

Some Answered Questions, The Immortality of the Spirit (2)

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



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The Immortality of the Spirit (2)

Yesterday we were discussing the immortality of the spirit. Know that the influence and perception of the human spirit is of two kinds; that is, the human spirit has two modes of operation and understanding. One mode is through the mediation of bodily instruments and organs. Thus it sees with the eye, hears with the ear, speaks with the tongue. These are actions of the spirit and operations of the human reality, but they occur through the mediation of bodily instruments. Thus, it is the spirit that sees, but by means of the eye; it is the spirit that hears, but by means of the ear; it is the spirit that speaks, but by means of the tongue.

The other mode of the spirit's influence and action is without these bodily instruments and organs. For example, in the state of sleep, it sees without eyes, it hears without ears, it speaks without a tongue, it runs without feet—in brief, all these powers are exerted without the mediation of instruments and organs. How often it happens that the spirit has a dream in the realm of sleep whose purport comes to be exactly materialized two years hence! Likewise, how often it happens that in the world of dreams the spirit solves a problem that it could not solve in the realm of wakefulness. Awake, the eye sees only a short distance, but in the realm of dreams one who is in the East may see the West. Awake, he sees only the present; in sleep he beholds the future. Awake, by the fastest means he travels at most seventy miles in an hour; in sleep he traverses East and West in the blink of an eye. For the spirit has two modes of travel: without means, or spiritual travel, and with means, or material travel—as birds that fly, or as being carried in a vehicle.

While asleep, this physical body is as dead: It neither sees, nor hears, nor feels, and it has neither consciousness nor perception—its powers are suspended. Yet the spirit is not only alive and enduring but also exerts a greater influence, soars to loftier heights, and possesses a deeper understanding. To hold that the spirit is annihilated upon the death of the body is to imagine that a bird imprisoned in a cage would perish if the cage were to be broken, though the bird has nothing to fear from the breaking of the cage. This body is even as the cage and the spirit is like the bird: We observe that this bird, unencumbered by its cage, soars freely in the world of sleep. Therefore, should the cage be broken, the bird would not only continue to exist but its senses would be heightened, its perception would be expanded, and its joy would grow more intense. In reality, it would be leaving a place of torment for a delightful paradise; for there is no greater paradise for the grateful birds than to be freed from their cage. So it is that the martyrs hasten to the field of sacrifice with the utmost joy and elation.



TRANSLATION

In wakefulness the eye of man sees, at most, as far as one hour's distance; for the influence of the spirit through the intermediary of the body extends only so far, but with the mind's eye it sees America, understands that land, is apprised of its condition, and arranges affairs accordingly. Now, if the spirit were identical with the body, its power of vision would extend no further. It is therefore evident that the spirit is different from the body, that the bird is different from the cage, and that the power and influence of the spirit is more pronounced without the intermediary of the body. Now, if the instrument becomes idle, its wielder continues to exist. For example, if the pen is abandoned or broken, the writer remains alive and well; if a house is destroyed, its owner lives on. This is one of the rational arguments proving the immortality of the soul.

Another proof is this: Man's body may become weak or robust, sick or healthy, tired or rested; it may suffer the loss of a hand or leg; it may decline in material powers; it may become blind, deaf, dumb, or paralysed—in short, it may become gravely impaired. And yet, despite this, the spirit maintains its original condition and spiritual perceptions, suffering no impairment or disruption. But when the body is afflicted with a major illness or calamity, it is deprived of the grace of the spirit, like a mirror that is broken or covered with dust, and that can no longer reflect the light of the sun or manifest its bounty.

We have already explained that the spirit of man is not contained within the body, for it is freed and sanctified from egress and regress, which are among the properties of material bodies. Rather, the connection of the spirit with the body is like that of the sun with the mirror. Briefly, the human spirit is always in one condition. It neither falls ill with the illness of the body nor is made healthy by the latter's health; it does not become weak or incapacitated, wretched or downtrodden, diminished or lessened—that is, it suffers no harm or ill effect on account of the infirmities of the body, even if the body were to waste away, or if the hands, feet, and tongue were to be cut off, or if the powers of sight and hearing were to be disrupted. It is therefore evident and established that the spirit is different from the body and that its immortality is not conditioned upon the latter's, but that the spirit rules supreme in the world of the body, and that its power and influence are as plain and visible as the bounty of the sun in a mirror. But when the mirror is covered with dust or broken, it will be deprived of the rays of the sun.