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**Mysticism
and
States of Consciousness**

2014 Edition

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Contents

Introduction	3
Prologue.....	4
I. STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS...7	
States of Consciousness	8
Love for God.....	15
Positive and Negative.....	22
Growth and Unfolding.....	26
II. NEGATIVE VIRTUES31	
Negative Virtues.....	32
Responsibility.....	35
Acceptance.....	41
Patience	46
Non-possession and Participation	48
III. MYSTICISM.....53	
Mysticism.....	54
Virtues.....	55
Positive Renouncement.....	64
Mystical Death	76
Affirmative Denial	83
IV. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION87	
Spiritual Direction	88
Spiritual Directors	90
Balance	98
Self-mastery	101
Continuous Transformation.....	106

Introduction

Although this book was written in the late '60s, not only do the questions we asked ourselves then remain valid today but, as we face what is happening in the world right now, we should also ask: Despite having at our disposal everything we need to live in peace and unfold our possibilities, what makes us keep confronting, attacking and even massacring each other until we run out of all possibility of building a better world? What good is progress if we use it to destroy one another?

I therefore continue to think that we need to work honestly on ourselves so that we can know ourselves better and, even more importantly, so that we can realize what this knowledge tells us about who we are and what we are doing. It's not enough to notice what happens to make us happy or sad nor is it enough to wrap ourselves in preconceived ideas that, although we think they're good ideas, they further deepen the differences that divide us. Let's see if we have the courage to realize that each of us is responsible for what happens, both in our own lives and in the world; let's see if we have the courage to assume that responsibility and solve within our own selves the problems we generate by our way of being, thinking and acting. In other words, let's see if we dare to realize that our way of being, thinking and acting define a state of consciousness associated with a mysticism that transcends the usual definitions and includes the human family's entire system of relationships.

Therefore, the issues addressed in this work do not particularly relate to the relationship of the faithful to their God. They start with my relationship with you, continue with my relationship with everyone, until reaching my relationship with the totality of all that is.

J. W.

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Prologue

When we think about the conflicts we face in the world we live in, we ask ourselves whether we have to accept and adapt to our situation or respond in some way. If we come to the conclusion that we are supposed to respond, then we want to know what would be the most beneficial reaction for ourselves and everyone else. Yet no matter how good a response we might choose to work on society's problems, it would rarely solve our inner problems.

The fact is, we don't feel satisfied with solutions that only promise us a better world; we want to deepen into the problems we experience. We feel the need to commit ourselves beyond doing something or other. But when we ask ourselves how we should commit ourselves, this need becomes anguish. We reach the point of doubting our own identity and the authenticity of our attitudes, as if our acceptance or rebellion were not really our own but the product of a milieu that absorbs our being and dilutes it into a series of automatic reactions.

One of the most serious problems of our times is the fact that not all of us have the necessary means that unfolding requires and that, when we do have them, it's clear that we don't make the most of them. In practice, we are formed—or deformed—by circumstances; the guidance we receive comes from circumstances that we occasionally happen to experience in our environment.

In this writing, we will study our relationship with the milieu, in other words, the way in which our states of consciousness define our relationship with our milieu and the possibility of expanding our states of consciousness.

This book is divided into four parts. The first part deals with states of consciousness. Instead of trying to analyze the various possible states of consciousness, which would be an arbitrary compendium, I have outlined

the basic characteristics of the states of consciousness which, in my view, mark the basic stages of our unfolding.

The second part describes the nuances of an inner attitude that allows us to participate, that transcends the dichotomy of assimilation-reaction, that grants us the freedom to live a committed life in a way that doesn't mean that our participation is gloomy.

The third part touches on the process we tend to experience when we pass from the state of consciousness that I have called *positive* to the one I consider *negative*, and it describes how we experience at this stage the ideas presented in the previous chapters. I have called it "The Mysticism of Renouncement." Mysticism, because inner expansion leads to a state of union, first with those around us, then with all human beings and, at least ideally, with God and all that exists. "Renouncement" because, the way I understand it, renouncement is a force that makes a permanent expansion of consciousness possible.

The last part addresses aspects of spiritual direction. We may tend to think of spiritual direction as what a priest imparts to the faithful of his flock. In this writing, I try to broaden this concept of spiritual direction beyond a framework of beliefs. In developing this subject, I delineate the characteristics that, as I understand it, would comprise the guidance we need to unfold.

But we are not guided only by the advice we might receive at a certain moment in life. We also receive a continuous teaching from our milieu. However, if we keep in mind how much we are influenced by our milieu, it is sad to see the multiple ways it acts as a force of manipulation rather than promoting our unfolding.

We are actually manipulating each other, because we are all the milieu.

The question is this: Is it fair to manipulate?

When we manipulate others, we demean not only them but ourselves as well. We repudiate ourselves as beings and transform ourselves into objects.

A solution to our problems is not a solution if it is based on the demeaning of one and all. That is, if the solution that we apply consists of a new way of manipulating. And any type of manipulation transforms us into consumers.

Our society is consumer-based not because it happens to be centered in consumer goods but because it has transformed us into consumer goods through advertising, the manipulation of information, and in ways that slant us in one direction or another, or even in ways that cause us to split with each other and destroy one another. When we look for protégés, adherents or disciples, we turn someone—another human being—into a product from which our cause, be it personal, social, economic, ideological, or religious, can fuel itself.

If we better understood the states of consciousness that make us susceptible to manipulation, perhaps we could work together toward a more harmonious society and a world with peace.

I. STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

States of Consciousness

When we speak of “the” human being, we’re thinking of a generic individual, not a specific woman or man. When we say that one person is the same as another, we tend to think that one individual is the same as another. But each of us is unique. Although humanity is a whole, each man and each woman is a particular individual with his or her own particular state of consciousness.

What we call a “state of consciousness” is the idea we have of ourselves, our immediate environment, and our situation in life and the world.

When we identify with our milieu, our state of consciousness is conditioned by that milieu. The idea we have of ourselves depends on the characteristics—historical, social, cultural, or biological—of the milieu in which we live. But culture, creed, nationality and race are not enough of a basis for defining our real state of consciousness. It is true that all these characteristics have their importance, and that successive changes of milieu tend to provoke correlative changes in ourselves. It is also true that a person living in an enlightened milieu is better placed to unfold his or her possibilities. But as long as we identify with the milieu in which we live, our state of consciousness will be a function of that milieu; changes in this environment will affect us only superficially, and the way we think of ourselves and our circumstances will not substantially vary.

Although the cultivation of a milieu can favor the development of a state of consciousness that is identified with that milieu, it won’t necessarily alter its nature. We will be able to learn more about ourselves and our environment, but we will unlikely change what we feel and think about who we are and the world we live in. Only when we transcend that identification does a real advance in our state of consciousness take place.

In other words, the nature of our particular state of consciousness is defined by its fundamental characteristic: whether it is or it is not derived from our identification with something outside of ourselves.

Unfolding one's state of consciousness has traditionally been linked to the field of mysticism. But if we stop limiting mysticism to an objective, if we no longer categorize it according to a definition that's associated with a theology or philosophy, it can acquire an amplitude within which we can each find ourselves, understand ourselves, discover how we are, what happens to us, and where the road of our own unfolding lies.

In order to be familiar with our state of consciousness, we have to recognize that we have a state of consciousness, and that "a" state of consciousness is temporary and limited. It is only when we recognize how temporary and limited it is that we can become familiar with it, and by becoming familiar with it, begin to expand it. This knowledge is basic; it is our point of departure and, at the same time, it shows us the direction of our unfolding. And here we may ask ourselves what it means to unfold.

We do advance in our unfolding through education, study and training. But in spite of everything we learn about ourselves and the world we live in, this does not automatically or fundamentally change the way we think about ourselves and our role in life. Therefore, when I speak here about unfolding, I am not only referring to the development of our intellectual, artistic or practical abilities, but to the development we call "spiritual," because it is related to our consciousness.

Within this context, unfolding spiritually means expanding our state of consciousness.

What, then, is the state of consciousness from which we must depart in order to begin that expansion?

Every individual has a state of consciousness. But any attempt to categorize us according to our states of consciousness would lead to arbitrary classifications: Who can say what someone else's state of consciousness is?

Moreover, our state of consciousness is not homogeneous. We express ourselves at one moment in a way that could suggest we have a certain state of consciousness, while at other times we express ourselves according to the characteristics of a different state of consciousness.

Our inner world is also apparently contradictory. Varying tendencies, or even opposite tendencies, manifest themselves inside us simultaneously, which could make us think that there are different states of consciousness inside us at the same time.

In a certain sense, we could say that we are a composite. Mind and heart, reason and passion, instinctive voices and spiritual calls are forces inside us that struggle to predominate and don't always permit us to have a clear vision of who we are. However, it is possible to explain certain stages of our unfolding in broad strokes. These stages we also call states of consciousness since, in the process of our spiritual unfolding, each stage is, actually, a state of consciousness.

In this book, I use the term *positive state of consciousness* to refer to the stage of our unfolding in which we develop and define ourselves by our personality. In other words, we limit the way we think of ourselves within the personality we have acquired, to the point where we identify with our personality as who and what we are.

We call our state of consciousness at this stage “positive” because we feel that we are more when we add power, wealth, possessions, knowledge, degrees, skills (or whatever we consider valuable) to what we believe we are. At this stage, we feel and think that having more means being more.

In the positive state of consciousness, we develop our rational mind and we structure our lives within a system of pairs of opposites: good or bad, right or wrong, winning or losing, friend or enemy. And we generalize these ratings as if what is valid for me is valid for everyone else, too.

We have traveled—and continue to travel—a long road within the positive state of consciousness. Life initially was only an expression of the instinct of

self-preservation. To live was to survive. The instinct of self-preservation manifested itself in us as the will of nature. In this state of consciousness, then, our will is nature's will. Loving means obeying that will. Our self-awareness is barely beginning; it is based on expressions that are common to the species: we are-as-species.

But we need to defend ourselves to survive. Defense dimly distinguishes that "something" we defend. That "something" is myself plus the people and things that constitute the first extension of who I am: people who are connected to me, or things like food, utensils or weapons.

The instinct of self-preservation bound the first human groups together. The group became the family, the populace, a race, a nation. However, the growth of the group—the greater Self—did not signify a fundamental change in our state of consciousness. We don't always participate fully with an entire group, but we identify with a group to the extent that the group benefits and protects us. For this reason, the number of people in our group increases or decreases according to circumstances.

And so we do not always love everyone in the group; we love those whom we consider "our" group at any particular moment. As the group changes according to situations we must face, our love may switch to hate or vice versa. We may reject today the family with which we have previously identified ourselves, or reject our group, community, country or race. Our identification isn't genuine; it's based on interests, be they social, political, ideological or economic.

Sometimes our identification seems absolute, as in the case of a war or persecution that threatens the survival of our nation, race, or religious congregation. But once the danger has passed, we are back to reducing our identification to the small group that shares our interests within our race, community or church. Our identification with a group is not only partial but also superficial and temporary.

As we go along defending ourselves, our personality becomes more and more defined. Since we do not yet have a deep self-awareness, we identify

with what we defend: our bodies, our belongings, our offspring and our group. We are all that. We don't even have our own personality. At this stage, the only thing that is our own is our body. So we apply our will to the satisfaction of all that our body asks of us.

The satisfaction of physical needs quickly leads us to identify with our body. Our will is at the service of a physical self. Loving means loving a self that is primarily physical. Our basic need is the satisfaction of the desires of this self, and upon that need we structure laws by which we rule our life. This is how each of us becomes a separate, distinct person. Our awareness incarnates: we-are-in-a-body. Our personality acquires precise limits. Physical differences are what bring out someone's personality. Racial division is accentuated by physical characteristics.

But if we define ourselves by a personality, we end up alone. Before we acted as a group; now we are facing the group. Instinctive love brings together but it doesn't unite. We therefore seek points of encounter, communication. The need to share gives rise to mutual affection, which endures beyond physical need. Peers appear: one person like another.

A sense of defensiveness deeply roots us in the personality we have acquired and strengthened; we don't want to die. As we cannot avoid our death, we root ourselves in life through our achievements and our children; they prolong our life. We root ourselves in posterity, as a way of projecting ourselves beyond our death. We want to escape the prison of time.

But the desire to free ourselves from time is a way of wanting to free ourselves from the personality we have acquired. Our personality doesn't limit us only to a self; it also limits us to a particular time—the duration of the self's physical life.

The desire to be free of our limitations marks the beginning of the expansion of our state of consciousness. Discovering another means expanding our love.

When we discover our fellow human beings, charity is born—the ability to sacrifice ourselves for our equals. We suffer for them; we work for them. But the idea of an equal implies the idea of an outsider. Just as we protect our friend—even if this protection only takes place in our mental and emotional world—we attack and may even come to destroy our enemy.

By defining ourselves within a personality, we define our vision of life within a system of pairs of opposites: myself and everyone else; peers and outsiders. Our charity is the incipient movement of expansive love, but we are still unable to understand all human beings as our equals, or, in other words, to feel we are an indivisible part of all humankind.

Our consciousness has expanded, but it doesn't extend beyond an existence that is seen from a dualistic point of view, in which good and evil incarnate in a world of good guys and bad guys. We are able to conceive of compassion as only toward those who are good. Our idea of God is similar to the God of Hosts who protects the good, among whom we include ourselves, and who destroys, or should destroy, the wicked.

A positive state of consciousness allowed us to master nature and granted us the possibility of travel to outer space, but it also developed our ability to destroy. It gave us material wings but did not teach us to fly within. We can escape the earthly world and go into the cosmos with our spaceships, but we can't easily transcend our anguish or our inner problems. Nor can we find a way out of the vicious circle of the problems created by our own progress.

But love is like a flower that, once it starts to open, continues expanding outward to reveal all its beauty and release all its perfume. Love is the door that leads us to transcend our positive state of consciousness.

When our love ceases to ask for things, mysticism begins.

To stop asking is to stop waiting for our desires to be met. It means giving up the pursuit of objectives that are limited to our own personal interests. But at this stage, loving without seeking anything from that love is a renouncement for the personality that we have acquired, because that

personality expresses separativity. Our positive attitude doesn't allow us to understand that we won't expand our consciousness unless from now on we renounce the particular limits within which we have defined ourselves.

The expansion that results from our renouncement to the limits of our consciousness is of a different nature from the positive expansion we were used to experiencing when we only added something to what we feel we are. It is no longer an increase in some dimension of our personality, but rather an expansion in the way we think of ourselves.

We call this expansion of our state of consciousness *negative*, because we haven't found a better way to refer to an expansion that is not positive. Positive expansion is an increase in extension, an addition: more people, more things, more power, more land, more space as our own particular world expands. Negative expansion, however, is interior, a going deeper; it is a spiritualization of our state of consciousness.

When we transcend the dualistic representation of existence, our love expands inwardly to encompass everything that we know exists. It becomes *participation*.

Until then, love was experienced as a movement, something that flowed from me and came to me. Participation, on the other hand, is inner identification. Others live within me. Communication stops being a movement only and is established through the expansion of my self-awareness. Being means being in all others.

Furthermore, when we expand inwardly we can describe our life as Presence. Our lives no longer consist in flitting from experience to experience. Our self-awareness is rooted in the present moment, which is our only contact with the flow of life. And this keeps us aware of all that exists in life, to the extent that we can perceive it.

Each of us has a state of consciousness. Within our state of consciousness are many possibilities that, once fulfilled, grant us knowledge of the extent

of our state of consciousness. But it is when we expand our consciousness that we really unfold.

Love for God

We have always given a lot of importance to personal beliefs, and in consequence we are divided according to our beliefs. However, from the state of consciousness point of view, I think *how* we believe is perhaps more important than *what* we believe. In other words, how open or closed our way of believing is.

We can say we believe in God and that we want what is good for all beings. But depending on our state of consciousness, believing in God and loving everyone could mean self-sacrifice and offering or destruction and death.

God doesn't mean the same to everyone. An individual might not want to limit himself within someone else's idea of God. This doesn't mean he doesn't believe in God, but rather that his inner vision proffers him an understanding or intuition of the divine that he feels is deeper—or different.

Every state of consciousness defines a particular vision of life, the world, and also of God. These differences can be understood within a state of consciousness that could include different personal visions. We don't therefore try to seek harmony by reconciling the disparate views of the various beliefs but try to place them in relation to the scope, characteristics and possibilities of each state of consciousness.

No matter how exalted and spiritual a spiritual message might be, each of us understands it according to our state of consciousness. We might understand it in a vague, diffuse way, and the only thing that we manage to see clearly is the next step in our unfolding, the effort that allows us to expand our state of consciousness.

In the process of the expansion of our state of consciousness, there are no tricks of the trade. Each person advances step by step, by stages, in this process.

Love for God is not characteristic of only one state of consciousness. It is the spiritual force that continually drives us to expand our state of

consciousness, and it exhibits different characteristics as we pass from one state of consciousness to a broader state of consciousness. In our early stages, God was the Big Chieftain who helped us find food, survive the attacks of wild beasts or disease, and destroy enemy tribes. In more advanced stages we are able to appeal to God as the supreme love with whom we unite through offering and renouncement to ourselves.

At first glance, the description of successive ways of loving might suggest that progress entailed loving an ever-greater number of people, and that this would be reflected in a new state of consciousness.

Loving more is always an advance, but it doesn't necessarily mean a change in a state of consciousness. The nature of love unfolds at each successive state of consciousness. Loving another person in addition to yourself is good; but loving another, or many, might be just another way of loving yourself.

Therefore, loving everyone doesn't mean loving oneself, plus loving another, and another, and another. We love everyone only when "another" no longer exists. This is a new state of consciousness, a new love.

Some of us think that we will be able to expand our state of consciousness if we experience states of consciousness different from our usual one. There are various ways to have experiences in other states of consciousness. But most people who have had these experiences don't know what to do in their own state of consciousness.

Others have sought ecstasy as if it were liberation, and some spiritual guides solely teach methods that might eventually lead to ecstasy or an out-of-the-ordinary experience.

Ecstasy is a momentary experience of a certain state of consciousness but it's not possible to live in permanent ecstasy. As I understand it, ecstasy is only one of many possible experiences we could have.

Making ecstasy the goal of spiritual life would mean reducing life to the preparation for an experience. Moreover, the idea that ecstasy is the

culmination of human unfolding has often led to confusion about the meaning of spiritual life, either because ecstasy isn't acknowledged to be a real possibility or because it is thought to be the highest possibility. I therefore think that, in the process of our unfolding, it is prudent to bypass the path of psychic experiences and concentrate on the task of expanding our view of life and the world and deepening our sense of participation, in order to foster the expansion of our consciousness.

Being in one state of consciousness doesn't mean having outgrown the previous ones, if by outgrowing we mean we no longer have aspects of those states of consciousness. Every step we take leaves an imprint on us.

Throughout human history, each state of consciousness successively represented something that had been accomplished after long years of experiences, after great effort and suffering. Every state of consciousness was a milestone in human unfolding. And it left its mark.

These days, we don't express ourselves as if we all had a single, well-defined state of consciousness. We express ourselves as composites, in which past states of consciousness come face to face, sometimes with each other, and sometimes with the possibility of a development that would indicate a more expanded state of consciousness.

Nor do we always express ourselves in the same way. We express ourselves according to the state of consciousness that predominates in us at any given moment. What always remains alive in us is the yearning to attain a love that will lead us to a broader state of consciousness. We may have had wonderful victories and deep satisfactions. But the yearning for something that transcends us makes us feel dissatisfied with what we are and have accomplished.

At the same time, our unconscious memory of the stages we have traversed calls us back to relive past experiences. But now the same progress we had made at one point in the past would be a step backward for us.

Expanding our state of consciousness helps us to transcend the system of pairs of opposites, thereby freeing our vision of life and individuals from compartmentalization into absolute good and absolute evil. That same freedom should lead us to adapt our behavior in accordance with our expanded state of consciousness, as well as giving an increasingly more elevated scope to our idea of good and responsible action.

It would seem that as our spiritual unfolding advances we lose the freedom to do what seemed permissible at an earlier stage. Raising the bar on the way we define good might make it seem that we are gradually restricting our field of action, but this is not so. On the contrary, this protects us against our tendency to go backward, uselessly repeating experiences that are over. Closing the door behind us drives us toward a more expanded state of consciousness.

Personal problems, and the social conflicts that stem from human relations, very rarely have a solution if we don't place them in a greater context than the one that generated them. *It is useless to seek solutions to problems that are generated by a state of consciousness if those solutions are imagined by the mindset of that same state of consciousness.* The only possible course is to expand one's state of consciousness into a broader one, in which problems are understood more deeply and universally.

Our basic task, then, is to learn to expand our state of consciousness.

Some people think that this work has to be done from the outside in, by changing a system that will give us a new vision of society and its problems. But no external work is sufficient unless each of us works voluntarily and freely on ourselves, in our inner world.

We can't depend only on what we receive from outside ourselves or on what others tell us we should—or must—do to progress in our unfolding. Respect for individual freedom is indispensable for spiritual unfolding to be possible. Without that respect for our own freedom we would be unable to develop our sense of responsibility or unfold past a certain point. Coercion doesn't

increase people's sense of responsibility; in fact, it causes them to reject the obligations that have been imposed on them.

As long as we don't feel an inner imperative to do what we must do, we won't be able to transcend our problems, be responsible, and fulfill our inner possibilities. Although we need guidelines and guiding ideas, coercion hinders the development of a sense of responsibility.

Moreover, we would unlikely be able to advance in our unfolding as much as we yearn to, by ourselves, without any help. We need guidance, but it must be extremely prudent, balanced and wise guidance. To achieve unfolding it is not enough merely to want it, just as telling someone repeatedly that they have to change is not enough for them to make a change.

Rarely has a successful outcome resulted simply from telling someone what to do, for it leads to the need to monitor him to make sure he did it, and usually ends in a series of penalties to punish him when he hasn't done it.

Since people habitually think that their beliefs and ideas are better, or at least more correct, than those of other people, they usually try to impose them by persuasion or force, because they want them to be acknowledged and accepted by everyone. This is to confuse universality with hegemony, or with the assent of a majority, or a large number of adherents, believers or sympathizers.

One idea or belief is not more universal than another simply because a greater number of people professes it. Its nature isn't defined by how many adherents it has. The universality of an idea depends on its scope *as an idea*, its sphere of influence, and the nature of the milieu that serves as its point of reference. Moreover, even if an idea is, in itself, universal, it is always expressed by human beings. So the scope of an idea also depends on the degree of universality of those who explain or transmit it.

When our attitude is possessive—when our ideas or beliefs are *ours*—we are unable to understand a universal idea. With this attitude what's important to

us is to impose our beliefs on others, regardless of what is good for them or their advancement. Our possessive attitude turns people into objects to be convinced or converted; but at the same time we are also turning ourselves into objects of our own beliefs.

Therefore our systems of ideas and beliefs are often possessive, but not necessarily because they aren't universal in themselves but because we typically express them with an intention and attitude of possessiveness.

Until we stop giving a personal scope to the ideas we profess, we will not be able to understand a universal idea or ideas that are different from our own. And when we don't understand them our natural tendency is to be suspicious of any idea that transcends the borders of our beliefs.

But as we engage in the process of broadening our state of consciousness, we also begin giving a more universal meaning to our ideas. This allows us to understand the different attitudes people have about their beliefs as well as our attitude toward our own beliefs. This is how we deepen our faith and expand our consciousness, which gives us a feeling of great inner expansion: we achieve a more complete vision of the world and life; we rediscover individuals and our milieu. This experience gives us great inner plenitude and a deeper and more inclusive way of thinking, feeling, and experiencing love; as well, of course, as love for inner freedom and love for God.

However, one realization is not the ultimate realization, it's just one stage completed. Although for us a completed stage is indeed an accomplishment, our path doesn't end here. We need to develop a dynamic concept of realization instead of thinking about a final realization. Every end is a new beginning.

The passage from one state of consciousness to a broader one involves in-depth transformations with crises, struggles and suffering; this is evident throughout human history. However, not every conflict has always translated into a fundamental change in a state of consciousness. To understand a moment of human unfolding it is necessary to discern whether its problems

are generated by its state of consciousness or whether they reveal a crisis that has been brought about by a change in its state of consciousness.

Human spiritual unfolding is not a personal experience, nor is spiritual vocation the inclination of one certain type of person only. We unfold according to a line of development that, in general terms, is common to us all, and it indicates the expansive development of our state of consciousness. When we understand this process of expansion we also understand that human unfolding is moving in a certain direction. This understanding clarifies the idea of what is good for us and allows us to direct our life in a way that is consistent with the best human possibilities. Our expanding consciousness shows us that our participation and responsibility are growing and there are no limits to this expansion.

Just as love for God is also without limits.

Positive and Negative

In common parlance, the words positive and negative have a meaning that's similar to good and bad, desirable and undesirable, advancement and regression. Here I will use the words positive and negative to describe two different inner attitudes that define two distinct relationships between oneself and people, things, and goals. The words positive and negative will also be used to define two types of possession and two types of objectives.

Positive effort means energy that is applied to a specified object for the purpose of obtaining a desired result. It helps us acquire knowledge, improve production, raise our standard of living, preserve our health, as well as develop sensitivity and practical and cognitive abilities. It also helps us earn money and make friends. Positive effort is the expression of personal will that allows us to survive, progress, and relate with our milieu.

But it doesn't make us happy. It doesn't give us inner peace.

We can control ourselves using positive effort, but we can't unfold our state of consciousness in any meaningful way.

Positive effort is effective in obtaining things that are external to us—material things, intellectual things—that enrich our personality by accretion. Every victory increases our personal assets.

Humanity progressed and continues to do so through positive effort. This type of effort has allowed us to communicate better and faster with each other, but not necessarily to understand each other or ourselves.

Positive effort is indispensable for living and developing materially. It's also indispensable for unfolding spiritually. But if we don't understand it correctly it can be an obstacle in our unfolding instead of the tool it should be.

An inner positive attitude causes us to identify with our attributes and defines us by or confines us within them. These attributes can be mind-

related—intelligence, imagination, pieces of knowledge, areas of intellectual expertise—or feeling-related, body-related, or related to us as individuals with rights, obligations, privileges and possessions. Any increase in the number or quality of our attributes is an enhancement. In positive terms, enhancement is the same as advancement.

As a consequence, our aim, when we're looking at ourselves and our life from a positive point of view, is to have more. Having more is our way of being more; losing, from this perspective, would mean being less.

On the spiritual side, from the positive point of view, renouncement would represent a loss that would only make sense if we were compensated for it with a greater gain. In other words, if renouncing served to get us something that we couldn't get in any other way. Our efforts, including our efforts to renounce, would only make sense if they resulted in our personal enrichment.

The classic question of the positive attitude is, "What do I get out of it?" What we gain has to be something we can evaluate positively and, above all, possess personally. "I'll give up something, but only if I can gain much more than I gave up. If not, then why give it up?"

When we define¹ ourselves by identifying in a positive way with our attributes, we only know how to live by doing things. Within this

¹ We use *define* here to express the limitation that results from identifying positively with something. When a person defines "life" as "my life", they reduce existence to a personal life. When life is defined by acts, it translates as a succession of actions. The individual reduces herself as a person by limiting herself in actions that are only an expression of her attributes but are not her being. When she defines her life in acts, she is also defining her vision of herself and others. Although of course she knows that other people feel and think, her vision of them is of people who do things. Moreover, definition implies diminished awareness. When a person defines himself within a system of beliefs or ideas, he does not know how he really thinks. When he expresses himself, it is not he who is speaking; it is the system of ideas or beliefs that is speaking through him, while he is only operating as an agent. When we define ourselves in a particular way, we don't communicate as individuals; we don't really know ourselves; we turn ourselves into agents through which the beliefs by which we are defined express themselves. When a person is defined by her ideas, each time she expresses herself is subordinated to that definition. Obviously, even if someone is defined by actions, they don't stop thinking and feeling, but all their expressions, including what they think and feel, are functions of their basic self-definition. When faced with whatever situation, their reaction is, "What must I do?" In other words, their self-expression is always operational.

framework, we think of living as doing things. Doing means doing something, and doing it to get something.

Doing things is a personal attribute. When we identify life with doing things, we will be unlikely to know life. Since we have a lot to do, we tacitly assume that self-discovery will come later, spontaneously. But as our assets increase, the big question of being becomes increasingly more evident and awakens our distress. It is then that we ask ourselves again, “What must I do?”

The answer is: Be.

To be sure, we can’t stop acting in a positive way, because we are always doing something. But we are not a succession of actions or a set of attributes. We can’t stop identifying with the positive by making a new effort; it is impossible to make a negative effort. All efforts are positive. In order not to identify with what we do, have or accomplish, we don’t need yet another effort or a different effort from the usual one, but a new inner attitude, which we call a negative attitude.

It is, in other words, an attitude of non-possession.

Personal possessions, because they are extrinsic—since having implies possessing something different from what I am; I say that *I* have *something*—leads to my identifying with the positive, since the way I think of myself and my intrinsic value include what I have or have earned. And this identification defines our state of consciousness within contingent limits that vary according to what I have, get, or lose.

Spiritual expansion with an inner positive attitude isn’t possible. The only expansion that would take place would be an increase in our attributes, an expansion by accretion: more things, knowledge, capacities, and experiences.

Spiritual expansion means inner participation, and this is only possible when we have transcended the sense of personal possession, or the idea that we have complete power over something. The idea of total possession is always

associated with the risk of losing that possession and the need to protect and preserve it. We also tend to think that ownership means we may dispose at whim of whatever we think of as ours. Since inner possessions don't work that way, we tend not to think of them as actual possessions when, actually, they are the only possessions we can't lose. Who has the power to limit the context we embrace in our consciousness? Who could rob us of what we have understood, or lessen our love?

Positive effort generates our spiritual unfolding when we accompany it with an inner negative attitude of non-possession. In this way, our commitment to the objective that makes our life meaningful isn't limited to the particular actions we take or the renouncements we make to accomplish that objective.

Growth and Unfolding

We have a lot to do when we begin a new stage in our spiritual unfolding. We study, exercise, acquire habits, and discover horizons. We feel we are advancing during the first period, the apprenticeship period. Learning and practicing is the way we progress. Every new piece of understanding we acquire makes us feel surer and confirms we are moving forward. But the moment always arrives in which there is not much left for us to learn. We already know the broad terms of our path, its principles and practices. Then we begin to experience a new sensation; it feels like we're not advancing as much as before, as though we've stalled. We would like to feel we're progressing as we did at first but we don't know how. We have studied and practiced. What else can we do?

We pack our suitcases in preparation for a trip but that's not the same as traveling. Let's not confuse growth with unfolding.

Piling up knowledge and learning exercises doesn't involve a basic change in our state of consciousness. At the most, they predispose us to expand our consciousness. When we discover our vocation and prepare to fulfill it, we adopt a method, we begin a practice, we study, and we work. We learn a lot. But learning isn't our only aim; we want to expand our consciousness. In order to accomplish that expansion it's good for us to understand that we'll fulfill our vocation, not only through studies and practices, but through our very life. Once we have learned to follow our path, we need to walk it.

Traveling our path is different from what we were doing before that moment. It's one thing to learn how to walk and another to do the walking. While we are in the learning process, the aim is to remain on our feet and take one step after another. But once we know how to walk, we move toward a destination. This doesn't mean that we should then abandon our method, exercises or studies. But if we limit ourselves to a superficial

comprehension and practice, without using what we know to expand the way we understand ideas and ourselves, naturally we'll feel like we're stagnating.

Everything we study and practice has to help us recognize² our state of consciousness and establish the foundation we need to be able to expand it. Recognizing our state of consciousness is our point of departure. From then on, our unfolding demands an effort of a different nature than that which we applied to our study or exercises. It demands an inner effort.

Knowledge and exercises aren't ends in themselves, so when we don't use them to learn how to live and expand our state of consciousness, they increase our sense of frustration and stagnation. This is logical; their aim is to awaken our consciousness to help us recognize who we are and the place we occupy in life. Yet we are the ones who need to choose consciously what we are going to do with our life, and then do it.

Growing in things, experiences, and wisdom is a quantitative increase; unfolding, by contrast, involves a qualitative change.

When we confuse that expansion with growth, we seek new writings, new exercises and perhaps new paths. We will find them. But all paths lead us to the same point; once we are familiar with them, we come face to face with ourselves yet again, asking ourselves what we should do from then on. Yearning for spiritual unfolding means I need to understand that I am my own instrument.

Growth gives us power; it's an increase of strength, knowledge and experiences. But a moment arrives in which growth stops and decline begins. When we identify in a positive way with the power—any kind of power—that helped us grow, we are attempting to avoid decline by retaining at all costs the power that inevitably escapes from our hands. After all, if others don't take that power away from us, life will. If we fail to understand

² *Recognizing* means accepting, thoroughly examining, and re-familiarizing ourselves with what we know. By accepting that we are in *a* state of consciousness, our positive identification with that state of consciousness comes to an end. By accepting our state of consciousness only as *a* state of consciousness, we can re-familiarize ourselves with it and unfold. It is then our being that is developing, rather than our attributes—e.g., sensitivity, intelligence, abilities, or position in society.

the nature of this power, which is only one of the visible signs of growth, if we mistake it for an intrinsic value and identify with it in a possessive way, we make personal use of it. Though personal use at a certain point may seem like a real exercise of power, it is in fact a loss of power. When the power that we have achieved through growth is not employed to produce a qualitative change, it degenerates and hastens our decline and end.

Although we can't avoid physical decline, we can free our spiritual unfolding from the growth-decline dyad. We accomplish this by understanding and practicing renouncement to our positive identification with what we acquire—things, abilities, achievements—and the personality we have created to define our identity.

A limited field of possibilities conditions our growth and we tend to identify with things in that field that we associate with our self-concept. When we renounce that identification, we are able to transcend the limitation of that field of possibilities.

Movement is positive during our growth stage. When our growth culminates in the accomplishment of our objectives, the understanding and practice of renouncement allow us to invert the positive movement into a negative one. In this way, instead of pursuing the downward path of decline, the realization we achieve is encapsulated in an understanding that transcends our personal use of the attainments, abilities or skills we have obtained.

Our state of consciousness expands when we renounce identifying in a positive way with the fruits of our efforts; the things we have understood in previous stages take on a more universal dimension. This experience becomes the foundation for the next stage in our spiritual unfolding.

Within one state of consciousness we seemingly advance along a trajectory of growth, until we exhaust the possibilities of that state of consciousness. At that point we need to make a change of a different nature. In other words, we need to expand into the state of consciousness that will introduce us to a new field of possibilities.

By renouncing a positive sense of possession, we turn an extrinsic victory into an intrinsic one. We encapsulate our past experiences into an awakening of consciousness that broadens the context of how we think of ourselves. And we avoid the crystallization that inevitably results from a personal appropriation of power. From that point on, new possibilities for growth open up.

In other words: although fulfilling a particular field of possibilities shows we have clearly progressed, it has to lead us into a new field of possibilities. If not, the progress we have made will always be a mere temporary upward trend that ends in stagnation or decline. We can imagine a diagram in which the positive effort that allowed for the fulfillment of possibilities in the upward trend of our journey must switch to an inner negative state—in other words, renouncement—at the apex of our progressive movement upward. Thus our victories and the way we think of ourselves become essentially blended, and we will have the necessary freedom to discover and fulfill the possibilities of the new field that, at that moment, represents our real possibilities.

The shift of a positive attitude to a negative one requires an extra-ordinary effort of us. In order to acquire the freedom to continue our spiritual unfolding uninterruptedly, we don't need to make a greater effort than the positive effort we were making up to now. We need an action of a different nature: we need simply to renounce, to cut the tie that binds us to what we think we have attained.

In the language of mysticism, that renouncement is called offering. In order for that offering to really be a renouncement, it must not be based on the expectation of future rewards; getting something is the driving force within the positive state of consciousness. When we offer our impulses out of the force of love, that offering moves us to give ourselves without asking for anything in exchange, without expecting anything. As a result, we are allowed to be steady witnesses of the expansive movement of our consciousness.

Within the positive state of consciousness, giving what you possess is equal to giving what you are. What someone gives when they renounce is actually the now-useless burden of experiences that they don't need to repeat; they drop the baggage that has clung to them from the experiences they have undergone. By integrating only the bare experience, free of what is incidental and anecdotal, they are able to thoroughly understand their past experiences. This understanding expands their sense of participation and deepens the way they think of themselves. This expansion of our state of consciousness reveals new possibilities that heretofore we were obviously not able to suspect existed for us.

We experience this expansion as a new birth.

II. NEGATIVE VIRTUES

Negative Virtues

Virtues are what we call our so-called good qualities or those that are considered proper by the ethos of the milieu we live in. These virtues are not only those that can be found in the faith we profess. We tend to consider virtues the actions or attitudes that make us stand out from others or the actions of those who do things that we think are admirable but never imagine we could dare or find it possible to do ourselves.

Our behavior produces different effects in ourselves and in those around us, according to our qualities. For example, courage, boldness, fearlessness, business acumen, the ability to overcome opposing viewpoints, are qualities that boost our image in the eyes of others. These are qualities that are admired and even envied at times. We call them *positive* because they add worth both to our own self-image and also to what others see in us.

In contrast, attitudes such as patience, acceptance, self-denial, the ability to dialogue, accept what's different, be inclusive, be empathic and participate with people who do not share our beliefs or are actively opposed to them, seldom make us shine and can even give rise to criticism, as the case may be. We say these qualities are *negative* because they don't boost our image; on the contrary, they tend to make it less important in the social scene.

However, we need more than this explanation to describe the negative virtues. The distinction between positive and negative virtues isn't based on the way they're practiced but on the attitude that brings them out. We should rightly say that our attitude is what can transform a positive virtue into a negative one and that our attitude can epitomize our effort to unfold within this "negative" state. This attitude is the inner state of renouncement that makes us struggle for a positive goal as if it were the most important thing to us, while in our inmost selves we don't particularly enjoy it or seek it out to enhance ourselves spiritually.

Of course the practice of any virtue is commendable, and every virtue has value in our life, but it doesn't affect us in the same way when it's positive as it does when it's negative.

The practice of positive virtues helps us to blaze a trail in life and strengthen our self-image, but it also makes it difficult to accept our limitations or our ignorance. And this willful avoidance of self-knowledge hinders our unfolding.

On the contrary, the practice of negative virtues blazes a trail not only in self-knowledge but also in the way we see ourselves, others, the world, and the life we lead. We think, therefore, that the practice of negative virtues leads us to deepen the meaning of what we usually interpret as a virtue. Negative virtues aren't only actions but inner states that we express in actions.

From this viewpoint, a negative virtue is the way we internalize our interpretation of the concept of virtue and the spiritualization of our interpretation of what is good, or what it means to do good.

Moreover, negative virtues are mystical states, not ascetic efforts. In other words, they are inner states that we could define as states of "union with life." In them, we don't reject the suffering caused by misfortune, or the effort required to carry on in the face of adversity. And we can also say that they are states of union with every human being, whether near or far, friend or foe, because we open ourselves to listen to them, share with them, feel what they feel and understand what they think.

The practice of negative virtues doesn't depend exclusively on exterior exercises. People live according to what becomes increasingly real to them inwardly. When negative virtues become natural to us, our exterior life spontaneously expresses our sense of responsibility, self-mastery, patience, acceptance, participation and renouncement. In other words, our visible virtues are the consequence of our inclusive and unitive mysticism.

Of course we don't reach this mysticism only by yearning for it. We wouldn't have anything to lean on if we disparaged the positive practice of virtues in our search for the inner states that spontaneously produce virtue. We attain an inner negative state through the positive practice of self-mastery, virtues, and acts of renouncement. But by basing our external practice on inner renouncement, we don't continue accumulating achievements that our efforts have earned us, even spiritual ones. In this way we quickly discover the inner milieu within which our mysticism unfolds.

A sense of responsibility, acceptance, patience, and a feeling of non-possession are only some facets of a single spiritual state: our expansive participation.

Responsibility

Some of us ignore the world we live in because we are displeased with it. Others, though not displeased, also ignore it.

There are many ways of ignoring something. For example, by disengaging ourselves, isolating ourselves from society and its rules; by ignoring society with its rules; by seeming to obey all the rules while extracting the greatest possible profits from the milieu, without contributing anything but the barest inescapable minimum. The last way is the most comfortable way; society judges according to appearances. Only I know how much I contribute outside of what's established.

In actuality, we each contribute according to the degree of our sense of responsibility.

Responsibility is frequently measured in terms of how scrupulous one is in fulfilling external obligations. But this type of evaluation only reveals a superficial aspect of responsibility. We would be giving a very limited scope to responsibility if we only measured it by our response to the demands or expectations of the milieu. For we would be expecting, on the one hand, every possible thing that society could give us yet would feel, on the other, that we owed society nothing more than to pay our taxes and comply with its norms.

Our contribution becomes complete when giving means giving ourselves, and when the milieu to which we give ourselves goes beyond the reduced limits of the radius we live in until it expands to the outer limits of earth.

* * *

We tend to measure our spiritual advancement by the virtues we practice, the prayers we say, and the abilities we acquire. But one of the ways we express our real unfolding is the extent to which we expand our responsibility.

We learn good habits and norms of life but, in the end, we act as we are, which is often independent of what we profess to think or believe.

If we are on a spiritual or religious path, we learn prayers, meditations and practices; we do good works. But it's always the degree of our responsibility that shows what spiritual state we are in. In other words, it shows the scope of our state of consciousness.

We usually take it for granted that responsibility consists in fulfilling our obligations in the best possible way. But what are these obligations? Observing society's laws and rules is one type of obligation. Each person's sense of what they should be doing may constitute another type of obligation, which doesn't necessarily have to do with fulfilling a law.

The stage of our unfolding in which we limit ourselves to fulfilling the obligations of society is characterized by how we divide what affects us from what we think or believe doesn't concern us.

If we decide to reduce our responsibility to fulfilling duties to avoid punishment, we are choosing to live according to a relatively low system of values. "The good" becomes reduced to doing what's right according to the law and established norms. We imagine that, to be a well-meaning person, we only need to fulfill the stipulations of the milieu we live in. Thus, to be a well-meaning person it's enough to limit our behavior to align with established laws and accepted norms. But a person who complies with obligations and norms, who remains inside the law, might at the same time live outside his or her own law. The responsibility inherent to a person's state of consciousness can go much beyond the mere fulfillment of their civic duties.

We have traveled a long way to acquire a sense of duty. Achieving compliance was a basic milestone in the development of our sense of responsibility but that is only the exterior aspect of responsibility. Limiting responsibility to fulfilling obligations is external not only because it is limited to external actions but because it expresses an inner attitude of confrontation with something—society, authority, the law; duty. But we are

also in confrontation with our awareness of duty. We thus divide ourselves into an external personality that complies according to the way (that personality) defines that which concerns us, and another personality that judges whether we comply with the obligations we can't avoid; but not always whether we comply in accordance with our awareness of morality and participation.

External responsibility is an obligation for which we are held accountable. It is also a responsibility we can unload on others. Moreover, it allows for "vacations"; i.e., periods of relative irresponsibility.

When we have a responsibility to someone, there is often a way to avoid fulfilling it. When we have and take the opportunity to shirk a responsibility that is ours and ours alone, we think we have scored an advantage, a benefit that we joyfully celebrate. We think we have "gotten out of" something. We aren't aware that we're being irresponsible if we think we can shirk a responsibility that, in our eyes, is not ours to fulfill.

If we were to define the margin of freedom we have by the number of responsibilities we have to fulfill, then freedom and responsibility would be irreconcilable opposites. Being free would mean being irresponsible, and being responsible would mean fulfilling what we can't shirk without being reprimanded or derided. If this is how we thought about the subject, it would show that we think of responsibility as something outside ourselves, a laborious burden we carry uncomfortably and that we would like to be free of. But we can only feel responsibility as a burden when we think of ourselves as separate and independent from others.

If we were to limit our responsibility to an external responsibility, we wouldn't really be responsible. Within that state of consciousness, liberation would mean freeing ourselves of responsibilities and seeking liberation would mean finding the way to unburden ourselves of the world and life.

As we develop our state of consciousness, we gradually replace our external censor with an inner one; in other words, with our awareness of what we *should* do, which then makes evasion possible. From then on, although we

could try to justify our lack of responsibility, we would no longer be able to ignore it. Our awareness of what we need to do is a stricter censor than external judges. But awakening our conscience is only one step in developing responsibility.

Although we all have responsibility, each of us responds according to how aware we are of our responsibility. Our idea of responsibility is a consequence of the idea we each have about ourselves and our relationship with our milieu and the world. And this idea isn't static; it develops at the same pace as the process of our unfolding—in other words, at the same pace at which our consciousness is expanding. We can say, then, that every state of consciousness establishes a different relationship between oneself and the milieu and between oneself and the world.

Everyone has a certain idea about their milieu, which is generally thought of as the space around them. This space doesn't have the same contours for everyone. If we haven't gained an awareness of being-in-our-milieu, reality does not extend beyond what we perceive. And what we perceive is directly related to the personality we have acquired through education, training, and the culture of the milieu in which we live. From that point of view, we can come to feel that we have no obligation to do anything that is unrelated to us personally; that we are not obligated to anything more than that.

The outer limits of what matters to us are a line that divides us from the outside world, a world which might seem like a painting on a screen that we can choose to look at or not. The outside world is foreign to us; it doesn't matter to us unless it directly affects our personal world and interests. It is a milieu that feels unreal except as a framework for our life. Billions of people are, for us, just part of the scenery, interchangeable in a world that is right before us yet beyond the reach of our self-awareness. We don't feel responsible for that world.

The frequent counterpart of this limited vision is thinking that others are responsible for what happens to us. But if those who belong to our milieu have the same state of consciousness, they also think we are foreign to them

and that we are responsible for what happens to them. Within this state of consciousness, it is impossible to achieve a level of communication that really connects people with each other. There is no solution to problems that essentially divide reality between me and others, my circle and everything else.³

When responsibility is limited to the circle of oneself, it is self-serving, eager for results and personal benefits. But in fact we live inside the milieu, not in confrontation with it. So, inevitably, our interaction with our milieu will gradually broaden our awareness of the context in which we live, whatever our state of consciousness may be.

Our sense of what's external to us depends on how extensive our self-awareness is. The extent to which the limits of our self-awareness expand to embrace a greater reality—the extent to which our self-awareness encompasses the milieu—is the extent to which our responsibility expands and transforms into an awareness of reality. This awareness isn't spontaneous; nor is it generated by what we are learning from the milieu in which we live.

Knowledge about a milieu doesn't necessarily imply awareness of it; we might have only a piece of information about it—information that we can pick and choose from or close our eyes to. Responsibility, on the other hand, is awareness of the milieu. The milieu is inside oneself.

To feel we in confrontation with the milieu would be to deny our responsibility toward life and the world. However, when the milieu is inside oneself, what is external to ourselves is the complement that balances what is inside us. Inner milieu and outer milieu harmonize in a balanced unity. There is an end to the antagonism between self and milieu, one person and another, individual and humankind. Our responsibility no longer stems from our sense of duty; it is the inclusion in our self-awareness of what until that moment we considered to be external to ourselves. It's the expansion of the

³ *Everything else* not only refers to that which is other, or foreign to me; it also means that which is superfluous, or surplus.

borders of a personal awareness into a more universal dimension. It's participation.

Undertaking responsibility is an inner process of unfolding that moves from the mere fulfillment of unavoidable obligations to a spiritual state of expansive participation. Progressively undertaking responsibility is what gradually shapes the real place we occupy in life.

When we broaden our sense of responsibility our ideas expand, we understand others better, and we see the origin of their—and our—problems more clearly. Our responsibility has no limits when our inner expansion has no limits.

Acceptance

People often think of acceptance as passive resignation to what seems inevitable or as inertia in the face of life's circumstances. This is not the way acceptance is understood in the context of this work. If we didn't strive to discover and fulfill our possibilities, we would never know if we could overcome our problems or—if it's impossible to avoid them—learn how to relate with them.

Having to make an effort to get what we need, or to face frustrations, loss, illness, and personal or collective tragedies—or knowing that time will bring decline and death—carries a burden of pain that does not disappear even if we may sometimes have enjoyable moments. But though we can't avoid pain, by accepting it we are able to understand it. When we accept pain, we break the bond with which pain shackles us when the only thing that matters to us is our own pain. We then understand that to accept pain is to accept life.

We give the name "pain" to one of the ways in which life expresses itself to us. "Suffering", on the other hand, refers to how pain impacts us and how we relate to it.

We are rarely fully aware of the pain inherent to life. We are usually only aware of our own suffering. We can say that suffering is our personal relationship with pain. But as long as we suffer only because we ourselves suffer, we will understand neither pain nor life.

Let's begin by learning to accept what is not in our power to change—the past, for example. The milieu in which we live, people's personal characteristics, group conflicts and personal conflicts, are a dynamic expression of the past. If we react against it, it means we don't accept what has been. The only effective action we can take is to work for the future by acting in the present.

By accepting the past we stop reacting against the present. Thus we can understand the past and also the present. It is useless to react against history, to claim that life and people were different back when. And so accepting the past means accepting the pain that this past evokes in the present. By accepting it, by ceasing to react, we discover the present and are able to work for the future. If we don't accept the present just as it is, our actions will be reduced to reactions that, in fact, can't change what already happened. Acting by reacting would add more burdens to those that already exist, piling pain upon pain. Accepting the past, therefore, means accepting ourselves, as we are, and it means accepting the reality we live in, as it is. This acceptance brings balance to our life.

We usually accept the pleasant part of life and reject the part that makes us suffer. When we feel good we are optimistic, nothing is a problem for us. We're happy, and our world is the best of all possible worlds. But when we suffer, our vision of life tends to change. We don't find meaning in what we do; we plunge into sadness, angst, or despair. We can even reach a point where we reject the world and life itself.

Reality is independent of our attitude toward it. We shouldn't distort it with momentary reactions; we need to discover it as it is. But to understand it we need to accept it. This acceptance isn't abstract; it means we accept reality in the way it affects our life.

This shouldn't be interpreted as resignation or fatalism.

Fatalistic resignation puts a veil over reality. When we believe that everything is predetermined, we don't tackle our real possibilities and are, in fact, unable to recognize them. Accepting, on the other hand, means accepting the challenge of the possibilities we all have at each moment. Each decision we make changes the course of our life. Let's decide then, to accept what already exists. We will then be able to discern the best decision we can take now to direct our life the way we choose. If we don't accept the moment we're living in, life will most likely decide for us, as if we were dead leaves moved by the wind.

If we want our decisions to promote our unfolding, it's good if we learn not to pre-judge what happens, or what happens to us. Of course we need to develop the capacity to judge, to evaluate situations, possibilities and options. The important thing, when we're judging, is to be able to remain free of the pressures of our joys and sufferings, and also our likes, aggravations, leanings, biases and mindsets.

Accepting gives us the inner freedom to perceive and understand situations without clinging to previous ideas or personal affinities or antipathies. Without this freedom we would not be able to make objective judgments. We would only have personal judgments, which would derive from our prejudices.

We need to be familiar with life, circumstances and people rather than judging them. Yet so often when think we are judging others, we are actually criticizing them or unloading the responsibility for our suffering on them. Accepting, on the other hand, gives us the freedom not to be bound by rigid judgments that easily turn absolute; the freedom to be free of prejudices about what life is all about.

As we become accustomed to accepting things, we learn not to grumble as if we think we should be exempt from all suffering. Many of our complaints are attempts to avoid the responsibility that we have by the simple fact that we are alive, as if we could be mere spectators on the sidelines of life. This would mean we wanted to live in ignorance at the fringes of reality. By complaining in such instances, we would reveal the weakness of not wanting to deal with the problems inherent to human life. This would be a way of not committing ourselves. On the other hand, when we accept things, we dwell within the reality of our experience. We feel responsible for what happens. Every problem is my problem.

Acceptance, therefore, means remaining aware of everything that concerns us. So acceptance means dropping the illusion of believing that we can exist in isolation from our surroundings.

When every problem is our problem, we not only hear about problems, we understand them. What one understands becomes a part of oneself. Of course, feeling and acting this way doesn't make us more important. On the contrary, the more we accept things, the more inclusive we become and the less important we feel. So much so, that we are not surprised to find that we no longer talk about ourselves as often as we used to, but only when necessary. We understand that when people always talk about themselves they are always thinking about themselves and about their needs and concerns, blotting out life with the self, trying to be the center of every situation, even those that are unconnected to them.

We also understand that accepting things means learning not always to speak only from one's own point of view. Speaking only from one's own point of view means thinking only from one's point of view. When we look at life and the world only from our own point of view, we reduce reality to a single point of view, our own. We lock ourselves into our own opinions without caring whether we consider other points of view or not.

To speak from one's own point of view also means reducing life's problems to the ones that worry us. But our personal problems shouldn't be a preoccupation, only an occupation. To worry exclusively about ourselves would mean we had turned our back on life, limiting life to the circumstances of our personal situations. It would mean making ourselves more important than reality, disregarding reality itself.

When we are no longer concerned exclusively with ourselves, we discover that accepting means loving. It means uniting, including everything within ourselves: life, other beings, Becoming. This helps us distinguish the various nuances in life. And by accepting these nuances we are able to see life in its totality, without reducing it to material life.

Reality is exterior life and our inner world, too, with its possibilities and imponderable values. Therefore, acceptance brings us face to face with the challenge of fulfilling both our exterior possibilities and our inner ones. We would be limiting our vision of existence if we limited ourselves to fulfilling

only what we could do externally, without paying attention to our inner unfolding, to the expansion of our self-concept. On the other hand, when we stop confronting life in a personal way, when we don't make judgments about life by reacting to it, when we don't turn ourselves into the only topic of interest, when we give up being merely a spectator, life and our being become as one.

By accepting life in its totality, we stop limiting ourselves to merely being informed about it. When we stop considering life's events as mere data to ponder, we begin to live with greater plenitude and understanding. Living becomes a process of continual unfolding.

Patience

Our lives are pushed forward by time. We can't hold on to time because either it's gone and beyond our reach or because it doesn't exist yet and is an unknown.

Time is a distance that memory can't shorten. The passage of time casts a veil over what has been, covering it so thoroughly that we ask ourselves if it really happened. Time blurs images and scatters memories. Experiences gradually disappear into the fog of oblivion.

Time is also a piercing question about what is to come. Not knowing what is to be is a source of insecurity, fear and angst.

Patience teaches us to accept time.

Accepting time means understanding that life doesn't provide us with supports. Neither the past nor the future are supports for us in the present moment. The present is continuous becoming, permanent transformation. Attempting to ignore time would be to pursue an impossible goal. When we have the illusion that we are escaping time, we crash into the present. When we want to trap the present, we are left only with memories. And when we resist becoming, we stand still inside the active flow of time. In terms of becoming, this inaction is like a death. The person is no longer really living, they are merely lingering. If we are reluctant to accept time, we are not part of the rhythm of life.

Patience allows us to surmount the fear of change that comes with the passage of time. Living in fear of changes means hanging on to what no longer is, as if we could turn our backs on the future, contemplating a past that is over. By giving us freedom as we face changes, patience teaches us to become part of becoming. This allows us to center ourselves in the essence of who we are, beyond the changes brought on by time.

Within the process of individual unfolding, patience means recognizing that individuals have their own time.

People have a different rhythm, their own rhythm, which needs to be respected. When we force everyone to walk at the same pace, we hold some back and drag many forward. Therefore, it's good if each of us accepts our own rhythm. Knowing one's pace means one is moving along. It's good, therefore, to learn to move at our own pace and to respect everyone else's pace as they go forward.

Advancing doesn't mean catching up to or overtaking others. No matter how much in a hurry we are to attain something, we know that even though we might feel inwardly free of time, in daily life we live according to its rhythm. This means that we can't rush through the stages we need to complete—we have to traverse them. Traversing means walking from the beginning to the end without going back. Let's therefore differentiate the stage we have traversed from the one that we are perhaps repeating. Patience gives us the perseverance to walk our path until the end and the wisdom to discern when we are moving forward and when we are repeating.

Sometimes our inner rhythm is faster than the pace we are willing to set. Then time goes faster than we do and leaves us behind.

Some people walk at a faster pace than others sometimes. The distance gained should not leave others behind. If we are really advancing, we understand that everyone is on their path, moving forward at their own pace. We understand that being behind doesn't mean being backward, that being in a different place doesn't mean being in the wrong place. When we get impatient we become victims of our enthusiasm. We can't grow all in a rush. We can hurry ourselves up but we can't hurry life.

Patience puts us on the road to wisdom. It's not time that brings wisdom but the understanding of time that leads us to it.

Non-possession and Participation

Our inner freedom increases as we unfold spiritually and our understanding of the meaning of freedom expands in consequence. It no longer means being able to do what we feel like at any given moment, but that what we do comes from our sense of participation and responsibility.

As a result, we stop living arbitrarily, only for ourselves, according to our desires, or stirred by impulses or reactions. We work for our own good and that of others. We begin to understand that we can't attempt to take things from life only for ourselves or for our own benefit. We gradually understand that our sense of possession ties us to the illusion of believing that we can keep something that is only passing quickly through our hands; this might be an actual thing or a moment we would like to stop in time. We also understand the illusion of thinking it's okay to refer to the things we have accumulated as ours. We understand that while we are hanging on to what little we are able to seize, life slips through our fingers and we are losing it.

As a matter of fact, even if we think and feel that our possessions are absolutely ours, our relationship with what we think we have is of non-possession, whether we perceive that or not. How can we imagine that we have something that we can't keep permanently? Since the passage of time obliges us to let go of everything, wouldn't it be sensible to become aware of the transitory nature of what we have and develop an inner feeling of non-possession? This feeling would give us inner freedom to live each moment fully because we would be aware that it is unique. This awareness would change our relationship with anything we might obtain, and would especially and significantly enhance our relationship with other people. We remain aware that the time we share with another is unique and valuable, and we remain aware that our things are not entirely our property. Today they are in our hands, but tomorrow either they won't be, or we won't be able to enjoy them as much as we'd like to.

The idea of personal and absolute possession limits our perception of reality. Not only does it lead us to think we can stop time and hold on to what we believe is ours; it also makes us feel that everything that happens to us is exclusively our own, especially moments of pain. However, by shutting ourselves in pain, as if it were ours alone, we do not perceive the pain that is part of life. We fence in our pain and life escapes us.

As we advance, we gradually untie the cords with which our feeling of personal possession limits us, and we slowly develop a feeling of non-possession that blazes the way to inner freedom.

This inner feeling of non-possession allows us not to be tied by what we have, use or desire, and not to become slaves to what we acquire or accomplish along the way.

A sense of non-possession transforms possession into inner possessions, which can't be lost, don't need tending, and can't be sold. We don't need to own things to know that we exist. What exists cannot cease to exist; it can't be lost, and it can't enslave us or turn anyone else into a slave, either.

* * *

If we are advancing, we are also expanding our consciousness, and our sense of responsibility and inner freedom are expanding accordingly. But our advancement does not take place all of a sudden. So while on the one hand we are developing a sense of non-possession, on the other, the remaining vestiges of a positive state of consciousness make us feel that non-possession means losing what we have. From this state of consciousness, we understand growth as adding on to what we have.

By expanding our state of consciousness, we necessarily change our relationship with our milieu, with our things, and even with our abilities. It is this very relationship that determines how deeply rooted our sense of possession is. When we identify with the personality we have acquired, our sense of possession is external and personal. We are separated from what we think we are and what we think we have. We try to bridge this gap with the

idea that what we have *is ours*. But if we need to defend what we say is ours, it is not actually totally ours, since we can lose it. When we gradually transcend our positive state of consciousness, our sense of possession becomes inner and intrinsic. We only have what we can't lose—in other words, what we are, with the fullness of consciousness we have attained.

To be able to understand the inner meaning of non-possession we need to be wary of our tendency to catalogue things as pairs of opposites. Within the system of opposites, we contrast the personal with the social, the unique with the collective. We don't always recognize the unity of the human family on the one hand, and the transitory nature of all things on the other. And when we affirm ourselves in our sense of possession, we not only imagine that we can stop time, we think we can also hinder the inevitable changes that will take place in the future.

We could also say that wanting to possess means wanting to be served, to be constantly asking for something—what we want to have, what we want to show we are. Non-possession, on the other hand, is to live in service. The person who participates serves⁴ others and, to my way of thinking, the person who serves is served by life.

An inner sense of non-possession is expressed through a participatory state of consciousness. When we participate, we do not possess ourselves totally; our life is life in all human beings. When we participate, separating ourselves from others by an egocentric selfishness would feel like spiritual death, since the love that kindles our participation transcends the limits of our person. We don't feel we have the right to expropriate our life, to splinter ourselves off from life, or separate our life from the life of each human being.

When we don't possess ourselves, we live our lives by giving of ourselves. But we don't feel like we're giving. Giving is no longer thought of as a handout; it means giving of ourselves. "Giving" is what someone does when

⁴ *Serving* is used with the double meaning of *giving of oneself and being useful*, in the broadest definition of the term

they keep something back for themselves alone. When we don't possess ourselves, we feel that there is nothing better than ourselves that we could give. Since we give ourselves completely, we give without being choosy. Being choosy would mean making a deal, picking and choosing according to our personal preferences and not according to the reality of the context.

When we participate we do not attempt to master others or subject them to our whims. When we live in all beings, we feel we couldn't have more than we already do. Therefore we don't have more than we need, but only what we can use well. We know that having more than what we need would mean accumulating, unnecessarily, what someone else needs or may need in the future.

When we participate, we learn not to waste anything. We feel that we have the obligation to use what we have efficiently, that to waste would be to disdain the essential value that exists in all things. It would be particularly disdainful of the life that every person puts into what they do. When we participate, we don't throw away what could be useful to others or could be recycled.

When we participate we don't waste time. We feel strongly that wasting time would be a lack of responsibility, not only personally speaking but also socially speaking. Wasting time would be like wasting life, particularly the opportunities inherent in the time that was wasted.

When we participate our lives are a covenant. How could we waste time? Our time is already given through our participation, responsibility, and love.

When we participate, we share whatever we may have. Our abilities are not exclusively our own. What we know, what we can do, and what we understand is meaningful not only if it is useful to us but also if it is useful to others. If not, why have it? If we used our gifts only for ourselves we would go backward, separating ourselves from life and from other human beings, falling into the separativity of an egocentric selfishness. On the other hand, by sharing our gifts we possess them in all their plenitude. The master is a

master when he teaches; the musician, when he shares his music, the surgeon, when she operates for the good of the patient.

When we participate, we don't hoard what we understand. Our knowledge becomes wisdom, since we don't use it to gain advantages.

Our relationship with existence also evolves when we unfold spiritually, and it's expressed in an inner sense of non-possession. Existence cannot be possessed personally. We can't separate our life from life itself. Nor can we separate what we are from what is.

III. MYSTICISM

Mysticism

Mysticism is clearly not limited to the topics included in this work. Here I am covering only some aspects that are observable as a person shifts from a positive spiritual state to a negative one.

The inertia of the positive spiritual state that predominates in many of us is too great for us to understand easily, and it prevents us from being able to attain a negative inner state. Moreover, today's social problems make our yearning for renouncement seem almost utopian as a point of departure for mysticism. Yet we take up this yearning as if it were a real possibility, so that we don't spend too long in the first stages of the expansion of our consciousness, which easily become familiar to those who wish to unfold spiritually. It is more difficult to describe the subsequent steps of spiritual unfolding because we have less experience of them. In those stages we find ourselves alone, without the support of the illusions we so often pursue. Nor is it easy to find a wise guide to orient us in our mystical journey; it is easy to be bewildered by the superficial spiritual liberation that we are led to think we can have in exchange for study, practices or conversion.

Virtues

Traditionally, most religions and spiritual paths base spiritual life on the persevering practice of virtues, by means of which practitioners theoretically attain a perfection making them worthy of salvation, beatitude or divine union. Many people have zealously endeavored to practice virtues and some have made some spiritual gains by doing so. However even these people see themselves as so imperfect compared with the ideal prototype that the great majority of them despair of ever reaching the coveted goal.

In fact, the diligent practice of a virtue doesn't mean or guarantee success in attaining it; the very fact that we have to make an effort to practice it reminds us that we haven't really attained it. At the least slackening of effort, our repressed or poorly channeled energies bubble up in rebellion, as if they wanted to show us that we haven't achieved anything in spite of so much effort.

Many of us suffer at the apparent failure of our noble plans, and the more time we spend in the struggle to attain virtues, the less clearly we see the path ahead. It's common—and even natural—that every downfall or weakened effort deepens in us the feeling of guilt or failure and that, in the end, we feel incapable of reaching the spiritual unfolding we had set out to accomplish.

Moreover, many people who, according to the present-day idea of virtue, could seem like models that we should imitate are, in practice, so narrow in their views and rigid in their behavior that many of us ask ourselves what value there is in a virtue that deepens interpersonal divisiveness, antagonism and misunderstanding. How many of us scrupulously cling to the letter of our beliefs and fulfill with extraordinary fervor the norms of our dogmas and yet are intolerant and even cruel to those who don't share our ideas! This contradiction has led many people to mistrust the efficacy of virtues. They don't actually question virtue in itself, just virtue as it was taught to them—

in other words, according to the meaning and scope each belief system has given to the concept of virtue.

Virtue has been turned into an ideal concept that is disconnected from human nature. By being idealized and beyond our real possibilities, virtues have lent themselves to personal interpretations. When everybody has their own idea of virtue, their practice of such virtues ends in confrontation with those who have a different idea of what a virtue is.

Although one would think that the exercise of virtues optimizes our love for God, even when we persevere in our effort to practice them we typically feel that mysticism is beyond our reach. We feel that the saints, mystics and contemplatives were of a different category of being, alien to our world today. It is as if there were two worlds, the world of the perfect who tell us how we should be; and our world, in which we struggle to be perfect without ever being able to rise above our hardships. In fact, the positive practice of virtues is not enough to attain peace and happiness, or to enter the inner realm of mysticism.

If we don't understand the difference between this state of mysticism and virtue—even negative virtue—that we want to achieve, we will end up reducing our mysticism to the practice of virtues, and turning a limited concept of virtue into an end in itself.

Moreover, if on the one hand we admit that we are imperfect by nature and, on the other, virtues are held up as the perfection we are supposed to attain in every aspect of our behavior, there will inevitably be a chasm between what we feel we are and what we feel we should be. This unbridgeable distance will deepen our suffering or despair.

We must therefore learn to transform virtue into a permanent good that will expand us inwardly and give us peace and wisdom.

Before anything else, we need to understand the nature of our spiritual yearnings. We won't be able to expand our consciousness, or reach inner peace or divine union, as long as we seek them possessively as something

personal. We won't be able to reach spiritual liberation as long as we understand it as our personal liberation

But if the aspiration to unfold is constant in us, there will surely be a way for us to be able to fulfill it. In this writing, renouncement is understood as a means to attain what we aspire to.

Renouncement doesn't mean discarding what we have because we consider it of small value compared to what we are attempting to attain. On the contrary, renouncement gives us an inner freedom that allows us to use everything in just the right way, by transforming that which is limited in itself into a solid support to accomplish greater unfolding.

Forgetting about ourselves is the first step on the road of renouncement. But how is it possible to forget about myself if all thought and feeling stems from me? How can we stop taking ourselves as our point of reference? This is possible when we begin to attach more importance to the life and problems of others than we do to our particular life and our personal problems. The formula seems simple, but it requires a lifetime of effort, offering and renouncements to understand it thoroughly and fulfill it interiorly.

When I change the relationship between myself and what is around me, the nature of the objectives I pursue also changes. Till now, virtue was an objective I struggled to attain to enrich myself inwardly. But when we no longer seek personal spiritual enrichment, we need a motive that is more universal in origin and objective.

More universal in origin, because if I am no longer the center of interest, the source of impulses has to bore more deeply into my consciousness and rise from more spiritual waters than those of my particular self.

More universal in objective, because the incentive of inner efforts goes beyond a wish for an isolated accomplishment that is only for oneself, and obliges us to open up to a broader reality: the reality of all human beings.

However, self-forgetfulness isn't enough to transform a positive virtue into an inner negative state. Even if we're not always thinking about ourselves, we can't stop gathering the results of our efforts; nor can we prevent setbacks and frustrations, even if we make an effort to avoid them. But although we can't avoid setbacks on our road, we can transform them into liberating experiences. Although a failure might humiliate us, it also teaches us to know our limitations and to gauge our objectives so that we can fulfill them. Little by little, these realizations reveal the road we yearn to follow.

Moreover, a triumph blinds us with its brilliance and projects its importance beyond its real scope. We tend to say that we triumph when we attain our objectives but then, since we identify with what we have gotten and cling possessively to it, that apparent victory becomes an obstacle for our subsequent unfolding. It is just as important to free ourselves from our failures as it is to learn to liberate ourselves from our victories.

The spiritual path isn't a road of successive victories; it is more of a continuous increase in the knowledge of our limitations, of the trifles, of the misfortunes that we mask with the shells of superficial conquests. In reality, it is continual personal failure that allows what we really are to emerge.

* * *

Emphasis on the practice of virtues that we call positive has been indispensable for the development of our personality, for the advancement of each individual within a world separated into races, classes, countries, and belief systems. Positive virtue affirmed us in a personality of our own; it gave us strength to master the material world and, especially, to develop our positive faculties: the ability to do things, to discover the secrets and laws that govern the natural world, and the ways to make use of those secrets and laws to improve our way of life.

We define the positive exercise of virtues as the practice of those virtues in a possessive way; in other words, it is a personal effort to accomplish an objective we have craved to attain. The successive fulfillment of a series of objectives was how we measured our progress. We employed the same

model to measure our spiritual advancement that we had used to assess our material advancement.

Within the process of affirming our personality, mysticism was used to affirm ourselves through our conquests. And the positive exercise of virtues assured our progress on the road to “our” salvation. But it was inevitable that, within this positive development, each personality would end by confronting and opposing others, that every belief would strive to conquer or eliminate all others, and that each individual would struggle against other individuals, in their keenness to attain their particular goal. This positive struggle has been not only beneficial but also indispensable to develop our abilities and the knowledge of our extraordinary external possibilities.

Although we may think that this stage has been outgrown—or rather, that we try to outgrow it—let’s not disparage it for the sake of valuing only the new step we have to take. Let’s not lapse into the attitude that is characteristic of the positive state of mind, which classifies everything in absolute terms. Let’s not end up saying that what isn’t good is bad; or that since the positive stage has to be transcended, then all positive effort is harmful and/or useless. There’s no point in condemning positive effort simply because we have discovered another way of looking at things. It needs to be understood, and we also need to understand that the positive stage isn’t transcended with a mere explanation. Comprehending something isn’t the same as understanding it.⁵ Even if we clearly comprehend the need to reach a negative inner state, we will still need to exercise positive effort for a long time to reach that state.

When we renounce we aren’t objecting to positive effort, but by understanding it and duly valuing it, we place it within the context of the

⁵ We are using the word *comprehend* to mean rational comprehension only, which does not necessarily involve deep understanding. We can comprehend someone’s problem and yet remain distant from that person and their problem. *Understanding* means comprehending and participating; it means including, making what we comprehend a part of us. Understanding is inside us. In contrast, comprehension is only one of the mind’s functions.

efforts we must necessarily make to control our primitive tendencies. In this way we turn the practice of positive virtues into a powerful and effective means that, if we use it wisely, promotes our spiritual unfolding.

When we renounce, we transform virtue and the positive attitude we might have into a negative state-virtue. By not turning virtue into an end in itself we avoid the ethical person's rigidity, and by not turning virtue into a means to achieve a personal goal, we don't distort the meaning of our spiritual unfolding.

The desire to achieve one's own personal salvation, prosperity, or wellbeing separates people from each other just as much as the hatred we tend to absolve ourselves of. Moreover, the quest for personal fulfillment has often been the label we use to conceal our avoidance of any commitment to others, to life, and to the world. Who can be sure that this yearning for a personal and separate liberation isn't stoked by the same selfishness that motivates us to be richer, more powerful and happier than others?

We quickly forget about ourselves when we focus on world problems outside ourselves. This forgetting allows us to better understand our reactions and attitudes toward life and the people around us. We realize that our reaction to, rejection of, or lack of interest in the world and others go against our desire to transcend the personality we have acquired. That reaction is only possible when I count more than anyone else. We understand that a positive attitude unleashes reaction after reaction and increasingly encloses us within the personality we want to transcend.

Some mystics explain the negative inner attitude as a state of acceptance, offering, giving of oneself. Although it is true that the negative inner state implies a state of offering, we reserve that word, and also the words giving and acceptance, to designate only some nuances of the inner state of renouncement. Therefore, in this work, we only refer to a negative attitude; in other words, we aren't seeking, don't want, and aren't expecting anything for ourselves; we are not pursuing personal enrichment.

Within the positive state of consciousness, human relationships don't establish a nexus, they don't really communicate. They are a continuous action-reaction in a struggle for predominance. The desire to impose ourselves, to win, is the defining characteristic of the positive attitude. When our inner state is negative, our intention goes beyond the desire to impose ourselves on others. Our effort to unfold is not based on present-day ideas of progress, advancement, or achievement. Although it's true we sometimes use those terms to explain the road of renouncement, we shouldn't confuse spiritual unfolding with mere growth by accumulation.

If we're not seeking to enrich ourselves or attain personal fulfillment, what are we looking for and where do we garner the strength we need to travel a road of renouncement to ourselves?

People often think that objectives that promise something are valid incentives, while ignoring—involuntarily perhaps—the impulse we all have to give of ourselves, offer ourselves, and sacrifice ourselves for the sake of a noble objective without expecting a personal reward, with nothing apparently in it for us. Even if such an offering doesn't take place frequently, the force that motivates us to self sacrifice is more powerful than the impulse that moves us to possess, since we not only renounce the things that are within reach but also offer our life when we feel it is necessary. We do it for those we love, for those in danger, and for our ideals.

The need to give ourselves is a constant in us. In all ages we have admired, revered, or adored those who gave an example of renouncement and offering. We have called them heroes, saints, and redeemers, and we have held them up as ideals of ethical and spiritual systems.

In the past, those examples were isolated and sporadic. This made sense during a period in which human beings were affirming themselves as separate personalities. But now that this affirmation is complete, we need to understand and transcend it, so that we may assimilate and incorporate in ourselves everything we have accomplished. These days, anyone can

transform him or herself into a living expression of renouncement that, up to now, we revered in others as if that offering were foreign to us.

We have fulfilled our own individual objectives through positive effort. But when we possess them in a positive way, we become attached to them and can't transcend them. When we are bound by our attachments we are unable to spot possibilities that are beyond personal possession. We understand that positive possession is a relative victory. When we don't transcend it we become enclosed in a vicious circle of possession and loss, victory and defeat.

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It is a victory to have arrived at the place we wanted to go, but the fruits of that victory will turn bitter if we stay in that place. For an objective to spur us forward without either limiting our future possibilities or binding us with the ties of personal possession, it has to be a negative objective.

Renouncement is a negative objective.

A negative objective motivates us to fulfill necessary contingent objectives as if they were the highest possible good. But by freeing ourselves from our tendency to identify, positively, with what we accomplish, it keeps us free of our successive victories. In other words, a negative objective turns what we do or experience into a permanent renouncement, which is how we drive our spiritual unfolding ceaselessly forward. We no longer think of this unfolding as a pursuit to achieve and possess, but as a sort of taking and leaving, a desire without desiring, a love that frees the object of love at the very moment in which we could possess it.

Freedom from what we seek and achieve keeps us free of the exhilaration and frustration that result from our relative triumphs and failures. It gives us a rich understanding of our experiences and grants us the gift of living in peace within a life that can't stop triggering joys and sorrows. This is how we remain free of our conditioning and experiences. This allows us to remain serene and objective within our unfolding, without seeking to stand

out from those around us. Since we preserve a negative inner attitude, we are able to achieve a spontaneous self-forgetfulness, something that we may previously have thought to be impossible.

This inner negative state transforms the active exercise of positive virtues into a task, a sort of inner work or, more precisely, a responsibility. We no longer think of advancement in the acquisition of virtue as something that brings us closer to a goal we crave because we no longer think in terms of going forward or backward. Our work on ourselves—which is always a positive action—is how we do things when we are not attached to our experiences or to their associated consequences of pain or joy; acquisition or loss.

Transcending ourselves in this way—which we could perhaps understand as impersonality—allows us to remain essentially in peace even while exercising the dogged effort of fulfilling our yearning to unfold spiritually as we live the life that this world requires of us.

Positive Renouncement

We mark three basic stages in our path of unfolding: the stages of personal affirmation, mystical death and affirmative denial.

Another name for the personal affirmation stage is the stage of positive renouncement, because the characteristic of this stage is that our attitude is always positive. In other words, in this stage we are in a state of positive consciousness.

How can being in a positive state of consciousness that moves us to strengthen our personality lead us to a renouncement that transcends that personality? When we walk the positive path to the end, it ends in a contradiction. The excessive growth of our acquired personality attacks the foundations upon which we have tried to support ourselves.

Just as each of us develops a particular personality that competes with the personality of those around us, every human group develops its characteristic personality as well. These collective personalities act and react as if they were thinking, free-willed organisms, and when they carry their competitive struggle to the extreme, they end by destroying each other.

In the personal domain, the more brilliant our outward victories are, the deeper our spiritual crisis tends to be. Our anguish could be accentuated if our unfolding has been entirely external. The answer to the question we can't avoid—the question of meaning—becomes more and more obscure. What is the meaning of my progress that has been acquired with so much work and suffering? What meaning does *my* life have? The crisis of meaning undermines the foundation of our personal triumphs.

We yearn for happiness and inner peace. The things we possess, our life and objectives, might come to seem empty and meaningless when we juxtapose them with the plenitude we aspire to. It is not that we hate the world or feel discontent with our everyday life, but we don't need to follow that path to the end to know that it won't give us what we really want. We yearn for

something inner, a basic certainty, a true knowledge that will tell us who we are, what we are suffering for and working toward. We love life and know how to make the most of everything we receive from society, but that's not enough: we ache for permanent actualization.

We already know, because we have verified it, that the path of possession gives us neither peace nor security. We know that having more doesn't mean being different, being more, or being happy. We have never been able to slake our desires totally. In fact, satiety can actually increase our dissatisfaction. In the end, the weight of our experiences and acquisitions overwhelms and suffocates us. We're tired of running after goals that promise only temporary happiness. We're tired of pursuing illusions, of learning passages in words that don't give us what we are looking for. We're tired of repeating what someone else has said or done, of trudging paths that have been worn down by tears and hopelessness. We're tired of covering our anguish with the veneer of sophistication, affectation, artificiality and emptiness. We're tired of playing a role without knowing why or what for.

We would like to stop, to put the brakes on life so that we can see better, ask deep questions, know what's the matter, and what's the matter with *us*.

We know that it doesn't help at all to react against the system we live in; our reaction would be just another product of the system we want to be free of, which moves with the rhythm of contraries, "for" or "against," "live" or "die". We can't run away, either. Physical flight is impossible. We all belong to the system. We can't physically escape from a state of consciousness.

Nor do we listen to people who tell us not to think, not to worry, who tell us just to live our lives. We know that living our own lives means turning our backs on everyone else and their problems, disregarding them. We don't want to disregard anything. We don't want to cover our eyes with indifference. We can't: we are committed.

We feel trapped. When we don't find any way to escape, we want to break loose from what we feel we are. What we actually want to do is to transcend our positive state of consciousness. That is: we want to renounce.

This is where we begin our path of renouncement. Our first step is a change of attitude toward the world and life, that at first seems to return us to the place we want to escape from: we have to accept the world and life. But accept not with pessimistic resignation, as we would have done if we had remained in our positive state of consciousness. We have to accept life and the world as *our* reality. In other words, we have to stop reacting positively against a milieu that is our milieu, against individuals that make up our humankind.

Our rebellion against the pain and ignorance that isolated us from the world and life becomes a profound acceptance that integrates us into the world and life. This integration, which we may superficially understand as a materialization of our being, is actually an inner communion with other people, integration into existence, which deepens and spiritualizes our vision of the divine.

By accepting *our* world, by no longer rejecting a humankind that is, in fact, our own, we begin to discover every individual within humankind, and to love each and every person just as they are. By loving them, we begin to understand them. And, *through human beings*, we begin to understand ourselves.

When we reacted we were only worried about our own selves, and became anguished at not understanding ourselves or anything else. When we renounced, when we became responsible, when we accepted everyone else, the world and life, we understood human beings in ourselves and began to find ourselves in other human beings.

So our first renouncement was to stop running away, to stop isolating ourselves in indifference and lack of interest; to stop thinking about ourselves and only from our own perspective, which is the same as turning our backs on everything else.

But this wasn't enough. Although acceptance, as I describe it here, leads to a new state of consciousness, we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that we are already in this new state of consciousness simply because we understand that we need to be accepting. Deep acceptance requires many occasions of acceptance. We don't change our state of consciousness and inner vision so easily. We need a persevering inner effort, a permanent renouncement.

So let's begin to renounce. Every renouncement requires an inner struggle; it's hard for us. Since we are in a positive state of consciousness, we measure what we leave behind, what we lose, what we sacrifice, and we compare it with what we get. We break down our mysticism into profit and loss columns. We don't yet realize that our reasoning is based on a positive way of thinking, and that until we acquire the ability to change a positive way of thinking for a negative one, we will not understand the meaning of renouncement.

Our renouncement is positive and is materialized in extreme attitudes: "If seeking pleasure doesn't bring happiness, I don't want pleasure. If material wealth doesn't satisfy my desires, I don't want to be wealthy. If instinctual or limited love makes me emotionally attached and chains me to fear and pain, I reject that love."

Positive renouncement is truly a dispossession. We gradually divest ourselves of what we had and reject what we used to want. If desire was the source of pain, we no longer want to desire anything. We want to be free. We want to achieve happiness. We want to attain realization. We want divine union. We *want*.

We fall into a deception. We haven't renounced. We have dropped certain things because we wanted others. But although we have left one world behind, we have not yet found a different one. We have turned away from the road of pain, ignorance, confusion and escape, but now we don't know where we are. We have shed false attributes, but have not yet found real ones. We have broken some chains but have not attained freedom.

In a positive state of consciousness, renouncement means letting go, rejecting, shedding. It is like dying while still alive. But leaving this place means being somewhere else. Discarding this means embracing that.

Just as being able to measure our footsteps, efforts and achievements we have give us the sensation we are advancing—a sensation that makes us feel secure—we are also subject to the contradictions of the positive attitude. No matter how much we try, we don't achieve balance or depth. Inner stability, when we do achieve it, is the result of willpower, not of peace. And if we do sometimes understand something, it is with our intellect only; our understandings are not rooted within us.

Since we don't have good command of our inner movements, we need to be alert all the time, which is where our almost belligerent attitude comes from. We can't overcome our tendency to be hypersensitive, since we are still subject to the patterns that a positive attitude has imposed on our behavior. The effort of creating our personality has made us used to being permanently on the defensive, which easily switches to an attack and, sometimes, into a provocation. The point is, our aim was always to win. Winning means feeling strong, being sure; it means having triumphed. So from the perspective of positive renouncement, we are constantly measuring and comparing ourselves to others. We also remain battle-ready, quick to reject what's bad and embrace what's good. But at the same time we remain immersed in affliction, because we can't stop oscillating between joy and sorrow, hope and frustration, triumphant moments and the moments of failure and despair.

We want to renounce but are never able to. We are sincere in our purposes but are wedded to the ups and downs of our fickle thoughts and feelings; we are attached to the contingencies of our inner struggle.

We remain the same. We have left everything, sacrificed everything, but have not been able to touch our inner center. We don't even make a dent in the crust of our personality. Our renouncement is a series of renouncements that give us neither permanent peace nor real love.

This first part of the process of spiritual unfolding is easy to traverse. We can be guided without difficulty because our inner effort is of the same nature as our outer efforts. The spiritual struggle assumes the same characteristics as an external struggle against an objective, specific, visible enemy.

At this stage, spiritual realization is a concrete objective: ecstasy, or extraordinary inner states, through the practice of appropriate exercises; salvation, through the perfection that has been achieved by the positive exercise of all the virtues. We are at the stage of doing, of accomplishment. At this stage we develop will power, which we apply to the attainment of precise goals: specific things that we stop doing or leave behind, that we sacrifice, in order to get something more perfect.

It's good to make an effort to gain mastery over our will, because it allows us to improve our habits. It's also good to diligently practice spiritual exercises, pray and meditate. We need to be constant in our efforts and acquire a certain self-mastery if we want to make a habit of these practices. It's essential that we use strength of will during this first period, because later it won't be easy for us to acquire habits that will help us gain good command of our mind and impulses. But, although we gradually acquire a more integral vision of ourselves and life, as we gain greater understanding we begin to rely less and less upon the powerful driving force of positive desire that allows us to concretize our resolutions.

We affirm our personality during the positive stage; in fact, positive renouncement seems to continue strengthening the personality. But this should not make us think that, since the state of renouncement is negative, we will only be able to attain it through an exclusively negative inner pathway.

If from the beginning we were to follow a totally negative pathway, it would be very difficult to develop the necessary inner strength we need to persevere in our efforts. Since we are aware that all goals are relative, that perspective, though broad, tends to deprive us of the strength we need to

attain such goals. It's true that we need to know from the beginning that renouncement means to gain nothing, to have nothing and to be nothing. But during the first segment of our unfolding, to gain nothing, to have nothing, and to be nothing become concrete goals we need to fulfill through a positive attitude and effort.

We know that renouncement means gaining nothing, so we wish to gain nothing. We can't help but reap the results of our work, so we systematically reject them. This rejection, motivated by a real inner sacrifice, by an effort of will to pull away from things, one by one, that we don't want to acquire or keep, is a positive, objective, purposeful movement. But it is accompanied by suffering and not plenitude.

We want to renounce, be free, and turn away from anything that could maintain a hold on us or hinder our steps. Yet every time we let something go we suffer and lament over what we have relinquished, and don't even feel more free after having given that thing up. If our inner state had been negative, our letting go would have been spontaneous, the result of an understanding that transcends the act of giving something up. Instead of suffering, letting go would have given us a feeling of spiritual expansion.

A positive inner attitude makes our willpower stronger, but it strips us of awareness, or else hinders its expansion. The positive application of willpower limits our inner perspective; it doesn't allow us to have a deep understanding of ourselves or of our path of unfolding, or of the nature of our spiritual yearnings. It proffers the bare action we need to take and that's all. We know we need to divest ourselves of something we still want to have. That's all we know and all we want to know. While we reject something with all the strength of our willpower, part of us continues to want it at the same time. At that moment, our positive attitude hinders our awareness of the extraordinary freedom of renouncement. We can't remember that our pain was caused by the very things we desired.

During this period, every act of renouncement denotes a simple question: am I ready or not to divest myself of what I am still hanging on to. If I am

ready, and I let go of it, I succeed, I feel that I have accomplished what I set out to do, that I have taken a step forward. At this moment of success our fervor and enthusiasm increase. Our growing faith in ourselves helps us fulfill what we set out to do but at the same time affirms us in the personality we want to transcend. Moreover, although we feel like we are really renouncing every time we are able to divest ourselves of something, we can't avoid the polar opposite of any positive situation. Our successes depend on our level of enthusiasm in each circumstance, our mood at the time. Though we fulfill many of our resolutions enthusiastically, we forget many others. We become closed again and seem to reject our yearning for spiritual freedom and expansion. This variability makes us feel really miserable and it generates feelings of bitterness and failure throughout the whole positive period, independently of the spiritual successes that we may be having along the way.

So a feeling of failure is another aspect of personal affirmation. This affirmation results just as many times from a success as it does from a defeat. Regardless of the result we have achieved in a particular situation after having made an effort, we use it to focus more on ourselves, giving extra strength to our personal and separate self. But by highlighting the nuances of our personality, this affirmation also exposes it. It shows that our personality is unable to attain a permanent and transcendent inner realization; that it can't escape the fluctuation of its contradictory states. Our personality has to reveal itself just as it is, so that it may be a total failure once and for all.

But the only one who may talk of failure is my personal self. What we call failure is merely the discovery of the limits we can't transcend with positive actions. The field of personal successes is very big but it does have its limits. Since we are unable to attain the peace and plenitude that we so desire, we think we have failed; we can't make a greater effort than we already have. But this apparent failure leads to what has traditionally been called mystical death, which leads us to what we could think of as a resurrection. Failure

liberates our inner being, which no longer depends on the positive exercise of willpower.

Even if we study, understand and clearly explain all the states we have to surpass during the process of the expansion of our consciousness, our inner reality may be very different from the unfolding we described so clearly. We need to understand, because understanding predisposes us to a broader state of consciousness. However, though understanding is progress, it's not realization. For example, many of us can talk superbly about virtues without actually having practiced them.

It's not good to turn mysticism into an intellectual abstraction. Mysticism is our inner state; intellectual analyses of it aren't the same as having mystical experiences or inner spiritual realizations, and may easily lead us to false conclusions.

So let's strive to attain a positive letting-go, positive renouncements, and the positive acquisition of virtues; but let's do it in such a way that we will be able to discover the spiritual meaning of renouncement. While we are moving our unfolding forward with positive efforts, let's be careful not to turn means into ends. May our positive successes be only a means to transcend to a negative state that will guide us to a permanent state of renouncement.

* * *

While we were in the positive stage, just as virtues were gifts we attempted to obtain, defects were imperfections we had to get rid of. But those defects were means that our personality used to affirm itself and develop. One needs to have a strong personality to succeed in a world where strength is law and human relationships turn competitive. Pride was the motivating force behind most of our positive efforts. Ambition drove us to struggle and overcome, it moved us without letting us rest until we gained mastery over our objectives. Impatience, defensiveness, selfishness, ambition, and aggressiveness were the tools that let us progress, to succeed in the struggle for life. And we used

those as weapons to defend and attack, as means by which we could possess and hoard. They gave us the strength necessary to attack and win.

During the stage of positive affirmation, we lived at the level of the personality we have acquired. Life is competition, open or concealed aggression and, in some cases, violence. To have more, gain more, be more, is the law of the positive life.

A positive state of consciousness always gauges our efforts within a system of competition. This competition is not limited to the push to surpass others or stand out over them, but also gets between who we feel we are and what we want to be, what we have already acquired and what we still want to get. The image of the objective is that of something or someone we're competing against; as the distance shortens between where we are now and the goal we want to achieve, we feel we are progressing and that success is getting closer.

But when competition is carried to its ultimate expression; it destroys the relationships we yearned to improve; it undermines love and hardens attitudes. In the positive and competitive world, the more people there are in the group we belong to, the more alone and forlorn we feel, for we are all competitors. And when we establish spiritual life within a positive state of consciousness, our struggle to attain divine union is also a competition, but this time it's between ourselves and God. In other words, it's a contradiction.

Since, during the stage of positive and personal affirmation, we equate renouncement to a positive state and want to possess it as a concrete thing, we find ourselves in a paradox and on a path of contradictions. Though renouncement is our ambition, it requires us to stop being ambitious. The tools that allowed us to succeed as a personality are now defects that have to be yanked out. But these defects are the way we are: the pride, selfishness, and passion are all ours. It's the way we *are*; it's our state of consciousness.

While we are in the positive stage, we can't stop identifying with our thoughts and feelings. We are what we feel and think at a particular point in time. Being, and being the way we are, are still the same thing to us. We

don't yet realize that *being* is permanent, while *being the way we are* is transitory. I *am* good, I *am* bad; I *am* a believer; I *am* an atheist; I *am* backward, I *am* evolved. That is, we identify our being with transitory states. This identification is so deeply rooted that if we change our beliefs we seem like somebody else, somebody of a different nature than ours. The infidel, upon whom all guilt and curses are heaped, becomes one of the faithful, gifted with virtues and advantages.

So when we were in a positive state of consciousness, we found that we had to eradicate everything about ourselves that felt inseparable from our nature. To get rid of ambition, selfishness, the desire to have things, seemed like a sort of self-destruction, a kind of inner suicide. This made us suffer in a seemingly endless struggle. Even if we are able to impose our will over our desires, even if we triumph over ourselves, there always remained the sensation that that triumph was neither total nor final, that we had only been able to control ourselves but not change.

And we wanted to change; we wanted to be different. But would we ever be able to do that? Would we be able to eliminate our personality the way we can remove an unpleasant stain? Would I be able to free myself from what I had been, from my experiences and desires, from the imprint that life has left on me?

It may help us if we understand that *a being's personality is his or her embedment in a positive state of consciousness.*

We can't stop being what we are, but we can understand what we are not. Our personality is our contingent way of being, and that's all it is. From the viewpoint of a positive state of consciousness, since renouncement transcends the personality, we see renouncement as if it were out to annihilate us. But from a deep consciousness of being, we see that to identify with a personality is to deny our individuality.

When we think about individuality, let's be careful not to confuse it with individualism. Individualism is a consequence of personality and is the manifestation of its separativity. In the language of Mystical Asceticism,

individualism is the opposite of participation. We can only be individualists when we identify with the products of our personality.

We can therefore say that individuality is a negative affirmation of our being. When we renounce to our personality, we affirm ourselves in our individuality. We affirm ourselves negatively in our being instead of identifying in a positive way with its attributes.

During the stage of positive renouncement, when we understand that we need to renounce to our personality, we want to destroy it. But there's no point thinking in those terms because destroying the personality is impossible. Every expression of a person in life establishes a personality. But when we don't identify with it, it loses its positive, composite and unconscious characteristics and becomes what it should be: the point of support by which consciousness becomes will and thought becomes deed.

Mystical Death

During the positive stage of renouncement, we are trapped within the pairs of opposites of winning and losing, having and letting go. We see clearly within us the bad things that need to be rejected and the good things we need to achieve. But this first step does not constitute a homogeneous state of consciousness that we will eventually have to transcend in favor of a different one. At all stages of our unfolding we have instants of spiritual expansion and inner understanding that belong to higher states; the various stages are distinguished by the characteristic that most predominates in them. In the first period of our unfolding, which we call a *positive state of consciousness*, a possessive attitude predominates, along with the positive exercise of willpower.

Even if we limit spiritual life to the positive practice of virtues, our will to renounce can't help but give inner results that we call negative. We gradually open ourselves through a state of participation that unites us interiorly with other people, the world, and life. It's a progressive expansion that gradually reveals to us the spiritual meaning of the divine. But since a positive attitude still predominates in us, we still mainly see the world and life through their extreme elements of pain, anguish, destruction and despair.

Just as we felt previously that we had failed in our attempt to achieve personal perfection, now we feel impotent in the face of the evil and pain that are visible everywhere and that we don't know how to eliminate or alleviate. The bad things outside us gradually enter us and become our bad things. Little by little we stop differentiating between our pain and the general pain. Our suffering, which was previously confined to the narrow limits of our person, has now been transformed into the pain of the world and manifests itself in us through our pain.

We want to do something positive and concrete, but we know beforehand that our action, even the best possible action, would be lost in the sea of

confusion and violence all around us. Our impotence makes us love others more and more; it connects us with them. We love them in their helplessness. We love them in their pain and for their pain. The fact is, we also feel helpless; we can no longer rely on our positive faith. We realize that our faith was a not-very-aware personality's merely superficial adherence to a belief system. Paradoxically, now that we discovered a purer meaning of the divine within ourselves, we feel that we can no longer believe. Actually, our beliefs are transforming into knowledge, but it is such deep knowledge that we don't yet feel it as a support. Therefore, the feeling of failure at not having reached the inner plenitude and understanding that we were in such quest of, is now compounded by the desolation, impotence and despair at not being able to help others, at not being able to change the condition of the world we live in. Previously we thought we had failed only inwardly; now it's combined with the sensation of external failure.

We feel useless. We don't know what to do. We would like to die, if our death would serve to save other human beings, to rescue them from the chasm of ignorance and confusion in which they are submerged. But we can't help thinking that our death would merely be one more death within a becoming that transforms life into a continuous death. Our eyes see life and the world through the lenses of pain and impotence. We feel impulses to fling ourselves into a desperate act in our anguished effort to do something. We imagine solutions; we weave plans; we think about others and for them. Yet we confirm painfully on a daily basis how others turn their backs on us, ignoring us, even despising us, in a cruel and lacerating mockery.

We look sorrowfully around us, seeking someone who understands. Being understood ourselves doesn't matter—we're not important, we don't matter—we want to find someone *who understands*. We are alone. Alone inwardly. Alone exteriorly. We feel isolated, excluded. And in that absolute solitude we begin to unveil ourselves to ourselves.

We have left everything behind; we don't retain a single triumph; not one of our ties has been left unbroken. But we keep on being here. We persist.

The will to give things up, to free ourselves of things and characteristics, has led us to the core of our personality. And so we believe that we have already exhausted the possibilities of the inner journey. We have had the experience of possession and poverty; of surfeit and privation. We have prayed, beseeched, wept, and hoped. We have suffered and despaired. We have reached a point of acceptance of life and the world; we continue to accept them. But we rebel at the resulting pain. We don't accept that there is no way out—or, better said, at that moment *we* don't see any way out. We would like to disappear, to stop existing. We can't. The greater our pain, the more evident it is that we exist. Our anguish affirms our personality even more. We are, increasingly, *ourselves*, with our pain, questions, and darkness.

Again and again, we ask ourselves what to do. We have reached the end of the positive journey without finding either peace or answers. The positive journey allowed us to master what we wanted and leave aside what we didn't. We had our triumphs and our downfalls. We held others and the world within us. We experienced their pain and anguish in a possessive way. We possessed the virtues and, consequently, positive good. We wanted our heaven and we wanted our renouncement in order to get there. We possessed renouncement as just one more thing. But at the end of the positive journey of possession and affirmation, what awaited us was our own image, firmer and more strongly rooted than ever.

Now we suffer:

I suffer.

I would like to die, but I don't deceive myself any longer: the desire to die is a quick escape. I haven't found new lights to guide me on my inner journey. Sometimes I would like to go back, to be attached again, to immerse myself in unconsciousness, return to my creed of possession, to revere pleasure. I would like to cover my eyes and heart with my tattered old illusions.

But can I really go back? Can I go back and take up what I relinquished voluntarily, since giving it up didn't give me the happiness I yearned for?

Can I deceive myself once again; go back to affectation, artificiality, to what's illusory? Go back and sate myself with objects and pleasures that I no longer value?

Can a person undo an understanding, an awakening, the way they can retrace their steps? Can I stop seeing what I see; can I not feel what I feel, not love as I love? Can I possibly go back to limiting myself within a selfish love, or entangle myself in lies and pretense? Go back where? Return to what?

There is no escape. The way out that I sought was an escape. And now I don't want to run away.

But I'm scared. I fear the void. I eagerly seek something I can grab onto but I don't find it. My energy is fading. I want to be alone. Rest. Forget. Close my eyes and get away from my own image, myself. Forget that I exist, that I am, that I was looking for something; that I wanted to be.

Even though desire has not disappeared in me, something starts to give way in me interiorly. I begin to accept everything in a deeper way. I no longer confuse acceptance with resignation. My acceptance previously meant acquiescence to the inevitable. Now it means saying "yes." A total, integral "yes" that is born from the deepest darkness of my being. My whole being is a "yes."

So I say yes. Without asking for anything, without expecting anything, without imagining anything. For the first time.

I offer myself freely.

I no longer want anything: I don't want to have or to leave; to know or know not. My quest for peace and happiness now seems like a vain illusion. How could I desire them like that, for myself? I no longer want anything. My will gives up; there is no objective that I could apply it to in a positive way.

Without fully understanding what is happening to me, I begin to plunge into a new and different inner state. It's as though I'm not interested in anything and I'm not moved to do anything. I am here; I am still. I have nothing. I'm

not looking for anything. The despair that previously overwhelmed me has transformed itself into a weight in my heart which is almost sweet. I feel far from everyone and everything. I am alone with nothing. Empty. In a gray void like an ocean of sadness.

I begin to die mystically.

When I stopped desiring it was as if I had stopped existing. Desire gave me life. It wasn't the fact of owning the object but the desire, the strength of wanting, that gave me the sensation of being alive. But as long as I had desire I was living in expectation. And by living in expectation I identified life with the passage of time. Now that I don't desire, I live as if I were dead.

To me, life was like a line drawn by desire in pursuit of something. Living meant moving forward, going somewhere, achieving something, struggling, all in order to have. It meant winning and losing, running and stopping. Life meant competition and struggle. Loving meant having strong feelings, getting excited, suffering, clutching, possessing. Struggling meant violence, loathing, aggression, or destruction and triumph. Life was something positive, sensate, concrete.

I now feel like I'm dead. Where can I go now that I'm no longer seeking anything? For someone who has lost her ambition, what triumph could possibly await me? My sad and desolate gaze, suspended between heaven and earth, sees nothing to hold on to and nothing to comfort it. What can I expect when there is nothing I want? The interests that I was once enthusiastic about have become a dry and burdensome routine. I make an effort because I'm used to doing so; my existence is based on habits I acquired at the positive stage, and these habits are the only points of support I have. Renouncement and offering are the way I am; I can't be different. Therefore, I don't feel virtuous or greatly value the extra-ordinary life I live; this is the way I am.

These states could make a person think she has become mentally and emotionally unbalanced, as if she had fallen into a permanent state of hopelessness, into a sort of total disillusionment with life and the world. So

it is important to be able to differentiate the truly mystical state from an imbalance or subjective fantasy. The further we advance along the mystical path, the greater our inner balance and stability are, the clearer our discernment is and the more sensible our attitudes are. We don't confuse our spiritual experiences, which are inner and personal, with the obligations and responsibilities that we all need to fulfill in the world like everybody else. The deeper our mysticism is, the greater is our practical efficiency and dedication to work, and the more harmonious are the relationships we have with others. But besides all this there is a sign that helps us discern: someone who is inwardly unbalanced turns their dissatisfaction into selfishness, isolation, and an increasing lack of interest in others, life, and the world; they shun society. Mysticism, on the other hand, makes us feel increasingly more committed, expanding and deepening our sense of participation. From this point of view, renouncing means conquering indifference.

And so we actively and permanently participate in life. There's no doubt that we experience a great inner void but at the same time an increasingly deeper love for others, life and the world throbs within us. Even though we feel alone and empty, even though we no longer want or seek anything, we participate. We participate with our whole being, but negatively, without passion or personal desires. Our participation is the expression of our love, which is ever deeper. At the same time that we mix with life and others through our participation, and suffer or celebrate with them, there is something in us that doesn't move. In the deepest part of being we remain still, as if we were dead.

But we don't realize how extraordinary our inner state is. Since our participation is not based on positive actions or emotions, we don't feel more connected with other people, the world or the divine, although we really are already deeply so. When we suffer, it's due to a lack of the positive sensation that belongs to a personal attitude. To the extent that our love becomes more and more interior, it ceases to express itself through strong emotions, and we become less and less emotionally moved. So we think we feel less. Bound as we are to our memory of positive states, we think we

love less because we're feeling less when, in actuality, we are turning the gift of love into our own.

When we were at the positive stage, our emotions were strong and well defined. Our devotion was active. Praying meant saying prayers; loving meant feeling an emotion; suffering meant crying about something. This was the period of sure steps, heroic acts, and concrete virtues. The ground we walked on always felt firm beneath our feet. Fervor was an inner strength that surged irrepressibly, and love wiped away violent and even cruel sacrifice.

We left everything behind, like trying to remember the past, wondering whether it really happened.

Now we are still. We suffer and love, but in a different way. We ourselves don't know how much we suffer or how much we love. We don't think about that. We don't measure or weigh; we are here. And so we begin to discover a deeper inner world, the world of negative spiritual states.

We experience mystical death as a real death: when desire is gone, it's as if the personality we had acquired has died. Our personality remains, and we continue expressing ourselves through it, but without identifying with it. What changes is the way we feel about how we are and what we do. Mystical death leaves us with an extraordinary inner freedom and peace that we keep forever.

Affirmative Denial

The discovery of our inner world, and of our sorrows and needs, the yearning to do something for the world, the despair caused by the impotence we feel when we come up against the problems we would like to fix, are not states that we only experience in mystical death. It is normal to feel the pain of others and to want to do something to fix it. This desire moves us to do good works and spurs us on to new ways to unfold. But in mystical death, we experience pain and the human condition in a way that the distinction between my pain and another's pain, my life and another's life, disappears.

The despair of feeling impotent in the face of human suffering is a state of participation; not to be confused with the despair we sometimes feel when things are not going our way. In the latter situation, despair wraps us up in ourselves, isolating us. By contrast, in mystical death pain expands us interiorly as if all human beings lived inside us.

Up until now, we divided the world into good people and bad people, those who suffered and those who made others suffer. Now we are experiencing a pain that is beyond separativity. We now see exterior injustice and pain as only a reflection of a state of anguish that we discovered at a much deeper level than the level at which we so often place problems. Our pain arises from a heightened awareness, ever deeper, of what it means to live in this world, of what it means to be a human being. It is pain for the darkness, for the misfortune of the human condition; it is the pain of not being, to the extent that "not being" means the absence of God.

Even if we have been illumined by transcendent moments of understanding, even if, in our estimation, we are "saved", that all means nothing to us at this moment, because not all human beings have experienced this good.

When we participate with all beings, it feels as if our experience and understanding are accidental in the life of humanity, something that is almost foreign to us. It's as if all our previous experiences belonged to

another person, *one* person. Because now we-are-in-all-beings. And by being-in-all, we experience the darkness and pain of the human condition, of the being who doesn't exist, doesn't know, who blindly experiences a destiny in which no aim or meaning are evident.

Our personality has lost the incentive of desire. Cravings have disappeared. Inner movements have abated.

During the positive stage, emotions were clear and well defined. Enthusiasm, anxiety, pleasure and pain were the sharply defined peaks of emotional states. Emotions were strong, a consequence of the polarity of one's inner states. But now suffering and loving seem almost the same to us; there is only a shade of difference between joy and sorrow.

Just as during the positive stage our life was mainly external and defined itself in actions, now our life is interior and is expressed in states. The various spiritual states we experience after mystical death become increasingly less differentiated from each other, until the moment arrives in which they become a single simple state.

Previously we identified with our doings; now we identify with our being. Therefore, when we speak of states, they are not to be understood as different ways of being that change over time, but as the nuances of a consciousness that is increasingly simpler.

Our inner centering becomes increasingly more permanent. The peace of this state flows to us from the deepest strata and paves the way to our inner world, which we're getting used to entering and lodging in. We thus discover a new environment: the inner milieu. In the inner milieu we rediscover everything. The divine, life, people, the world, take on new dimensions and meanings that are so profound that we can't translate them into ordinary language.

Naturally, the inner milieu is beyond an interior-exterior polarity. The life we previously believed was our inner life and that we identified with our thoughts, yearnings, and emotions is revealed to us as a mere shell that

covered the life we have now uncovered in our inner milieu. Although we can't stop the movements of our mind and heart, by establishing our self-awareness on a deeper level, the succession of thoughts and feelings become revealed to us as the superficial products of our mind and heart, and they no longer trouble our peace or disrupt our inner life.

By reaching depth we achieve balance and also wisdom, little by little. By not being carried away by our imagination and emotions, we maintain a serenity that allows us to develop discernment and knowledge.

I still exist, even if I renounce a positive state of being. A negative state of being can't be defined. That is because although the state of renouncement is expressed in a contradiction between being and not being, it is only an apparent contradiction. A being doesn't exist, but that's true only if we are talking about the way she expresses her self in a positive way, i.e., through her acquired personality. But this relationship is always and only superficial and contingent. The life of a being is "being-not being", which is expressed in what we call "not being-being".

"Being-not being" defines the spiritual awareness that we have to be ourselves, in terms of which all the positive expressions of our being seem illusory and unreal.

"Not being-being" defines the active pole of that self-awareness which, by asserting itself positively in concrete and well-defined acts, in behavior and ethics, we experience in all their contingency but without thereby losing our self-awareness. Since that awareness is relatively opposed to all positive resolve, then rational understanding seems to be "not-being".

The state of renouncement, then, is not a positive attitude that denies one value to emphasize another. It is a state of reversibility. Denying doesn't mean separating or excluding, but understanding and integrating. Affirming is not limiting; it makes implementation a means for expanding and participating, which always translates into a broadening of one's state of consciousness.

We now have an unshakeable certainty. Our support is no longer a structure built with things and possessions. It's not the result of our actions, nor does it come from our personal victories and conquests. Our support is negative: it is our freedom from every support. This freedom is born from our renouncement; from gaining nothing, having nothing, and being nothing.

IV. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Spiritual Direction

If we have been fortunate throughout our life, we probably feel we are civilized. We have received the breeding, education and training that allow us to satisfy our needs and the needs of those who depend on us. We have a perception of ourselves and life that makes us feel sure of what we think and believe. What more could we want?

Yet it's not unusual for people who have much more than they could ever need to not feel happy, and to look for ways to not think or question anything, and to forget the shortcomings and deficiencies of what we refer to as our civilization. This begs the question: to what extent are we civilized? What state of consciousness do we need to have in order to consider ourselves civilized?

Centuries ago, we also probably felt we were civilized. In every age and place, people have accommodated themselves to the culture and ideas of the times. That's all it takes for us to feel sure we know who we are, what our place is in life, and what objectives we need to meet. We are so used to feeling good about the way we think and act that it doesn't alarm or scandalize us to reflect on our history of wars, massacres and horrors one after the other for as far back as we can remember, and which continue happening.

Nor are we alarmed by the growing discord among people who say they love each other, the cases of mutual physical and psychological abuse, misunderstandings between factions of those belonging to the same culture, or the assaults between groups that each display their own truth.

Therefore, since we feel so sure of ourselves, we don't always understand the idea of spiritual direction. Perhaps we mistakenly think it means others will suggest that we change our beliefs or ideology, or we feel it deals with subject matter that is not akin to our aims in life.

But even if we feel sure of ourselves and think that we don't need any more orientation than we already have in our lives, we can't avoid the inner tugs we feel when we see that life is going by, that what we have accomplished isn't giving us the plenitude we yearn for, that we are not safe from misfortunes no matter how much we protect ourselves.

It's true that humankind as a whole has advanced in terms of our rights and freedoms, and that we have progressed remarkably in knowledge and technology. But as we reflect on those advancements, we don't really see great progress in human relationships, in our ability to avoid, or at least overcome, personal or social conflicts, nor our ability to be able to feel fulfilled and happy. Moreover, no matter what we think, we all encounter the same challenges when faced with the mystery of life and of our destiny.

I consider that the way to respond to those challenges is by expanding our state of consciousness. This is the aim of spiritual direction.

Said in another way, spiritual direction helps us to give meaning to our life.

It's good to remember that spiritual direction assumes that the one receiving the direction is psychologically balanced within the range of what is typically considered normal. In the case of a serious personality imbalance, the imbalance would need to be treated by professional experts. Although spiritual directors need to be extensively knowledgeable about psychology so they can understand those who consult them, they do not provide psychological treatment.

Spiritual Directors

Experience teaches us that no matter how extraordinary our personal gifts may be and no matter how intense our spiritual yearnings, we need wise spiritual direction to bring those gifts and yearnings to fruition.

Some of us mistake erudition in spiritual subjects for spiritual realization. Knowing about various doctrines and viewpoints about life and the world broadens our vision of things and makes us more open toward those who think differently from the way we do. But this relative openness doesn't significantly expand our state of consciousness. If we never go beyond what we have read or learned, we will find ourselves back where we started after a lot of time and study. We doubtless know more, but we haven't changed spiritually.

Others practice mental exercises because they think this is the way to achieve the spiritual realization they yearn for. A few people acquire, after much effort and perseverance, certain psychic abilities or a capacity for concentration. But these attainments are not enough to give us better understanding of our problems, aspirations and possibilities.

Still others give themselves over to the practice of prayer and mortification of the flesh. Although devotion keeps us aware of a higher reality, and mortifications we make for the sake of love foster participation and increase our self-control, if we limit our actions solely to these practices we don't achieve any measurable unfolding. There are numerous examples of very devout people who practice mortification of the flesh according to their beliefs, but who are at the same time intolerant of and even cruel toward those who don't subscribe to their dogmas.

It is supremely difficult to unfold spiritually without wise orientation.

When we seek spiritual direction, it is good to reflect why we are seeking it. Sometimes we mistake it for a means to solve our personal problems. But if

that was all we wanted, all we would need was a good counselor, not necessarily a spiritual director.

The idea of inner unfolding and spiritual realization changes according to people and the times they are living in. Each stage of our development contains experiences that, by giving us an increasingly broader vision of the world and life, make our earlier ideas seem antiquated. This can make us suppose, when we discover a new way to unfold, that we have embarked on a new path, when really it is really a new stage on the same path.

In spiritual direction we learn what we can do to stimulate our unfolding, which does not require a great deal of knowledge or extraordinary personal circumstances. We only need an inner disposition, suitable means, and suitable orientation.

If we want to unfold, we need to follow an appropriate method. Although all of us are in a process of unfolding, we each have individual characteristics. If these characteristics were not respected, everyone would be confined by rigid frameworks from which it would be difficult to be able to free ourselves. Each person needs his or her method and teaching: in other words, individual orientation.

Although spiritual directors study books and souls in the process of giving orientation, they know that good will and some reading aren't enough. Erudition helps, but it doesn't replace the knowledge that can only be achieved when a person expands her consciousness and transcends herself; when she renounces personal objectives, when she doesn't expect a reward for her work, when her life is a continuous giving of herself to souls. This is what we find in the spiritual director, along with other hallmarks that characterize him or her.

For example:

- She treats each person as if he or she were unique
- She gives advice only when it is expressly requested

- . She does not set herself up as an example to follow; she doesn't talk about herself, her history, her life circumstances or her possible spiritual realizations.
- . Her orientation is sparing. When she speaks as a director, she does it clearly and succinctly, so that her ideas or advice don't get diluted in a sea of ruminations.
- . She respects our inner freedom. She makes us feel that we are free to choose what we would like to do with our life, and how far we yearn to go.
- . She doesn't criticize us when we make decisions that are different from those she may have advised us to take.
- . She doesn't allow herself to get annoyed or show personal feelings when we don't accept what she says or argue about it; she doesn't hurt with her words.
- . She doesn't censure those who don't agree with her teachings or who don't seek out her advice.
- . She doesn't make differences among people.
- . She doesn't compare anyone with anyone else and she doesn't use personal competition to stimulate our advancement.
- . She doesn't force us to talk about what we don't want to mention.
- . She does not make mention of what we have confided to her.

The relationship between the spiritual director and the person who receives orientation is beyond the limitations of ordinary friendship. In this relationship there is no room for selfishness, defensiveness, competitiveness or preferences. Nor is it influenced by emotions, which are always variable. Orientation can be balanced, wise and certain only if and when it is not affected by personal factors—be they those of the person giving orientation or the person receiving it.

The spiritual director doesn't always need us to talk to him about ourselves in order to know us. However, in order to know ourselves we do need to open up to him. But he doesn't push us to do that. It is just as bad to neglect those seeking orientation as to direct them too much. If you don't help people at the right moment, they come to a standstill. If you orient them too much, their unfolding gets blocked.

The spiritual director gives each person her nourishment, how and when she needs it. They support when help is needed; they let her go when she needs to fly.

The spiritual director teaches that each person needs to discover their vocation and that, in order to fulfill it, they need to persevere in it to the end. They know that in spiritual unfolding there are no easy shortcuts; that without constant effort there are no real victories. He teaches that we attain spiritual benefit by renouncing, making an effort, being patient, and persevering.

The spiritual director wisely teaches the path of renouncement. He doesn't deprive us of the supports we need; on the contrary, he supports and motivates us, but his motivation is solely spiritual. He does not resort to promises of a reward.

Every effort gives results, but the results are not a reward; they are merely a broader foundation that allows us to expand the meaning of the objective we are pursuing, until the latter disappears as an aim and becomes our inner state.

It is commonly supposed that people need to be permanently instructed through words, and this leads to talking a lot. But this excessive talking does not always answer the needs of those who seek orientation. The spiritual director knows that people are rarely influenced by words alone. Words gain power only from the example of life, from the purity of intention, from the spiritual strength that emanates from the love of the one who speaks those words.

In spiritual direction we need timely advice at the right moment. In due course, our minds will be illuminated with understanding but this usually happens in a different way, not with words but with a broader perspective on what has been concerning us or what we're yearning for.

When we need advice our mind is not always in the best state to understand the foundations or reasoning that may be used to back up that advice. The spiritual director tries to counsel us as clearly and concisely as possible, so that we are left in no doubt about what is best for us to do. At another, better time, reasons and considerations will come, if we need them to understand the situation that generated our request for advice.

The spiritual director does not force us to believe what we don't understand or what our mind rejects. He simply clears the way so we can understand how we are and why we think as we do. When we learn to think for ourselves, we drop prejudices and gain understanding.

When the spiritual director gives advice, he is not in the habit of accompanying it with doctrinal or moral considerations; he does not turn orientation into a doctrinal platform or confuse counsel with a teaching. People can learn about many doctrines, but what they expect from their spiritual director is to learn how to live, to know themselves, to transcend their limitations, and to fulfill their vocation.

Therefore, although the spiritual director has his own view of life, others, and the divine, he doesn't transmit his ideas as if they were the ultimate truth or as a dogma that must be accepted and believed. He only gives the indispensable points of support so that each individual whom he advises may discover, through their own experience, the scope of the orientation they receive.

A view of reality can't be transmitted as one more piece of knowledge. The only thing that can be taught is the path that allows each person to understand, for herself, her situation in life and the world. Let's guard against the tendency to consider the latest understanding we have reached as

the absolute truth, so that we don't turn our relative and limited understanding into hard and fast dogmas.

The spiritual director doesn't force anyone to believe in a particular idea. He knows that we can't do without tradition, history and experience, but is careful that these don't turn the teachings he transmits into dogmas. He only teaches as certain what is evident and irrefutable. He teaches as possibility what each individual has to corroborate for themselves through their own experience.

The spiritual director does not have prior conceptions about how someone is, what they should do or what they need. No two people are alike. Everyone has their own way of living, of striving, of fulfilling. They have their own rhythm and require their own distinctive orientation.

Each of us lives in a state of consciousness and undergoes experiences that, though they might be familiar to others, feel exclusive to us. Even when the spiritual director is very intuitive and can gauge the inner state of a person beforehand, he only gains a thorough knowledge of her by listening to her lovingly, participating with her.

The spiritual director does not allow himself to be trapped in the inner process of those he orients. Otherwise, his emotions would influence his discernment and he would not always orient wisely. He remains attentive to the characteristics of those who receive his orientation; only thus can he help them. It is extremely difficult to correct tendencies that are due to temperament. The director makes us aware of them so that we can balance them, transmute them, or know how to endure them.

Even if our spiritual director teaches us, from the beginning, the ropes of the process of our unfolding and the nature of our spiritual objective, he doesn't expect us to support ourselves on these general observations alone. His orientation typically and steadily focuses on the stretch of the path we can walk at this moment.

If he were to speak in absolute terms, giving rather dramatic definitions of people, life and vocation, we would be creating a theory out something as simple as living.

Nor does the spiritual director give extreme advice. Extraordinary physical mortifications rarely result in any unfolding whatsoever. This of course does not imply that he recommends a soft life or the satisfaction of all appetites. Our director teaches us to be aware of our inner movements and obey only those that promote our unfolding.

Some people think that it is necessary to punish the acquired personality in order to reach spiritual realization. This method helped very few people in the past, and left deep wounds in many practitioners from which they are unlikely to recover.

The spiritual director teaches us to be uncompromising with ourselves but tolerant with others. This formula, which is opposite to what is common in society today, marks out a clear path of inner self-mastery.

Sometimes, when we dislike the orientation we receive because it doesn't support something we've been wanting, we seek out more indulgent advisers. This behavior doesn't give us good results. Our director isn't attempting to oblige us to do what we don't want to, he is only trying to awaken our consciousness. It is up to us to respond to what we know, or not. We are free to renounce, out of love, what we wouldn't yield by force.

The spiritual director teaches us not to live in expectation.

Since it is natural to hope we'll get what we want, it's not easy to live without waiting for the moment we'll be able to gather the results of our efforts to unfold. We can't escape the idea of symmetry in life; every action produces a reaction that balances it. So our renuncements "must" give us, as a consequence, a happiness that we should experience somehow.

The desire to attain something, to reach a goal, keeps us trapped in the web of time. To expect a reward for our renuncements would be to lose the results of those renuncements.

When we reduce renouncement to a series of necessary sacrifices—as we think of them—to reach peace and happiness, we attain neither peace nor happiness. Then, despite the advancement we may have reached, we are disappointed, we feel frustrated. When we don't obtain what we expected to get, we look back, bemoaning what we left behind, what we lost. Frustration nourishes selfishness and leads us to withdraw into ourselves and try to revive impossible dreams in fantasy.

The spiritual director teaches us that spiritual realization doesn't arrive at the end of a life of mortifications; it is not the supernatural reward for a natural asceticism. He also teaches that we don't attain peace and happiness after having rejected all desires, but rather when we don't have desires.

We don't deprive ourselves of something in order to get something better. What we can get this way is not different, in essence, from what we already have.

When we renounce we are not depriving ourselves; our renouncement doesn't rob us in the way we feel that death or misfortune does. Nor does renouncement mean mortifying ourselves, although on the path of renouncement, mortification may often be necessary.

Although inner self-mastery may mortify our will to satisfy some desires, it expresses the freedom we have to do what we really want to do.

It's not a mortification to prefer the freedom of an open field to the four walls of a cell. The value of freedom is of a different nature from the relative protection of a jail.

The spiritual director teaches us that to renounce is to be free. For us, being free means happiness and peace.

Balance

As we unfold, we give a more universal scope to our thoughts and the things we understand. But at the same time, our tendency to disparage relative objectives, which to our mind are more limited, increases.

When there is little scope to an idea on which a belief system is established, it tends to be assessed by rigid structures. Then, when a viewpoint expands, special importance is given to the essence of the idea, but the method to fulfill it tends to be relaxed.

This also happens in spiritual life. When we expand our inner vision, if we are not careful to give it an integral scope, it is harder and harder for us to follow a method that starts to seem relative and not always necessary.

The fact is, we need to maintain the balance between our exterior method and inner understanding. Every norm is necessarily limited, but without an appropriate norm we will probably not be able to unfold.

The greater the inner scope we attain, the greater care we must take to comply with the method we follow. When we don't do this we tend to lose the impetus that positive effort gives us, and we don't always find a replacement for that.

When we transcend narrow-mindedness, we tend to value only inner attitudes and states, without understanding that these are always expressed in exterior acts. Therefore, the spiritual director gives us a precise exterior method so that our inner strength does not get diluted in scattered intentions.

Within the positive state of consciousness we tend to make extreme judgments. If we're told, for example, that renouncing means living without supports, we want to cast aside all supports, thinking they're useless. If we're told that the method is only a means, we want to abandon all methods.

To throw away all supports is to fall into a void. Moreover, extreme attitudes lead to rigid positions and limited insights.

It's just as bad to get attached to the letter of a law as it is to abolish the law completely. To transcend supports, we need some supports. Transcending the objectives we think of as relative doesn't mean throwing them out; it means fulfilling them when they are necessary, always taking care not to lose inner spaciousness.

While we are in the positive state of consciousness, we reject something when we can't reduce it to concrete actions or things. But when we understand later that those things are relative, we also want to discard them, without having yet understood either their meaning or the nature of spiritual good. This tendency has confused many people, who have become disoriented because they did not give value to positive objectives, or to the positive effort they had to make in their spiritual practices as well as in the work of everyday life.

It's true that when we teach the path of renouncement we say that we are to want nothing, acquire nothing, and support ourselves on nothing. But this could mistakenly lead to disinterest, indifference or confusion. If we don't balance not wanting with the strengthening of our will, and apply our will to the fulfillment of necessary relative objectives, we will be unable to fit harmoniously into the world and life.

The spiritual director teaches various exercises of prayer and meditation, and orients the soul to transform those exercises into an inner state of prayer of presence. To produce that transformation, we need constancy in the practice of our ascetic exercises, method of life, and appropriate routines.

Even if we have attained an inner state of prayer, if we don't continue with the routine practice of the exercises of prayer, our inner life gradually loses strength, and is reduced to a memory of what was, or of a fantasy of what it should be.

In order to unfold, we simply work. Since we are not seeking personal results from our efforts, our responsibility is limitless. Therefore, wherever we are, we try to do everything in the best possible way, without getting

distracted or sparing any effort. When we study, we study. When we work, we work. When we advise, we orient.

If inner renouncement were not expressed in evident results, that renouncement would be an illusion.

The spiritual director teaches us that when we learn to limit ourselves in concrete actions, we prevent our desires from getting diluted in diverse endeavors that never reach culmination in an effective accomplishment.

When we unfold spiritually, we broaden the vision of our possibilities and discover all we could do in the milieu in which we live. We would like to multiply ourselves, be everywhere, learn all sciences, and work in all the places where our effort could be useful for all human beings.

Everything can be done, but the only one who leaves a work for the good of many is the one who concentrates his strength in the necessary work that he can do here and now.

It's good to have a broad inner understanding, as long as we are careful to balance that understanding by limiting ourselves consciously and voluntarily in the concrete work that we can do in each moment for our own good and the good of society.

It's beautiful to follow all paths, know all subjects, and develop all aptitudes. But when we want to carry out a work, we renounce gratifying ourselves and concentrate on that work. This renouncement expands our understanding, increases our creative potential and makes us more efficient. Our exterior limitation is merely relative; it does not hinder our inner expansion but, on the contrary, gives it greater scope.

Self-mastery

We attain inner freedom to the extent that we gain mastery over our mind and feelings.

We are unable to know ourselves well as long as we're identified with the movements of our mind and heart. We believe that we think what our minds come up with and feel when our heart is moved.

We believe we're thinking when all we are doing is remembering and making associations. We believe we're feeling when what we're really doing is reacting emotionally.

Sometimes we think that controlling our inner movements would make us tense, and that we would not be able to be spontaneous. It's a mistake to assume that mastery and spontaneity are opposites and mutually exclusive. Mastery is precisely the means that allows us to discover spontaneity.

We are spontaneous when our expressions are genuinely our own. A person can't be spontaneous if they're identified with desires, fears, or automatic reactions. The person doesn't show, only their identifications do. Let's discover our own voice, the one that clearly shows itself to us when we learn to master our inner movements and are thus able to pinpoint them.

When we choose to live at the level of our reactions, we reject the idea of self-mastery and consider all rules a constraint on our freedom. We call freedom the possibility to do only one thing: obey all the impulses that pop up from our subconscious, even if they are contrary to our interests, health, and unfolding. We think we're free, but when we want to free ourselves of a habit or vice, we can't do it.

We aren't free if our thoughts and feelings don't obey our will, for we can't be certain of who or what we are. Moreover, when we choose to live at the level of our reactions, we become slaves to them. We know what we have to do but are rarely able to do it. We say, "I would like to . . . but I can't."

If we are very identified with our reactions, we need to come up with a value system that will justify the way we live and the way we are. We want to draw on reasons that will give us a pretext for behavior that we know is not proper. For we always keep a spark of conscience that points out our real objective, even if we may not have the strength to fulfill it because it hinges on our variable desires. That conscience continually shows us our deficiencies and flaws. When we look at ourselves honestly we quickly discover the fallacy of the theories with which we attempt to cover our selfishness, separativity and blunders.

We gradually attain inner liberation as we master our thoughts and feelings through the habit of self-mastery.

When we don't well understand the function of self-mastery in the process of our unfolding, we don't always have the same degree of mastery. We control ourselves more or less according to the circumstances, but this would only mean we had the habit of behaving a certain way on every occasion. Partial or occasional mastery would not really be mastery. From the viewpoint of our unfolding, self-mastery is self-regulation.

Self-mastery makes us aware of our unconscious automatic habits, and spotlights the nature of them.

A great majority of our displays—tastes, tendencies, opinions, and habits—come from acquired habits that make us react automatically and unconsciously. We think we're the way we are, when in reality we are the way we have been conditioned to be. Mastery of our inner and outer movements makes us aware of the reactions that, until then, were unconscious and automatic in us.

What we tend to call flaws or imperfections that, to our minds, hinder our unfolding, are not isolated elements in us; they are habits. By becoming aware of them we struggle against them with the energy to eradicate them. However, we will not accomplish our aim with that attitude. We don't realize that this struggle implies we are repressing something that's not going to disappear but will, on the contrary, become even more internalized.

Nor do we realize that our effort to repress ourselves is making us focus on the habit we don't want to have, and are thereby making it stronger.

In order to overcome one habit, we must replace it with another. A habit can only be conquered by another habit. If we have a hurtful thought or feeling, we replace it with a loving one. If we are used to doing something that harms someone, we replace it by helping them, collaborating with them, validating them or cheering them up. When we are able to replace one habit with another, we can make positive changes in our lives and others' lives. This is a basic point in upbringing and in spiritual unfolding.

In order for self-mastery to give us freedom, it must be something we exercise over ourselves freely and voluntarily.

However, we are rarely able to attain mastery over ourselves only through willpower. We need the help of our spiritual director. By following the suggestions we receive, we find it simpler to control ourselves.

The spiritual director is careful not to give instructions that would contradict our aspirations. On the contrary, he or she orients us in a way that allows us to fulfill those aspirations. But if we don't master our thoughts and feelings, we become victims of our variable desires. Sometimes we want one thing, sometimes another. We identify with the ups and downs of our fluctuating inner states. If our spiritual director ever suggests that we do something we don't want to do, let's remember that he is orienting us in the direction we really want to go. If we ever have doubts about what he is suggesting we do, we need to clarify them with him until we are sure that what he telling us is for our own good.

The spiritual director teaches us not to confuse impulses with genuine yearnings. Therefore, when we control our desires and the inner and outer movements that they spawn, our mastery arises from our free will.

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Mastery means remaining attentive to our inner movements and regulating them.

It is commonly thought that, when we say we need inner mastery, we think this is the way we will curb only bad tendencies. We automatically associate the good with the desirable and with happiness, and the undesirable with evil and pain. Control is therefore associated with evil. If that were true, what sense would there be in controlling what is good?

When we reduce mastery to the repression of movements we consider evil, we are giving a very poor scope to asceticism. Moreover, it is impossible to be constantly repressing all our inner movements; this would be a denial of life. We need to know how to orient them. In other words, we need to transform one feeling or impulse that we don't want to experience into one we do want to have.

The habit of conscious mastery is a system of knowledge. The spiritual director teaches us to master ourselves not only so that we learn how to live better, but so that we can discover the nature of our impulses and establish our self-awareness at a deeper level than the level of desire. Therefore, he not only teaches us to master our instinctive impulses but also to control emotions we thought were good and should let flow naturally. Therefore, our spiritual director counsels us not to confuse spiritual life with intense emotions. He teaches us that spiritual life is expressed through balance and serenity.

Moreover, the habit of conscious mastery leads to the transmutation of our energy.

When we discover our genuine aspiration, our real vocation, we work to regulate our inner life. This regulation means directing our energy into that single point. Channeling our energy toward a higher objective produces a transmutation.

Spiritual unfolding is, in the end, a process of transmutation of energy.

There are those who teach special exercises of transmutation. These practices are not really necessary, since self-mastery keeps our conscience active and produces a natural transmutation of our energy. For this

transmutation to be beneficial, we need to bear in mind that mastery is not limited to corralling our thoughts, feelings or movements, but implies the wise use of our reserve of energy. In other words, the wise use of life.

When we are aware we know what we want and what we are seeking. We are aware of the means at our disposal and clearly discern what we need and what is superfluous. We know how to live because we don't deceive ourselves.

But it's not always easy for us to maintain balance in relation to self-mastery.

When we understand that we need to master ourselves, we make big plans. If we can't fulfill them all, we may get discouraged.

Let's remember, then, that we can't gain inner mastery from one day to the next. Let's strengthen our willpower gradually within a process that requires of us a great deal of patience, perseverance and humility.

Let's also remember that our spiritual director does not ask more of us than what our spiritual vocation asks of us. He actually asks us for nothing; he simply awakens us inwardly. With his suggestions and with his presence, he keeps alive in us the awareness of our genuine yearnings. This awareness is what demands inner mastery of us.

For that mastery to promote our unfolding it must stem from our free will; it must be an expression of our conscience—and of our respect for the freedom of others. Let us guard ourselves, therefore, against the tendency that appears in us when we learn how to master ourselves a little, since we could want to dominate the lives of others. Let's remember that we can't teach mastery by means of coercion. That would mean oppressing others without awakening their consciousness. We wouldn't really be free if we didn't give others the freedom we want for ourselves.

Continuous Transformation

Although we all keep our essential unity, at each moment we are a new person. Our minds, enriched with new experiences; our body, in a continuous process of transformation, turn the static image of a person into something ideal.

That person doesn't exist. That person is only an image that, having been plucked out of time—which means change—belongs to the past. This person is already gone; he is now someone else.

Life is dynamic; we can't avoid change. When we resist, when we don't accept continuous transformation, we withdraw from the rhythm of life. By shaping ourselves into *that* person, we become crystallized.

If we accepted change instead of resigning ourselves to it only when it is inevitable, we would discover a new life. Although every change represents a kind of relative death, a renouncement to what has been also implies a new birth. Being alive means transforming oneself continuously.

These concepts sometimes seem disconnected from our daily problems; however, they imply a way of life, a way of interpreting systems of ideas and the way these systems become set into structures.

Within a positive state of consciousness, when we set an idea into a structure, we also set ourselves into the structure we create. When the passage of time makes a change in that structure inevitable, we stubbornly defend it: we *are* that structure.

When our sense of possession is taken to the extreme, it crystallizes us in a work of our hands. It stops us. It turns us into a mere witness of something that is now gone.

By possessively defending our victories, we identify with our works and we lose. We lose our victories, for these are only milestones that remain as

mementos of the path we walked before. We miss the possibility of a new transformation. We lose the gift of remaining conscious that we are alive.

Because of our sense of possession, doctrines which we considered forces of renewal at the time seem conservative once they have become concretized into systems and structures.

When we discover a possibility, we dedicate ourselves to carry it out. We formulate theories, make plans, and work to fulfill them. But once our plans have materialized, our accomplishment becomes a new prison. We think that our solution to our problems is *the* solution. But the person I apply it to—myself—is already another person with new possibilities and needs—and with a new vision of life. I myself am different. My accomplishments are no longer my own; my solutions no longer solve anything. They belong to the past.

When we identify ourselves possessively with our victories we stop; we even die, in a way. We identify with the shadows of the past. The ideas, structures and things we hoarded are only pages of our history that we have already read.

When we stop, our ideas become crystallized into rigid systems, and we don't realize that they're no longer up to date; they belong to the past. They no longer produce results.

An idea that's extraordinary when we come up with it is not liberating when we apply it, unless we are also transforming ourselves in accordance with what that idea requires of us.

When we have an idea, we can't give it a greater scope than that which the possibilities of our era allow us to perceive. If we don't later acknowledge that we have undergone transformation, that idea gets fixed in time; it doesn't evolve; it doesn't take flight. It doesn't become universalized. It has stopped in juxtaposition to humanity, which does evolve.

If an idea becomes materialized through people who do not evolve, it becomes crystallized into old patterns. The time that passes between its

conception and materialization makes it alien to our needs, because we have already achieved a greater awareness and a broader field of possibilities.

We could say, then, that even if an idea contains a kernel of unsuspected possibilities, it becomes an unbearable burden when we concretize it in a positive way.

When we are in a positive state of consciousness we live in a static way, enclosed within a conception of the world and life that doesn't evolve. When we imagine and plan something, we do it for our needs and aspirations of today. When we then apply our ideas, they have become anachronistic. They would have been good for the people of yesteryear. If we haven't transformed ourselves during that interval, we are also the picture of yesteryear's person; a picture that desperately clings to life, struggling against today's person, which always prevails in the end.

But if the person of today keeps living according to the same sense of possession, he quickly turns into a person of yesteryear.

We experience a continual transformation when we inwardly free ourselves of our victories. Our personal freedom, our freedom from our present and past, makes us able to intuit our future possibilities. In other words, intuit ourselves into the future. We distinguish our real possibilities and, therefore, our real needs. Our freedom projects our intuition beyond the problems of our times, and we are able to contemplate them from a broader and more complete point of view. Our anticipation bridges the gap between ideation and concretion.

This is why no fulfillment is permanent and no goal is final.

Spiritual realization would become a new illusion if we were to seek it as the ultimate experience. No matter how extraordinary an experience might be, it is only one rung on the ladder of countless human experiences. Only the irreversible steps we take should be called realizations. In other words, when our acquired state of consciousness does not allow us to go backward; when

it sums up all past experiences in a unique, simple and complete experience, and when it forms a firm basis for continuing forward.