

LIVING CONSCIOUSLY

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COMMON GROUND

First Teaching

What we have in common constitutes a much more powerful bond than the differences we use against one another.

Each one of our daily activities demands from us great skill and effort to behave the way others expect us to behave. When we work, for example, we are expected to fulfill our obligations and to behave in a way that is in keeping with our position. We have to treat clients in a certain way and supervisors in another. When we leave work and take the bus or train, we must behave in one way; if we speak with a stranger, we express ourselves in another.

We continuously change the way we behave according to different situations. We adapt so spontaneously and quickly that we think we are always the same. We think that our way of relating and of expressing ourselves never changes. One of the main aspects of our education is precisely this: knowing how to behave in an appropriate way in all circumstances and recognizing the difference between one situation and another. Thanks to this capacity, it is possible for us to maintain a system of relationships which is very complex but, at the same time, neither burdensome nor hard to maintain.

Even so, many of us are not satisfied with the way we relate, not because it is bad, but because it is superficial. We would like to establish deeper and more meaningful relationships. It is obvious that we can't do this with everyone, but we wish we could at least with those who are close to us. Unfortunately, this is something that we don't always find easy to do.

To achieve a good relationship within the framework of our daily activities, we need to exercise a lot of control over ourselves. When we absorb annoyances and difficulties without appearing frustrated and maintain a certain demeanor at work and with associates, we accumulate tension. This tension quickly builds up. What better time to release it than when we meet a friend or arrive home?

Releasing our tension rarely opens up good communication with others. On the contrary, it is often a source of misunderstanding and mutual pain. Our friend also may want to unburden his problems on us, and at home others, too, tend to release their tensions and frustrations. We cannot hope to have a good relationship with someone if we use him to cry on his shoulder or make him the recipient of our frustrations and reactions. Our friends and family may very well expect a different behavior from us.

What can we do to improve the situation and transform it into a means of communicating more deeply with one another?

We can do a lot. We can begin by observing ourselves as we relate. We can see

how we use others to release our frustrations or to get what we want. We can honestly see how we try to control others. As soon as we see ourselves a little more clearly, we realize that we can take many small steps to improve our relationships.

Let us begin by simply observing our relationships. For example, when we are with other people, we can pay attention to see if we try to emphasize our differences--differences of opinion, customs, likes or objectives. When this happens, we usually defend our position and others defend theirs. It is but a short step from this stage to an argument or a great conflict. Emphasizing our differences seldom leads to good relationships or deep understanding. We need to have a different attitude.

Rather, we can try to find elements we have in common, what we could call "common ground." When we discover similarities, we find a common language, and through that shared language a more harmonious relationship begins. With time and effort we can deepen this relationship.

Differences between people are always relative to circumstances. Everyone undergoes different experiences. Some of the people we work with may be from different cultures and social strata. Each personality was formed with its own characteristics. Even members of the same family can be very different from each other. But we are all human beings, we are all sensitive to pain and joy, we all have difficulties, we all yearn for happiness, and we all seek the way to unfold our possibilities.

Our human condition unites us. What we have in common constitutes a much more powerful bond than the differences we use against one another. In the end, what tend to separate us are elements of our own making which we ourselves can control and change. What unites us in fact belongs to our human nature, to a history that is common to the whole human race and to the possibilities all human beings have. When we remain conscious of this common ground, and when our relationships unfold along this line, we automatically communicate better and find the channel by which we can understand one another deeply and permanently.

POINTS OF VIEW

Second Teaching

*The wider our horizons become,
the wiser are our judgments and decisions.*

It often happens that well-intentioned persons have different opinions on the same subject: no matter how much they argue and discuss the issue, they cannot come to an agreement. Many times we have heard someone say, "It's impossible! No matter how I explain it, you still don't understand me!" We tend to think that it only takes an explanation of our opinions for everyone to see clearly that we are right. However, as we have seen so often, this rarely works in relationships, either between persons or between nations.

We must not confuse "opinion" with "point of view." Each point of view generates opinions. These opinions are consistent within the perspective of that particular point of view. All opinions can be correct if they are consistent with the point of view that produces them. For example, let's imagine a group of people who get together to plan a trip and can't agree on where to go. Some want to go to the mountains; others would rather go swimming in a river; still others prefer a walk in the woods. No matter how much they talk, they cannot agree where to go. Since each person wants the group to take a trip to the best place, each has given an opinion according to the way he or she evaluates places. But it is doubtful that they will arrive at an agreement, since at this level their opinions do not have anything in common. Everyone imagines that they agree because they all want to take a trip. But they really don't agree because each one understands the trip in his or her own way. If they realized that the problem is in the nature of their points of view, they might quickly come to understand one another. In this particular case, they could clarify the reason they are taking the trip in the first place. If the purpose is not to decide what the best place is, but rather to go somewhere together, no one will hesitate to give up a preference for the sake of having a common objective.

Every time we have to evaluate or decide something, we cannot avoid taking a point of view. Sometimes we are aware of this, but more often we are not. It is better to choose a point of view consciously, considering all the options we have. In the majority of cases we can choose from a whole range of viewpoints, from those which are strictly personal to those which are universal. For example, if I am a lawmaker, I can take any number of points of view: I can consider only my private interests; I can consider the interests of the group to which I belong; I can consider the interests of my nation or those of all humankind. In practice, this implies that, before giving an opinion or adopting a resolution, we have to ask ourselves which point of view we will base our decisions on. Even though at times it seems that what we think and do does not have much relationship to anyone else, we all influence and are influenced by one another.

Humanity receives the consequences of what each of us does and decides. For this reason we must not forget others when we have to make decisions.

Undoubtedly, this way of thinking forces us to leave aside some of our preferences. We will move from a limited point of view to a more expansive one, and we will begin to see the whole of which each of us is only a small part.

The more we know, the broader the vision is with which we contemplate the world and life. Moreover, the wider our horizons become, the wiser are our judgments and decisions. When the legislator makes laws, he thinks of the needs and the welfare of his community. The better he knows history, the better he knows how to correct past errors. The better he knows the present, the better he knows how to prevent future difficulties.

Every time we have to make critical, far-reaching decisions, it is good to contemplate the situation from the broadest point of view we can possibly conceive of. Once we have made a decision, we have to concentrate on fulfilling the objective we have chosen.

The art of living consists in living our own life without losing sight of humanity; concentrating without ceasing to see the whole; viewing the whole without failing to give importance to details.

In certain cases it is necessary to begin working from a reduced point of view to be able, eventually, to acquire a broader one. For example, I might be concerned with solving the world's problems. This is, of course, magnificent. But at the same time I need to limit my viewpoint and see whether in practice I am self-sufficient and really solve the problems I create around myself. The good of the world must not be a fantasy that prevents me from seeing what is actually within my power to improve, not only in my own life but also in the lives of those around me.

In other words, a broad point of view becomes concrete when we become aware of reduced points of view. When a young person sees how illness produces suffering, he can ask himself what he can do to alleviate it. His global vision of human suffering allows him to understand that he cannot eliminate it totally, but if he reduces his point of view he realizes that he can indeed help some people. He can decide, for example, to study and become a surgeon. Of course, when he later performs a delicate operation, he will not be able to have a cosmic vision of humanity; he will have to concentrate completely on what he is doing at that moment. When he is working at his specialty, the surgeon reduces his point of view; when he leaves the hospital, his world expands and his awareness of human suffering feeds his capacity for sacrifice, leading him to help others.

Whenever we adopt an opinion or make a decision, we are choosing a point of view. If we are able to become conscious that this is a point of view, we are in a better position to foresee the consequences of our decisions and our way of thinking. Moreover, to clearly see that our particular point of view is just one more point of view among others, allows us to discover other points of view. Thus, we can discover better possibilities.

CONVIVIALITY

Third Teaching

*The road of spiritual unfolding
is a continuous process of
deepening relationships.*

Human beings live in relationship. We relate in some way or another with ourselves, with each other, with the world, with the entire universe. We live an organic, but unconscious, relationship with the earth. We establish relationships with other people. And, in a broader sense, we are an inseparable part of the universe.

But, for the most part, we do not recognize our relationships. We are aware of only some of them, especially those that we establish voluntarily.

We embrace the cosmos if we include all of its manifestations. We reach the infinite only by integrating the finite. We unite with God through souls, through all souls. Yet, when we seek spiritual unfolding, we are usually not only unconscious of our relationships but also have little understanding of how to live well with others, even in the most elementary way.

Conviviality is an art that needs to be cultivated. Human beings have always dreamed of the perfect society and have imagined innumerable utopias. But no organizational change can produce a better society by itself unless we learn to establish conscious, harmonious relationships.

Sometimes we overlook this fundamental fact and strive to live a “spiritual” life as if our personal lives were something separate from the rest of humanity. We forget that spiritual unfolding is possible only if it is connected with everyone’s unfolding, and when we deepen our relationships.

The spiritual tradition that we inherit from all the great religions teaches the first steps we need to take for a minimum degree of human relationship: not to kill, not to harm. That is, we must control ourselves enough so that we do not cause harm to others. Spiritual tradition also teaches the practice of virtues which help us to accept our neighbor: tolerance, patience, compassion. But we have not yet really learned to live these teachings, even though their moral standards mark only the beginning of a basic human relationship. Once these first steps have been taken, we still need to find the way to live a more loving relationship with others.

When we become conscious of the poor state of our relationships, we make the effort to remove any barriers we have placed between ourselves and others. We work to control our personal expressions-- gestures, words, and attitudes--and strive to prevent them from separating us from others. We look for that nexus that harmoniously links an individual to another person, each individual to the group, each group to the greater human society. Through self-control and a harmonious integration with others, we establish an indissoluble spiritual bond between ourselves and everyone.

We then discover that if we want our life to be spiritual we need to work to make harmonious conviviality possible, since conviviality is the point of departure to attain to perfect union with God.

Our task, then, is to harmonize our relationships. How can we know if our relationships are harmonious? We can know by recognizing a very simple fact: the more harmonious a relationship is, the less obvious it is. When our relationships are harmonious, they seem more natural.

Destructive relationships, by contrast, are always obvious: anger, exaggerated gestures, physical confrontation, irony and insults leave no doubt that a relationship--an imperfect one, of course--is being established. A genuine and profound relationship is unobtrusive because no personal outbursts mar its harmony.

To live in conscious and harmonious relationship is to participate with everyone: the art of conviviality.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Fourth Teaching

*Only unfolding can give us
the possibility of arriving at a more
transcendent vision of our difficulties.*

There can be no doubt that each of us has the right to think in our own way and to fulfill our ideals, but in practice we often deny this right to others. The level at which we confront our differences is often the cause of our problems and does not allow us to live together in harmony and stimulate our unfolding as a human society.

When we face a problem, we try to solve it. But until now, our solutions have not ended our problems. Probably we need to understand problems better instead of looking for new solutions, since we do not have the basis for solving a problem in a constructive way unless we understand it thoroughly.

The most serious problems we confront are neither natural catastrophes nor trials brought to us by destiny. We are the ones who create our problems with our way of living, working and relating. Therefore, our problems are mainly symptoms of our own failings. Thus, it is essential not to mistake symptoms for the problem itself.

When children play they often fight over toys, even though there are enough toys for everybody. If a more mature person does not intervene, their games may end in tears, suffering and even physical aggression. Fighting, which is a way children solve their conflicts, is the expression of their problem at the level of toys--in other words, at the level of the child. Each child imagines that the solution to his problem is to have all the toys for himself. A mature person understands that the solution is neither that nor giving children more toys, but to teach them to relate in a way that will help them grow as human beings, live together, share, and participate.

In order to guide children we must be more mature than they are. As experienced adults, we understand the relationship between the child and his toys, and hence we know how to gradually orient the child in his process of unfolding.

As children mature, they learn to value toys less and discover the value of other aspects of life they have ignored until now. They stop fighting over toys and fight for other reasons. But when they mature and understand their relationship to others from a broader point of view, they stop fighting.

The mere fact of growing up and becoming adults does not imply that we have matured in all aspects of our lives. In some respects we act as if we were children. We no longer fight over toys, but we do over material things, prestige, power and opinions.

Therefore, when we face our problems we must remember that, in addition to the immediate solution, there is the broader one: working at a more integral level, the level of spiritual unfolding.

Only unfolding can give us the possibility of arriving at a more transcendent vision of our difficulties. It is only when we place ourselves within the greater human context that we can arrive at the root of all our problems and the source of all solutions: our selfishness and our capacity to love unconditionally. When we give more importance to selfishness, we create more problems; when we give more importance to loving unconditionally, we find solutions. For example, when we consider the problem of hunger, we know we should feed those who don't have food. But at the same time we know we cannot conceal the enormity of the problem of hunger with gifts. There must be a terrible lack of maturity in our relationships as human beings for hunger to exist as a problem in this world. If we don't work inwardly, spiritually, to relate better among ourselves and with all human beings, our immediate solutions delay or disguise the problems, but do not solve them.

To solve a problem, we need to begin by understanding it from our broadest point of view. How do we do this? By maturing as human beings and working on our spiritual unfolding. This process is too often interrupted before reaching its full development.

Each level of unfolding has its characteristic problems. The solution to these problems takes up a great deal of our daily work. But the work of our life should not be reduced to containing and controlling our personal problems. Our real and productive work is to progressively mature. Our own unfolding gradually changes the way we look at our problems and how we see ourselves. This change in the breadth of our vision of things eliminates the cause of our problems and allows us to attain a more harmonious, stable, and productive way of relating.

UNIVERSALITY

Fifth Teaching

A universal point of view is not only the result of the work of specialized groups; it depends to a great degree on individual effort.

Every advance in knowledge demands a reevaluation of our interpretation of the world and life. Human knowledge is constantly evolving. Each day we know more; discoveries are made continuously, opening up new frontiers of knowledge. The history of humanity reveals, not only the chronology of human events, but also the process of the evolution of knowledge.

At first glance, this evolution does not seem to create conflicts but, in fact, it often does and results in real revolutions. Every step forward demands a change, for each discovery alters the vision of everything believed to be known.

Some discoveries cause a restructuring of society. The invention of the printing press, and much later, the telephone, television and computer precipitated enormous changes, the effects of which we are still experiencing. Free access to information and direct and instantaneous communication make the world smaller. This forces us to relocate ourselves within present-day reality. Proof that the earth is neither flat nor the center of the universe, direct exploration of space, and access to the world of the infinitesimally small force us to redefine our place in the cosmos. Every time we change the way we understand things for another, broader view, we must also change the way we understand our surrounding reality and even the way we understand ourselves. The image we now have of ourselves and the world is quite different from the image we had in the Middle Ages.

Even though we accept the idea that change is indispensable for progress, it is very difficult for us--not to say almost impossible—to recognize that the process of permanent change is a universal law and that it is, therefore, equally applicable to all the aspects of our lives, including our opinions and way of thinking. From the moment of birth on, we begin forming an idea of reality. Little by little we form our opinions and vision of the world and life. While we are involved in this process we are eager to learn; we question, investigate and study. We absorb knowledge and each new piece of information enriches us and helps us to expand our understanding. When we reach the point where we feel sufficiently sure of what we know, we become less open and begin losing the capacity to change our interpretations. We are more inclined to defend our positions than to broaden them. We give more importance to proving we are right than to seeking a truth that could show us we are not right.

The readiness to impose our own point of view gives rise to personal conflicts. But it does not stop there. History shows us that the different visions people have had of the

world and life often led a particular group of people to try to impose its interpretation on other groups. Yet the struggles were between visions with the same limited idea of reality. For example, two groups could begin a war, with each one defending its point of view while sharing with the other the vision of human beings as inhabitants of a restricted world, a world limited by their ignorance of their place in the cosmos. In the past, our conflicts were usually of this kind.

Today, the situation is somewhat different because the life span of one particular point of view is much briefer. Each day brings new advances in all fields of knowledge. It becomes necessary to adjust our vision to conditions that are evolving at a fast rate. The different concepts of reality held by two or three successive generations may be observed at the same moment in history. We are now contemporaneous with several of those visions. Today the youngest generation is forming its own way of understanding things, since it has richer sources of information than previous generations had at the time their interpretations were crystallizing. There thus exist two kinds of confrontation: one between groups of the same generation with differing opinions, and the other between generations that assign different limits to their realities.

What does all this mean for us today? Although we know that our way of seeing things is not perfect or final, many of us feel that "we are right," that our view is the most sensible, the most just, the best. We may truly tolerate different opinions and, ideally, give everyone the right to think and feel as he or she likes, but deep down we feel the need to justify our point of view. We think it is right and therefore the best for everyone. This attitude, which seems innocent at first, is possibly at the root of humankind's tragedies.

It is now time for us to learn the great lesson of history. In spite of the tremendous determination with which, for centuries human groups have struggled to impose their vision of life, not a single one has ever reached that objective. No vision of the world, no doctrine, has been shared by all human beings.

Of course, this does not mean that a particular viewpoint is pernicious or inferior. On the contrary, each has the possibility of being the best, within its limits. For example, my understanding of my sickness may not be the most perfect. Nevertheless, it may be very useful to me if it helps me to heal. Moreover, if I accept that my understanding of my sickness is imperfect, I am always alert to the new discoveries which might help me in the future. By remaining conscious of the limits of my knowledge, I have the opportunity to broaden it continuously. I do not become enclosed in my way of understanding. I desire to learn and improve what I already know. Therefore, although different schools of thought exist in all fields, as long as each recognizes the limitations of its point of view, every advance a particular school makes will be of benefit to the others, since all will be prepared to take advantage of it. In this way, everyone's work will be useful in generating a more universal vision of the world and life.

However, a universal point of view is not only the result of the work of specialized groups; it depends to a great degree on individual effort. If universality does not happen at least in one of us, it won't happen anywhere else.

Even if we are shown a more universal point of view, we deal with it in the same way we do with any information we receive: we understand it according to the way we

interpret things. For example, if we learn that outer space is habitable, we may consider it as a possible place to take a vacation, or as providing an opportunity to develop a more harmonious relationship with the universe. This depends on the breadth of our point of view.

It is not easy to broaden our viewpoint. However, if we were able to change our attitude from thinking “I am right” to thinking “I can learn”, the path towards universality would be clearer. If we realized how limited our view is, we could learn the lesson that history is trying to teach us and pay more attention to the need to examine and expand our vision, instead of always struggling to impose it. From this standpoint, we are all in the same situation: we all need to broaden our point of view. This is a work that each person does within himself or herself. It cannot be done by somebody else or forced upon someone. It is a victory that each person can achieve in his or her own heart. Perhaps this is the road to take toward a more harmonious and loving world.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHOICE

Sixth Teaching

*To unfold spiritually
one must limit oneself voluntarily
and consciously within a method of life.*

We are continuously making choices, sometimes consciously and at other times unconsciously. The choices we make trace the trajectory of our lives.

Becoming aware of the kind of trajectory we trace with our choices and the consequences they have for us, as well as for others, helps us mature as human beings.

We are not always aware of this trajectory. We might get distracted with the success or failure of our endeavors, but it is actually more important to understand the extent to which our choices determine the quality of our lives. The trajectory that we trace can be consciously changed through the wise use of our capacity to choose.

Each instant presents us with options, but we rarely choose consciously. Usually we react to situations before us by simply following old habits and the mental currents of the time. Sometimes we think that we do not need to choose, and other times we think it does not matter what we choose. But in spite of what we might think, each choice, conscious or unconscious, has its effect on us and others.

There are times we feel dissatisfied and unhappy with our lives and the stretch of the road we see ahead of us. We imagine how we would like to live, what we would like to be, what we would like to achieve. Although dreaming about our possibilities may bring us sweet moments of illusion, we still have to face life, which is sometimes difficult and seemingly impossible to change.

Instead of abandoning ourselves to a dream of what we would like to be and do--which moves us to reject what we are and what we do--we need to learn to discern the difference between the illusions created by the imagination and the real possibilities we can choose from, moment by moment. In other words, we can establish a conscious relationship with our choices.

To be able to choose, we have to have a clear idea of what we want. If we were to ask ourselves what we want to attain in life, our answers could probably be summarized very simply: to satisfy our desires, feel happy, be fulfilled. But each of us is different, and we define these longings differently.

In our imagination, we think of the companionship, the achievements and the success that this sense of fulfillment and happiness would bring. Meanwhile, most of the time we reject our present situation which, like any situation, implies limitations, difficulties and a certain amount of suffering.

This contradiction between what we want and what we actually have produces a continuous feeling of discontent in us.

What can we do?

First, we can review our present situation and identify those things we cannot change. We cannot change, for example, our age, our experiences, those things we have done and not done during our lives. We cannot change our aptitudes either, nor our commitments, such as those to home and children.

To accept what we cannot change is a matter of common sense, and it helps us to stop daydreaming about impossible fantasies and illusory escapes. It would not make sense, for example, to imagine that we don't have any obligations when it is obvious that we do. The only way to free ourselves from a commitment is to fulfill it. This, too, is something we cannot change. Nor is it realistic to imagine that we have a particular talent when it is evident we do not.

To accept what we are is simply to accept our past. That, in itself, frees us from what may seem a limitation but which really is the foundation on which we can constructively move ahead. *We have to learn to use what we cannot change.* Knowing this allows us to see what our options and real possibilities are. It is only then that we are ready to choose.

What do we have to do in order to choose well? Some people, facing the real choices before them, ask: How can I choose if I am not sure? Shouldn't I try different things, investigate all options, until no doubt remains about what I want?

Certainly it is helpful and necessary to investigate all our options. But if we wait to make a decision until we are absolutely sure, until there is no doubt left, it is unlikely that we will ever fulfill anything of value.

Our choices always imply an element of risk, a margin of uncertainty, since when we follow one option, we usually don't follow the others. Doubt is ever present in our decisions and choices. Yet there remains one thing that is certain: we are going to die. It is this certainty that in fact generates all our insecurity, doubts and vacillations. "Doubts" are really a condition of our reality.

One way to avoid facing this uncertainty is to play around with our imagined possibilities, with all the things we would like to have and do. This creates an interior void and a feeling of failure and frustration. But nothing is achieved if we don't make a clear choice, and then make the effort needed to fulfill our choice.

We could say there are two kinds of choices.

The first one we could call *exterior choice*. It is the choice of how we are going to use our life: what we are going to do, how we are going to do it, how we will support ourselves. Exterior choice implies career decisions, training, commitments to other people, lifestyle, and concrete accomplishments in work and interpersonal relationships.

But our real possibilities are much broader than the realization of our exterior choice. That is why, regardless of the success we might have in the realization of our exterior objectives, we so often do not attain the happiness and fulfillment that we hoped for. The specter of old age and the gradual decline of our faculties remind us that there is meaning in being alive, a meaning we must discover and make our own.

The moment comes when we realize that *there must be something else in life besides the exterior choices we've made*. We discover that there are other possibilities, that there really is another kind of choice.

This kind of choice is no longer an exterior commitment, either to others or to some particular thing we want to do. This new choice, perhaps the most important one we ever make, requires a commitment to ourselves, to our inner life. We have to choose if we will commit ourselves to our own unfolding and if we will give a spiritual meaning to our lives.

We call this choice *inner choice*.

Our inner choice is fundamental, and it marks a decisive moment in our life. It often requires us to reevaluate all previous choices and sometimes completely changes our lives.

The inner choice is made only once in life, and it is continuously renewed with behavior consistent with it.

We fulfill this choice only if we are continuously conscious of it and face the contradiction between what we do and what we know we yearn to do.

If we want to keep our inner choice alive, it is good to ask ourselves:

- *Am I learning from life? What am I learning? What meaning do I give to what I learn?*
- *How can I use an exterior experience to transform my life?*
- *How do my exterior accomplishments influence my inner possibilities?*
- *How can I be free of the web of my habitual thoughts and feelings?*
- *How can I expand my thoughts and feelings?*
- *What steps am I taking to transcend the limited world of my personal interests?*
- *What means can I count on and use to learn and not repeat experiences in vain?*

In other words, how do I use the experiences I live to understand better and expand my notion of being? Am I living in such a way that I can maintain inner peace while at the same time serve the society I live in and the group to which I belong?

Even though it is important to ask ourselves these questions, this is not enough. It is not enough to study texts, practice exercises or talk about inner or spiritual life. We need concrete means to expand our consciousness, give meaning to our lives, and work inwardly. We also need to apply these means concretely in our everyday lives.

For example, on the path of spiritual unfolding, we need:

1. A method of life
2. Spiritual direction
3. Continuous effort

All forms of life imply a limitation, some with negative results. To unfold spiritually we must limit ourselves voluntarily and consciously within a method of life that can help us achieve what we are looking for. We unfold when we follow a method of life suitable to each one of us.

Spiritual direction is likewise indispensable. We all need the help and guidance of those who have already traversed the path we have chosen.

And without persevering effort, no realization is possible. No matter how high our aspirations may be, these aspirations in themselves are no more than a dream until each of us makes them a reality through a systematic and responsible effort.

Throughout our lives, we are continuously making choices. We tend to think that only some choices are important, but that is not so. All of them determine the trajectory of our lives. Yet it is the inner choice that we each make which gives meaning to our lives, leading us toward the peace and happiness of an experience fully lived. Once we choose inwardly and behave in a manner consistent with our choice, we can establish a clear relationship with all the exterior choices life presents us with.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Seventh Teaching

Instead of imagining that one can change, that one can be another person, we have to contemplate our real possibility, which is the possibility to unfold.

Some of our characteristics are inherent, others are acquired. Together they shape the way we are and the way we express ourselves. Because characteristics are individual and vary from person to person, we will refer to them as "personal characteristics."

Just as everyone has a body—which enables us to be identified physically—all of us have a set of characteristics which distinguish us as a person. These characteristics reveal our temperament, traits, and the way we express and conduct ourselves. There is no such thing as a set of perfect characteristics, although there is a certain consensus among us on what might be considered desirable characteristics. Usually when we think about our own characteristics, we identify the ones we feel are bad and those we think are good, based on what we want to achieve through them. Moreover, we usually say that a person is good or bad depending on the way his personal characteristics affect his relationship with us or with other people. Yet this way of appraising personal characteristics often leads to contradictions.

It might be that someone thinks she has very good characteristics while those around her do not think they are good at all. For example, someone might feel very satisfied with her compulsive personality because it allows her to get what she wants from others. But we can be sure that those around her do not feel happy with the way she treats them.

It might be that another person is a hard worker and thinks that this is her best characteristic. But her capacity for work might negatively affect her relationship with those who cannot keep up with her tempo. She might even be continually comparing herself to others and criticizing them for not being able to work as she does. Besides, that characteristic—which might be advantageous in an office or shop—could prevent her from appreciating other aspects of life, such as being with her family, enjoying nature, sharing time with friends.

We need to know our personal characteristics because they tend to be the cause of many of the problems that trouble us. They may also be the means through which we express the way we work and relate to others and develop.

How can we establish a relationship with our characteristics, then?

Since not all of our characteristics are good, often we are not satisfied with ourselves. And since it is very difficult for us to change these characteristics or even control them, we might become discouraged and think that no matter how great an

effort we make, we cannot free ourselves from the limitations that our characteristics impose on us.

However, it is possible to establish a productive relationship with our personal characteristics if we stop identifying with them.

Just as we know we are not our eyes, nose or hands, we do not need to identify with other personal characteristics that are only exterior manifestations of the way we act and react. They are just superficial aspects of ourselves. It is helpful to remember that our characteristics are tools that allow us to express ourselves. In this way we keep clear the distinction between what we are and the characteristics we have acquired.

When we understand the nature of our personal characteristics we create a distance between them and ourselves. We understand we are not our characteristics. We can then observe and manage them purposefully, for our benefit and happiness.

When I maintain this distance between myself and my characteristics, I have the possibility of using them deliberately and, what is more important, the possibility of improving them. But if I identify with my characteristics, I cannot get to know them well or work on them.

For example, if we are very emotional and identify with this characteristic, we tend to think that our emotions really express our true feelings. In reality, these very emotions confuse our discernment. Since we identify with everything we feel, we cannot distinguish the extent to which we are slaves of our emotional states. But if we are able to keep a distance from the way we react emotionally, we can discover a deeper source of feeling. We can work better with the energy of our emotions and can achieve a more serene and harmonious inner state, which lies behind our emotional ups and downs. Moreover, as this distance allows us to recognize the influence of our emotional characteristics over the way we think and relate to others, we learn to use our judgment better and can relate better with others.

When we identify with some of our characteristics we dislike, we dream about being different, about changing. Unfortunately, this desire alone does not take us very far. When we identify with our characteristics, as we dislike some of them, we dream of being different, of changing. The desire to change and be better is beautiful. But this yearning needs to be well channeled if it is to lead to a true realization and not to self-rejection.

Instead of imagining that we can change, that we can be "another" person (which is usually nothing more than a reaction against some of our characteristics), we have to contemplate our real possibility, which is the possibility to unfold. In other words, instead of abandoning ourselves to the game of imagining how we would like to be, we have to dedicate ourselves to the concrete work of our own unfolding. We have to begin by getting to know our characteristics and working on them.

Our relationship with personal characteristics, then, has to be one of knowledge and work.

First we must know what our characteristics are and how they express themselves. We have to discover which are helpful and which have a harmful effect on our unfolding. Then, we must begin a systematic work on them.

At first glance we think it is not only easy to recognize our characteristics, but we actually think we already know which they are. It is true that we identify some of them, but we don't usually recognize the ones that cause problems for us.

Let's continue with the previous example: a hard worker might think that he does not get along with his colleagues because they are lazy and he works harder than they do. But the real reason for his difficulties of relationship could be that he is intolerant. An intolerant person rarely recognizes his narrow mindedness. It is unlikely that such a person will improve his relationship with others. He will always think that others are responsible for his problems of relationship. It is only if he recognizes his intolerance that he will have the possibility of unfolding.

If we are very emotional, it is possible we will not recognize this characteristic and might even think we are sensitive. Consequently, when we see that a certain circumstance produces a wave of emotion in us but does not awaken the same response in those around us, we might think that they are insensitive. Thus, we might judge them in a way that hurts our relationship with them.

It could happen that we think we are very sympathetic, warm and friendly, and that we need lots of attention and a show of affection from others. If they don't respond the way we expect them to, we might think they are being indifferent. But perhaps that is not at all true. Perhaps we are neither as warm nor as friendly as we imagined, but in fact quite self-centered, since we evaluate others in terms of how they treat us. This, of course, prevents us from relating harmoniously with others. Since we do not identify our real characteristic, we can't improve it even if we want to.

We might like to think that we are very spiritual and that is the reason why we don't worry about material matters. We might even think this is our best characteristic. But actually we could be quite lazy since we don't want to make the necessary effort to make a living and keep our affairs in order.

The characteristics we are most identified with are the ones that are hardest for us to identify. They are also precisely the ones we need to recognize and work on.

How can we learn to see and manage our personal characteristics? There is only one way: to stop being defensive. When we are shown characteristics that we are glad we have, we feel very encouraged. But if someone tells us that we have a certain characteristic we don't like, we don't want to admit it, and we react and feel mortified. We might even react negatively toward the person who pointed it out to us. Our very strong tendency to be defensive shows our spiritual immaturity. If we do not overcome this attitude, we cannot unfold our inner possibilities. We should really feel grateful when people or circumstances help us see our inner nature more clearly, since this helps us uncover characteristics that so far we have not wanted to recognize.

We cannot work spiritually if we deceive ourselves about our characteristics, especially the ones we have to improve. I remember a conversation I overheard once in which one person said to another:

"It seems that you are a little defensive."

"I? Defensive? It cannot be."

This anecdote might make us smile, but we could all ask ourselves how we would react if someone said the same thing to us.

To recognize our own characteristics without reacting is essential to unfolding spiritually.

Being happy about the characteristics we consider positive and sad about the ones we dislike is natural. But if we react by being happy or sad we cannot work on our characteristics. We need to keep alert so as not to be defensive. We also need to avoid criticizing the characteristics of others, which simply blinds us to our own.

All of us have characteristics that may harm us and also characteristics that harm others. The first thing we notice about a person are those characteristics that attract us and those that we consider disagreeable. At the same time, the other person also sees in us the characteristics that are agreeable or disagreeable to her. When we try to improve our relationship with her, acting on our tendency to notice her good and bad characteristics, we simply ask her to change those that bother us. But when she asks us to do the same, we think she doesn't understand us. It is very difficult to achieve a good relationship this way, since it often leads to confrontation.

Just as it is helpful not to identify with my characteristics, it is also very helpful not to identify other people with their characteristics. A person might have some extraordinary qualities but we might not see them because some of her characteristics bother us. On the other hand, another person might really attract us with his personal characteristics and yet we might not share the same values or spiritual aspirations.

In adolescence it is common to feel attraction or rejection toward others for superficial characteristics. Later, as we mature, we find another way of discerning regarding the characteristics of others based on understanding and tolerance.

In most cases when we feel hurt or bothered by others it is because we do not know how to relate with them on a deeper level than that of personal characteristics. Let's take the following example: my own child's shortcomings bother me less than those of my neighbor's child. This is so because my relationship with my own child goes beyond his personal characteristics.

To spiritualize the way we relate with others, we need to begin by accepting each and every person with all her characteristics and understand her as she expresses herself. But tolerance is not enough. Our relationship improves when it is based on acceptance, understanding and love.

To accept others is also to accept their feedback. We hurt them often, usually without recognizing it because we overlook their hints that we are hurting them.

When we accept a person, we accept her circumstances and her history. We never know to what extent the events that happened in her life influence her relationship with us, or the influence her personal history has on our relationship. Above all, we have to understand that we, ourselves, influence the relationship to a great extent, and that many of the characteristics that bother us about her are really the result of the way we see ourselves and the way that person reacts to our own characteristics.

When a relationship irritates us we have to uncover the origin of our reactions because we need to work on ourselves to unfold.

There is a certain degree of pain in all relationships. When we accept the pain that is always present in life, it becomes easier for us not to demand anything from others. Instead, we demand from ourselves a level of acceptance and understanding that will cause our relationships to be more harmonious and spiritual.

We work with our personal characteristics on three levels: on having good manners, at the psychological and at the spiritual level.

Learning to have good manners helps us to develop the capacity to control ourselves exteriorly and form positive habits of conduct. Conduct establishes the standards upon which every kind of relationship is developed and determines the objective characteristics of the relationship.

Having good manners consists in acquiring a degree of control over our characteristics. This control allows us to channel our characteristics through habits of collaboration, work and communication so that they promote harmonious living conditions and the unfolding of our possibilities.

The second level of work is the psychological one. Being able to relate well with others exteriorly is a great achievement. But our relationship would be very superficial if we related with others only at this level. Working at a psychological level helps us to understand ourselves and others. When we understand ourselves and others better, we can love more expansively.

But for this inner work to produce a real transformation in us, it must reach the spiritual level.

Our personal characteristics are the channels through which our energy flows. We say that a characteristic is good when it channels our energy in a way that will produce the result we desire, and that a characteristic is counteractive when its result opposes the sought-after goal.

It is therefore necessary, when evaluating characteristics, to have a point of reference: where do we want these characteristics to lead us? If we do not have an ideal in life, our inner work lacks meaning.

Moreover, without that ideal we don't know how to channel the energy we repress when we control some of our characteristics. If we do not transmute it, that energy turns against us and against others.

When we control an undesirable impulse—anger, for example—the energy remains in us. If we do not channel it in a better way, it grows until we can no longer control it, and then it either overflows unpredictably or causes harm. In other words, if we discharge our energy we harm others; if we repress it we harm ourselves. What can we do? We can guide it, so that the strength of our impulses is transmuted into the expansion of our state of consciousness and into the way we relate and love.

All spiritual work is summed up, in the end, in the wise use of one's energy. Spiritual unfolding does not come from nothing; it is the fruit of our transmutation of energy.

On the spiritual level, we also work on the notion of being. As it helps us to transcend our identification with our characteristics, spiritual work leads us to discover who we really are.

When we consider our characteristics we usually say, "This is the way I am," as if the situation were definitive. This makes us think that we already know ourselves and who we are. When we make the effort not to identify with our characteristics we understand that what we show exteriorly is not necessarily the way we are. We also understand that instead of wanting to change what we are, we need to discover who we truly are and work on the way we manifest ourselves. When we understand this, we also understand others.

When we establish a distance between ourselves and our characteristics, we transform them into instruments that allow us to express ourselves and unfold.

If we are not motivated by a spiritual ideal, it is very unlikely that we will persevere in our work on our characteristics. At one moment our enthusiasm stimulates us to make an effort, but when our enthusiasm is exhausted we will have no reason to continue on our effort. How do we want to live? What is the objective of our life? Our clear answers to these questions are the only foundation upon which we can base ourselves. The type of objective we choose also determines the level of our unfolding.

If what we are seeking is material well-being, it is possible that we do not need to work further than being educated in good manners. If we also want our relationships with others to be more meaningful than the usual superficial relationships, we also need to work on the psychological level.

If we yearn for real peace and happiness, we need to understand that this is attained only when we are motivated by the spiritual ideal.

We all want peace and happiness. Who doesn't? But not all of us understand that having peace and happiness doesn't mean we will always be enjoying life and never suffering. Instead of thinking of happiness as the opposite pole to work and suffering, we need to discover how to find peace and happiness within this very life, for we cannot evade life as it is.

The role models of realization we know, which include those human beings who have brought us the material advances we enjoy as much as those who are examples of the spiritual realization we can attain, show us that these realizations are based on continuous effort and renouncement. These persons not only show us our ideal, but also illuminate the road to realize it.

Our desire for transformation and realization needs to be based on renouncing the set of characteristics, of mental and emotional habits, with which we identify and through which we express ourselves. In that way we will find the peace and happiness we yearn for.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Eighth Teaching

We need to look at life in an integral way and see the body as an inseparable part of what we are. Body and mind are a unity.

So much has been written about physical health in the popular press as well as in serious scientific journals that we ask ourselves: Why include an article about this topic here?

The very fact that so much has been and continues to be written on health-related subjects shows that this is an unresolved issue.

All of us worry about our physical well-being; however, not all of us have a clear plan of action for putting the recommendations of scientific research into practice. It is not information that we are lacking. Where we usually fail is in integrating the information we already have into our way of living and our habits.

We can do much to keep ourselves well physically—the right amount of physical activity and appropriate nutrition produce remarkable results. We trust in our willpower to carry out our resolutions. Yet exercises and programs in themselves are not enough to improve our way of living as much as we know we should. We need to learn to see ourselves as we are.

Our body is an inseparable part of what we are. Body and mind are a unity. Physical health is not an isolated topic, one more among many others; it is something inseparable from mental and spiritual health.

The way in which the mind influences the body is well known—a simple emotion quickens one's pulse; states of stress make one's blood pressure rise. In the same way, one's bodily state has an influence on one's mental state. When our physical energy is low, we tend to get depressed; if our appearance is not good, we feel bad about ourselves. Therefore, the question we are asking is this: How can we use our minds to keep our bodies in the best possible condition?

First of all, we should look at the kind of attention we give our body. We do not always treat it in the same way. When we feel well we do not pay much attention to it. On the other hand, when we are sick it is hard for us to think about anything other than our sickness. These two extreme ways of relating to our bodies prevent us from being very objective and cause us to behave in ways that are counteractive. To try to ignore the consequences of habits we know harm us is like running with our eyes closed; to think only about the state of our health is to fall into an obsession.

Just as we are concerned about our economic situation and follow plans to attend to future needs, we could also plan our way of living so that we do not contract illnesses we can easily prevent—or at least greatly reduce the risk of having them.

Certain eating habits, lack of physical exercise, exposure to toxic substances and radiation, alcohol abuse and smoking are associated with the development of degenerative illnesses such as certain types of cancer, cardiovascular diseases and bone disorders. We certainly do not like to think about this, since it makes us feel guilty for not improving our way of living. The thought of illness is sad since it evokes tragedies we might have to undergo. Besides, life already accosts us with so many worries that we would rather not look at problems before they come up. Who likes to worry about illness when one is well? For this reason we tend to act only when problems appear, that is to say, by reaction. We think about health only when we feel sick, just as we go on a diet only when we have gained too much weight.

Neither ignorance nor escapism frees us from sickness and suffering. Therefore, we need to become conscious of our habits and the risks we run if we do not change those that are harmful to us.

Our health is related to our way of living, working and confronting problems as well as our eating habits, resting and recreating. At the same time, they depend on our attitude. Hence it is good to attend first to our attitude.

An intelligent attitude stimulates us to live in a way such that, instead of changing our habits after we have become sick, we change them each time we learn that other, more healthful and beneficial habits could be followed. But learning about more helpful and beneficial habits does not motivate us enough to change. Our attitude creates habits that are unconscious, automatic movements. To choose healthy habits consciously we need great inner strength. If it all depended on our capacity for choosing, we would of course not have too much difficulty. Who doesn't always want the best? But in order to transform our good resolutions into appropriate behavior, we need to remain conscious of the consequences of our habits, to develop a plan of action to improve them and not to look upon this work as a sacrifice, but rather as a needed step in our unfolding.

Calling to mind the harmful effects of the habits we want to change and the beneficial effects of those we want to take root in us helps us a great deal. This act of remembering is a source of strength we should not underestimate, and we should practice it frequently. Simply keeping the risk in mind helps us to avoid danger until we learn to protect ourselves automatically. Being prudent when we walk on difficult ground does not mean that we need to stop walking. Rather, we pay attention to walking carefully so that we are not likely to fall. If we usually walk on difficult terrain, prudence will become a habit. Repeated movements turn into habits and with time they become automatic. Then we don't need to make a conscious effort to carry them out.

A new behavior is like a stranger. In the beginning we don't know how to relate to it, but as we get to know it better it becomes familiar and pleasing, and eventually it becomes a habit.

There are no difficult habits to learn; we create the difficulties with our way of thinking. As long as we feel that to change one habit for a healthier one is a sacrifice or a loss, it is unlikely that we will be successful in implementing a better habit.

Nevertheless, before a new habit takes root, not satisfying an impulse creates a void that needs to be filled. An effective approach in this situation is to choose beforehand

something better to do, and to do it every time the same impulse appears. If we always respond in the same way to the same stimulus, little by little we will introduce new habits which will gradually replace the old ones. To the degree to which a new habit takes root, the old habit loses strength. Healthful habits of life become much more attractive the more we practice them, because their results are clear: our body feels better and our mind is more serene. Our self-esteem also increases because we see that we can gain control over our life.

To develop the capacity for creating new habits is fundamental to living better. When we learn to change counteractive habits for better ones, we learn to harmonize what we know with what we do.

It is just as one-sided to consider spiritual matters without taking into account the human body as it is to pay attention only to the body without considering the spiritual aspect. The body is intimately connected with the mind and together they form the foundation of a healthy spiritual life. The capacity for becoming conscious of our habits and changing them when we see fit is a fundamental aspect of our development as human beings. It is good for us to pay attention to physical health not only to feel better physically, but also to get to know our habits and to acquire mastery over our lives.

TWO FACETS OF WELL-BEING

Ninth Teaching

When we are well, we use our energy to produce and create better living conditions and new possibilities. Sickness, on the other hand, teaches us that the body is only a temporary instrument; this opens up new spiritual horizons for us.

Few subjects are as important as physical well-being and its counterparts: sickness and death. Life depends on health. Getting sick seems like a catastrophe. If we are lucky enough to be healthy, we tend to live as if this were always going to be the case and do not pay attention to our health.

Of course, health depends on many factors, some of which are beyond our control. Heredity, physical constitution and congenital diseases establish conditions that we are as yet unable to change. Even so, we can have a positive influence over our health. The main thing is to be conscious of the relationship that exists between health and our way of living, thinking and feeling and to remember that we cannot separate health from sickness, or life from death.

Spiritual unfolding is possible in any state of health. When we are well, we use our energy to produce and create better living conditions and new possibilities. When we are sick we learn that the body is only a temporary instrument and recognize the importance of keeping it healthy.

Living in a way that threatens our good health is harmful not only to ourselves but also to others. Staying as healthy as possible is an aspect of the responsibility we have toward society, since we must all face the cost of illness and the limitations it brings.

We can do a lot to be in good health during most of our life. Health is not merely a gift. It depends to a large extent on our way of life.

However, the emphasis on staying in good health should not make us forget that we cannot completely avoid sickness, debilitation and death. It would be foolish to close our eyes and not look at these fundamental aspects of life.

In order to keep spiritually healthy, it is good to look not only at the aspects of life we call positive. We need to learn to live with the limitations, pains and problems that illnesses bring.

As an old adage says, we should accept what we cannot avoid. We might add that even in the most critical situations we can always find possibilities for unfolding. To live means to grow, produce and fulfill objectives; it also means to die. And, although we still don't completely understand the meaning of death, knowing how to die well is perhaps as important as knowing how to live well, since learning to die is to learn to live well.

It is natural for us to fear death. But learning to accept death helps us to overcome this fear. When we are able to do so, our life attains a depth and fullness that we could not have achieved in any other way.

Can we really separate death from life? Death is not the denial of life; it is, rather, its culmination. The idea of death is not opposed to the joy of life, the plenitude of fulfillment, the peace of the heart. On the contrary, the consideration of death leads us to value each thing; when this happens, our life becomes permeated with a transcendental meaning.

Moreover, the thought of death helps us to understand human pain and to develop the compassion and love for assisting those who need us.

ALTERNATIVES

Tenth Teaching

If we were able to identify some element that is common to all our problems, we would have the concrete means to begin working on all of them at the same time.

Even if our life seems to run smoothly, we confront problems and difficulties every day. Although we may care very much for loved ones and they may care for us, in relating with them there could be something that hurts us or we could hurt them without meaning to. We like our jobs, but there are moments in which we find them tiresome or dull. It is often a hard struggle to excel or even just to survive. Sometimes we feel lonely and sad. Other times we are troubled by the world situation and humanity's uncertain future. Although these problems do not prevent us from living, they often feel like obstacles that stand in the way of our happiness or the possibility of inner peace. What can we do about such a situation?

We usually try to endure our problems in the simplest way: we put up with them, we are patient. Of course, this does not put an end to them, and when our resistance reaches its limit, we react. We want others to change, or the situation to change, or we want to run away.

When we want others to change we complain about them, and demand that they stop making trouble for us. But other people are not always predisposed to listen to us, and if they are, they are not always ready to change.

When we want circumstances to change, we think, "I can't take it anymore. I never want to see that person again," or "That's final. I'm going to change jobs," or "I'll apply for a transfer." This approach doesn't give us the results we hope for. We find ourselves face-to-face with similar situations and problems again.

So we might decide on something more extreme: we run away, we escape in distractions, we stop thinking about the things that worry or frighten us. This tendency to try to run away transforms us into strangers to our reality, and deepens our indifference and lack of communication.

None of these attitudes does much to alleviate our troubles. Instead, they intensify our problems and multiply our conflictive situations.

We might like to dream of a life without problems, but even in our dreams such a life is hard to imagine.

If instead of running away from our problems we learn to work on them, they might not seem problems to us anymore.

We cannot eliminate with a single blow the infinite number of obstacles we encounter on our road, nor can we overcome them by confronting them one by one.

Even if this were possible, it would be an endless task. But, if we were able to identify some element that is common to all our problems, we would have the concrete means with which to work on all of them at the same time. This is much simpler and more practical. So let's try to look at problems from a broader point of view to see what they have in common.

In each problem we can easily identify some elements. The first is "the obstacle" itself. Each problem seems to present a barrier that separates us from what we want. For most of us, "the obstacle" is the most easily identified element of our problem. The second element, ever present, is less often recognized. We are the ones the obstacle hinders and causes to suffer. Obstacles change—whether they be people, situations, work, etc. We, on the other hand, are the ones who always run up against these obstacles. So the common element to all our problems is ourselves.

Besides these two elements—ourselves and the obstacle that causes the problem—there is a relationship between ourselves and the obstacle. Considering our problems within a system of relationships, we find new possibilities that are worthwhile exploring.

What types of problems do we have?

We can have problems with some of our personal aspects we dislike and which, in spite of all our efforts, we cannot change: our physical appearance, our age, our temperament, some of our limitations.

We can have interpersonal problems: conflictive relationships with people we can't stand or who can't stand us; difficulties at home, at work, at school; difficulties with the objectives we have set.

We can have problems with society: our social class, our ethnicity, our ideas, our way of life.

We can have problems with certain aspects of life that we have not been able to accept: little money, loneliness, sickness or old age.

Moreover, we can have "problems" with ourselves, with others, with the place where we live, with life. That is to say, we have "problems" with our system of relationships.

If we work on our system of relationships, we work on all the "problems" at the same time and obstacles become centers of work. By improving our system of relationships we can change each obstacle into an opportunity for personal unfolding.

For example, if my problem at work is that my boss is authoritarian, I have different alternatives. One is to react and create such a hostile situation that he forces me to quit my job. Another is to put up with this authoritarianism. A third alternative is to work on my relationship with my boss. I cannot make him change. But neither can I ignore the negative effects of his authoritarianism. I can explore new ways of relating with him and with his way of dealing with me which do not alter my inner stability or destroy the pathways of communication we need to keep open. Instead of transforming the obstacle into a problem, I work on that obstacle by improving my relationship. At the same time, my inner work with my boss can show me my own conflicts with authority. Knowing myself better can help me improve my relationships with my family and friends.

Each problem is nothing but a symptom which tells me that a relationship can and must become better. Each relationship that improves produces a chain reaction that helps other relationships improve.

Conscious and systematic work on our system of relationships is revealing and fruitful. Besides giving us a broad vision of ourselves and our life, it opens a perspective that makes us feel part of the whole of humanity and gives meaning to what we do and feel.

Moreover, discovering the way to work on our system of relationships gives us a great inner strength because we understand that we are not at the mercy of what happens. On the contrary, to a large extent we have in our hands the means to exercise a positive influence on our environment.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ANGER

Eleventh Teaching

To react with anger adds a greater problem to the one we already have, and this self-created problem is the one that does the most damage.

Who does not feel annoyed when something does not turn out as we hoped it would? When our annoyance increases and persists we say we are angry. We don't like to be victims of our anger, but if we let ourselves get carried away by anger we multiply our problems.

When we are angry we let ourselves become immersed in aggressive feelings. The torrent of inner emotions that whirls inside us focuses our attention on the source of our irritation. It becomes difficult to think about anything else. Even if we do not physically assault the person who made us angry, we attack with violent thoughts and feelings that we do not usually have. Pouring out our anger in criticisms and bad manners tends to feed the fire of our anger and also create resentment. If we allow anger to grow it can turn into wrath. When that happens we are no longer fully conscious of what we say or do.

Even if we are able to control ourselves exteriorly, anger makes us suffer and we look for someone to blame for our deep annoyance. We justify our anger by thinking we are right and argue to prove that we are. We rarely ask ourselves if it makes sense to react in the way we do. On the contrary, we come to believe that our anger is necessary, a "holy wrath," the cure for evil. We think that by reacting with anger we are doing something good, such as clarifying a situation, revealing the truth, or punishing a culprit.

Yet when we are angry we do not act or think sensibly. We are tense and we may actually be physically and emotionally unbalanced. In most cases our anger worsens the situation that caused us to be angry. To react with anger adds a greater problem to the one we already have, and this self-created problem is the one that does the most damage.

To be angry is a form of vengeance which we turn against our own selves.

Moreover, anger undermines our spiritual foundation because it actually moves us to act the same as, or worse than, the person we are reacting against. Even the most common encounter can cause us to be angry. How many times has it happened that someone has said something that irritated us and then that person continued on his way without even thinking of us or what he told us? Meanwhile, we remain so involved in the incident that we mentally attack him for a very long time. Inwardly, we keep arguing with someone who doesn't even have a clue we are angry with him. Without realizing, we act worse than what we criticize. We might not necessarily throw a fit or a temper tantrum, but we still suffer from our negative feelings and our lack of self mastery.

Any anger implies the loss of inner control; usually it also implies a loss of exterior control. For this reason many spiritual guides teach that anger and resentment are setbacks in our unfolding. In just a moment, they cause us to erase what we thought we had accomplished over a long time and with great effort.

If we compare, for example, what we feel and yearn for in moments of spiritual elevation with what we think, say and do when we are angry we see two different people.

Anger also produces a certain kind of alienation. We not only react against those who irritate us but, since we are upset, we express ourselves in an aggressive and hurtful way to everyone around us. How frequently do we discharge our reactions upon people who don't have anything to do with the cause of our anger! We are not aware of the wounds we produce in others with our reactions. When we regain our composure it is already too late.

The fabric that sustains our relationships with others is very delicate. Each of our reactions profoundly affects it and can even destroy it. When we react with anger, even our relationships with those we love deteriorate.

If we easily get upset, it is probable that, little by little, we will lose the capacity to relate with anyone. Who wants to keep up a relationship with someone who has the habit of discharging his irritations? It's good to remember that all we do and say is irreversible. Even if we get over our irritations and apologize, try to patch things up and forget what has happened, nevertheless, what is said is said, what is done is done, and we cannot do anything about it.

Even though there isn't a formula against anger, we can isolate two aspects when we analyze it: the effect it produces in us and in those around us and the relationship we establish with it. This relationship allows us to know ourselves better, control our reactions and relate with others more positively.

In order to control the effects of anger, we have to establish a relationship with it. First, we keep a distance between ourselves and what happens to us; second, we learn to become conscious of our weak points; and, third, we develop the capacity to choose the way we will react when we are faced with similar situations.

To learn to keep a distance between ourselves and our anger, we can do a simple exercise: we can try to look at ourselves from the outside and see ourselves as others see us. To do this, we first need to separate our reactions from our justifications, for example, we need to stop being so anxious to show we are right. If we set aside our reasons and stop trying to explain why we feel the way we feel, we can then concentrate on working on our anger. This is a way to keep a distance from what is happening to us. Although we may not be able to control ourselves completely, we can be objective enough to have a better understanding of what is happening.

Although at first the distance we are able to make between ourselves and what happens to us is very small and lasts only a short time, it is the first step to be able to put the events of our life in perspective. It is hard, for example, to appreciate a work of art if we hold it close to our face. The same thing happens to us when we want to evaluate a situation; in order to understand what happens we have to learn to observe ourselves from a distance. If, for example, we are able to keep ourselves from reacting

to criticism, we can contemplate the situation in the same way as it would be seen by a friend who is with us. We can avoid turning the matter into a personal problem and try to discover what makes us react. Although at first glance this exercise does not seem to be so difficult, being able to do it represents a real triumph for many people; it actually implies a fundamental step in our unfolding as human beings.

To the degree to which we gain objectivity, we discover our most vulnerable areas, those which need no more than a light touch to awaken a strong reaction. We all have "sore spots" which we are not always ready to acknowledge. To accept our weak points is a fundamental step toward understanding our reactions. For example, if we recognize that we do not like to be shown our shortcomings, instead of becoming offended when someone shows us our mistakes, we learn to listen and learn from them. When we accept the fact that we react and we know why we react, then we are less inclined to justify our anger. This shows us what moves us and how we can improve our way of relating.

But is it possible not to react at all when something contradicts us? Of course this is not what we are attempting to achieve. Every healthy organism reacts when it is stimulated. What we do believe is this: it is possible not to be obliged to respond in an unconscious and aggressive way. On the contrary, even in touchy situations we can choose responses that promote our balance and unfolding.

To gain a certain distance and recognize our way of reacting gives us a solid foundation from which to choose the best way of responding. To gain distance and recognize our weak points are part of an interior method; they give us effective control over the situation. Even though this control does not mean that trying moments and difficulties will disappear, it allows us to discover options where before we only saw inevitability.

Anger is not a passion that has to dominate us. Rather, it is an aspect of our personality to which we may give the form and orientation which is most advantageous in each instance. The simple fact of having options at our disposal gives us the opportunity to continuously improve our relationship with those who surround us and with the different circumstances we encounter in life. To learn to know our feelings and transform our irritations and anger into healthier and more positive attitudes is a good way to smooth our path and to learn how to hurdle obstacles that would otherwise block our way.

MOVING BEYOND PREJUDICES

Twelfth Teaching

It is not easy for me to accept that I have preconceptions about what I am.

The very idea seems incredible to me:

How can I have prejudices about myself?

During the course of my life I have formed a view of things, of others and myself. Since this view is so familiar, it seems to me to be the most logical and sensible one, if not the only correct one. I acknowledge I have prejudices about people I don't know fully. Thus, I say that some people are "different", "strange" or "odd." I do not realize that the attitude which gives rise to these judgments about others is the same that creates prejudices which cloud my view of myself and of reality in general.

Just as my preconceptions about other people hinder me from knowing them and having a harmonious relationship with them, preconceptions are also what block my unfolding and do not allow me to broaden my vision of myself.

I easily notice other people's prejudices but find it painful to accept that I too have prejudices. I continuously judge others as prejudiced but am unpleasantly surprised when someone points out my prejudices to me.

I am biased when I think that my opinion is right. I am used to thinking that my opinions reflect the truth and not a position I have taken in favor of or against someone. In fact, I believe that I always make an effort to overcome my preferences to maintain a fair and just view.

Even though my mind tells me the world is diverse and that my way of being, feeling and thinking is only one among many, I cannot help reacting when I see persons who live and think differently from the way I do. It is almost as if I see in them a potential danger from which I must protect myself.

When I stop and think about my attitude, I find that I am not free of prejudices, even though intellectually I accept the idea that all human beings deserve the same respect and have the right to choose their beliefs and lifestyles.

With regard to knowledge in general, my opinions are simply based on what I read, on conversations, on partial or sporadic experiences, on ideas which happen to be in vogue. I do not find it strange that, though my direct experiences are limited, my ideas are firm and solid. Perhaps this is so because I cannot live without the security of being right and so I imagine that my ideas are the consequence of what I know. In short, I confuse my opinions with information.

Certainly it would not be sensible to reject an opinion simply because it can't be definitive, since I need a starting point for getting on with my life. But if I remain aware that my opinions and judgments are only provisional, I can keep my mind open to new

information, keep on learning and above all, keep on listening so that my opinions and information are always up-to-date.

I see this process already going on around me—in the sciences, for example. It is remarkable to see how quickly theories that were believed to be firmly established are being displaced by new discoveries. In the social order, growing communication and interdependence among peoples—their economies, their politics and even their ideologies—propel me to accept other cultures, other opinions, other traditions. More information gives a broader perspective. Consequently, belligerence changes to tolerance and tolerance leads to acceptance, knowledge, harmony and integration.

If I wish to develop the capacity to keep up with the times and unfold fully as a person, I have to transcend the prejudices I have about myself.

It is not easy for me to accept that I have preconceptions about who and what I am. The very idea seems incredible to me: How could this be possible? My most well-founded information is that which refers to my person. After all, who or what can I know better than myself? There is nothing closer to me or more continuously with me than myself.

Yet, as incredible as it may seem, I do not know myself well. I do not have even the most basic understanding of my way of being, reacting and expressing myself. I have frequent proof of this since my family members, friends, doctors, teachers and people I relate with see me in a different way from the way I see myself. Their way is so different that I am sometimes convinced it does not reflect the way I really am. In fact, a good deal of the conflict in my relationships with others originates in the differences between their perceptions and my perceptions of myself. This increases my frustration, making me feel misunderstood or unjustly accused.

My prejudices about myself not only prevent me from seeing my defects but also from discerning my possibilities—perhaps the best of them. How often do my friends, parents or teachers try to persuade me to do something I don't want to do because I think I cannot do it? They see in me possibilities that I do not see in myself. It is a matter of accepting that others can see in me what I do not know how to see or am not capable of recognizing.

It comes down to the fact that the knowledge I have of myself is partial and incomplete. However, on such a weak foundation I build firm ideas about myself. This bias prevents me from seeing my strengths, my defects, my limitations, my abilities and my possibilities

I often think that my limitations are exterior, that other persons, the environment and circumstances are the obstacles which bar my unfolding. This might be true to a certain extent, but I am sure I will never be able to know my real possibilities until I look beyond the line drawn by my preconceptions about what I am and what I can accomplish.

We can use as examples the people who see possibilities where others see limitations. Sometimes people who just arrive at a place—even though they are not better or more capable—see possibilities that those who have been living-there don't see. They can carry out something new not only because they believe it can be done, but also because they can do it. We see this in cases where people have decided to embark on an endeavor others thought was crazy or absurd: the great discoverers, those adventurers who crossed oceans, discovered lands and flew in machines that for others did not have any future. What was different about them? It was that their

imagination went beyond the prejudices common to their time and place. They believed that something was possible which, for others, was not.

We can also look upon ourselves as uncharted terrain, with many challenges to take on and explore.

This refers not only to the exterior achievements, such as material goods and academic degrees I may acquire, but also to my spiritual life. Beyond what I believe I know about myself and what others believe they know about me, there is an inner space I have not yet explored. The spiritual possibilities only I can discover inwardly, as long as I love spiritual freedom enough to transcend my own prejudices, are there.

The yearning for spiritual liberation impels me to move toward God. In the measure in which I respond to this yearning, I discover the barriers which I myself placed—without realizing it—between my soul and my possibilities.

As I transcend the prejudices I have of myself, my relationship with others becomes more harmonious, my view of the world expands and my understanding of myself deepens. Above all, I understand the need to unfold as a complete human being.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES

Thirteenth Teaching

The capability of contemplating the earth as a whole helps us to understand that cultures are diverse and interdependent. In order for a universal vision to evolve—one that includes all human beings—each culture needs to respect not only the diversity within its own interpretation of life, but also the interpretations of other cultures.

Humankind is made up of various cultures and peoples, each of which has its own vision of life and a particular way of solving its problems and fulfilling its possibilities. In every age there has been a predominant culture. Often it has tried to conquer other cultures or impose its own way on other peoples, but that objective has never been completely achieved. No matter how great its control, the predominant culture has to tolerate the existence of conceptions of life that are different from its own. This proves that there has never been a single world view appropriate to all, and also that the differences among various cultures pertain to the functions each performs in the whole of humankind.

This is not difficult to understand in general terms. Nevertheless, it is not easy for each of us to recognize the characteristics and limitations of the culture to which we belong, nor is it easy for us to discover the function of our own culture in its relationship with others.

We can see the function that we as individuals have within our culture, especially when our work consists of something concrete. For example, if I have been trained as a biochemist and perform that job in a laboratory, I have no doubts about my function. It is also easy for us to see that other people contribute to society by performing other functions.

The opportunity to choose proves to us that there is more than one option and that not all of them are appropriate for each one of us. This does not make us think that the functions we do not choose are bad or wrong. On the contrary, it shows us that diversity brings progress and benefits for everyone. Thus we can choose the most suitable functions for ourselves and our skills and live in peace. We know that others depend on the way we carry out our functions and that each one of us depends on others as well.

We see that all our functions are interdependent and that for all of us to fulfill our functions, each one of us must fulfill his own. We can't get to our job on time if our bus driver doesn't get to his job on time. All our functions are intertwined and all are necessary. This example can help us understand the functions that different cultures play.

However, the functions of great human groups—peoples and cultures—are not so easy to recognize.

We do not always have a broad enough perspective from which to observe different human groups, especially if they are contemporary. A culture's time period is different from an individual's time period. A culture's influence, its importance, and its impact are measured in centuries rather than years. That is why it is not easy for us as individuals to understand our own culture and its role in the whole human group. It is even less easy to understand a different culture, with customs and values that are different from ours.

We do not choose our culture and native country as we choose our profession and the place where we live. We are born into a culture and molded by it. We are so identified with our own culture that we can feel what we call *culture shock* when we come into contact with customs, points of view and values that strike us at first as not merely different, but as absurd, ignorant or wrong. In the past, it was common for conquerors to bring back objects or even persons from other cultures as curiosities to be exhibited. It was also common for them to enslave or to try to convert other peoples to their own beliefs and customs. The imperial culture considered that others were ignorant, and part of the work of conquerors was to see that subjugated peoples changed their values and customs for those of the victors. In this way the other cultures would become "civilized."

Today we have a broader view. Close contact among the various peoples of the world and the capability of contemplating the earth as a whole help us to understand that cultures are diverse and interdependent. We also realize that if different visions of the world exist today, it is because none of them is appropriate for all. In order for a universal vision—one suited to all human beings—to evolve, each culture needs to respect not only the diversity within its own interpretation of life, but also the interpretations of other cultures.

Just as we have awakened to an ecological respect for nature, so too at the human level we are developing a consciousness of respect and integration. Vegetable and animal species form a chain in which each link is unique and irreplaceable; likewise, each human being and each people with its culture are indispensable. We are beginning to apply the same degree of tolerance and understanding that we grant each member of our own culture to other peoples and cultures.

How can we accelerate this process of harmonization? We can begin by cultivating a broader way of looking at what is different. Certainly each people, each culture, has its way of fulfilling its possibilities. But instead of using these differences in order to oppose each other, why not recognize that each culture contributes something that enriches the whole? Why not recognize that it is by integrating the differences and not by eliminating them that we can reach a universal vision of ourselves?

Rather than thinking that our culture is the norm, we can learn to understand other cultures and peoples within their own reality. Thus, instead of seeing different and antagonistic groups we can see a single body: humanity as a whole.

If we develop respect and acceptance for what seems different to us, it will be easier for us to understand the function of each individual, each group, each people and each culture in the whole of humankind. In this way, we will be able to broaden our vision of ourselves and the reality we live in.

THE YEARNING FOR MEANING

Fourteenth Teaching

*Love is a companion
in a work done alone
in the intimacy of each person's
heart, mind and soul.*

We are used to asking questions of others and being guided by their answers. The questions may be fairly trivial such as, "Is it going to rain on Sunday?" or more serious such as, "Do you still love me even though I got really angry at you?" We are used to seeking the advice of family members, friends, therapists and advisers about our professional and personal lives. Advertising pushes us to buy, and tells us how to fill our free time and where to spend our next vacation. But there are moments when we stop asking, remain silent and become conscious of the mystery of life.

These are the moments in which the search for meaning in life surfaces. Sometimes the search is phrased in questions such as "Where am I going? What do I live for?" and "What is the meaning of my life?" Since the answers to these questions remain a mystery, we are not at peace. This search for meaning is the foundation of spiritual life.

Such moments may occur at any age and under any circumstances: in the discovery of a friend's need for comfort and love and of our desire and ability to assist him, in the realization that a lifetime of possibilities lies ahead and that we have choices to make, in the yearning to devote our life to something greater and more generous than simply satisfying our desires and personal needs, and in discovering our need to work for the good of others in any field that we can benefit with our skills.

Such moments may occur when we have everything we have wished for, or when we encounter painful situations or see a need. Such moments may occur when we have solved our problems and have "everything" we need and yet feel a strange uneasiness, a feeling that says, "There has to be more to life than job, home, friends, distractions... There must be something beyond that gives meaning to all this."

The search for meaning demands a different type of question and calls for a different response. The answer must come from within us, from the silence of our vital commitment. Thus, we begin the search for meaning in the last place we usually think of looking, within our mind and heart.

When we ask "Who am I?", "What is the meaning of my life?", only we can respond. We are the only ones who can answer those questions. Our answers will be the only ones to satisfy us, and the elements for undertaking this spiritual search—and the capacity to think, discern and love are in our own hands.

We can then learn to commit ourselves to the search for meaning and to participation with all human beings because we have the means we need to do it: our own life.

The search for meaning is not a research project carried out from the outside in. It is not a search for more information to cram into our mind. It is not measured by the number of conclusions we draw or by the number of questions we answer. Moreover, our conclusions are not based upon facts presented and interpreted by others. Our yearning for meaning involves research within our own life to understand how our mind works, what stimulates it to think in certain ways, what automatic mental response mechanisms we have, and in what ways our mind can assist us in our search for meaning. We carry out the same research with our emotions. As we learn how our minds and emotions work we center ourselves within and discover our inner world. The questioner's life is the laboratory in which the fundamental answers are sought.

There, we discover that a method to work inwardly and spiritual orientation are essential for keeping our yearning alive.

We need to put our life in order and to establish priorities in the use of our energy; we need to create spaces for silence and reflection, for study and work, for healthy recreation and for quiet relaxation. We do not need more time, time separate from our everyday life. We need to establish priorities and organize our days. What is even more important, we need to choose the general direction we want our lives to take and respond concretely to the following question: "Where am I going?"

We need the guidance of those who have walked part of the road we are just beginning, to show us the dangers we may encounter, support us in our efforts and help us to see our inner states objectively. Thus, finding a good spiritual guide is essential.

We often ask, "How can I find time and energy to dedicate myself to something else other than my immediate reality?" We don't realize that when we throw ourselves into a way of life filled with uncertainty and anxiety and lose the space for thinking and becoming more conscious, we are draining our energy and turning our perception of time into a tyrant. There is a point we have to reach to break this vicious circle that imprisons us. That point is love, the fire that feeds all our efforts. If we do not love life, the search for meaning, the possibilities that wait to be discovered and the people who wait for light and refuge, we will soon forget our search. Love nourishes our commitment, stimulates us to be attentive and to practice the exercises that help us to persevere when we lose heart. Love is the companion that pushes us to carry on the work in the intimacy of our hearts and minds.

What do we do while we are still searching for and have not yet "found" the meaning of our life? The attitude that makes us, and others, happier and joyful is to give our lives the broadest and deepest meaning we can think of, expanding our love and using our skills to concretely participate in a real way with all human beings. Perhaps, we may then discover that we are not the ones to ask life what it means, but it is life that asks us the meaning we are giving to our life, how we are responding to it day by day with all its ups and downs, its happiness, pains and possibilities. Perhaps, each one of us is the answer to life's challenges. It is up to us, then, to give meaning to our life.

LIVING CONSCIOUSLY: BUILDING OUR FUTURE

Fifteenth Teaching

Our fundamental choice

is to know what to do with our life.

We yearn to live fully, to express our deepest intention; we want to give meaning to our life. Even though we do not have any doubt that this is what we want, the means to do it sometimes slips through our fingers. Perhaps one way to fulfill this yearning is to learn how to choose.

We have the possibility to choose whatever is under our control. This capacity to choose, no matter how limited it may seem to us, is what makes possible the progress of a society and the unfolding of an individual.

Of course, there are aspects of life that we can't change, the past, for example. We can't change our own past or that of humankind. We cannot even avoid its consequences in the present. The best we can do with the past is accept it, since only by accepting it can we understand our own history and, more importantly, allow our past experiences to have a positive influence in the present.

The future seems to be a new field of possibilities. Although we can speculate about it by looking at what happened in the past and what we are living now, we can never be sure what will happen. Our real and effective area of work is the present. The only way of having some positive control over our future is through the decisions we make in the present.

Let us examine that margin we have for altering the course of events, our capacity for consciously changing the direction of our lives by learning how to choose.

Our fundamental choice is what to do with our life. This decision shapes the rest of our choices and touches every part of our lives.

Even though all of us live on planet Earth, not all of us live in the same world. The world we live in depends on the meaning we give to our life and the choices we make minute by minute. If we are only interested in ourselves we choose to be the center of our reality. We limit our life to the circle of our interests and we do not want anything to do with what happens to others. Then, our world not only becomes small but also full of conflicts and darkness. When we choose a larger world our interests also encompass a broader area than our personal interests. Our world becomes more interesting, more challenging and more constructive. When we choose universal ideals which include all human beings, our life becomes more meaningful, our thoughts and feelings expand, our world becomes the universe and, consequently, the meaning we give to our struggles and achievements deepens.

Once we have made the fundamental choice about what to do with our life, we need to choose the steps we will take to fulfill our objective.

When we choose something, we also choose everything that choice implies. A person in New York can travel to Paris or Hawaii. If she chooses to go to Paris, she can

stop in London. If she chooses to go to Hawaii, she can stop in Los Angeles. But it is inefficient to reverse the choice of stops since that would also entail more flying time, more expenses and more travelling time. Each choice establishes a course of action, and within which are certain possibilities. It is important to know each time we choose what possibilities we have ahead of us and what options we are leaving aside in order to fulfill our desires, since each choice determines future possibilities. If we decide to buy something luxurious we can't complain that it costs too much. If we spend money on luxury items, we can't complain that we don't have enough to buy essential things. Yet not everyone accepts this obvious fact. When we choose selfishly we don't always understand the consequences of that choice and often complain about the very thing we have chosen. We don't want to recognize that if we don't care about others, we can't expect others to care about us. We choose what we want, but reject what it implies. We resist accepting that life has its law of cause and effect which inevitably affects us.

When we want to have a home, we are at the same time choosing sharing, tolerance and acceptance of responsibilities we haven't had before. When we choose to have children, we are also choosing to feed and educate them. We cannot be happy about having a child and then reject the work of caring for him. We can't have one thing without the other. If we only do what we want and reject what we don't like doing, we are forcing others to carry a burden that is really ours. This is also a choice and has consequences we can't evade, even if we don't like them.

An artist, for example, doesn't only choose to be successful; she knows very well the effort that choice entails. She knows that her possibilities to be successful are limited, and that she probably won't be famous.

Every time we choose we limit ourselves, since choosing is to choose one option out of several. Sometimes we don't want to choose in order not to limit ourselves. But if we don't choose, we don't fulfill our goal. To be able to do something, we need to choose an option and concentrate our efforts on it. Even though we might be able to fulfill several objectives at the same time, we would never be able to fulfill all the possibilities we have all at once.

We can never stop limiting ourselves because we can't avoid deciding—even when our intention is to not make a decision. Not to choose is to decide to wait, to let time and possibilities go by. This is an even greater limitation because we are not channeling our efforts into any goal. If among our various options we choose not to choose, we are really choosing to ignore our possibilities.

To limit ourselves by ignoring our possibilities is counteractive since it prevents us from realizing our full potential and living fully; besides, it reduces our capacity to understand and participate. But when, after having considered our options, we limit ourselves voluntarily and consciously in order to fulfill our fundamental choice, our energy and capacity multiplies; thus, we can fulfill our objectives.

In addition to the choice of our ideal and the means to fulfill it, there are the countless decisions we make, instant after instant each day. What mood will I be in today? How will I relate to others? What work will I do and how will I perform it? Though we may not be aware of these small decisions, their sum marks the path we will follow throughout the day, just as the wake behind a boat indicates in what direction it is headed.

Every time a person completes a stage, he encounters new possibilities. While a student is in high school he appears to have many options, but in fact he has just two fundamental ones: to finish high school or not. While he is still in school he can think about all he will be able to do when he graduates, but it is only after he completes his studies that he has the real option of going to college. New possibilities appear after the previous stage is finished.

If we make a habit of choosing consciously, even in seemingly small and unimportant matters, and are aware of the stage we are going through, we have greater strength to fulfill our objectives without wasting time. We know beforehand the path we will follow, the responsibilities we will assume, the work we will begin and the obstacles we will have to overcome. But when we don't choose consciously, we simply drift and usually don't arrive at our destination—we might even drift into danger. If we wander on a mountain in the dark and come to the edge of the cliff without realizing it, the best we can hope for is to escape alive and reach safe ground. Conscious choices help to avoid not only wasting time but also suffering unnecessarily.

Sometimes we are surprised upon arriving at a particular place because it isn't the one we thought we had chosen. However, it really was the place we were choosing when we made all our small decisions, the ones that seemed unimportant and which we didn't associate with our goal. Let's take the example of a father who almost never spends time with his son. Whenever he has the opportunity, he chooses something else, without seeing how he is affecting the relationship with his son: he goes out with his friends, watches television, or takes a well-deserved nap. As time goes by, the father-son relationship becomes increasingly distant. Finally, the father realizes that his son is like a stranger to him. Although he had always wanted to have the best possible relationship with his son, the small decisions he made every day produced a very different and unexpected result.

Although we choose our ideal once and forever, it is fulfilled at every instant of our life. When we understand this, we become more and more conscious of our choices and their consequences. To live consciously is, then, to choose deliberately the way we live all the time—the moments of great decisions and those of small, apparently insignificant ones. As we establish the habit of choosing consciously, we become better able to fulfill the fundamental intention of our lives.

THE INNERMOST SANCTUM

Sixteenth Teaching

Those who have sought have found God within themselves and have taught that the path of unfolding is individual and spiritual realization is interior.

In ancient Egypt, only the priests were allowed to enter the inner sanctum. The profane (pro=before + fanum=temple) remained outside it. The monumental temples testified to the presence of God upon earth, but those who exercised religious power did not allow ordinary human beings access to them. The priests were the mediators between heaven and earth; the crowds gathered outside, in the great temple courtyards and galleries. A direct relationship with God was only possible for chosen and consecrated souls.

However, even though we now enter temples and witness sacred ceremonies, we don't always feel we are in contact with God. We still tend to identify the spiritual with the place to which we go to pray. Compared with temples and religious ceremonies, the other aspects of our lives seem common, materialistic, not transcendent at all.

The transcendent always seems to lie beyond our possibilities. Even if we have the habit of raising our thoughts to God, it is difficult for us to integrate our spiritual life into our everyday life. In a way, we act like the ancient Egyptians—we separate the sacred places from the profane, the divine from the human, the spiritual from the material. Since we normally have to contend with situations and problems which are quite worldly, we feel materialistic. When we look within ourselves we do not find highly elevated feelings. Our actions do not easily show the spiritual aspect of our lives. We are then inclined to think that the realm of the spiritual and the divine is outside ourselves, that it is a state we have to discover some place. We search outside ourselves for the solution to the relationship between the divine and the human: we seek the formula for salvation, the miraculous intercession, the magic touch that will open the doors to the transcendent. We have the idea that there must always be someone or something between the spiritual and the material, between God and the human being.

Since Egyptian times, when the priests and the people lived in different worlds, we have advanced a great deal. Today, we ordinary people, have the right to realization, a realization of almost limitless possibilities. But any limit to unfolding sets off what is beyond it: the unknown. The more we know the more conscious we are of what we do not know and this deepens our yearning for God.

Those who have dedicated their whole lives to the realization of a spiritual ideal seem extraordinary to us, alien to our condition as ordinary people. They seem to live in a different world from ours, without the problems and tragedies we have to confront.

It never occurs to us to think that we ourselves could be saints or mystics. No matter how high our aspirations may be, we feel that the spiritual is in some inaccessible place, behind closed doors that only some High Priest can open and walk through.

Nevertheless, those who have sought have found God within themselves. They have taught that the path of unfolding is individual and spiritual realization is interior. They have also emphasized that the search for God is carried out by following a method, with determination, perseverance and love.

It is in our hands to build our inner temple and establish there, in a direct and simple way, our relationship with God. How can we do this while we live our usual, every day, ordinary lives in society? This is, in fact, the art of spiritual life—to transform ordinary acts into the means for awakening the transcendent in our lives.

Nothing in life lacks transcendence. Each act, each instant, is unique, irreplaceable, and contains a teaching we need to discover and learn. We can all achieve mastery in this art of living, but it would be difficult to attain it without the help of a method of inner work, without the help of those who have already walked this path and without formally committing ourselves to the effort that this implies.

It is indispensable to find the appropriate guide. Yet, it is clear that no matter how perfect the teaching we are given is, it is reduced to mere words if we do not realize it in our lives. Thus, though it is necessary to receive good spiritual assistance, it is not enough. Spiritual unfolding demands on our part a sincere commitment to work on ourselves and on our effort to attain it. That is to say, on the one hand, we need orientation and, on the other, we depend on our individual work to realize in ourselves the spiritual teaching we receive.

This spiritual and individual work takes us directly to our inner temple; it teaches us to seek God within ourselves and unfold through our own effort. Divine assistance helps us discover our path which we, ourselves, have to traverse with our eyes fixed on our inner temple.

We have the responsibility to choose our path of unfolding and follow it to the end. It is not enough to go to the temple's gallery and wait for others to intercede; it is necessary to go into its innermost sanctum. This possibility is open to all human beings in all circumstances and in each moment of life.

FINDING THE ROAD

Seventeenth Teaching

Life could be a process of continuous and harmonious unfolding if we used difficulties and contradictions as signs that showed us how to keep advancing in the discovery of life and of ourselves.

There are times we feel dissatisfied, unhappy with ourselves. If, on the one hand, we have achieved what we were looking for, it seems that the end result isn't worth very much. If, on the other, we feel we have failed, we cry because we have not reached our objective. We can even think we don't have any more possibilities because we can't see any more options.

Our frustration, which we probably are not aware of, stems from the underlying belief that our development as persons is complete. Since we are adults we think that we have matured into the persons we will always be. So we sometimes find ourselves living on the defensive, feeling that each moment is a test of our maturity and our capacity for solving life's conflicts. It is a tragic simulation game to make us believe we have all the cards in our hand and that we are complete, finished human beings. Since deep within we know this is not so, we get discouraged and anxious. We feel our lack of honesty.

Nevertheless, those instants of discouragement we would very much like to avoid can really show us that we need to move forward, grow and live fully instead of repeating what we did yesterday. They can be very valuable if we use them for our spiritual unfolding.

Just as we need to update our professional knowledge and information, we also need to continue unfolding throughout our lives. Just as we choose a profession and immerse ourselves in learning more and more about it, we can also learn to live consciously, to expand our horizons, and to discover new possibilities for fulfillment. Reaching adulthood means being ready to continue working and studying consciously and responsibly. In that way, we can transform our conflicts into instruments for change and unfolding.

Of course, we can say we are all learning continuously from our experiences and vicissitudes, but when that learning is not systematic and conscious but reactive, it gives rise to great suffering. We live as if we were driving a vehicle blindfolded, as if we had no choice but to bump into something before realizing that we have to change our course. However, our life could be a process of continuous and harmonious unfolding if we used the difficulties and contradictions as signs that showed us how to keep advancing in the discovery of life and of ourselves.

If we accept that we are not a finished product, but that we need to unfold as persons throughout our life, and especially if we are determined to do this, we begin a new stage in our lives marked by our spiritual vocation.

We say that we have a spiritual vocation when we not only choose to unfold in a conscious way but also take the necessary steps to orient our efforts toward a higher ideal, one that transcends selfishness and personal interests.

It is not enough to be conscious—after all, it is possible to act negatively in a deliberate way, even to the point of committing a serious mistake. The result of a conscious work depends on the orientation we choose: why we are working and what we are working for, and what ideal is moving us.

When we choose a higher ideal and take the task of our unfolding into our own hands, our life stretches toward new horizons. This process becomes our way of living and leads us to transcend what we believed were our limits: those which defined our being, our condition and our possibilities. And our inner foundation is our honesty with ourselves, our faith in our vocation and our permanent dedication to its fulfillment.

Let us remember great human beings such as Gandhi. We usually consider his achievements as a leader; however, it is his remarkable unfolding, which took place during the course of his whole life **that** can help us in our lives. His unfolding transformed him from an obscure citizen under imperial control into a spiritual figure who inspired and guided multitudes. Even today he continues to inspire many of us to do our spiritual work. Gandhi never felt he was a superman; he had the humility to always recognize that he was an ordinary person. Notwithstanding his political triumphs, his fame and popularity, he persevered in his inner search; he worked continuously on himself in what he called the "search for truth." Gandhi's vocation of spiritual unfolding is what can make a difference in our own lives. It is encouraging to know that it is within our reach to unfold as human beings, to learn from ourselves, to recognize our inner possibilities and fulfill them, doing this as an inner and exterior lifework.

The moment we stop growing physically and finish our intellectual preparation—that moment in which we consider ourselves adults—is the moment we could begin dedicating ourselves fully to our spiritual unfolding, to thinking and reflecting. We are now ready to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the conscious process of unfolding that will accompany us our whole life. This implies a turning point in how we see ourselves and our possibilities. We are no longer enclosed within that crystallized mold of the fully formed person, that image we feel forced to keep up. We no longer have to defend our mistakes or justify them. On the contrary, the possibility of unfolding spiritually gives us freedom to learn, to correct our steps, and to confront our best possibilities without fear of failure or discouragement, without feeling impelled to succeed in order to confirm we are living fully.

If we want to fulfill these aspirations, we need to commit our life. To unfold spiritually, we must center all our efforts on that goal.

MYSTICISM IN OUR LIVES

Eighteenth Teaching

Mysticism gives our life both a universal perspective and direction. It makes us aware of our destiny.

When we refer to mysticism, we usually think of something disconnected from our daily lives. We imagine mysticism as the choice of certain privileged souls who are able to dedicate their lives to a spiritual ideal. We think that the only possibility we have is to fit the spiritual side of our lives in between our other, more-pressing obligations. The possibility of being mystics does not enter our minds.

Yet, if we analyze more deeply the teaching of the great mystics, such as Swedenborg, Sri Aurobindo or Simone Weil, we discover that they never considered themselves extraordinary or different from other human beings. Like us, they fulfilled their personal and social responsibilities.

Mystics are not people different from us nor do they live privileged lives. They face the same conditions as us: illnesses, disappointments, setbacks, misunderstandings. When we read about their lives we discover that they experience doubts, inner darkness, discouragement and anguish, as well as love, compassion and joy.

What is it that makes the mystic different?

What makes them different is the attitude with which they orient their lives, understand their difficulties and respond to problems and challenges. This attitude expresses itself in their everyday decisions. Daily life and mysticism are actually not contradictory. In fact, mysticism makes daily life a school of unfolding.

Mysticism gives our life both universal perspective and direction. It makes us aware of our destiny and, at the same time, daily life provides a wealth of experiences that form the foundation of an effective work on our spiritual unfolding. Let's try to summarize here this symbiosis between daily life and mysticism in some basic mystical attitudes.

1. To dedicate, through mysticism, one's life to a transcendent objective

The first thing that we find is that mystics orient their lives towards an objective that includes all of humanity. They know they are part of a greater whole, and act in accordance with that understanding.

The mystical attitude consists in a process of expansion of perception and harmonious participation with family, neighborhood and country, until all of humanity is included. The greater the circle of participation, the deeper the mysticism.

This way of understanding our own life radically changes the way in which we do everything. Just as we change our lifestyle when we form a family, we also change our life when our family expands and embraces all living beings.

Besides having a dimension in space by encompassing a larger area and a greater number of beings, participation also has a dimension in time: to assume responsibility for the future.

There is consistency between short-term and ultimate objectives. The mystic understands that the happiness of today must be a step towards a better world and a greater happiness tomorrow. This is something very important. Without this mystical perspective, one finds trouble around every corner: the satisfaction of the moment is transformed into the cause of a future sorrow; the easy carelessness with which one consumes something today generates a shortage that oneself—and society as a whole—will suffer tomorrow. The effort to achieve selfish goals often implies a progressive and irreversible deterioration in our relationships with loved ones. The triumph of the moment can lead to future suffering for ourselves and for others.

Mystics extend the term of their objectives to include not only the well-being of the human beings living today but future humanity as well. What is good for all is good for oneself. Mysticism gives a sense of the eternal. It is an attitude and a way of living that encompasses life as a whole. This consciousness helps us to overcome the temptation to live for today without responsibility for the future. The future is not only our future but the future of all humanity.

When we look at ourselves and those around us, we can see that the present situation is, in great measure, determined by the apparently inconsequential attitudes and decisions of the past. It may surprise us that past attitudes can be important today. But how important they are! Each thing we do is important—even what we think and feel—since it has consequences in the future.

When the young and successful lawyer Gandhi suffered discrimination in South Africa, he did not take it as a personal affront or as a reason for feeling bitterness or hatred, but as a point of support to respond to the great drama of human suffering. He understood that many groups of human beings were suffering from prejudice. He decided to dedicate the rest of his life to correcting an unjust situation. The decision he made in that moment not only changed his own life radically but changed the life of humanity as well.

Mysticism leads us towards an ever-increasing and fuller participation with the world. It not only transforms what we do, but how we do it. It leads us to greater understanding of ourselves and of life. Not only that, but our participation encompasses the whole of reality which, though far beyond our present understanding and knowledge, exists and includes each one of us and the world.

2. To place personal experiences within the context of humanity

When we are happy we don't think about the meaning of our happiness. We simply enjoy being happy. But when something causes us pain, we despair. We ask, "Why me?" and we don't find meaning in our suffering. What we don't realize is that it is not possible to understand a particular event if we don't see the larger context to which it belongs. We have to see it within the greater picture.

Each experience, including the positive ones, occurs within a context of effort and suffering. Those times in which we suffer also contain a message; they are the

counterpart of happy moments. When we learn to accept suffering we can begin to understand life.

By orienting life towards an objective that encompasses all of humanity, the mystic attitude develops our capacity to understand our own life. Personal experience with illness, old age and death, as well as happiness and joy, are understood when we place them within the context of all human life. This allows us to accept the laws of life fully and gives us the necessary discernment and strength to work on those aspects of our life that can be improved. This is what each of us can do in every moment. And it is imperative that we do so not only for our own good, but also for the good of humanity.

3. To establish a direct relationship with the Divine

Mystical life is fundamentally seeking union with God. It is the inner certainty that the possibility of union with God is inherent to our human condition; it is the certainty that our life has a meaning which leads us to the fullness of consciousness.

The life of the mystic is based on faith, prayer, and the inner work of participation.

Mystical faith precedes a belief in something particular. It is based on the intrinsic human need to deepen consciousness of being. That is to say, faith is the inner certainty of our countless possibilities and our freedom to fulfill them. This faith is the source which gives us the strength to face difficulties and to unfold our consciousness.

This faith is not limited to the mystic; it a characteristic of the human condition that remains hidden behind our eagerness and the struggle to survive. Thus it is a gift we need to guard and cultivate, drawing inspiration from it to go beyond our prejudices, complexes and petty desires.

Faith leads us to prayer. Prayer reminds us of the immensity and the mystery of life and our place in it. Conscious acceptance of our own littleness is the key to a free and spontaneous relationship with God.

To pray is, essentially, to penetrate one's own heart, to discover one's own voice without the help of intermediaries and to give this good to others.

Everyone can pray. Even more than that, we need to pray. Prayer expands and deepens our understanding. And most importantly, it keeps us with an open and expectant attitude before the divine mystery.

Just as it takes only a moment for us to recognize the beauty of a sunset, so too it takes only a moment for us to become aware that we are passengers on the ship of time moving towards the divine. Mystics call these moments of awareness "stopping." It is good to make a habit of periodically stopping during the day to reflect on our notion of being passengers in time. These instants of awareness are indispensable for the unfolding of our notion of being since they help us to remember the main objective of our life and the need to be conscious of how we are fulfilling it. Let us think how much time we spend every day running, chasing after goals that are not even fundamental. How much more important it is to make the time to stop and become conscious of how we are living and where we are directing our efforts.

4. To work on our way of thinking and feeling

As we have already pointed out, we live in accordance with the way we think and feel. Consequently, improving our thoughts and feelings will help us to live better, to actually transform our life in a positive way and give it meaning.

Where do we begin? Where do mystics begin? First, we have to attain some degree of self-control. With practice and effort, we discover that this self-control increases as we practice it.

We are used to letting our thoughts and feelings carry us away. We think that this is the way it should be; we rarely think that we could do something about it. Yet, when we have to, we can control our thoughts. When certain obligations make it necessary, we can concentrate and can choose what to think and how. If we make a systematic practice of our capacity to ennoble our thoughts and feelings, our inner work will be reflected in all areas of our lives.

The way to do this is simple: every time we identify a negative or selfish thought or feeling in ourselves, we replace it with a more positive and generous one. Thoughts and feelings are negative not only when they are depressing, but also when they are aggressive and hurt us as well as others. Thoughts and feelings are selfish when they are centered exclusively on our own interests. These types of thoughts and feelings limit our perception and our consciousness. When we replace such thoughts with others that are more expansive, we perceive more, understand better and are stronger and more resourceful in making decisions about ourselves and the world.

This is why mystics say that a person's spiritual transformation begins when he or she learns how to generate one good thought, then another and another, thereby cultivating the habit of thinking and feeling expansively. Feelings become purer as we purify our thoughts.

The lives of mystics teach us that mysticism is a possibility for everyone and that it begins when we see the particular circumstances of our life within the greater framework of all life. All human beings participate in the same reality; they are subject to the vicissitudes of life, illness, decline and death. All of us face the challenge of the same fundamental questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Knowing this helps us to appreciate our situation, face our difficulties, make decisions and realize our potential. By keeping always present the great panorama of life, we are not confused when we make decisions and choose objectives. Working on our way of thinking and feeling allows our inner voice to speak from the heart. We relate directly with God when we lean only on faith, on the certainty that, because we are human beings with consciousness, we have the possibility of understanding who we are and where we are going.

This is the secret of transforming common, ordinary life into a full and meaningful life. And this is something anyone of us can realize right now, wherever we are.