

## Ostad Elahi's Thought in Seven Points

By Emmanuel Comte



Ostad Elahi's thought could be summed up as the elaboration, both systematic and practical, of a natural spirituality. The term "natural" refers to a spirituality that corresponds to the true nature of humans, their disposition and deeper needs. Ostad Elahi's approach to this natural spirituality is to have it adapted to the mindset and lifestyle of men and women of our times, in contrast to classical methods, that we generally associate with the great saints and mystics of the past, who gave priority to emotion over reason.

In attempting to clarify the meaning of spirituality by examining what it is based on, Ostad Elahi provides an answer to the following question: Why is it that human beings cannot do without the spiritual? It is this point we must first focus on in order to better grasp what place is given by Ostad Elahi to the spiritual within the framework of human existence.

### Introduction: What place for Spirituality?

Posed in this manner, the question is not immediately answerable. Not that the idea of spirituality has disappeared from our mental space. The break-up and reassessment of the religious structures upholding human life, the proliferation of spiritualist movements or cults outside the great monotheistic religions, the emergence of customized spiritualities, where each person can find what suits them best, all on a background of bewilderment, the restless quest for "values" or "meaning", all these phenomena clearly indicate that the dissatisfaction and longing that once drove humans towards traditional forms of religion have never ceased to torment humankind, even if expressing themselves at times in twisted or deviated forms. However, speaking the word spirituality, or bringing up religious dogmas cannot in any way be sufficient for setting about a real spiritual undertaking; what's more, the word spirituality has come to designate almost anything and everything. It is therefore vital to define what is to be expected from spirituality, and what function it should have in our lives.

#### Introduction

- 1) The perfecting process
- 2) Human beings are bi-dimensional
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Now, an interesting aspect of Ostad Elahi's thought is that it gives us the possibility of defining the place and function of spirituality, even before its content has been fully elucidated. The very example of his life, as well as the views reflected in his teachings, testify to the fact that, contrary to a common misconception, spiritual life should not be thought of as an alternative to material life. Our spiritual life should not be dissociated from our material life, either by totally renouncing this world, or periodically distancing ourselves from it, in order to recharge our spiritual batteries. The tendency of ancient mystics to give up their social privileges and worldly possessions in exchange for a solitary and secluded life was basically justified, since it was a symptomatic expression of the fact that something was essentially lacking in the mere social intercourse of the human-animals that we are. Such a model might nowadays lead to the false notion that a spiritual undertaking could be made as something separate from normal life.

We have a tendency to take spirituality as a separate, esoteric reality, reserved only to the initiate and requiring the development of specific esoteric faculties. This is what leads to many deviations, such as blind obedience to masters, fondness for paranormal phenomena and for altered states of consciousness, etc. Attraction for the occult, which springs probably from a deep human impulse, also breeds ostentatious and deviated forms of spirituality. As for the idea that spirituality is a luxury, or an added soulfulness of sorts, or a therapeutic aid to lighten the burden of lives too harsh to bear, it is no more than a mundane and materialist view of the spiritual; it is indicative of a desire for serenity and psychological security that may alleviate the distresses of modern life, much like health foods, in a different context.

Even though natural spirituality may, at some level, bring about some form of tranquility or serenity, this is not to be taken as its main goal or principal motivation. According to Ostad Elahi, spirituality is not a technique to achieve well-being, a technique that we may or may not apply to our lives, for which durably effective substitutes could be found. It aims at something completely different, something that could be better elucidated by the word perfection.

By newly defining the purpose of spirituality, Ostad Elahi places it right at the center of our lives. Spirituality is not something to be had on top of what we have, like a relief or a luxury, it is not something to be practiced laterally, separated from daily life; it is at the center, or rather, everywhere, filling every moment of our lives. We have actually no choice. We may neglect our spiritual dimension, but we can never get away from it.

This isn't just asserting a principle. For Ostad Elahi, the place of spirituality in human life is determined by its function and how it is put into practice. The reason for spirituality to be at the center is that spirituality is the experimental science which makes it possible for us to transform our substance and perfect ourselves, by living a life governed by sound principles and a healthy reason. For this is, in fact, a natural objective for every human individual, coinciding with the idea of the perfect happiness everyone hankers after. The greatest happiness, coming from the outside, would not be true happiness if we were to remain the anxious and imperfect beings that we are in our daily lives. If we are to attain infinite happiness, we must develop within ourselves the faculties that will make it possible for us to really taste it, to fully perceive and sense its effects. In short, to experience perfect happiness, we should first perfect ourselves. Whatever goals we set ourselves in life, short term or distant, we are repeatedly faced with the same question, whenever we think about the condition and the meaning of our existence. The question is not "What will I become?" but, at a deeper level, "What can I do with myself?", "What potentials am I capable of developing?" But first of all, "who is this self?"

In sum, the life of a person worthy of being called human can hardly be reduced to the mere bustle of daily life, for he or she is bound to be inclined towards the transcendent, no matter what it is called: Supreme Cause, Life Force, Nature, God, and so on. This aspiration, which has been traditionally addressed by religions, is, nowadays, an open question for all. But the important thing, here, is that this aspiration for transcendence should not lead to the exclusion of spirituality from everyday life; for it is spirituality that points us in the right direction, provided we become conscious of the fact that we are perfectible creatures, capable of transforming our substance and freeing ourselves from whatever interferes with our true vocation.

What we should examine first is the concept of perfection, or rather, the perfecting process, for everything proceeds from this. Once we've realized that the perfecting process is the generating axis of all existence, we must ask ourselves what it is that gets perfected, and how this happens. We should ask, in fact, what it is that constitutes the true nature of a human being, his/her essence, his/her real "self". We must also ask what form, in practice, the perfecting process takes, and how it can be related to what we commonly call "ethics". For Ostad Elahi, the process of perfection is, indeed, a practice, a task to be seriously undertaken. We should earnestly ask ourselves what course the process of perfection takes, and throughout this course, what is the role of earthly life. These different aspects of Ostad Elahi's thought can be summarized in seven key points.

### 1) The perfecting process

The process of self-perfection is decidedly the basic concept and leading thread in Ostad Elahi's teachings. It is therefore important to understand what it implies. It does not mean developing one's talents, or attaining perfect mastery of some technical ability. There are many different ways of improving one's physical or mental skills; but when it comes to spirituality, it is the very essence of human nature which is the main issue. The purpose of spirituality is not merely to develop physical and mental faculties, but to bring one's essential self to full spiritual maturity.

Now, the question is, what do we mean by bringing oneself to full spiritual maturity, which has nothing to do with aptitudes valued and approved by society? What does perfecting oneself entail, when applied, not to the various aspects of one's personality, but to one's essential self? Do we need to make out a list of performances to be improved upon? And if we are to acquire certain qualities, how are we to identify them? To understand all this, we must first clarify what is meant by the "self" – what is it in me that says "I".

The concept of perfection, as applied to humans, would remain undefined, if it were not taken into account as an idea directly related to the specific finality of human beings. It is only when we understand what we, as human beings, can become, how we are made to better ourselves, and finally realize truly what we are, that the question of perfection can acquire a more concrete meaning. Now, what is our highest potential, our ultimate aim as human beings? To bring our nature to full bloom, to develop all our inner powers to the highest possible degree, and thus raise human traits within us to their highest level. This is how the concept of transcendence takes on a concrete meaning, being inseparable from the drive that prompts us towards a higher state of self-realization. Human beings are creatures who have the capacity to transform their essential being into radiating human qualities within themselves.

## 2) Humans are bi-dimensional

The progression towards perfection has often been described by the spiritual traditions of the past as a change of plane, a drastic separation between body and soul, matter and spirit, eternity and impermanence, this world and the other. The reason why they did this is that human beings are bi-dimensional by essence. Ostad Elahi puts a special emphasis on this human bi-dimensionality: human beings are, on the one hand, this animal body endowed with a psyche and an intellect that enables them to evolve in a natural environment, regulated by physical and social determinisms, and on the other, this spirit with which they spontaneously identify themselves, because it is the source of moral consciousness, willpower and free-will, and because they feel that the spirit has its origin in a Principle that transcends the entire material order. This Principle, which is also called the "Source" by Ostad Elahi, is considered by him also as the true destination of human beings. The aspiration for returning to the Source is the motive that underlies human progress; but human beings cannot attain this goal unless they themselves succeed in developing the quality homogeneous with that of the Source, a trace of which they carry in their innermost self.

As bi-dimensional beings, humans may achieve this goal only by delving deep into themselves and finding a way towards the perfection of their real being. It is natural to think of the process of perfection as a relentless struggle for transcending the animal or terrestrial part of our nature. It is on this ground that the terrestrial world appears to us as what it is: a temporary abode and a transitory stage. According to Aristotle, to become human is to "strive to live like an immortal". This maxim becomes even more meaningful if we acknowledge the fact that in every human being, there is a part that is immortal, literally imperishable, it is the basis of our identity and the source of our selfhood, that is, our celestial part (or celestial soul).

In practice, the bi-dimensional character of human beings manifests itself through constant tension between the terrestrial part, which is dominated by the pleasure principle, and the celestial part, which is the seat of reason and the willpower that is capable of transcending the animal desires and impulses, to attain freedom and self-control, which evolve hand in hand with knowledge and reason. We human beings are intrinsically inclined towards transcendence, but this is a predisposition that can be made to bear fruit only through conscious efforts and persistent practice. Our nature being what it is (essentially tending towards imbalance), if we stand still and remain inactive, our terrestrial part will eventually get the upper-hand, overwhelming our psyche, prompting our thoughts and leading to our spiritual downfall. To avoid imbalance, we should resort to the power of ethics to control the impulsive and assertive animal part of our nature, called the "imperious self", which, left to itself, begins by pervading our personality and ends up by taking full control of it.

Ostad Elahi does not prescribe annihilation of the imperious self through rigorous asceticism as many spiritual masters of the past did in order to attain spiritual salvation. His prescription is that we make the best possible use of the terrestrial part of the self in order to foster the qualities of true humanity within ourselves. The terrestrial part, therefore, should not be eliminated, but harnessed and put to the service of the celestial part, to help it attain maturation.

In sum, the two human dimensions are not merely juxtaposed, but closely connected. According to Ostad Elahi, the terrestrial part consisting of the body, psyche and intellect should not be allowed to become obstacles to spiritual progress, but rather be instrumental in boosting the process of perfection. Terrestrial life is not only a transit area, but also a place of exercise, a laboratory of sorts. Let us now find out what this laboratory has in store for us.

### 3) Spirituality: a Medicine for the Soul

Natural spirituality provides us with a framework for a unified discipline that takes into account two interacting human dimensions which are responsible for our progress towards self-perfection. To further clarify this, Ostad Elahi points out that the conjunction of our terrestrial and celestial parts results in the formation of an intricate psycho-spiritual organism, that should be nourished by spirituality and kept in health and harmony until it reaches maturity.

Here, the traditional model of self-perfection is greatly modified. The concept of purification as presented in many religious cultures, is too primary in that it does not take into account the focal point of the matter, which is the necessity, for the celestial soul, to be immersed in the bodily matrix and its terrestrial milieu. The celestial soul is created pure and innocent but by itself, it is incapable of developing its multiple potential qualities. In order to mature, it needs the complement that can be provided only by the terrestrial matrix. Before being a metaphysical necessity, the cycle of an earthly life is, one might say, a physiological necessity. The terrestrial part of human beings contains within itself, albeit in excess, ingredients without which the soul cannot grow nor develop the truly human qualities that will transmute its substance.

The celestial soul can achieve maturity only through a process that can be compared to the process of osmosis. It is as if there was, between the terrestrial and celestial parts, an osmotic membrane through which exchange of substances takes place. An essential function of the celestial soul is to regulate the permeability of this membrane to establish a measured relationship between the inputs and the outputs. Ethics is not only a matter of balance, but also a matter of dosage. It is in this light that the practice of ethics, which is the mainstay of spiritual practice, along with the pursuit of self-knowledge, should be envisaged.

It is through the gradual assimilation of the right dosages of the nutrients residing in the terrestrial part that the celestial soul gradually attains maturity. The work of self-perfection consists, therefore, in letting the elements that are present in excess in the terrestrial part seep into the celestial part, in measured proportions. Here, Ostad Elahi is in agreement with the idea of virtue being a state of equilibrium between excess and deficiency, as famously set forth in the philosophy of Aristotle.

“Medicine for the soul” specifies the conditions necessary for a balanced and progressive growth, in which every element of human nature finds its place and fulfils its function. At the end of a long and exacting process of distillation, the soul, essentially pure but imperfect, acquires a quality homogeneous with that of the Divine. Thus it finally returns to the Source and attains perfection.

### 4) The twin foundations of Ethics: Education of Thought and Respect of Rights in general

The processes of assimilation and growth inherent in the concept of “medicine for the soul” are not mere metaphors. They correspond to something real that must be evidenced by experience. It should be pointed out that education of thought is the backbone of spiritual practice, thought being the stuff we are actually made of. Our sense of being, our self-awareness, our emotions, perceptions, intentions and conceptions, that we translate into words and deeds, are all but thoughts. It is through thinking that we nourish ourselves with ideas and principles, that we give shape to our desires and form our projects; through handling our thought process, we give direction to our conduct, and by working on it, we can change our habits, develop new capacities, qualities or virtues

and eventually succeed in reshaping our character. It is essential, then, to get to know precisely how certain principles or guidelines for action can affect our psyche and transform our behavior. It is essential also to become aware of the real reasons that motivate our actions.

There are two aspects to spiritual practice, personal and social. The first has to do with the self and with self-knowledge which is essentially psychological: we must decode our impulses, decipher the real significance of our desires, discover our qualities and defects, define our deeper aspirations and evaluate our doubts and convictions. We must, in short, become aware of the different tendencies of our psyche. It is important to find out, through daily observation, in what ways the different dynamic elements of our psycho-spiritual system intervene in our thoughts and actions. This self-knowledge involves the deeper layers of the conscious self, and not the surface of it, where our psychological and social identity belongs. It is also an active knowledge that makes it possible for us to better control the impulsive and imperious part of the self.

The fact is that the imperious self is set to keep our mind in a state of imbalance, blunting our vigilance in the face of our natural impulses. These are legitimate when channeled in the right direction; but unconstrained, they can lose their legitimacy and become harmful. What we have to do is to detect the stratagems of our imperious self and protect ourselves against it by nourishing our spirit with authentic ethical principles or "nutrients". This is the way that leads to self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is not something that can be reduced to a mere psychological introspection. It is, as Ostad Elahi says, the culmination of a complex process of thought education.

Since we live in society, most of the trials and challenges encountered by those who decide to struggle against the imperious self have something to do, more or less directly, with the others, such as family members or professional connections. Our relations with the others constitute the second aspect of spiritual practice which accounts for progress towards perfection. This is where Ostad Elahi brings into focus the importance of the respect for the rights of the others as a decisive element in thought education. Not to infringe on the rights of the others is a model of behaviour to be complied with in every situation, whatever our thoughts or actions. Regarding this principle, the classic formula is quite well known: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Ostad Elahi puts a very special emphasis on this point: to live in peace is a condition to which every being, as a rule, aspires. It is a fundamental right. Now the imperious self, knowing no bounds, is inclined to infringe constantly upon the rights of the others. It could therefore be said that the struggle against the imperious self mostly amounts to striving to respect the rights of the others on every occasion. Thoughtfulness, tolerance and altruism are fundamental qualities to be acquired, so that we may, through willpower and perseverance, truly transform our substance.

However, self-perfection cannot be carried out but through continuous inner struggle. Whether we try to get to know ourselves and outwit the "imperious self", or succeed in respecting the rights of the others through words and deeds, or better yet, accomplish selfless deeds that benefit our fellow beings, we must invariably be on the alert to correct the course of our thoughts by paying close attention, not only to the intention behind each of our actions, but also to the way we judge the others, and to the thoughts we entertain about the world we live in and the ups and downs we have to go through.

## 5) Spiritual understanding and the causal system

Ostad Elahi's conception of spirituality demands that great importance be given to reflection and discernment, not of course of the material kind that we apply to ordinary matters of daily life, but a reflection and discernment rooted in spirituality and nourished by authentic ethical and spiritual principles. Spiritual discernment is also to be considered as a faculty related to the sphere of our emotions. The more refined our spiritual senses are, the more penetrating our spiritual discernment will be. Our spiritual senses remain numb and ineffective as long as we keep to the surface of ourselves, at the level of our superficial conscious self. But it is of no avail and could be even dangerous to activate our spiritual senses artificially – as is the case with altered states of consciousness – before attaining a certain degree of spiritual maturity. The faculty of spiritual discernment that stems from the celestial part of human reason must be exercised and developed, for it is inseparable from the process of thought education and the acquisition of self-knowledge that results from continuous practice.

Ostad Elahi's emphasis on spiritual discernment gives a special direction to the way ethical and spiritual issues should be approached. Even though intuition and emotion have an important part in the process of self-perfection, it is rational understanding which is specially emphasized. In this sense, spirituality can be taken as a science, based on objective realities to which spiritual understanding could be applied. A reality is objective if it is stable enough to provide solid ground for experimental approach, the goal being the detection of general laws and principles of conduct.

All our thoughts and actions are part and parcel of some chain of cause and effect and by the same token, the maturation of the self is subject to causal sequences. Whether we act rashly or wisely, we'll be confronted with the correspondent consequences of our acts, there's no escaping the causal scheme of things. But Ostad Elahi tells us that if we get to know what we are made of and what is the purpose of our being in this world, we may be able to put to good use the causal sequences contained within that all-embracing scheme of things. But how can we do that? He proposes a close scrutiny of what lies behind our thoughts and actions, aims and reactions, along with a thorough consideration of the way we are affected by the world and the people around us, then we should be able to make some assessment of what we are and what we would need to be if we are to improve ourselves. This is what Ostad Elahi calls "delving in the self". The way a causal sequence can be put to good use is that, having found out that the effect B can be brought about by the cause A, we should then insert the cause A into the causal fabric of our life and, by means of self-suggestion and repetition, we might succeed in gradually eliminating objectionable traits in ourselves and eventually replacing them by qualities more suited to the demands of our celestial reason.

It should be remembered that delving in the self can better bear fruit in the context of a coherent spiritual system. In such a system, everything that exists finds its proper place and whatever occurs is relevant, when reframed within the primordial chain of cause and effect, of action and reaction. Conceiving spirituality as a system or ecosystem subjected to the principle of causality, a system in which we are necessarily integrated, has two decisive practical consequences. First, whatever happens to us, we must always look for the cause of it within ourselves; second, when acting as free responsible beings we can, to some extent, bring about changes in the course of events. This new approach to spirituality, according to Ostad Elahi, is the surest guideline on the path of perfection.

## 6) Worlds, interworlds and successive lives

It is a function of true understanding to bring back together the dispersed parts of a whole in a coherent context where they become meaningful. Our earthly life is a case in point. As a brief stage in the course of a long and complex journey, it should be carefully reassessed according to this pattern. Ostad Elahi raises the curtain on a cycle of successive lives through which every soul must pass and the effects of which are indelibly engraved on what might be termed as our spiritual unconscious. From its first entry into this world to the last phase of its successive lives, the soul is allowed a fixed period of time during which it has access to all the necessary elements for attaining perfection. It is up to the soul to put them to good use. At the end of each life, the state of the soul determines the conditions in which it will find itself at the start of its next life.

The upward movement of the soul, generally speaking, is generated by the all-encompassing process of perfection that pervades all created things. But every human individual, being endowed with free will, is responsible for the efforts that will have to be made in order to develop the virtues necessary for the attainment of self-perfection. You cannot get anything for nothing: a reality derived from the principle of causality.

At the end of the ascending arc of successive lives, the final lot of each individual soul is necessarily determined by the quality it has imparted to its own substance. And this is how the notion of divine "judgment" can be rationally accounted for. Perfect souls join the world of the perfect, where they live eternally in a state of absolute bliss, as they have acquired the right for it. The final state of the other souls depends on the degree of maturity they have reached by the end of their journey towards perfection, each of them residing finally in a permanent world correspondent to the level of its maturity. Every permanent world is permeated with all shades of emotions and sensations, from the bliss of paradise to the terror of the accounts of hell as described by different religions, meaning, according to Ostad Elahi, nearness to the Divine or estrangement from Him.

So there are innumerable worlds, permanent and impermanent, as, indeed, there are many intermediary worlds [interworlds], each belonging to its own appropriate material world, each made of a matter more subtle than what can be perceived by ordinary senses, each an abode for the soul during the interval between two successive lives.

From the teachings of Ostad Elahi, a consistent theory emerges that points to the origin and the overall destination of human beings, and provides a logical basis for the idea of the meaningfulness of life. From the beginning of its being to the time of its arrival at its final destination, the human soul is scheduled for a voyage towards perfection through a limited number of successive lives. Caught in a chain of cause and effect unfailingly operative not only within the span of one single life, but also between one life and the next, the soul has to proceed by trial and error until it finds the right way to choose between the openings presented to it at every step of the journey.

Ostad Elahi's theory of successive lives is backed up by rational arguments. The process of successive lives provides a logical solution to the problematic issue of divine justice. The seeming injustice of human condition finds its logical explanation, once placed in the context of successive lives. The conditions assigned to people at birth, whether positive or negative, and the events, happy or unhappy, that combine to shape their lives are the direct or indirect consequences of their actions in their former or present lives. It is the combination of these elements that eventually determines the conditions of the process of self-perfection, a process fair and accessible to all, with a final aim that is the same for everyone: attaining perfection.



## 7) The Relation to the Divine Source

If, as normal individuals without extraordinary faculties, we are to carry through to the end the task of self perfection, we should bear in mind that we would not be able to achieve this without drawing sustenance from a transcendent source of energy. By cultivating within oneself a feeling of an omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely benevolent entity ( "God" ,"the Source", "the Primary Cause" ...), by striving to feel His presence and support when making decisions and by trying to act with the sole intention of obtaining His satisfaction, one practices what Ostad Elahi describes simply as "natural meditation". To act in a disinterested manner, out of sheer duty, to counteract the influence of the animal impulses that prompt our actions will be actually possible if we succeed in getting connected to this intelligent and benevolent entity and feel its all-pervading presence within ourselves.

"Natural meditation" enables us to capture the energy needed for performing actions that our willpower, left to itself, cannot accomplish. Another important result of "natural meditation" is that being practised with a view to obtaining divine satisfaction, it does, in the long run, convert our ethical habits into genuine divine virtues.

Without this transcendent energy emanating from the divine Source, there can be no self perfection, and ethical habits remain inconclusive. That's why Ostad Elahi's doctrine of natural spirituality emphasizes the importance of developing a capacity for benefiting from this transcendent energy, along with a fresh approach to the conventional, inherited codes of morality. While ethical principles should be adapted to our modern needs, they should not be dissociated from authentic religious fundamentals and not be applied without reference to the divine.

Apart from the divine emissaries, the saints and prophets of different authentic religions, charged with the mission of putting life into the divine truths, who continue to exert a positive influence, there exists on earth, at every epoch, a source of guidance transmitting divine energy to mankind, directly or indirectly. Ostad Elahi gives a clear explanation of the principles of spiritual guidance, while warning against possible deviations in the master/disciple relationship and against the different impostures that threaten individuals deprived of guide marks. Insisting on the importance of spiritual understanding, freedom of conscience and individual responsibility, he announces new forms of spiritual guidance, unhampered by the formal framework of the religious traditions of the past.