

My Lessons in Detachment and Reliance on a Higher Power

Badi Shams

Aging has many benefits, allowing us to reflect on events in our past and understand how they changed the direction of our lives – which creates a good learning tool to analyze each life and its direction.

In my life, I always thought I had tried to follow the spiritual principle of detachment – to avoid accumulating too many material possessions or following the pathways of acquisitiveness and greed.

In other words, I wanted to run away from the material world because it could pollute my soul.

Originally my approach was classical, black-and-white, which meant all or nothing. I told myself that this is the path Sufis, monks, nuns, and Sadhus adopt, attempting to reach higher planes of spirituality, denouncing the material world out of devotion, all in pursuit of eternal spiritual happiness.

This passage from the Baha'i writings, along with many other similar ones from different religions and philosophies, motivated me on my path of detachment:

Beware lest ye cling unto that which ye possess, or take pride in your fame and renown. That which behoveth you is to wholly detach yourselves from all that is in the heavens and on the earth.

As time passed and I got older, though, I began to re-evaluate my concept of detachment.

By studying the Baha'i writings, I realized a new way of approaching my goal. I gradually recognized that I was trying to detach, escape from reality, and take the easy way out by not facing life's challenges. But really, as I came to see, detachment means living a responsible and productive life with all of its demands – and still being detached. Baha'u'llah gave this advice to those who attempt to practice detachment by withdrawing from the world:

... O concourse of monks! Seclude not yourselves in your churches and cloisters. Come ye out of them by My leave, and busy, then, yourselves with what will profit you and others. Thus commandeth you He Who is the Lord of the Day of Reckoning. Seclude yourselves in the stronghold of My love. This, truly, is the seclusion that befitteth you, could ye but know it. He that secludeth himself in his house is indeed as one dead.

So I initially tried to be detached without knowing how to do it. I tried and prayed, but I still failed to achieve it in a practical way that could become my habit and my spiritual practice.

After I grew a little older, while taking inventory of this part of my life, of all my successes and failures, I discovered that my life had been steered positively and fruitfully despite my failed

attempts at detachment. I realized that the Creator's mercy had guided my life for the better and, most of the time, despite my own personal judgment and lack of cooperation. All of this made me realize that my approach to detachment was lopsided. Yes, I tried to be detached, but I didn't know how to ensure that my spiritual journey was heading in the right direction.

A personal experience made this matter clearer. My father was the only one in his family who was a Baha'i – he had four Muslim brothers. The youngest, a devout Muslim, tried to live what he thought of as a pious life and wanted his children to follow his example. So he did not allow TV, radio, or music in his home. Going to the movies was also not allowed since films were made by foreigners, who he saw as the enemies of Islam and the source of all corruption. He expected his children to follow his example, but the result was quite the opposite. One of his sons is now an actor and a comedian in Hollywood. Later, the father regretted his actions and admitted his methods were wrong. That example provided a simple yet important lesson for me: avoidance is not the right way to live, and detachment does not mean non-involvement.

The Baha'i teachings suggest that true happiness is detachment from all else except God – but that detachment does not mean having possessions or wealth is wrong. They instead suggest that while we enjoy the world and the material benefits available to us, our relationship with God should be uncompromised, a relationship that is based on service and love for humanity.

This implies that our inner being must focus on the spiritual realities regardless of our material achievements. It means we should be unaffected by gains or losses, and detached from blame or praise. It recommends detaching from selfish desires and from our own egos.

I reflected on my life from that perspective and soon realized that an invisible force had aided and guided me throughout my life. I realized that the Creator had been with me all my life without my awareness, like a good Friend, a Father. He had chosen what was best for me. So now I find practical ways to be detached, do my best, and happily leave the rest to Him, knowing that His Will is a thousand times more beneficial for me than anything I could dream up.