded to action”. Other characteristics of the institutes include: “the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, the acts of service it recommends, and, above all, its reliance on the Word of God. Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the process reflects the complementarity of “being” and “doing” the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false dichotomies; the stress they lay on memorization of the Creative Word; and the care they exercise in raising consciousness, without awakening the insistent self.”^[21]

And perhaps one of the most outstanding and unique processes being cultivated by the training institute is that of accompaniment. “As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause. In this way will the impulse to over instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be

averted. Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning. The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.”^[22]

[1] Universal House of Justice, letter of 28 December 2010 addressed to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, paragraph 36. This document describes the features of the Five Year Plan for 2011-2016, as the current phase of the Divine Plan. It is referred to as “Plan” in the rest of these notes.

[2] Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, p. 260

[3] Abdu’l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p.17

[4] Plan, para. 36

[5] Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, p. 289

[6] These ideas are expounded by physicist and philosopher David Bohm in his book *Wholeness and Implicate Order*

[7] Plan, para. 37

[8] *ibid*

[9] *ibid*

[10] *ibid*

[11] Universal House of Justice, message of Ridvan 2010, to the Baha’is of the World

[12] Plan, para. 38

[13] *ibid*

[14] Shoghi Effendi, quoted by the House of Justice, in para. 38 of the Plan

[15] Plan, para. 38

[16] *ibid*

[17] These ideas are explained by Richard J. Bernstein, in his book, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, and further elaborated by Paul Lample in his book, *Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality*, p. 172

[18] Plan, para. 38

[19] Plan, para. 17

[20] These ideas are elaborated by Paulo Freire in his celebrated book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

[21] Plan, para. 16

[22] Plan, para. 8