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SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Introduction

In times like these, when continuous war, international conflicts, ecological disasters, famine, misery and despair fill the daily news, it may seem out of place to talk about spiritual life. It might seem better to look for concrete solutions to these terrible problems. In this book, however, we propose another approach: we believe it is precisely because of our lack of spiritual insight that we are unable to overcome the tragedies we experience today.

Most people tend to separate spiritual life from daily life. We might look for refuge in spiritual things to escape the stress of everyday life, or to feel at peace because we believe God is behind whatever we do in the world. While this separation can give us momentary comfort, it is unlikely that it will really help us find inner peace in our relationship with God or the world. Perhaps we think we have a good relationship with God, but we don't have such a good relationship with all God's creatures; until we do, our love of God is not a real love. When we understand that spiritual life and our life of relationships are intricately related, we begin to have a clearer idea of the kind of spiritual life we really have. Becoming aware of how we relate to one another is a good way to evaluate the quality of our spiritual life.

In this book we will try to broaden the meaning of spiritual life. We won't reduce it to the belief in a doctrine, nor as adherence to certain rules of conduct or spiritual exercises. Here we think of spiritual life as referring to our existence,

of who we are as human beings, of our vision of ourselves in the context of eternal time and infinite space, as far as we can perceive. We also believe these ideas arise from a process of development—or unfolding— in which we all find ourselves. It is up to each of us to work on our unfolding and expand our state of consciousness. At the very least spiritual unfolding will help us to recognize how limited our understanding is, and how our convictions—imperfect as they are—lead us into so many conflicts and problems. In this way we will be able to unfold our consciousness until it embraces the divine unknown, which guides our lives within the totality of all reality.

Jorge Waxemberg

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Spiritual Life

The expression *spiritual life* can have several meanings according to what we understand by spiritual: we can associate it with beliefs, practices, good feelings, artistic inclinations or elevated states of mind.

Here we will talk about spiritual life in terms of states of consciousness. By state of consciousness we mean the idea we have of ourselves, of our surroundings and our situation in life and in the world.

From this point of view we could say that we've always had a spiritual life because we have developed our state of consciousness ever since we were born. And although this is true, this development, this unfolding of our consciousness, takes on different characteristics according to our needs at different stages of life.

In childhood and adolescence, we develop our state of consciousness motivated by the need to understand our place in the world and to learn how to take charge of our lives. Rather than wondering who we really are, we pay attention to what others say about us and what they want from us.

The idea we have of who we are and our relationship with life and the world doesn't come from ourselves. We learn it from others and from the influences of the environment around us. We come to feel that we agree with a certain group, place or time in which we live. Our way of thinking, our opinions, our beliefs, are all a result of our surroundings. Whatever differences we may have in thinking from

those around us are simply variations of the same general way of thinking, characteristic of our times and culture.

Once we consolidate this notion of being, this idea of who we are, this way of thinking and feeling, we usually stay in this state of consciousness. Our identity, our way of thinking and feeling that is a product of our times and place, and the habits we have picked up, all these make up what we will call here our *acquired personality*. This personality makes us feel sure of who we are, of what we think and what we believe. And from this vantage point we judge everything around us. And so do all those who have acquired their personalities in other places, different from ours. Thus we identify with those who think and act as we do, and we separate ourselves from those who think and act differently.

The acquired personality enables us to take good advantage of the culture to which we belong and thus to advance in our unfolding. If we are consistent with the principles we say we have, we try to live up to the spiritual aspirations of our beliefs or our inclinations, acquired by our assimilation to our culture. We try to live the ethical standards of our belief system, we practice virtues and spiritual exercises, and we train our mind, refine our artistic sense and do good works.

However, although most of us adhere to ethical principles and noble beliefs, we have not yet been able to create a world without violence, destruction and tragedy—all of which we ourselves produce.

On the one hand, in most cases what really matters to us is limited and personal: I care about myself, my welfare and the small number of people I love. What may happen around us or what we could do about it might matter to us,

but it is secondary to the importance we give to ourselves. This makes it unlikely that we will ever create harmony in the society in which we live.

On the other hand, although we have excellent principles and ideals, we don't always get good results with them. We hold onto our truth as the only truth, not realizing that there are as many supposed truths in the world as groups that say they have it. We still do not accept that for a truth to really be true, it has to be something so obvious that there is no way of not recognizing it.

Those are the truths we can rely on; life gives them to us.

It is obvious that we cannot keep forever what we have today; we cannot avoid the vicissitudes of life, illness, decline and death.

It is obvious that, as much as we might refine our ability to anticipate and predict the future, we live in fear due to constant uncertainty.

It is obvious that, in the realm of personal relationships, what makes us happy is to be treated with respect, love and courtesy. It is also obvious that in many cases we do not treat one another this way.

It is obvious that much of our suffering comes from conflict: personal arguments where we try to impose ourselves on others, or so-called "spiritual" debates, when we impose our beliefs on others.

It is obvious that, although each belief proclaims a different truth, all belief systems agree on faith in a higher principle that governs life.

It is also obvious that, although some believe in this higher principle and others do not, no one really knows for sure.

It is therefore obvious that reality may be different from what we believe or think about it.

The obvious question would then be: does it make sense to create divisions among ourselves because we do not think in the same way about things we do not know? Or better still, isn't it wiser to be united in what we have in common—the essence of what we do believe and what we obviously don't know—rather than to assert something we don't know for sure is true?

What happens to us with our beliefs also happens to us with our ideologies. Each of us can expound on a theory about how to make a better world. But such thinking doesn't unite us; on the contrary, it leads us to fight those who also want to make a better world but have a different theory than ours on how to do it.

The obvious question is: wouldn't it make more sense to collaborate with each other to make that better world possible?

What could we do to break the vicious circle of good intentions and terrible results?

We can continue the development of our state of consciousness.

But achieving this continuity is not easy. In our current state of consciousness, it is not enough to simply admit what is obvious in order to live with what we do know. We continuously confront one another, trying to impose our ideas not only on those who don't agree with us but on those closest to us, our personal relationships. We even go so far as to have confrontations with the group with which we identify and from which we get our self-identity.

Furthermore, we live as if death did not exist; in practice, we refuse to admit the temporary and precarious nature of everything we do. We think we give meaning to our lives by accelerating our activities and wasting our time on efforts that do not expand our state of consciousness.

In order to really develop, to unfold, we need to work deliberately, methodically and persistently on unfolding our state of consciousness. In the language of spiritual life, this work is called asceticism. In this book we call it the Asceticism of Renouncement.

The Asceticism of Renouncement begins when we work on the personality we have acquired, because that personality defines our state of consciousness. We have no other starting point: from there we work to expand the boundaries of that state of consciousness.

The Asceticism of Renouncement

In its broadest meaning, *ascetism* refers to the method of work needed to reach a specific goal. In the context of our understanding of spiritual life, we use the word *ascetism* to describe the method we embrace to expand our state of consciousness.

We call this method the Asceticism of Renouncement. We call it renouncement because we need to renounce to our acquired personality to be able to transcend it; otherwise, we would only make it stronger. We also say that the work of unfolding is renouncement because that is what life is: continual renouncement, even though we aren't always conscious that we renounce every single moment of our lives.

Although it is obvious that nothing in life is permanent, we don't always relate this condition to the fact that life makes us renounce continuously. Happy moments are so fleeting that we have barely begun to enjoy them when they turn into memories, also fleeting. Nor will we always have our material possessions, and this makes us uneasy. On the one hand we like to think we will have our things indefinitely; on the other we vehemently defend them because deep down we know nothing lasts forever. And not only will we be unable to keep our possessions, but we even have to try hard to remember what we have lived; we actually only retain very small instances that stand out in a continuous past.

Time, that great fabric of which life is made and which seems eternal, belongs to us only in the present moment.

What we've already lived is behind us, no matter how much we want to hold onto it. Whatever experiences we live now soon become part of our past. And, in the present moment, the future is no more than the expectations we have, and those seldom turn out as we hope.

Even though it is obvious that we are only passing through life, we usually live in denial. We fail to recognize that every step we take is simply one small step after another; each one so small it could never be grasped. But if we dared to face our state of continuous renouncement, and we wholeheartedly accepted this renouncement as our experience of time, we would achieve the inner freedom necessary to continue the expansion of our consciousness.

This is what the Asceticism of Renouncement is all about: through it we can unfold our highest aspirations and expand our consciousness toward the divine. In traditional spiritual terms, we say that the Asceticism of Renouncement leads us towards the union of our consciousness with universal consciousness. Throughout the process of this expansion, we experience different states of union, depending on the context we place ourselves in. In traditional spiritual terms, we refer to these as mystical states. (Mysticism will be further explained in the chapter on The Mysticism of the Heart.)

The Asceticism of Renouncement includes all the areas of our life. We could go into a lot of detail about this because, in one way or another, spontaneously or imposed, we have been renouncing all our lives. Ever since childhood we have learned to renounce: we are taught that we cannot say nor do whatever we want. We have to renounce following our impulses in order to behave according to the expectations around us. Circumstances often lead us to give up what we

like, and sometimes we renounce out of prudence. Whenever we make a commitment, we renounce the freedom we had before the commitment. In everyday life, some recommendations might seem like renouncements to some people; for others, they are simply healthy habits or common sense: for example, not seeking immediate gratification, or living within a budget.

But in this book we will not go into so much detail. We will describe only some aspects of this asceticism, paying special attention to our relationship with ourselves, our surroundings, and the divine.

Inner Peace

Although we usually say we want happiness, this is an ideal that is rather hard to define as an immediate goal. For this reason, we would say that what we are really looking for is inner peace.

There are many times that we do not feel at peace. This can happen due to misfortunes we cannot avoid: for example, illness, the decline that comes with age, natural disasters, the loss of loved ones, and the fact that we, too, are going to die. There is a lot we can do to help ourselves regarding these causes of pain and sorrow. We know, for example, how to prevent, alleviate and even cure some sicknesses; we can predict certain storms and other natural events, taking preventative measures. Science and technology teach us ways to lessen our pain and suffering.

The origin of many other causes of suffering comes from ourselves: war, conflicts, problems in relationship; harmful habits, psychological imbalances. When we have to face these kinds of suffering, the way to help ourselves is to work on ourselves.

Sometimes we think we are going to feel at peace doing things we know are not good for us. For example, we eat something that we feel like eating even though we know it is bad for our health. We procrastinate about something we need to do now, knowing that later it will be harder to do. We follow an impulse without caring what happens afterwards.

There are ascetic practices that help us feel at peace, although not all of them affect our state of consciousness in the same way. The intention with which we practice these exercises can help us advance within the state of consciousness we already have, or they can expand our state of consciousness.

For example, study, reflection, meditation, concentration: all these stimulate our mental abilities. Physical exercises such as yoga help us control the body and some aspects of the mind. Other exercises can help us overcome stress, anger, distress, fear, conflicts.

In other words, there are many exercises we can practice so that we feel better or feel at peace.

For sure, the practice of such exercises will stimulate our unfolding, but if the intention with which we do these exercises is only so that we feel at peace, no matter how much we feel better or how much we develop certain capacities when practicing them, we keep the same notion of who we are, the same view of life and the world. We grow within the boundaries of the same state of consciousness. We continue to be centered on ourselves. It could even happen that, no matter how much we've advanced with these exercises, when faced with any disturbing or stressful situation or news, we block out whatever might be painful or disturb our inner peace.

But if instead we practice these same exercises with the intention of finding out how our feelings and actions affect everything around us, a context that transcends our person, then we begin to expand our state of consciousness.

For example, if when we feel annoyed or angry we develop the habit of paying attention to how our words and attitudes

influence others—whether we are at home, at work or when we are out—this intention affects our perception of who we are, expanding this notion to a much greater context. By renouncing our limited vision, which is produced by self-pity or selfishness, we can pay attention to the greater context to which we want to belong. This expanded view helps us find ways to respond to situations where we don't feel at peace.

Problems in relationships often create very sad situations that can last a long time. Many times we find ourselves trapped in these problems and it is not easy for us to find a moment of peace.

When we find ourselves upset by the attitude or behavior of someone else, we usually cannot do much to change it because we are expecting the other person to change. Very rarely will someone else change their behavior just because we ask them to. But we can do a lot about our attitude and our conduct towards those we wish would change—and towards everyone—if we want to really reduce the conflicts in all our relationships.

When we find ourselves caught up in a conflict, we often react in the same way as those who are annoying or hurting us; and this is what makes the conflict continue, and even to intensify. We can get out of this vicious circle if we change the level of our responses. For example, if instead of reacting, we decide to act according to the level of relationship we would like to have.

Maybe we still won't see a lot of improvement in that relationship, but certainly something will change for the better. At least we change the way we feel. We might not feel exactly happy, but we would feel at peace with ourselves.

Sometimes, despite having a good level of relationships with those around us, we have not found inner peace because of unresolved past conflicts. No matter how well we may feel at the present moment, if we remember a quarrel we had with someone, it has the same effect on us as it did when we had the argument. Not only do we lose the peace we had before this memory but we find it hard to get it back. If we remind ourselves that we can do little to feel at peace until we have resolved past feelings or grudges, we'll be on the right track: We cannot change the past, but we can change how we feel about it.

Thinking about the future can also bring up uncomfortable feelings: the thought of death is especially hard for us. One way to work with this is to think that today, this day that we are living right now, might be the last day of our life. It might seem like a contradiction in terms, but it isn't: one of the best ways to overcome a fear is to face it and work with it.

Remembering that we are going to die helps us to value each moment and to take from it everything that we can learn from it—and this may be the very reason we are alive. Every experience, every encounter, takes on a new dimension for us, an intensity that we don't usually notice when we go through everyday experiences without paying attention to the present moment.

This awareness of our temporality not only frees us from the fear of death, but it opens up to us a sense of the transcendent; in each and every moment we are in contact with the eternity of time. This consciousness also enhances every moment we have with those we love, because we know that it may be the last time we see them. When we lose a loved one, we can remember that we took good ad-

vantage of every moment we had with them; every moment was unique, full and celebrated. We carry these loved ones within our hearts, alive in our memory.

So then, how do we respond to our natural desire to want to feel at peace?

The Asceticism of Renouncement teaches us not to depend so much on what others do or on getting their recognition. It also teaches us not to depend on what we can get by what we do, but to find fulfillment by doing well whatever we have to do. Obviously this won't prevent suffering, nor will we find fulfillment through suffering; what is important is how we respond when we are faced with suffering. That is what can give us inner fulfillment.

Let's pay attention to what we do and not so much to what we gain from our efforts. Anything we gain is temporary. This is true not only with material gains but also with spiritual ones. Our actions, however, have the continuity of life: we are always doing something. And every moment involves the challenge of how we are going to face it. If we act in a manner consistent with what we know we have to do, whether in our relationships or in our work, then for sure we will feel at peace without depending on the results we might eventually get.

Moreover, we know that, although at some point we will manage to feel at peace, it is inevitable that this feeling of well-being won't last forever; the vicissitudes of life bring new moments of tension, work and, perhaps, further suffering.

Furthermore, if we are open to a broader context, we will see much better the situation of the world in which we live. When we see so much suffering and so many conflicts in

the world, we cannot but wonder: is it possible to feel at peace in a world of so much pain?

When we open ourselves to the context of humanity and let it all in: the joys and the sorrows, the beauty and the ugliness, we no longer look only for happiness; we know too well that happiness is the escape route we imagine so as to not have to face the challenge of unfolding. It is then that we understand that we lose nothing by renouncing the illusion that we can avoid suffering; we simply let go of the veils which, out of fear or unwillingness, hide reality so we can imagine how we wish it to be. And this understanding is the foundation of the perception of "being at peace".

We cannot avoid suffering nor change the laws of life. But we can do what our conscience tells us we have to do, and do it well. This is a source of inner peace that is always within our reach.

Prayer and Meditation

Prayer and meditation are important exercises in spiritual life; both have a special place in the unfolding of our consciousness.

Prayer is the simple recognition of a superior principle that sustains life; it also implies the recognition of our limitations and fragility before the challenges that life brings us. Likewise prayer suggests that the meaning of the unfolding of our consciousness is to reach towards this superior principle that we acknowledge. That is why all spiritual paths direct us towards union with God; in other words, towards the identification of our consciousness with universal consciousness.

The various creeds and spiritual paths have also given us ethical principles by which to guide our conduct to be able to fulfill the ideal we yearn for. These means, of which prayer and meditation are an important part, have helped us reach the state of consciousness we presently have. But they don't always lead us to a more expansive consciousness.

We can practice prayer to the great benefit of ourselves and others without going beyond our present state of consciousness. We can also attain profound states of prayer without ever changing our prejudices or habits. Although many of us pray to get closer to the divine or to help ourselves or to help others, this doesn't stop us from hurting one another or getting into conflicts. On the contrary, many times the identification with one's particular truth adds strength and rancor to these conflicts and is the cause of

many of the tragedies we endure. The members of different creeds might diligently practice their spiritual exercises without these practices ever helping them overcome their differences and live together in peace.

Meditation exercises teach us to reflect about ourselves, our relationships and our place in life and the world. However it is evident that, just as in prayer, meditation does not always help us resolve our conflicts. In quiet moments of recollection we usually have the clarity to discern our situation, but later we are not always successful in our efforts to apply what we understand.

Prayer and meditation have been very valuable tools in attaining the consciousness that we now have, and they continue to be very useful for expanding it, as long as we widen the context and the focus of our prayers and meditations.

Sometimes when we pray, in the elevation of our thoughts we feel as if we are alone with God, as if our intention were to achieve a feeling of fulfillment or plenitude that has no relation to the situation of the world or the people around us all. It's like reaching for something with our hand, but our hand is detached from our body. While this does not happen with the physical body, it can happen in our imagination, because the state of our consciousness is so limited.

To go beyond these limits we can begin to expand the scope of our prayers. Let us be careful of the tendency to pray only for ourselves. If we pray only for our welfare or our interests, we progressively close ourselves off to the world and emphasize our tendency to be indifferent to what happens around us.

When we elevate our thoughts, we do it not as one person, but as a person accompanied by all human beings, like the good brothers and sisters we are or want to be. And, in the same way that we pray for those we love or who think like us, we also make the effort to pray for those with whom we have no affinity, or even dislike, hurt or fight. We thus break through the barriers created by our prejudices, ready-made ideas and preferences.

If in prayer and meditation we open the limited circle of our interests, preferences and opinions, we can develop greater understanding and empathy, and open our minds to all that life and the world is.

It is also important in our meditation exercises that we do not exaggerate our concerns about ourselves and we pay more attention to the quality of participation and empathy in our relationships, both in daily life and with society at large.

The Affective Meditation is particularly valuable for working on our emotions and behavior.

If we look at the way we feel, we see that we don't have a lot of control over our emotions; they come up automatically in response to stimuli. And as emotions generate reactions, we often don't manage very well our responses to those emotions. We don't control our behavior very well. No matter how much we apply our will power, we have only a greater or lesser success, depending on what our goals are.

In the Affective Meditation we learn to associate stimuli with the emotions that we want to have. That way we can create new automatic responses to these stimuli and to acquire

enough emotional freedom to act according to our conscience and not our reactions.

The Discursive Meditation gives us the freedom to delve deep into ourselves and see what, out of preconceptions, embarrassment or denial, we refuse to recognize. It also gives us freedom to discover what we want to do with our lives and to do it.

In our inner search it is important that we don't fall into ready-made concepts or words that we think we have to say. It is better to go within, holding onto absolutely nothing, without expectations of what we will find there, in order not to believe we find something new when, in reality, we ourselves have brought it there. That way we will be able to glimpse new horizons extending far beyond our perception of ourselves and our place in the world.

Self-Control

Although we have achieved a certain control over our minds through discipline and study, we usually think and feel according to how thoughts and emotions arise in us. It is not unusual that when we speak or act, it is more out of impulse than discernment. Sometimes only after having said or done something, we stop to consider what we have said or done.

In order to continue to unfold we have to have control over ourselves. The direction our lives take is determined by the measure of control we attain over our thoughts and feelings.

We cannot eliminate the thoughts and emotions that we have, nor can we ignore them or pretend they do not exist. Repressing our feelings doesn't help either: we create a lot of stress that can affect our character, our discernment and even our mental health.

The key to self-control is to learn how to direct the energy that is in us, whether it be our thoughts, emotions, or reactions to the things that happen to us. To have enough freedom to do this, we need to set aside our value judgments, those that come from our ideas or prejudices. Instead of rating as good or bad the impulses that appear in us, we discern the effect that they will have if we let ourselves be carried away by them; what might happen within ourselves, to others or to our relationships if we act on those impulses. In this way we can change a reaction that could be hurtful into one that is healthy and constructive. The practice of the

Affective Meditation can be of great help in making this shift in perspective more spontaneous.

Why do we say that we must put aside value judgments and pay attention only to what we produce with our actions? Because by not making subjective or biased judgments about what we think or feel, we avoid developing feelings of guilt that could hinder our efforts to think and feel as we would like to.

In addition, we sometimes have reactions that we think are right because they make us feel better or alleviate some tension, but they are not good for those around us; for example, when we discharge our anger on someone else, or we humiliate others with our witty or sarcastic comments.

We renounce therefore the patterns we have been using to evaluate ourselves or recognize how we behave. We use this new approach well and learn how to work on ourselves in such a way that not only helps us feel at peace with ourselves but actually helps us unfold spiritually. This work is not always easy. Sometimes it takes a lot of effort and sacrifice to get where we want to go. From a selfish point of view we might find ourselves asking: Why do I have to try so hard? Isn't it wrong to have to suffer?

Yes, useless suffering is not good. But not doing anything about our unfolding doesn't help us avoid suffering.

To attain self-control, it is good to remember that every moment of our life counts. Even when we think we are not doing anything, we are doing something. Our mind never stops, and from this inner movement emotions and feelings appear. It is good to pay attention to how we manage this energy, and what good we do with it.

We also know that the past and the future have a great influence on the quality of what we feel and, consequently, on what we do.

What we remember most from the past are the experiences that are engraved in our minds. Remembering what made us happy can give us some good feelings; remembering what was not might make us sad or feel badly. As we saw in the previous chapter, when we remember past conflicts, it often brings up the same feelings we had during the conflict, generating resentments. Just as we learn to direct those feelings, we also need to work on our resentments. That is why it is important to revise our memories and work on them in order to clear up our past, because nothing is really left behind. What we are at this moment is the synthesis of our past facing the challenge of the present moment. On this foundation we create the future that we yearn for, or we get the one that we let happen if we don't work deliberately to build it.

We said earlier that the future influences the quality of what we do. Of course we don't mean that which is not yet here, but the future that we imagine, foresee or hope for.

It is good to imagine where we want to arrive in order to make a plan to get there. But it is also good to remember that we need to be conscious that every moment we are creating our future, according to how we develop our potential and generate the attitudes and responses with which we are going to face the vicissitudes of life. We could say that our future will be as good as the good we do in this moment that we are living.

To achieve enough control over ourselves to be able to do good in the present will surely help us to realize what we hope for in our lives.

Stepping Back

In order to have a view of ourselves that goes beyond our acquired personality, we have to renounce this personality. But it is not easy to do this as long as we are identified with this personality. To renounce, in this case, means to gain some distance from who we feel we are because of the conditioning we've always had. Stepping back from ourselves helps us attain this independence.

Throughout life we have developed our character, a way of thinking and expressing ourselves that we consider not only natural but which also has to do with our very notion of who we are. Nevertheless this security about who we are doesn't necessarily mean we know who we really are. If we always hold onto the idea that we have formed about ourselves, it will be very hard for us to progress in our unfolding, no matter how many teachings we study or spiritual practices we undertake. Not only that, but in daily life, our set ideas about who we are interfere a lot in developing good relationships with those around us.

The idea we have of ourselves is so deeply ingrained that when others disagree with it, we usually get upset. How we are, what we feel and how we act can be seen by others in a very different way than we see it. It is often the source of many conflicts in our relationships, and it can prevent us from being close to the ones we love.

It makes sense, therefore, to try to find a more objective view of ourselves. If we can go beyond the way we usually describe ourselves, we can find a solid foundation on which to base our work on our unfolding and on our relationships.

An exercise that can help us learn how to see ourselves better is to step back from ourselves. We can imagine, for example, the following:

"I am standing one step behind myself and from there I observe my attitudes and my actions. I don't judge what I see; I simply observe. If at some moment I see myself becoming irritated or aggressive, I am careful not to justify my reactions in my mind. I simply keep in mind how I behave."

"I pay attention to my attitudes when I speak, converse, give opinions, discuss. I also observe the reactions I produce in those I am talking to: how do they feel or react to what I say or do. I also pay attention to the atmosphere I generate with my presence and my actions."

To do this exercise well, it is important not to lessen the distance we take from ourselves, not to give in to the tendency to identify with our image, whatever might be the situation that provoked what we see. We also have to be careful not to become discouraged or to feel sorry for ourselves if we see ourselves doing something we know is not good. The important thing is to take a mental note, while stepping back from what we see.

If we manage to disattach ourselves from the part of ourselves that acts and we are objective about observing it, we can learn a lot about ourselves and come closer to the image others have of us. But this detachment is not always easy to achieve.

As soon as we try to practice this exercise, we start to realize just how strong our acquired personality is and how much we identify with it. But although it is hard to step back, the effort to do it makes us aware that it is our per-

sonality that has prevented us from knowing who we really are, due to the habits and mentality that we've acquired.

Although at first we probably can practice this exercise only for a short time, it is good to try to extend it more and more. The goal is to make ourselves witnesses of ourselves.

But we will need more than an exercise to attain a permanent consciousness of who we really are. The identification with the personality we have acquired is more than a habit; it is what we feel as our identity. Although the practice of stepping back leads us to perceive a deeper and more universal identity, this exercise ties us to the personality we seek to free ourselves from. We keep looking only at ourselves.

We need to take an even greater distance from ourselves to see clearly enough our attitude toward life and the world.

Leaving Center Stage

The personality we have acquired is a product of our time and place. This means we will need a lot of inner strength to be able to face the obvious lack of knowledge we have about who we really are. Our personality is so strong because of the importance we give ourselves, and because of this it's not unusual to think we are the center of the world. We need to take quite a distance from ourselves to be able to leave this self-centeredness and go beyond this illusion.

When we've managed to take this great distance from ourselves, we are able to observe not only our behavior but our attitudes as well.

As the stimuli we receive through the senses reach us from outside, we perceive reality as if we were only observers of the action that occurs in the vast scenery around us. While we know that we participate in that action, we often place ourselves mentally as if we were separate or above it, because in the judgment we make, we tend not to take responsibility for what happens.

And thus we often express ourselves as if we were independent judges of the reality around us. We understand and evaluate according to our ready-made opinions and our reactions to what is happening around us. For example, instead of saying "I do not like that," we say "That's awful"; rather than saying "From my point of view, I understand the situation differently", we say "You're wrong." We generalize, as if what we say or think is valid for everyone, every-where. In addition, some of us tend to comment on everything that happens and even on people we don't

know. We tend to talk more than listen, and most of the time we are talking about ourselves. Maybe even when we pray, we pay more attention to what happens to us, than to the object of our prayer.

In other words, we are used to acting as if we were the center of the world, to the point that we can feel we are victims rather than actors in life.

In spite of all the information we have, all that we know about our place in the world and the universe, these facts don't seem to affect the world we inhabit in our minds. The inhabitants of our world are usually only those we interact with every day or the few people we think about. The boundaries of that world often don't go beyond our small interests.

Our spiritual life can become so limited by the personality we have acquired and our attitude towards life that it seems unlikely we will transcend it simply by studying new ideas or practicing spiritual exercises. Although we assimilate the culture of our country and work with some success in it through our acquired personality, that personality strongly ties us to the very state of consciousness that we want to transcend. To be able to step back and leave the imaginary center stage where we have placed ourselves, we need to renounce this personality.

By renouncing the personality, we are able to use it without identifying ourselves with it; we work within its limits without letting it lessen our state of consciousness. It is natural that we express ourselves according to the time and place in which we live; we have to act in each moment to get what we need and want. But we do this while keeping a distance from our idea of who we are and how small is the environment in which we act.

While we carry out very specific actions, we keep the necessary distance from ourselves to be able to put into context these actions and, especially, to place our idea of who we are in the greater context of life and the world.

A simple way that can help us leave center stage is to put into context what happens to us, what we think and what we feel.

When we contextualize, we relate what happens to us and who we think we are with the surroundings that transcend our person. The greater these surroundings, the more balanced our judgments will be about ourselves, what we think and what we feel.

If when we are very upset we feel like enclosing ourselves, not wanting to even see or hear about anything outside of ourselves, it's not very likely we'll feel better. If instead we put in context what happened to us, we can not only diminish the importance we give it, but we can also discern better what we need to do, not only for ourselves but for those around us.

When we put things in context, we stop seeing ourselves as if we were the only ones around: our problems, our miseries, our difficulties. We also stop seeing only our success, our capacities, our intelligence, even our person.

When we put our thoughts and feelings in context, our opinions are no longer so unique and our feelings are no longer so extraordinary.

We are only one among many, and so are our ideas, habits and ways of thinking. We are only one more thing in the context of all existence.

When we haven't renounced being center stage, we feel put down when others think of us as simply one more. But if

we think we are simply one more because of the awareness we have of who we really are, then we really have taken a step forward in the expansion of our consciousness.

Presence

Although we usually know where we are physically, we are not always there mentally. Very often, just as soon as we come through the door or we meet someone, after only a few short moments, we withdraw into ourselves: we focus on what we are feeling or thinking, on what we want to do or what we want to happen.

Our body is visible to everyone, but we are not always there.

When we interact, we usually move back and forth mentally between the physical place where we are and what is going on in our mind. For example, when someone is speaking, after listening to just a few of his words, we stop paying attention to what he is telling us, waiting to jump in and say what we are thinking.

There are many ways we escape from where we are. For example, we go out with friends to take a walk, planning to enjoy the beautiful scenery. In a very short time we find ourselves talking about all sorts of trivial things, and this continues until we arrive home. We went somewhere, but we were not there.

It might also happen that, without realizing it, we sometimes are not in life.

When we try to remember our past, it is not easy to remember everything we have lived but only those experiences that really stand out. What happened all that time we don't remember? Were we present? Were we there? Perhaps when we were doing ordinary things, because they

didn't require all our attention, we escaped for a while, thinking and feeling about other things. But we were there, and perhaps because of those mental wanderings, we lost the opportunity to learn about ourselves and our surroundings. We were living in our mental wanderings; that is, living only part of life. We needed to live in the present context.

To be in life is to be in each moment and in the context of the present. We call this Presence.

Presence, in short, is the encounter with life through the present moment.

If we want to unfold, we look for this encounter.

How do we practice Presence?

Mental control, although it helps us stay in the present moment, is not enough to avoid mental escapes. When we rely on mental control, we keep alert so as to stop our impulses before they occur; for example, we control our self-pity, justifications, or complacency. Or we watch out for other impulses such as irritation or rejection.

But to be present, we have to do more than acquire good mental control; we have to renounce to ourselves. The importance we give to ourselves is what gets between ourselves and life. When we expand our consciousness, the only thing which remains is our notion of being, and this has no more importance than the context in which we are.

These simple exercises can help us expand our consciousness and be centered in the present moment:

- When we are with someone, we control the mental escapes that take us away from that person and that place.

- When others speak to us, we listen with complete attention, without elaborating in our minds the responses we will make to what they are saying. We only speak when the other is ready and only after we've thought over what we are going to say.
- We speak about ourselves only when it is necessary, either because someone asks us or in order to give information that might be useful for those who are listening to us.
- When we go about our daily chores or activities, we pay close attention to what we are doing; there is always something to learn from what we are doing and from what is happening around us, even though we think we already know all about it and about how we affect everything around us.

Let's be sure to remember that wherever we may be, that place takes on a greater expansiveness depending on how our mind sees it.

Even if we are only sitting at our desk, we are in a house, a town, a country, a continent, a world, a planetary system.... How far can we extend the boundaries of our Presence?

Wherever those boundaries lie, that's where the boundary of our consciousness will be.

Participation

We all participate in everything, but we don't all participate in the same way. Not all of us have the same empathy for others, nor do we relate equally with what happens to us and all around us.

Although we know we are part of a greater whole, our participation depends more on our notion of who we are than on what we know about this greater reality that we are part of.

Our notion of being creates the relationship that we have with everything around us. Depending on how we each believe we are, we can feel united with others or not, part of one group and not of another; at home in one place and a stranger in others. We can even forget that we are part of the planet that gives us life. As we are accustomed to seeing everything outside of ourselves, without realizing it we get used to feeling that we are separated from what we perceive, oblivious to what surrounds us.

Throughout our spiritual development we become aware of the web of relationships that connects everything with everything. Our notion of being also changes from being independent and isolated to being-in-participation, in other words, we get closer to the notion of being-in-all.

There are several stages in this process. The first has to do with our relationship with our fellow human beings. And within this stage, we can also identify certain steps.

The first step is related to the idea we have of our fellow human beings: how many common characteristics does a

person have to have for us to feel fellowship with that person? The greater this number, the greater is our prejudice towards those that don't look like us or think like us. The lower this number, the more open we are to participate beyond our family or social circles.

From there we can identify three stages in this first step we take in the process of participation:

- Paternalism
- Solidarity
- Inclusion

The first stage is that of paternalism. What happens around us matters to us though it doesn't really impact our interests or our welfare: We want to help; we want to alleviate the evils that we see in our society or in the world. But neither this noble intention nor the help we bring really unites us with those who receive our help.

We belong to the group that has more, can do more and knows more (or at least that is what we believe.) We make sure we don't miss the chance to give advice, even though no one asks us for it, or to give our opinion about what others should do and how they should do it, and to help those we consider deserving of our help, whether they ask for it or not. We feel sorry for those that suffer and we feel good about giving them something that might help them or alleviate their situation. Once we've given what we can, we continue with our lives without changing anything about it.

Although at this stage we feel as if we were above others, it is still a great advance to arrive at this point in our notion of who we are: We are no longer insensitive or indifferent to what is happening around us.

The stage of solidarity is characterized by a greater empathy. We unite with a group because it matters to us what is happening to them, or we agree with their ideas, their actions or their complaints, even when this group is different from the one that we feel part of. We participate in works of solidarity to better their economic level, the sanitation or education of a district, a region or a country; or to better the ecology of the planet. These works of solidarity are very beneficial, for others and the environment as well as for ourselves, because they make us become conscious that we are part of a reality that is much greater than that of our daily lives.

Out of solidarity we also tend to join ideological or social movements, either in favor of or against a state of affairs.

The stage of solidarity implies active participation in the movements that we join. But at the same time that we join others in a cause, we can deepen the separation we have with others. When we adhere to ideological or religious groups, such separation tends to be very deep, especially when these groups each claim to have their truth. In some cases we can even demonize our adversaries.

Sometimes these connections produce greater evils than the ones each group tries to remedy. The sad thing about this situation is that our solidarity comes from noble ideals, and the last thing we want is to cause any harm. But noble purposes do not always allow us to distinguish the great force behind our rejection, antipathy or hatred towards that which we do not want to exist. That force can actually connect us more to what we hate than to what we love. We do not always keep present those we love, but we find it difficult to get out of our minds those we dislike or hate. We do not realize that it is unlikely that we will eliminate what we

do not like or do not approve. Nor do we manage to see that by dividing ourselves into opposing groups we are trying to separate something from a whole that cannot be divided.

At the inclusive stage our compassion begins to unite us with those who suffer and in time extends to include all human beings, in whatever circumstances they may be. We no longer make a difference between those who think, feel or act as we do and those who don't. Our notion of being now includes everyone and everything. We-are-one-with-all not only in our joys and sorrows but also in our human condition: the fact that we don't have answers to the fundamental questions of life and we are all looking for those answers.

In addition, we-are-one-with-all because we remain conscious of the greater whole. Beyond the reaches of our world and our humanity, there is a greater reality that contains and sustains us.

In whatever stage of participation in which we find ourselves, sometimes we can reduce our notion of being to the point of thinking we are not part of the human species. For example, when we complain about the obvious laws of life or we don't accept them; the uncertainty of life; the constant struggle for survival, suffering, physical decay, death. If we feel good, we want to stop time; if not, we wish it would pass more quickly. In other words, we do not always keep in tune with our human condition. We should understand that it would be difficult to expand our consciousness if we do not knowingly integrate ourselves into existence as we know it to be.

We participate in everything and with everything, whether we perceive it or not. Unfolding the meaning of participation

leads us to become aware of this reality. We can assimilate the process of this awareness through the development of empathy.

We begin to empathize when we participate in an emotional way with a reality outside of ourselves, for example, when we suffer at seeing the suffering of another, or when we are happy because someone else is happy, independently of what we may be feeling due to whatever we are living. If we work to expand our empathy, we identify interiorly with the suffering of even those we don't see, until we identify with all beings for the simple fact that they exist.

From this point of view, the process of participation merges with the process of empathy, and both merge into the process of our spiritual unfolding.

To expand our consciousness, everything continues being incorporated into our notion of being, not because we are everything, but because everything is included in our consciousness.

Participation, empathy and mystical union become, at the end, aspects of the same expanded state of consciousness.

Reversibility

Everything we know has more than one side to it: there is obverse and reverse, not only in things but also in situations. For every opinion that exists, we can come up with an opposing one; every moment soon becomes a different one; for every change, there's another change. But we don't always keep this in mind when we are thinking, feeling or acting.

We say we are one way and not another; we don't give ourselves alternatives, and we don't even want to consider them. We are so stuck in our opinions that, even though we know they are not perfect, we find it hard not only to change them but to even consider working on them. The same is true about our way of being: we cannot imagine another way of seeing ourselves, much less work on changing ourselves.

Very often this attitude—or rather this lack of willingness to learn—causes us to get into conflicts with others. We take antagonistic positions, we get into useless discussions, disagreements, and confrontations, and we even fight among ourselves.

If we pay attention to our conflicts, we will see that very often they stem from this mental and emotional rigidity.

Even those of us who want to unfold spiritually are not exempt from this tendency.

No matter how sure we are of our way of thinking, it is obvious that we could never claim that everyone thinks like we do; the fact is they don't. But why is it so hard for us to

admit this? Because even though we know we don't possess the absolute truth, we think our opinions are the best.

If we were to really look at our beliefs, we might see that we are even more rigid about them than with our opinions. It is hard for us to admit that our beliefs might not describe things as they really are, even though we know we believe precisely because we do not know. There are many beliefs in this world, and they don't always coincide with one another. Do you ever wonder what would happen inside us—and among us—if we were to admit that our belief is only one among many interpretations of reality? It is possible that the differences and rivalries among us that have lasted for centuries would simply vanish.

The same thing would happen if we were to admit that our opinions reflect a point of view that is as limited as our perception of reality, as do the opinions of those who think differently than us. If we were all to agree on the temporality and limitations of our opinions, we'd probably get along much better and improve our chances of unfolding spiritually.

Reversibility, then, is to recognize first of all the limits of our perception, our judgments and prejudices; second, it is to improve our way of thinking. This means not only learning about information and facts, but especially learning about our way of thinking. From there we place our opinions within the vast range of outlooks that are different from our own.

This doesn't mean we have to change what we think or believe, but that we have to learn how we think and believe. And when we find thoughts and beliefs different from ours, we include them in our vision of reality in order to adjust our way of thinking to reality as it is and not as we wish it

to be. Once we are able to make this inclusion, we open our minds to understand why those who think or believe in a way very different from ours think they are right—and also why we think we are right. Only then can we say we have placed our way of thinking in context. It is in this context that we can see the obverse and reverse of that way of thinking.

On the other hand, although we feel sure about some things because these things are evident, our opinions are always relative to the moment and to circumstances. We need to keep this in mind so as to not hold onto opinions that are outdated.

In this sense, then, reversibility means to have the mental flexibility that is necessary for adapting our points of view and, consequently, our opinions to the rhythm of changing times.

Reversibility also applies to our way of understanding and living spiritual life.

One could think that the expression, “spiritual life” refers to a life that is different and even opposed to material life. This supposition could lead us to look for spiritual life as a kind of refuge, where we could forget—and even devalue—the worries, problems and sorrows of our material lives. We might even think that paying attention to material things would be to the detriment of our spiritual possibilities. And even more than that, we might actually think that material success in our work would be a sign that only material things were important to us and not spiritual life.

One thing is for sure: we all have possibilities of all kinds, and all need our attention. Independently of what we think or believe, we are all human beings and we are all in this

world. We have needs, and we also have the capacity to satisfy them. We have problems, some which are inherent to the law of life and others that are created by ourselves. It would not make sense to think that spiritual life is separate from this reality.

That is why we could say that spiritual life presents us with two clear challenges.

The first challenge is to develop our capacities and apply them to overcome our material problems as well as our problems in relationships.

Accepting this challenge broadens our consciousness to the limits of the world in which we live.

The second challenge is to expand our consciousness beyond the one that allows us to lead a better, more peaceful life.

Whether we believe in a higher principle or we think we disappear into nothingness at death, we can expand those beliefs. For example, we can use the idea we have of the divine—or of nothing, if we believe in nothing or can imagine it—as a starting point to deepen into this mystery. Or we can contemplate the vastness of the universe and try to empathize with that infinite reality. Or better, we enter eternity through the eternal present with which we connect at each instant.

In practice, reversibility helps us work on both challenges.

In daily life, we work as if what we care most about is to get the best quality and greatest result from our efforts. And we relate to one another with the attention of those who practice an art, for our sake and for those around us.

When we can stop, besides assessing what we have done or prayed or meditated about, we remember that we are not of this world, for our time here is so short, only a brief passage.

There is no contradiction, then, between spiritual life and a concrete and practical attitude about everyday affairs. Quite the contrary: we need to have practical criteria about things that are practical and concrete. Spiritual life does not make us underestimate the concrete and practical, nor is it an idealism that is not connected to life. Spiritual life is continually expressed in all we do; in increasing capabilities, efficiency and common sense before the challenges and opportunities we encounter everyday in life.

Here we find yet another aspect of reversibility: to know what our relationship with God is, we don't have to look to the infinite; it enough to observe the relationship we have with our fellow human beings. One is the reverse of the other. Let us work on both of them.

Responsibility

Because we are conscious, we are responsible.

Because we have free will, we decide how to respond to our responsibilities.

We assume our responsibilities according to our state of consciousness. For this reason, the way we respond to our responsibilities is evidence of our consciousness. But not everyone always responds responsibly with the consciousness we have of the happenings around us.

In general we can say that we respond with a certain kind of responsibility to that which matters most to us. We say "certain kind" because we don't always respond responsibly to that which is most important to us, such as our needs or our health. Sometimes we burden others with the work we need to do to provide for our needs or what we want to have. Or we knowingly follow a lifestyle that exceeds our resources or that harms our health.

But whatever may be the way that we respond to our responsibilities, we cannot escape the consequences of our attitudes, actions and even our thoughts and feelings. Everything we do has an influence on us, on those around us and on the world, whether we perceive it or not. The importance we give to this influence and to our way of life reveals who we are, not only to others but also to ourselves.

The context of our responsibility has three aspects: personal, social and global.

Our personal responsibility is to get the training necessary to support ourselves and those who depend on us; it is to take care of our health with good habits; it also includes developing good relationships with those around us.

Our social responsibility is to contribute with our knowledge and our work to the welfare and progress of the society in which we live.

Our global responsibility is to generate peace and harmony among human beings.

No matter how broad might be the areas of our responsibility, we respond to them according to what we think, feel, decide and do in each moment of our lives. If we keep this present, our state of consciousness will reach ever-widening areas, as will our awareness of our responsibility.

As our sense of responsibility deepens, the broader becomes the context in which we consider situations and the narrower the range of our free will in which we respond to them: we no longer feel free to misunderstand or to do things we know are not the best.

And in this way we discover one more way to know and evaluate our spiritual life: to see how far-reaching the context is that we give to our responsibility and how we respond to it.

The Search for God

The eagerness to learn, to advance in every way, is something inside each one of us. We all aspire to excellence, whether it be excellence in our abilities, our understanding or our consciousness. How we define this excellence depends on what we think the purpose of human destiny is. No matter how we each might define our ideal of excellence, in the context of this book we would say that all of us are searching for God, although we know not everyone would define this search in that way.

In this search, we sometimes feel very far from God because of the limitations of our perception and our consciousness. Other times we feel close to God because we sense a superior intelligence behind everything we live and experience, or a cosmic consciousness, or the divine in its creative aspect: the Divine Mother of the Universe.

We intuit an infinite distance between our consciousness and the consciousness that governs all of existence. This moves us to lift our thoughts and ask for help and protection. This feeling is the basis of our prayers. Rather than search for God, sometimes we ask for help in order to search.

But we also intuit that, in some way, there exists in our consciousness the way to reach universal consciousness. This moves us to look for God within ourselves. And this is the basis of mystical asceticism.

In our search for God, besides elevating our thought toward the ideal point we yearn to connect and unite with, it is good to look at the state from which we depart in this search.

Whether we be devout or not, let us look not only at the state of our consciousness but especially at what we do when we search for transcendence.

If we feel that God is far away, whether within us or outside, it can be helpful to think that this distance is one of amplitude and not longitude: God is not far away. Although we speak figuratively of the spiritual path as a path towards God, it is not the same as walking to a distant point. God is inherent to our consciousness, at any stage of expansion. We can perceive this reality by expanding our consciousness.

First we'll need to understand how the limits of our conscious work, and if those limits will allow an expansion.

There are many ways we can advance without expanding our consciousness. For example, we can get an education; we can develop skills, we can be successful in our work. But these developments do not necessarily mean advancement in the way we think and feel, nor in the way we relate. Often it is as if we advance within a tiny capsule of consciousness, with walls so thick they do not let us see beyond what we have in our mind.

In order to unfold, therefore, not only do we need to work within the state of consciousness that we already have, but especially to work on the limits of that state of consciousness. If not, no matter how much we advance in our knowledge and abilities, we are trapped within the vicious circle of the problems, confusion and tragedies we produce because of the state of consciousness we are in.

To be able to work on the limits of our state of consciousness, we will need other methods than the ones we usually use to overcome something. Rather than break these limits,

we need to recognize what they are and understand why we have them.

Every time we reject someone else's opinion, or we strive to get more than we need, or we insist on being more or having more than others, or feel that those who are not with us are against us, we show clearly how strongly our insecurity limits our state of consciousness.

Because we are used to being in denial about our limitations and our uncertainty, we hold onto certain "truths" that actually have no more validity than what we ourselves give them. How can we go beyond these limits? It makes no sense to fight against our own ignorant stubbornness; it would be like fighting against our very idea of being. Instead, the simplest way to overcome our limits is to renounce them.

In everyday language, to renounce is to leave something that we have a right to have; in the context of spiritual life, to renounce is to recognize what is evident.

What is evident with respect to the condition of our state of consciousness? It is evident that we are nothing before the vastness of reality and the superior intelligence behind it all.

If we were to recognize our true nothingness, if we were to renounce to our daily attitudes, to the greed of wanting to gain and to possess, to the idea we have of ourselves, of our value or inferiority; in the end if we were to renounce what we have in our minds and the way we believe the world to be, we would really feel free. Free not only from the limits that we put on ourselves but free to grow, departing from the state of being nothing.

From this point of view, spiritual unfolding is to expand inwardly on the basis of who we are through renouncement of

what we think we are. It is this renouncement that paves the way for us in our search for God.

The Mysticism of the Heart

The unfolding of our state of consciousness is a natural process that happens through our adaptation to our surroundings, our upbringing, the education we receive, our relationships and the work we do to make a living. As we pointed out at the beginning of this book, this process advances rather rapidly during childhood and slows down as we gradually come to feel that we know who we are and what place we occupy in the world. It especially slows down when we think we've learned everything we need to know about life and how to live well.

There is only one way for this process not to slow down, and that is to work deliberately on our state of consciousness. This is what spiritual life is all about. We call it "spiritual" because we seek to unite our consciousness with the consciousness that gives life to the universe. In other words, we seek God.

There are two kinds of exercises in spiritual work: ascetic practices and mystical exercises.

Ascetic practices can be physical exercises and/or mental exercises. Their aim is to maintain or improve health, achieve relaxation, calm the mind and attain a certain level of physical well-being.

Mental exercises include meditation and prayer.

Through meditation exercises we attain a certain control over our thoughts and feelings. We improve habits and we learn about the ways we think and act.

Exercises of prayer can consist of elevating our thoughts to God, or doing so with a particular intention, such as for the good of others or ourselves.

Mystical exercises are contemplative in nature.

The traditional exercises of contemplation are usually based on creating inner silence, focusing the intention on God.

According to the spiritual tradition, the culmination of contemplation is ecstasy. Ecstasy is an instant of illumination or inner clarity. We usually look for or expect to obtain ecstasy through our spiritual practices because that is what we've always heard from the different spiritual traditions.

Attaining ecstasy is not the goal of The Mysticism of the Heart. Instead of seeking extraordinary experiences, we understand mystical union as something different.

The Mysticism of the Heart is based on the process of the expansion of consciousness.

We do not seek moments of extraordinary expansion but rather an ordinary state of consciousness that is broader than the one we currently have. This process is continuous; rather than ending in a mystical experience, each expansion of our consciousness is the starting point for greater expansion.

The spiritual work of The Mysticism of the Heart is to incorporate within ourselves an ever greater context. More than a momentarily glimpse of a broader horizon, what really matters is that we expand the horizon that limits our notion of being.

The Mysticism of the Heart begins as an exercise and later becomes our natural state.

As an exercise, we take into account certain mental aspects which we can summarize as: *Who*, *What*, and *Where*.

Who refers to the one who thinks.

What refers to the state of our mind.

Where refers to how far our consciousness reaches.

Who thinks?

The one who thinks is the spark of consciousness behind the continual inner dialogue of the mind.

What is the state of our mind?

The mind is busy discussing, associating, remembering and imagining when it is not busy reacting to what is happening around us. This state of our mind is obvious. If we want to work on our state of consciousness, we need to quiet this movement and attain a minimum of inner silence. If we don't, we continue within the same level of ideas that we already have. We might be able to stretch a little the limits of our consciousness, but these limits would not change. What we need to do, then, is to create inner silence.

Creating inner silence is a way of thinking. Instead of stringing thoughts together, we pay attention to the content of our mind: our acquired idea of who we are, what we are living, what we desire, what we like or dislike, as well as ideas and opinions that we have not been willing to touch. Although this state won't take us any further than what we believe or think we know, it helps us contemplate and understand who we believe we are. The one who thinks is a witness of the discourse of a mind conditioned by the context of its world.

Once we begin to quiet our minds, we realize just how much we identify with the content of our continual thought-

ts. When we place that content before the immensity of a universe which we yearn to embrace, we realize just how small we are, we see our nothingness. To be able to expand ourselves to embrace this immensity, we will need to transcend the content of our minds. It doesn't make much sense to fight against it because that would be like fighting ourselves. But we can go beyond it if we renounce who we believe we are, if we discard the garments we use to cover our nothingness. We renounce, therefore, all that is in us related to a body and a world which one day we will surely leave behind.

And we firmly place ourselves in our nothingness, where the spark of consciousness we wish to expand resides.

To be conscious that one is nothing grants us an extraordinary freedom to interact in everyday life. On the one hand, one stands up for what is right and works enthusiastically for valid and noble causes. On the other, one isn't offended by comments or actions that could damage one's temporary notion of being. One knows there is nothing to defend since nothing can change one's spark of consciousness.

To be nothing doesn't have to do with feelings of importance or inferiority. To be nothing gives an extraordinary inner strength, and one is able to face the challenges of life with objectivity and serenity.

Where does our consciousness of being nothing reach, how far does it go?

We know many things about the world and life, but this doesn't necessarily mean that everything we know is incorporated into our consciousness of being part of the known universe.

We only reach what we include in our consciousness; what we don't include is no more than accumulated information that doesn't change who we believe we are.

For example, although we know there are several billion people living on the earth right now, we keep very few of them in our consciousness. Most of them—including those who cross our path everyday—are like shadows that vanish as soon as they are out of sight. Even those who live with us; we seldom think of them as a part of ourselves. It only takes a misunderstanding for us to cut them off and want nothing to do with them. Neither do we include those who think, believe or act differently than we do, even if they're right beside us.

What we do is draw a line between the information that we include in our consciousness of being and that which we consider no more than an appendix that we can disregard.

When we add something to something else, the only thing that changes is the number. When we include, however, that inclusion allows for a new change. When elements combine, a new element is produced. The same thing happens in our consciousness: to add knowledge is to know more things; to include knowledge is to understand in a new way.

To include in our consciousness something that until now has only been news, we need something more than simply wanting that inclusion. What we need is love. The kind of love that finds plenitude in loving without expecting anything in return: This is the love that unites and that union is transformed into consciousness.

Centered in the inner silence of being nothing, we radiate love everywhere: over those we know as well as those we

don't, but who accompany us in this journey on earth. This love unites us not only ideally, but also in all the circumstances we undergo in life. The love of the Mysticism of the Heart unites us to the pain that exists in the human condition in a way that goes beyond the initial sympathy we feel at the pain of others but at the same time makes us wish not to suffer. The love of the Mysticism of the Heart unites us to the sorrow that exists in the human condition, as it does to the yearning for peace and plenitude for all human beings.

We unite inwardly through love for all that exists on earth; and from there we aim towards the infinity of space and cosmic time. By including all that we know exists, our consciousness of being nothing goes from a mere attempt to find our place in life to being a self-evident reality.

We can therefore return to wearing the habits of the personality with which we act in society without losing consciousness of who we are in the web of time and the context of the universe.

When we first begin these exercises, we might see that the only thing in our consciousness is what we've learned from our beliefs. At this stage our mysticism consists in identifying with what we believe, and we could experience profound states of expansion from this identification. But we can continue expanding our consciousness if we understand that what we have found was already in us, coming from how we believe.

We could say, then, that the Mysticism of the Heart begins with the empathy of feeling what another person feels and understanding what another person thinks—even when we find this person disagreeable—to arriving at the conscious-

ness of being-in-everyone and from there, of being-in-everything.

Each advance in the expansion of our consciousness is accompanied by great inner plenitude. In the measure in which this expanded consciousness continues, it becomes our natural and spontaneous state. We no longer feel anything extraordinary since this feeling is now our state of consciousness.

Can we go farther? We think that, yes, we can, as long as we have really included everything we perceive within our consciousness of being: from the individuals who are close to us to the world in which we live. It's not likely that we could journey to God if we tried to avoid any part of life, even those things we don't like or don't want to endure. There is no trampoline to God, jumping over the life that we know exists.

How do we know if we have expanded our consciousness? One proof is found in the measure of serenity we have attained. We don't mean indifference, repression or emotional control, but real serenity, the serenity that comes from the expansion of our consciousness. The more we include, the less we react: we face serenely the situations that could distress or irritate us. We are more open to listen without reacting and we can understand other ideas without arguing.

Of course, this serenity does not prevent us from suffering when there is cause—and there is always cause, since suffering is ever-present this world. Nor does it prevent us from being happy when there are reasons for happiness. But our suffering doesn't weigh us down: each expansion helps us understand more clearly ourselves, our behavior

and our place in the world. We are serene in happy moments as well as sad.

If we don't see any major changes in ourselves, if we continue with our moods, reactions and aggressive attitudes, any expansion we may have had was no more than a temporary experience, without really affecting our unfolding. If these feelings of expansion come easily to us, we need to be careful not to reduce our spiritual life to the search for sensory experiences. We have to especially guard against the mistake of thinking we are more spiritual because of them.

And so the firm foundation on which we base our unfolding is to know and feel that we are nothing before the immensity of existence. And to love for the sake of love, without expecting anything in return is the dynamic force behind the continual expansion of our consciousness.