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**THE ART
OF LIVING IN
RELATIONSHIP**

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Introduction

This text has been prepared as working material for people who are interested in their spiritual unfolding. More than a book merely for reading, it is a guide for working on the system of relationships through which we understand ourselves and unfold.

Working on relationships is the way for us to respond to the challenge of accepting our ignorance regarding who we are, where we come from and where we are going. When we try to answer these questions with words, we come up against the limitation of our intellect. Working on relationship offers us the means to expand our consciousness and know ourselves by connecting us with all aspects of reality, including those we really do not understand.

Working on relationships requires that we have the daring to renounce the ideas we have formed regarding who we are, what we know, and what we want in life. It requires us to support ourselves on the task of relating harmoniously and consciously; continuously expanding our view of reality while, at the same time, having faith that, since we participate in all of existence, the final answers are indeed within ourselves. And we know that this is possible: we see the inspiring examples of others who have already traversed this marvelous interior road.

In this text, the word “God” is given the greatest possible amplitude. “God” and “the Divine” express the highest possibility of the human being and as such, the point toward which we direct the unfolding of our consciousness. Aside from our philosophical and religious beliefs, the concept of the Divine represents the unknown aspects of life and the world which pulls us towards greater knowledge of ourselves and of reality.

The chapter on relationship with our spiritual guide is dedicated to those who look for help not only to feel well or to deepen their role in the world, but also, and mainly, to unfold their complete potential as human beings. Unfortunately, there aren't many true spiritual guides; nevertheless, those who fully accept the challenge of their unfolding will find the guidance they need.

I hope that the work outlined in this text will help us relate harmoniously with ourselves, with all human beings and with the indescribable reality we call life.

J. W.

January, 2015

Relationship and Spiritual Life

Spiritual life is essentially based on love, and our love depends on a conscious and methodical work on relationships. Relationships are the great fabric of life; to unfold them consciously and methodically is to learn to love through a work that includes all of life. It is to transform living into an art. Spiritual life and the art of living are, therefore, two ways of referring to the same thing.

Nevertheless, the term “spiritual life” is generally associated with a belief rather than with living. When we refer to spiritual life, we need to remember that no one’s life is autonomous or isolated. We live in relationship, not only with other persons and our immediate surroundings but with the world, with time and with the mystery of not knowing who we are in the immensity of the reality we perceive. Most especially, we need to remember that we live in relationship with the fundamental principle of the universe, that which in this text we call God or the Divine.

The idea that spiritual unfolding is an occult process that takes place only between the individual and the divine is unsustainable. Our relationship with others and with the world is not simply an arena where our spiritual transformation takes place. On the contrary, our spiritual unfolding becomes possible when it is based on the harmonization of the relationship that we have with all human beings and with all aspects of life. That is why the process of spiritual unfolding is connected to the process of working on our relationships.

We are inseparable from the universe: we are and we live in relationships. Yet our relationship with the world and the cosmos is unknown to us. We are barely aware of some of our relationships, especially those which we voluntarily choose.

We live in an environment that is as reduced or as ample as our consciousness. Our attitude, health, moods and the circumstances of the moment influence us, and the subjective dimension of our situation changes continuously. Thus, we may sometimes wish to relate with all human beings—our realm is the universe—while at other times we don’t want to relate with anyone or anything—our realm is ourselves. But we live in relationship whether we want to or not, whether we realize it or not.

The expansion of our consciousness toward universal consciousness includes all human beings. We cannot relate with the cosmos if we won't include all its parts. We cannot despise, ignore or discard what seems limited. We might even think we are unfolding spiritually while at the same time finding it hard to tolerate those we live with or demanding them to change. It would be an illusion if we thought we were unfolding.

We dream of exterior systems to solve our problems. But an exterior system cannot produce a better society unless we learn to live together in harmonious relationships. If we want to create a peaceful and harmonious world, we need to become aware of our relationships and learn to live together.

The spiritual tradition teaches us the basic foundations of human relationships: not to kill others, cause others harm, humiliate others or jeopardize their welfare. That is, we need to control ourselves enough not to hurt others. It also teaches practices that help us accept our neighbor: tolerance, patience, compassion. Although these precepts show us the beginning of a respectful relationship, not all our relationships are harmonious. It is here, at these first steps, that we need to become aware of how we are relating and develop more harmonious relationships.

Interior and exterior effort is necessary to develop conscious and harmonious relationships. We need interior effort to work on the self-knowledge which will enable us to overcome the idea that we exist separated from others. We also need exterior control so that the way we communicate with others doesn't separate us from them. We need exterior control so that we may create a bond of union with all human beings.

Our effort to spiritualize our daily life by working on our system of relationships helps us live more harmoniously. Thus, we can learn to participate and expand our consciousness.

Possessive Relationship and Participatory Relationship

The way we relate indicates the extent of our spiritual unfolding. As we unfold, our consciousness is more expansive and our way of relating more participatory.

Although spiritual unfolding is a process of continual growth, we could, for the sake of discussion, divide it into two major stages: possessive relationship and participatory relationship.

A possessive relationship creates dependence. We think we can behave as if we were the center of everything, including other people's lives, feelings and thoughts. When we don't get what we want, we either become depressed or react against whatever escapes our control. The consequences of possessive relationships are grievances, sorrow and pain.

Aggression in possessive relationships responds to our will to dominate others and everything around us. When others are possessions, we readily vent our passions on them so they will follow our wants or wishes. Although possessive relationships do not always manifest in acts of physical violence, they do violence to other people, to their surroundings and nature.

Possessive relationships diminish basic human freedom. In this state of consciousness, we could conceive others have certain degree of freedom, but in practice we tend not to recognize any rights save our own.

The struggle to dominate and obtain something through relationships inevitably leads to deception and loneliness. A possessive relationship separates and, in the end, destroys the relationship and those we relate to.

We break the vicious circle of possession and destruction of interpersonal relationships when we understand that our eagerness to be possessive hurts those we love or pretend to love. We put aside our instinctual and selfish impulses and nourish our need to participate and offer ourselves. The first steps in harmonizing our relationships happen when we widen our circle of love and learn to cherish others.

When we set aside manipulation of those we love and relate to, we look beyond our interests and work for the good of others. We re-discover our surroundings and everything around us through love and respect.

To respect is to relate with love and allow room for other people to express themselves. We discover the teachings veiled by our eagerness to have everything obey our will. The natural world reveals its life force and nourishment that was hidden. Through respect we become humble and learn how to learn.

Through the practice of respect, we begin to relate through participation. We change our way of responding to the circumstances of life and other human beings. Instead of reacting favorably to what we like and negatively to what we dislike, we learn to accept and accompany others. Instead of focusing on our enjoyment or suffering only, we learn to participate in the joy and suffering of others. Instead of centering ourselves in our own concerns, we learn to enrich ourselves through the experiences of all human beings. In other words, we embrace all that exists with the same expansive love.

Appropriate practices strengthen a participatory relationship. Our first work is to develop an attitude of attentive awareness to serve the needs of others. We do not need extra time, money or possessions to help. We always have opportunities to help in constructive ways with understating, with words and especially deeds. Simple acts are good ways to begin learning participation: cleaning something we did not dirty, tidying a mess we did not make, sharing what we have and know, taking care of other people's things with the same or even more attention than we would with our own, and helping someone else instead of doing something for ourselves.

When we participate, we don't give in to selfishness or thoughtlessness. On the contrary, we work continuously on our minds and hearts to generate good thoughts and positive feelings towards ourselves as well as towards others. When we find we are feeling sorry for ourselves, we replace that feeling with compassion for those who have less than we do or suffer more than us. We remember that there is much to do to alleviate human suffering. These simple practices help us see that we really carry the world within us.

Relationship through participation helps us become aware of our union with all human beings and with the world. It generates reverence for everything that exists.

Relationship with Ourselves

One of the cornerstones of our unfolding is our capacity to know ourselves and to understand our surroundings. The first relationship we must consider as we begin our spiritual unfolding is our relationship with ourselves.

We are a composite. Genetic traits and acquired characteristics are continuously interacting and influencing each other. In encounters with circumstances, they generate diverse emotions, feelings, and thoughts. These are often contradictory: altruism and selfishness, love and indifference.

We believe that we are genuinely expressing ourselves, but the closer we look, the more we realize our demeanor is not coherent and harmonious. Often, we are like bodies with many faces.

Sooner or later, an identity crisis moves us to want to know who we are. Thus, the process of the inner search for our real identity begins. Adopting appropriate attitudes, standards of conduct and practices can accelerate the process. Let's consider some of the possibilities in working on "our relationship with ourselves."

To discover our place in relationship to others and the universe.

We can shine by polishing our personality without deepening the idea we have of ourselves. But we are not alone, nor do we live isolated from others. We find our place when our experiences are placed in the context of the universal human experience with equilibrium, generosity, and wisdom.

When we disattach ourselves from self-centered living, our perception becomes more inclusive. Discovering the life of the universe and the world of others give us the necessary perspective to understand our reality. Thus, we can recognize our possibilities better and have the strength needed to fulfill them.

We begin to establish a balanced relationship with ourselves when we understand the vastness of the universe and our smallness to it. And, at the same time, we could exaggerate our importance when we see the extraordinary worth of our lives. To have a harmonious relationship with ourselves and with others, we need to

harmonize our understanding of our smallness with the vision of the greatness of our destiny. We can do this if we consider our countless possibilities, especially those that help us expand our state of consciousness.

We are not the center of the universe; we are not even more important than other aspects of reality. But each of us has a unique and irreplaceable place in the world. We should be aware of the relevance of our unfolding to the whole—to our families, our friends and all those who depend on us.

In other words, we remember our littleness in the cosmic realm and the importance of our existence in the nucleus in which we live. This leads to the next step of our inner work.

To respect ourselves.

Even though we are not the center of the universe, we are an expression of the divine. This point of view helps us to become aware of the spirit that moves us to act and to honor it.

Although we know we are free to live as we wish, the consciousness of our spiritual potential does not allow us to throw ourselves into any experience or to be carried away by unconscious impulses. Awareness causes us to deeply respect who we are: human beings with countless possibilities.

Respect and reverence preside over the relationship we have with ourselves.

To be honest with ourselves.

Self-respect leads us to see ourselves objectively, to be honest, and to love truth above all things. However, being honest isn't always easy. We are so attached to our self-image that we unconsciously tend towards self-justification, self-pity and self-complacency. What we think, feel, and do is influenced by the strong desire to protect our self-image. To be honest with ourselves, we need to transcend this tendency.

To be honest with ourselves, we need to maintain a distance between ourselves and whatever happens to us and look at our way of behaving and reacting to circumstances objectively. We become an impartial observer of what is happening

to us. Then, we can objectively reflect on feedback received such as, how others reacted to what we said and did and how we responded to them. This objectivity helps us evaluate our behavior better. With practice, simple retrospective looks at what happened can help us gain the perspective and serenity needed to understand.

Not to identify with the vicissitudes inherent in life and unfolding.

The more we identify with our experiences, the less likely we are to understand them. Besides not distinguishing the difference between what we are and what has happened to us, we get caught in our mental and emotional states. Our perceptions and evaluations are so subjective that we can't learn from them as much as we could. Thus, we tend to repeat them time and time again without really understanding what is happening.

As long as we live hanging onto what's happening to us, we live only for ourselves. We cannot see other's points of view or their needs. We don't realize while looking at ourselves and thinking our own experiences are all that is important, we are wasting the possibility of expanding our consciousness and unfolding. Life slips through our fingers while we oscillate between feelings of irritation, elation or depression.

Getting irritated when disagreeable things happen, or we think we have failed, doesn't make mistakes go away or change reality. Mistakes can be valuable when we use them to learn; mistakes become triumphs when we don't repeat them.

Getting carried away when successful does not improve what happened and wastes energy for taking the next step in unfolding. When we use our triumphs for reliving in our memory the feeling of superiority over others, we lose the fruit of those experiences. Successes are helpful when we are grateful for what is accomplished, and we continue making the effort.

It doesn't help to reject difficulties either, because rejection doesn't help us solve our problems or make our reality more bearable. Life is a series of pleasant and unpleasant events. Acceptance of the ups and downs of experiences allows us to live in peace.

Let's relate to difficulties by accepting, learning, and changing our negative attitudes to positive attitudes. In this way, we do what's necessary to achieve and maintain inner balance.

When we are conscious of our relationship with ourselves, we respect and are honest with ourselves. In this way, we uncover what we know we are and what our mental and emotional states make us believe we are. As this relationship deepens and harmonizes, our views are less personalistic. Our consciousness expands and our lives become more stable and meaningful.

Standards of Conduct in Relationships

As we become more aware of the reality around us, our interest in others and the society in which we live broadens. We begin to see others as individuals with rights and needs. We gradually stop thinking of society as a mere environment, more or less favorable, in which our particular experiences take place. At this point, we become aware of the standards of conduct we internalized in childhood. Such self-knowledge makes it possible for us to reinforce the behaviors that are positive and to work on those which cause difficulties in our relationships with others.

Our relationships are based exteriorly on standards of conduct. As we become aware that standards of conduct have a decisive influence on our relationships, we no longer take them lightly, as if they were mere social conventions. Just as we need to speak the same language in order to understand one another, we also need standards of conduct which form a common basis of respect from which we can establish relationships.

Not everyone gives the necessary importance to standards of conduct, especially to manners. Although we cannot live without norms, sometimes we react against them. On the one hand, we do not want to control ourselves, but on the other hand, we don't want to suffer the consequences of someone else's lack of control. In the end, even the most rebellious among us have to subject ourselves to at least a minimum level of standards so that we can live together with some degree of peace.

Acquiring good manners is a necessary aspect of establishing standards of conduct. Even when we have good intentions, problems in our relationships develop if we are unconsciously inconsiderate, tactless, or rude. Our lack of control or good manners can even hurt a valuable relationship. Good manners help us overcome even the most difficult situations because they are irreplaceable assets in our work on relationships.

As we unfold, we acquire manners that are modest and discerning, and consequently, our relationships become more harmonious.

- We acquire and are able to maintain more self-control
- We avoid elaborate and affected mannerisms
- We respect others. We do not use others for our own personal benefit—materially, emotionally, intellectually or spiritually—nor do we use others merely to pass the time
- We relate with others courteously
- We respect other's good will
- We avoid taking advantage of others even if the opportunity arises

Our standards of conduct help us unfold only when we follow them consistently. To reserve good behavior only for certain circumstances while allowing passions and instinctual impulses go uncontrolled in our daily relationships undermines our effort to learn how to live. It is easier to keep the spiritual ideal alive and conscious when we concretely work on what each human being means to us, acknowledging and validating their existence while respecting their space. The way to express this recognition is to respect, validate and understand each person in their circumstances and work to help everyone, without discriminating or making distinctions. Just as we respect our own vocation and our way of realizing it, we also respect other's decisions, their points of view and their way of being.

Even though we might be very attentive and conscious of our relationships, sometimes we have attitudes that damage our relationships. Some of these unconscious attitudes can be pride and feeling superior to others. We might even think we know it all, or at least that we know more than others. Although we might mean well, we could confuse help and counsel with giving orders or imposing our way of doing things. As long as our orders are followed, we work hard. But as soon as others do not go along with our way of thinking, we begin to criticize them and want nothing to do with them.

Disdain and authoritarian behavior corrode our relationships—whether they are with our children, spouses, friends, acquaintances or those who depend on us. Also, when instead of validating others we try to take advantage of them, our relationships become very difficult. We point out the mistakes and defects of others instead of validating, encouraging, showing our appreciation and

encouraging dialogue. Rather than walking on a clear path together we dishearten those we are trying to help.

Respectful relationships lead us to love with compassion. We learn to transform our self-concern. Instead of asking ourselves, “What can others do for me?” I can ask, “How can I help others? In what ways can I offer my life, my work and my experiences?” We leave aside the attitude of being judgmental and we adopt the attitude of service.

We also need to remember that good manners and clear judgment are not enough for helping others. The effort to do good needs to be accompanied by an unselfish love and a positive attitude.

Our positive attitude supports and nourishes others, instills confidence in their capacity to unfold, and gives them the courage to face their difficulties. A positive attitude also generates happy and healthy relationships, and this in itself is already a great help, especially in times of trial and discouragement.

A positive attitude is much more than superficial optimism to face the vicissitudes of life. On the contrary, a positive attitude generates in us and in those around us the desire to make whatever effort is needed and to work and sacrifice ourselves for noble causes.

A positive attitude is sustained by our faith and by our capacity to love and offer ourselves. For this reason, those who generate a positive attitude always behave in the same way, whether they are happy or sad, feel loved or rejected, or even if they are successful or not in their endeavors. They choose to focus on a positive attitude to offer the best of themselves and help those around them to be happier.

Even though it is not easy to express happiness when we are in the middle of painful experiences or to transmit energy and faith when we are going through troubles and illness, we can use those experiences to challenge ourselves to participate with those who also suffer, to understand them better and to develop our tolerance and love.

When we see the immensity of the work that is before humanity in order to unfold, be happy, at peace, and attain prosperity, we can help by transforming our lives into understanding, strength and hope for all humanity.

Relationship with Society

Our relationship with ourselves and with society are aspects of the same relationship, and they unfold simultaneously. As we traverse the road of self-knowledge and become more conscious, we learn that we have a responsibility to participate integrally in human society. Understanding that we are an inseparable part of humanity is a process we can study by observing the unfolding of our relationship with society.

We could say that as long as we feel separated from society and look at it from the outside, we expect everything from it. Later, when we understand that we are an integral part of humanity and see everything we have received from it, we become aware of our responsibility towards society. Instead of expecting something from society, we know we can offer much.

If we're only paying attention to our personal world and private interests, our relationship with society is self-centered. We obey the laws because we fear punishment. We follow social norms because we are part of a group and being part of this group is useful. But we are not committed to solving the needs and problems of the society we are part of. We try to reap the greatest benefit from the society we live in—education and privileges—and believe that they are our birthright. In such a self-centered relationship, we create a gap between our own lives and the interests of society at large. When society protects us, we call it “our” society; but when society demands or deprives us of something, we call it “the” society.

Even though we call it “our” society, we don't fully participate in it. We prefer the comfortable little nest we have made with the small group of people closest to us and those we relate with daily, and we ignore everyone else. We look for warmth and reassurance, and this is what we really identify with. Everything else is alien to us, almost an abstract reality.

When do we become interested in society? At first, we tend to project our selfish interests on society, and we struggle to change only what does not benefit us. We defend, attack or ignore society, as if it were something outside of ourselves.

This is the stage of ambivalence; we relate with society according to the ups and downs of our circumstances, needs and states of mind. When society is “our” society, we defend it and identify with it. When we want “another” society, we criticize it, attack it and even rebel.

Society can neither be defended nor attacked. It is neither “our” society nor “that” society. Society is made up of a group of human beings who share the same circumstances and history and reflects the process of human relationships. To attack or defend this process is to attack or defend ourselves. Ignorance of our relationship with society leads to more problems than those that already exist, and adds more sorrow to the tragedies that we endure.

It is not enough to say that we want a just society, without evil, or suffering. We can only build a better society by working on ourselves and making a concrete effort to produce good works such as education, health, resources and knowledge.

We build a more harmonious society through our own unfolding, since the more we unfold, the more we know ourselves. We can then be more conscious of our relationship with society and we are able to work better towards improving it. In other words, we learn to relate through participation.

Relationship through participation conveys awareness that we are an integral part of society. It offers a constructive attitude toward our own spiritual unfolding and towards active work for the good of society.

There are three basic aspects to improve our relationship with society:

- To overcome the personalistic attitude
- To experience first in ourselves and then, in our surroundings, the good and the changes we wish for humanity
- To accept and alleviate human problems, creating constructive opportunities for unfolding

The personalistic attitude is the predisposition to follow our personal interests to the detriment of the common good. It is also the tendency to follow charismatic people who entice us to follow them with their words and promises. To overcome this personalistic attitude, we follow the ideals we consider useful instead of

following those charismatic people that call us to follow them. It is also practicing those useful ideals.

To work for a better society, we need to offer out time, work, energy and creativity. We need to put ourselves at the service of the common good. When human beings no longer consider “their” lives, “their” objectives, “their” energy belonging exclusively to them, they stop separating their own potential from those of others, their own vicissitudes from those of others, and their own sorrow from the sorrow of others. They experience what everyone experiences, with all of our possibilities.

When we desire to create a more harmonious society, we don’t criticize, complain, escape, or look for privileges. We fulfill whatever is necessary, wherever we are. When we discover something we dislike, we make the effort to transcend it. We also know that we can’t ask others to do what we ourselves don’t like or don’t want to do. Therefore, we work to overcome in ourselves the separativity, indifference, and selfishness that we see outside. We work for the good of society silently and persistently, without confronting anyone. This inner work expands to our surroundings and produces a chain reaction of good thoughts and good works.

Our constructive attitude toward society leads us to work in a productive and efficient manner. Today, there are large numbers of people who don’t even have the basics for living with dignity. If we work efficiently, doing our particular job well, producing what society needs without wasting resources, time or energy, we contribute to the common good. We can do the same with our thoughts, feelings and judgements, accepting differences and practicing positive actions. In this way, what we are, have, want, and do, contribute to the common good.

Our constructive attitude toward society makes us want to educate ourselves and others. We often think that education is transmitting knowledge and trying to have others think in a certain way, or do something specific. We might even confuse education with indoctrination or adherence to certain causes. Education is none of that. To educate is to stimulate the process of developing consciousness. It’s teaching to think, discern, and choose. It’s to uncover what’s veiled by our ignorance. We learn to educate ourselves so that we can teach others.

When we have been educated, we understand that we cannot get rid of the people we think are wrong or blame them for our problems. History shows us that this has never been possible, that segregation and persecution deepen those conflicts. The punishments imposed by law, while necessary, have not eradicated crime and violence. Society is made up of human beings. The problems we have with certain people or groups simply show us the deficiencies that we must correct within ourselves to promote the development of society.

If we want to produce the necessary changes in society, we need to stop enclosing ourselves in our own world and actively work on our spiritual unfolding, rather than coercing others to do what we want. Our openness is evidenced in effective works, financial stability, by transmitting broad and inclusive ideas and collaborating in works that benefit humanity.

Relationship with the Worldly Spirit

We often live as if we were immortal, as if pain and misery didn't exist, as if love were just another thing to be enjoyed without any need to cultivate it. The stubborn denial of evident reality, the blind impulse to chase after happiness without wanting to face the consequences of our choices, the banality with which we often relate, and in general, our selfishness and hedonism is what we call, in the context of spiritual unfolding, the "worldly spirit."

In all sectors of society, we find the illusion of thinking it's possible to be happy without making an effort, to live without working, and to enjoy life without any worries. The attraction of this illusion is so powerful that even terrible tragedies and pain don't help us see how harmful certain behaviors are, both to ourselves and to society as a whole.

We have to always be alert since the worldly spirit is a force always present. While a positive force moves us to actualize new possibilities, at the same time, the worldly spirit leads us toward inertia and negligence. It is as if we thought we had the right to indiscriminately enjoy the goods of the world without assuming any responsibility for it.

In our relationship with the worldly spirit, there is no rest. Either we advance in the unfolding of consciousness and love, or we waste time and energy slipping down the cliff of selfishness and unconsciousness. This is not a mere figure of speech; it can really happen to us if we are not attentive to our way of being and relating.

Spiritual unfolding is not necessarily a linear and ascending process. Detours and setbacks are possible. If we drop our guard even slightly, the worldly spirit can take over and make us lose everything we had gained in our previous efforts to unfold.

Even when we have the best intentions, we have to be on guard against the worldly spirit, for it exists in others as well as within ourselves. The worldly spirit sometimes appears very strongly in us, in meanness, instinctual desires and selfish

actions. If we keep attentive, we can counteract these tendencies with generous feelings, positive thoughts and noble actions.

The worldly spirit can take subtle forms even in those experienced in spiritual practices. We could imagine that we could transcend the worldly spirit by having an orderly life, by working hard and being generally moderate in our habits. Certainly, these habits are good, but a disciplined life by itself doesn't free us from the worldly spirit. We could be ascetic and worldly at the same time. If we have a selfish attitude, we could find self-satisfaction in the profits of a methodical work and the accumulated savings of frugal habits. We might live with sacrifice and measure for a time to later use our energy in self-gratification; then we repeat the cycle again, alternating times of responsibility and irresponsibility.

Let's remember that while we live on Earth, we aren't free from the worldly spirit. The tendency to imagine an easy and inconsistent life is part of our human nature.

To overcome the worldly spirit, we need to practice certain exterior asceticism. But this isn't enough. Our exterior work of living with measure and fulfilling our obligations help us unfold when they are accompanied by our inner work and based on spiritual objectives.

Our inner work has two aspects. On the one hand, we need to observe our attitude honestly, look at our tendencies straightforwardly, and choose the road of love and participation. On the other hand, we develop techniques to work inwardly to control our selfish impulses with appropriate exercises.

Our objectives are spiritualized when we put the good of others before our own benefit. Love for all human beings guides our energy to work for altruistic ends and for the common good. Rest helps us relax and put our thoughts in order. Moments of recreation are not moments of dissipation; we learn to enjoy activities that are enriching and help us relax. Recreation is spiritualized when we find happiness in bringing joy to others.

To control the worldly spirit doesn't mean that we turn our backs on the satisfactions and joy of a life fully lived. On the contrary, when we overcome the attraction of the worldly spirit, we find the plenitude that makes life simple, wholesome and productive. We learn from our pleasant as well as our difficult

experiences. We find joy in knowing that we can help those around us and that we are helping society to unfold.

Relationship with our Thoughts and Feelings

To unfold spiritually, we need to know and harmonize the way we think and feel.

The way we think and feel is largely determined by heredity and the environment. On the other hand, no matter what our mental and physical environment may be, the quality of our thoughts and feelings depends on our level of consciousness.

The more limited our level of consciousness, the more we identify with the mental currents around us and the more subject our mind is to impulses, passions and desires. In such situations, our life becomes determined by thoughts and feelings that we neither choose nor can control. We even defend them stubbornly without considering if they really reflect what we believe in and aspire to.

Our unfolding is marked by a long stage in which our thinking and feeling are determined by social conditioning and instincts. This keeps us in ignorance, conflicts and pain.

Even though there is a close connection between thoughts and feelings, our relationship with them is not always harmonious. This happens especially when instinctive impulses and selfish thoughts move us to feel in a way opposite to the ideal that we envisioned in the moments of our greatest understanding.

In general, the way we feel expands more slowly than the way we think. Selfishness and passion often dominate our understanding. For example, even though we intellectually accept that all human beings are equal, we may continue to identify with some people while rejecting and belittling others. Such attitudes not only can cause suffering to those around us, but also have negative effects on human relationships as a whole. To think in one way and to feel and act in another is an obstacle to the unfolding of consciousness and to building a world of peace and wellbeing for all.

We learn to improve our way of thinking and feeling by adopting an appropriate method. Systematic work on our will and attention, and the control of our energy through useful intellectual activity and productive work, constitute an asceticism

on the mind and emotions that help us achieve harmony. Our feelings respond little by little to our emerging consciousness of what is good. Consequently, we can control our thoughts better.

Besides harmonizing the content of our thoughts and feelings, we need develop the way we think and feel. A simple way to develop the way we think and feel is the practice of substituting noble thoughts and feelings for selfish and reactive ones. To attain mental control, we can cultivate logical thinking, starting by thinking sensibly.

Although it's inevitable that undesirable, aggressive or selfish thoughts and feelings will arise sometimes, we can transmute them so that they will do good rather than harm. For example, when a negative thought appears, we observe it with as much objectivity as possible, until it's consumed by the weight of its own negative energy. We then produce the highest, most elevated thought we can at that moment, regaining control of our minds. If we have a critical thought about a person, as soon as we become aware of that thought, we generate a positive thought toward that person. We can say a prayer for her or imagine that she is surrounded by feelings of peace and love. If we are consistent with this technique of substitution, we can, little by little, change our negative reactions. Instead of wounding others, we respond with love.

Another technique for learning to control our minds consists of generating love for everything we have to do. Love helps us focus our attention on what we are doing without getting distracted. When we don't waste our time and energy on the incessant distraction of mental associations or unconscious impulses, we perceive what is actually happening around us. We can see the effects that our attitude, and what we do produce in others. This practice helps us understand our circumstances and experiences; every moment in life becomes a teaching.

These techniques are easy to apply. But for them to be really useful, we need determination to see our way of thinking and feeling which defines us as limited personalities separated from the totality of life. We also need our willpower to participate with all human beings.

Right intention and continuous inner work are, in the end, our best allies for attaining a harmonious relationship with our thoughts and feelings. When we attain harmony between the mind and heart, we are free to think and feel in accordance with our vocation of unfolding. We have within our reach the necessary means for building a world of peace and happiness for all human beings.

Relationship with our Shortcomings and Strengths

Our personality is a composite of emotions, feelings, thoughts and desires. We call “shortcomings” those aspects that hinder our unfolding. “Strengths,” on the other hand, are the aspects that help us transcend our limitations and expand our consciousness. From this point of view, our shortcomings are our field of work and our strengths are our tools for working on them.

We are usually ashamed of our shortcomings and proud of our strengths. But we need to avoid getting entangled in this game of identification with our various characteristics. We do need to work on our shortcomings because they are habits which foster our ignorance. Likewise, we need to reinforce our strengths, because they activate the inner force necessary to know ourselves. Working on our shortcomings and reinforcing our strengths will finally lead us to overcome our identification with them.

When we begin the road of unfolding, we discover the value of our strengths and the harm caused by our shortcomings. We are, however, conscious of only some—and not always the most fundamental—of our shortcomings. We may have shortcomings that are actually the other side of the coin of our supposed strengths. For example, working hard can cover ambition; disattachment may really be indifference; meticulousness can lead to intolerance; determination can hide conceit. By faithfully following an appropriate method of inner work, we are able to see our inner landscape clearly and ourselves objectively.

The more we know ourselves, the more we look at ourselves with a critical attitude. We might become overwhelmed before the mountain of shortcomings that we discover, and the few strengths we have to carry out our ideal. In order not to get discouraged, it’s useful to concentrate our work on one or two of the most counterproductive characteristics and to continue walking, step by step, stimulated by our small triumphs.

We don’t need to struggle with all our shortcomings at the same time. A serious shortcoming generates many others that express themselves in different situations in life. To work on a specific shortcoming can help us to overcome other

shortcomings that at first glance might seem isolated. Selfishness, for example, can generate indifference, insensitivity and impatience. When we work on our selfishness, we will begin to overcome indifference and other related shortcomings.

When we relate to our shortcomings, we have to be careful to avoid extreme reactions. If we were to be constantly depressed by them, we would reveal an excessive preoccupation with ourselves, as well as vanity for not accepting our weaknesses. And, just as it isn't good to be constantly preoccupied with our shortcomings, neither should we deny them or ignore the feedback we receive from others when they point them out to us.

When we want to unfold and participate, we learn to overcome our shortcomings. When we recognize our shortcomings, we can learn to use them as a means of participating with all human beings. As we work on transforming our shortcomings, we learn to accept them as part of the human condition. This helps us to accept others just as they are. Through our experience of working on our weaknesses and shortcomings, we acquire the ability to help and accompany others in their efforts to understand themselves and overcome their shortcomings.

No matter how efficiently we master our shortcomings, we can never think that we have overcome them completely. On the contrary, we have to always be alert in our effort to keep our tendencies under control so as not to repeat the same mistakes.

Just as honesty, patience and perseverance are the basis of our relationship with our shortcomings, humility and responsibility are the basis of our relationship with our strengths.

Humility reminds us that the desire to show off our virtues is really the shortcoming of wanting to be superior to others. It would be counterproductive to use our good qualities to strengthen vanity. All human beings have good qualities. If we discover some good qualities in ourselves, we need to see them not as if they were exceptional virtues but as means for realizing our spiritual vocation.

In a harmonious state, nothing stands out independently from the whole. We can't become proud of our strengths since pride undermines our good qualities. Our

genuine strengths unite us with others; they don't separate us into categories of better and worse.

Our relationship with our strengths is based on responsibility since all of us are accountable for the way we use our good qualities, which are gifts.

Strengths are our point of support, the basis from which we unfold consciousness and assist those in need. When strengths are not cultivated, we lose our tools, and we waste the possibilities we could realize through them. A beautiful strength such as patience, for example, could become indifference if we used it as a way to avoid being hurt by others or by circumstances. But well-cultivated patience is a positive way of responding to painful circumstances. Instead of reacting aggressively or becoming enclosed in ourselves, patience makes it possible for us to accept and love. Patience enables us to transform difficult circumstances into a means for extending and spreading peace and helping others effectively.

Our spiritual work on our shortcomings and strengths ends the dichotomy between strengths-shortcomings. It shows us that both are aspects of the same effort. The acceptance of our shortcomings as inherent to the human condition transforms them into means of participation, understanding and tolerance. Being aware that our strengths are our means of working, protects us from the inner blindness produced by our pride and vanity.

Being sincere in recognizing our imperfections is the force that gives impulse to our spiritual unfolding. The humble acceptance of our good qualities reveals the potential that exists in all human beings, moving us to help others fulfill their highest possibilities.

Relationship with our Problems and Difficulties

Our lives seem like a steep and rugged road which at certain points is very hard to climb. To keep this road from becoming something so arduous that it isn't passable, we need to learn to distinguish the difficulties we need to overcome from the problems we tend to create.

Difficulties are part of life. They are the moments which require our best effort and attention. No one is free from difficulties. All of us have to struggle to make a living, are subject to accidents, illnesses, and natural catastrophes. All of us experience the limitations of our society, undergo physical decline and death. Difficulties, in fact, show us the obstacles we have to overcome to continue unfolding.

Problems, by contrast, are created by us when we don't know how to face difficulties.

We can easily know when we face a difficulty or a problem by observing our attitude. When we respond to our yearning to unfold, we accept a difficulty as a challenge and are quick to respond to it. We understand that what we are undergoing is part of life and look within ourselves for resources to help us overcome the difficulty. We also understand the need for help and counsel, and we look for it with an open attitude, willing to work on ourselves.

However, when we have a problem, we tend to look for solutions outside of ourselves and to blame others. On top of that, we ignore the advice of those who try to help us see our situation from another point of view, discern what we can do, and find solutions to overcome the problem we have created.

When we have a problem, we want to stop suffering. But what we really want is for someone or something else to change, believing this will eliminate the cause of our suffering. This attitude will usually lead us to react against our impotence since very seldom can we change the circumstances of life or other people. In fact, since anxiety and reactions don't help us solve the problem, our attitude creates an even bigger problem than the sum of the problems we already had.

Often a problem is caused by an attitude of wanting something without having to work for it. It's easy to make an effort as long as we have enthusiasm. But when we get discouraged, we tend to think that life is hard and unfair. We think we deserve something better and that we ought to have what we want. This attitude transforms common difficulties into insolvable problems, because we can never have our wish, which is not to have to make an effort.

Too often, we transform the difficulties having to do with the passage of time into problems. The changes that come with advancing years are natural and evident to whomever is willing to see them. But when we don't want to face them or accept them, we think the solution is to pretend that we aren't really growing old, or that we won't suffer the inconveniences of old age like others do. Since we aren't different from anybody else, we might transform the difficulties of old age into sources of fear and resentment and look for ways not to face our situation.

It's obvious that some situations don't have a solution, that the only way to overcome difficulties is to face them and work on them. Not to accept the roughness of the road is to not accept the road. If we don't accept difficulties, it's the same as not accepting life.

Some of our problems are not associated with the difficulties inherent in life; we create them with our attitude. Unfortunately, these are the most common problems presently afflicting us: violence, cruelty, destruction, hunger, indifference. There isn't any magical solution to solve them. The only sure way to solve them is to expand our state of consciousness by working on ourselves, as well as working to educate and assist all human beings.

Our relationship with problems—any problem—is positive when we face them honestly and energetically.

The best way to understand our problems and the role our attitude plays in them is knowing ourselves. It doesn't help to know if we have a reason for complaining. We will not solve our problems by punishing a culprit or trying to change what isn't in our power to change. It's only by working on ourselves that we can overcome our problems. We have the power within to change, to do better, to understand and to live fully.

When we understand that the origin of our conflicts is our attitude, our problems are simplified. We can then see the difficulties inherent in life and discern the steps we need to take to unfold. When we understand our attitude, we can find the right advice, the necessary help and the inner strength to overcome our difficulties.

Our honest relationship with difficulties makes us humble, simple and courageous.

We are humble when we understand and accept our limitations, identify the few events of life we can control, and accept the rest as challenges for extracting the teaching they hold. We also know that the law of life can't be changed to our liking, that the only life we can lead is our own, and that the difficulties we encounter are points of support for our inner work.

When we are humble, we can foresee difficulties. By looking at life without the arrogance of believing we can alter circumstances as we please, we see more clearly the road that lies ahead.

When we relate with difficulties honestly, we become simple; honesty is more important than preserving the image we have made of ourselves. When we truly yearn to know ourselves, we don't look for convoluted or superficial explanations to justify ourselves or to justify not making an effort. We look at ourselves as we are, with strengths and shortcomings, with limitations and possibilities.

We relate to difficulties with courage when we don't want to spare any effort to overcome them. We know we have the strength to live our lives fully, and we work with all our energy for our own good and the good of all human beings.

When we discover that the secret of our strength is to be found in our attitude toward difficulties, we stop dreaming of an easy life. We get to work walking our road of unfolding in the best possible way until the end. This attitude helps us, as well as the human family, unfold.

Relationship with our Body

Our body is an indispensable instrument for our unfolding. We use our body to express ourselves, to experiment and to learn. Our relationship with our body must be positive and based on self-control and responsibility.

By controlling our body, we learn to manage our impulses and avoid self-complacency.

When our impulse towards self-complacency triumphs over love, loneliness and emptiness grow in us, even when we have everything. Therefore, it's important to recognize the symptoms that inform us this is happening, and to foresee the consequences.

Laziness leads us to the pursuit of excessive comfort and to lack of control of bodily expressions.

Gluttony is a distortion of the need for nourishment.

Sexual impulses are unconscious expressions of the instinct of self-preservation. When we master the instincts, we are able to clearly distinguish our possibilities and discern our real options in life.

Exaggerated preoccupation with our bodies and fear of physical suffering cause us to be obsessed with our bodies; instead of using our bodies as instruments, we submissively place ourselves at their service. An indulged body compels us to subordinate ourselves to it and to be dependent on its sensations. Moreover, the fear of suffering lowers our physical resistance and tolerance for discomfort and pain. But, when we treat the body as an instrument, giving it the care it needs without indulging or debilitating it, we develop inner strength and become less susceptible to suffering.

We maintain good health by placing limits on the demands that go beyond what is necessary and sensible for good health. An over indulged body becomes a tyrant. But if we look after the body and train it to work and be productive, we find it is an efficient tool for our inner unfolding.

Control of the body is not an end in and of itself. It would not do much good to gain greater control of our body if we didn't later make good use of the energy that we had generated with that control. Knowing what to do with our energy is just as important as learning how to reserve it. We are responsible for the way we spend our energy, both to ourselves and to society.

We have a personal responsibility with our body because the body's usefulness is significantly curtailed if we don't pay attention to our habits. We are responsible for making sure our body yields as much as it's capable of.

Responsibility has a social dimension as well, because what we do with our bodies affects society. If we use our body sensibly, we can contribute to society. If instead we satisfy all our desires and follow our impulses indiscriminately, without considering the effects of such behavior on the body, we take unnecessary risks. We cannot think we are socially responsible if our careless behaviors cause us to have more accidents or contract chronic or disabling diseases. Sooner or later, we would become a burden to others by having to spend their time and energy taking care of us.

Even when we dedicate our lives to doing good works, we are not exempt from our responsibility to care for our bodies. Helping others is praiseworthy, but it's not an excuse for our lack of self-control or attention to overcome the habits that lead to preventable pain and disability. What we offer to others would be negated if our bodies became prematurely sick or disabled due to imprudence on our part. We may even become dependent on institutions and other people would have to take care of our bodies for years, until we die, because of our behavior.

We don't really need extra time or extraordinary resources to take care of our bodies. We do need sensible self-discipline and the knowledge necessary so that our judgement may rule over our impulses. We can then keep our bodies flexible, healthy and useful with less dedication to it. Sensible self-discipline in taking care of our body prevents us from falling into the extremes of neglecting the body or making it the center of our attention.

Knowledge about how to take care of our body allows us to respond to its real needs and avoid accidents and sickness caused by ignorance. Even when we take

the appropriate measures, there will be times we get sick. We must then accept this experience, use it to our spiritual advantage, and do whatever is possible to cure our illness.

We sometimes suffer greatly for what are just ordinary things: another birthday, more grey hair or wrinkles, a minor ailment or physical inconvenience. Wanting to help us, others may ask us: “If you have everything you really need, why are you so upset and in so much pain? In such cases it’s good to find out how much we identify with our bodies. We might be reducing our self-esteem to what we expect from our body; we might feel superior or inferior depending on whether we think our bodies are beautiful or ugly; we may feel useful or worthless according to the way our bodies respond to our desires; we may also judge others according to their physical characteristics. All this brings suffering and confusion.

Identification with the body conditions us to such an extent that we associate our personal value with our appearance and physical condition. Our bodies might even become more important to us than spiritual values, and the condition of our bodies more important than the state of our souls.

Identification with the body leads us to associate success with youth and good health. While the body is developing and full of energy, we feel full of possibilities and aspirations to do something meaningful with our lives. But as soon as the body gets sick, less fit or older, we feel that our prospects are finished, and we might even become discouraged. If we don’t want this to happen or wish to overcome the pain that this might have caused us, we can change the focus of our lives. We need to realize that being disappointed, suffering for what’s going to happen to us as we age, or the changes we see in our bodies as time goes by, doesn’t make much sense. When we do this, we are reacting against an unavoidable law of life.

For physical deterioration not to seem like a tragedy, we need to develop some discernment and change our attitude towards life, accepting it and accepting ourselves at every stage, whatever our situation may be. In this way, we will be able to be fully present, in the here and now, and end the illusion of living tied to a past that no longer exists and a fear of what’s happening now.

A healthy relationship with the body as it changes over time helps us unfold harmoniously. The physical body grows, matures, declines and dies. Good management of our relationship with these changes helps us to understand the meaning of life and death, to be happy, and to deepen and expand our lifelong objective.

For physical decline to be a source of learning, we need to understand, accept and process our experiences. The fulfillment of material and social goals is not our only end; we need to expand the significance of our experiences, understand life as a whole and give meaning to our lives along its entire trajectory, at the end as well as the beginning.

If we accept the law of life beforehand, if we develop the habit of controlling our instinctive impulses and placing a limit on our desires, we will be ready to let younger people take our place when our bodies begin to decline. We will then be free to concentrate our energy on mental and spiritual work, without ceasing to make an effort to use our body well and keep it as agile as we can.

When we relate with our body as an instrument and are responsible for it before ourselves, society and humanity, we learn to accept death serenely. Not knowing when death will come moves us to concentrate our energy on the realization of our ideal, loving and being creative, instant after instant.

Control, responsibility and common sense in our relationship with our body help us to keep clear the spiritual objective of our lives, the values that sustain it and expand our participation in the world to which we owe so much.

Relationship with Responsibility

We are part of a universal system of relationships. Our actions, thoughts and feelings influence our surroundings. In critical moments Gandhi, a poor and apparently frail human being, influenced the actions of millions of people simply by fasting. The action of even one imprudent individual can cause—and certainly has already caused—an ecological catastrophe affecting families, industries and immense areas of pristine land and waters. Although these cases are dramatic, they give an idea of the influence of individual actions on the whole world, both positive and negative.

The effects of our actions on our surroundings are not always obvious to us. In many cases, this is due to our ignorance; in others it's due to our indifference or even deliberate decisions on our part. Often, we don't stop to analyze the consequences of our actions honestly enough. No action is inconsequential. If a chance happening such as the falling of a tree can change the course of a river, it is not hard to understand that individual actions, laden with the strength of intention and will, have an effect on society and the environment.

Although from the spiritual viewpoint we are responsible for the way we influence the world, the way we understand and accept that responsibility depends on our spiritual unfolding.

We assume responsibility gradually. When we were little, we could not even take care of ourselves. As we grew, we gradually began taking on more responsibilities. By the time we were adults, society expected us to take charge of our own lives and look after our families. Yet, it is not society which determines the limits of our responsibility. We do, each of us individually. We can fail to meet society's expectations or even we can go far beyond what anyone could ask—even to the point of offering our lives for the good of humanity. We are the ones who decide.

We can identify three aspects of responsibility: individual, social and spiritual.

Individual responsibility defines what we do with our lives. Though much can be done to help another person, no one else can live that person's life or die that

person's death. Each of us receives the fruits, sweet or bitter, of our decisions and even our indecision. It is, in the end, I who live my experience, fulfill (or not) my possibilities, and determine my destiny.

More specifically, individual responsibility implies that we, if we are healthy enough, produce at least what we consume, that we use our time and energy with discernment, and that we respond for the things we receive.

Since the perception of individual responsibility is very subjective, it leaves room for interpretations which many times don't really meet society's needs. In this text, we'll identify two ways of interpreting responsibility which create problems in our unfolding and that of society: sporadic or intermittent responsibility and the misuse of one's social heritage.

Sporadic or intermittent responsibility leads us to reduce responsibility to a few external obligations and to believe we are free to act as we like, even in an obviously irresponsible way. For example, someone may be responsible at work and negligent in his private life: he may pay his debts, and not fulfill his commitments with other people; as long as he is married he may take care of his children, but after divorce he ignores them; someone else might overwhelm her children with extreme protectiveness and neglect her elderly parents, or vice versa.

A sporadic sense of responsibility is also expressed in aspects which seem secondary, but which still have a great influence in individuals' lives. For example, our daily interchanges with others greatly influence our day-to-day lives. We might be courteous with some people and uncontrolled with others; measured when with others, but imprudent and aggressive behind the steering wheel; careful with our belongings and careless with what belongs to others.

The misuse of our social heritage is particularly unjustifiable in those people who have received an excellent education and are trained to fulfill a meaningful role in life, yet do not assume the responsibility expected from someone who has received so much. We might be good at pointing out all that should be done to have a better world, but in practice we behave selfishly or unwisely. It could even come to the point where other people have to take care of our needs and solve the problems created by our lack of discernment.

Simply by virtue of living in society, we enjoy the benefits brought about by the effort of countless individuals who have worked to enrich humankind throughout history with their contributions. The spiritual tradition, accumulated knowledge, technology, and material progress are goods that we receive without making an effort. This implies an unavoidable individual responsibility.

Each human being has the right to enjoy the heritage of society, but that right goes hand in hand with the obligation of enriching and increasing it.

The second aspect of responsibility is social. When we assume responsibility for society, we feel moved to commit ourselves to its improvement. We strive to produce more than we need, so that we can contribute to supporting those who are not in a condition to be self-sufficient: children, the ill, the elderly, the handicapped. Even if we don't consider ourselves exceptionally gifted, our capacity for work increases to the extent that our sense of "being in society" expands. This is so because love and interest multiply our personal effectiveness.

For society to function harmoniously, we each need to share not only our material goods but also our talents. Society needs the gifts of all its members. The capacity to create, to discover possibilities where others don't see them, and multiply the output of our resources will benefit everyone. No one doubts that the discovery of a cure for an illness should be shared. Just as the scientist who discovers a vaccine places it at the service of all, each of us offers the fruits of our own personal gifts, whatever they may be.

Sometimes, our sense of social responsibility may become misdirected as a result of excessive zeal. Many generous, hard-working people—parents, teachers, preachers—feel responsible for those who, according to their opinions or beliefs, are misguided or spiritually lost. These people sometimes give beautiful examples of sacrifice, thoroughly devoting themselves to promoting social change or preaching and converting. Yet believing it's one's duty to force someone to live in a certain way or accept a certain idea is an arrogant and dogmatic way of understanding social responsibility. It doesn't respect the individual's freedom. It isn't useful to confuse social responsibility by disregarding people's free-will.

The third aspect of responsibility is the spiritual aspect; in other words, it's responsibility for human destiny.

When we want to unfold, we accept responsibility. We no longer stop at the mere fulfillment of our duties, but we accept new and growing responsibilities towards ourselves, society and human destiny. Many people assume responsibilities out of ambition and vanity. How much more we can accomplish out of love!

Our yearning to attain real love expands our understanding and broadens our responsibility, moving us to give more and more of ourselves, to be better, to cure others, to console, to participate. Our ideal of participation constantly expands like a horizon that is continuously moving forward as we advance toward it.

We begin to fulfill our spiritual responsibility when we are responsible for the quality of our inner life, which is the foundation of the whole system of relationships. We are responsible not only for our actions, but also for the inner attitude which nourishes our feelings and thoughts.

Spiritual responsibility develops together with the expansion of our state of consciousness. The development of spiritual responsibility never ends; we are constantly working to expand it. We depart from a state of consciousness in which we see only ourselves and in which our sense of individual responsibility is limited to our own personal interests. Little by little, through our experiences and our effort to relate and communicate, we begin to leave our selfish enclosure and to include society among our concerns. This expansion allows us to see the insignificance of our ordinary set of problems within the circle of collective suffering. We learn to see that our selfishness can undo all our good work. On the one hand, we work for others, but on the other, our separativity still produces pain and misery.

We understand that we cannot solve outside, in society, what we have not overcome in our own lives. This awakening represents an immense step in our unfolding. We know that we cannot create a better world if we don't overcome the selfishness which causes misery in life. It isn't enough to wish for wars and violence to end if we don't put an end to the violence within ourselves. There won't be union among human beings as long as there's separativity in our hearts.

On our road of spiritual unfolding, the beginning and the end of the road become one. At the beginning of the road, our state of consciousness was centered on ourselves only. At the end we return to our interior, our point of departure, not to be blinded with our self-concerns, but to discover our strengths, our vision, the courage to work on what we yearn to see in society. We go from an egocentric and narcissistic attitude to a participatory attitude.

Spiritual responsibility expands our consciousness and our participation in the world. We learn to actualize in our lives what we hope for in the world. Our exterior work reflects our inner participation, and our efforts give noble and lasting results to humanity.

Relationship with Ideas

When we try to understand what's happening in our lives and decide what we will do, we tend to analyze our interpretations from the current ideas of our culture, our beliefs and our experiences. Those interpretations are the reference we use to choose our objectives and the way we will carry them out. We don't usually realize that our interpretations are our personal bias of judging what's happening. We rarely stop to analyze why we think and believe in such a particular way. We tend to accept or reject ideals according to the predominant ideology of the moment. We identify with what we read or with the ideas of the group or political party we belong. We don't really analyze what we think, and we allow ourselves to be influenced by other's ideas. We don't even consider whether our ideas and beliefs coincide and more specifically, whether our spiritual ideas are consistent with scientific knowledge.

We can learn a lot when we analyze our relationship with the ideas and beliefs we consider appropriate. We then compare them with those that promote our spiritual advancement and that of society, instead of unconditionally following a specific way of thinking or believing.

Our relationship with ideas evolves as we unfold spiritually. We can distinguish three types of relationship in this process:

- Emotional
- Dogmatic-argumentative
- Silence-experimentation

These three types of relationships usually coexist in us in varying proportions. We say we follow one or another of these three types of relationships depending on which one dominates in us in any given moment.

When we *relate emotionally*, we are moved by ideas and beliefs we consider to be true, but we don't really practice them. We imagine we are living these ideas because we are affected emotionally when we hear about them, and believe in them. Since we don't recognize any contradiction between what we believe and

how we are living, we interpret our experiences in terms of our desires and according to our convenience. We always find arguments to justify our behavior. We stubbornly defend our beliefs while, at the same time, we deny them with our actions. We could even forget our principles: to love our neighbors, to forgive, not to kill, justifying hatred and revenge.

In an emotional relationship, the reactions of attraction and rejection have a powerful influence on our interpretation of concepts. It's easy to generalize an opinion solely on what we like or dislike, labeling something as good or bad according to our preference. As attraction and rejection form a large part of our upbringing and habits, the emotional relationship with ideas also tend to be dogmatic.

A dogmatic relationship with ideas reduces our vision of life to a single point of view. As we think our theories and beliefs are the only truth, we tend to project all that is wrong with society onto those who have opinions different from ours, thinking that they are the cause of all existing problems. This attitude leads to separativity and hostility.

A dogmatic relationship with ideas causes confrontations that don't lead to dialogue or greater understanding; it creates more confusion and pain. When we are convinced of our opinions, we are not seeking the truth. We want, instead, to prove that others are wrong. Here, of course, we are referring to hostile confrontations, not to the discussions which produce intellectual interchange, with each member really listening to different points of view.

An argumentative relationship with ideas is another aspect of dogmatism and leads us to filter the information received through the ideas we once adopted but never really analyzed. If the new information coincides with our ideas, we readily accept them; if not, we tend to argue about them and reject them. Our dogmatic beliefs are like a prism through which we interpret life. All information is filtered through our belief system. If it serves to confirm our vision or reality and to support our certainty that we are right, we accept it. But if this doesn't happen, we reject that information without even considering that we have received new information. We don't even stop to analyze it.

We are not always conscious of our dogmatism. Interpretations are so limited that they can make us believe our way of thinking is universal, and that different, valid and acceptable approaches to reality don't even exist. As long as we have this attitude, we systematically reject all that doesn't agree with our ideas and we lose the possibility of expanding our way of thinking.

A different vision from our own is not necessarily a mistaken opinion, but simply another way of perceiving a situation. To prove this, we just have to remember how the usual discussions we have with others, or those we hear about, end up. We rarely end up having a common agreement or a vision of things that include different points of view. Thus, it's useful to compare our opinions with those of others, not for the purpose of arguing with them, but to better understand our own position in contrast to those who think differently.

The third kind of relationship with new points of view is that of *silence-experimentation*. In this relationship, we become open to new ideas, to different points of view, putting aside our preconceived ideas. Our relationship with ideas goes beyond agreement versus rejection in which case, instead of learning something new, we would see the context of those ideas only in opposition to our fixed ideas. When we receive spiritual teachings, it's important to be open to new ideas without judging them as positive or negative. This openness allows us to perceive their universal nature.

We receive spiritual ideas and beliefs through our culture. Culture and spirituality go hand in hand. We learn varying predominant beliefs in each culture. At the same time, science explains aspects of reality that in the past were considered beliefs. Thus, we can remember that spiritual principles shouldn't be opposed to scientific analysis and experimentation if we want to have a more universal vision of life. Evident truths prove the validity of spiritual postulates and they in turn, teach us to wisely use the power that comes with knowledge.

Humanity definitely advances with scientific investigation and applied knowledge. It's important to study history and the sciences to understand the social as well as the spiritual ideas. Our vision of life is complete when we integrate the current knowledge; that is, when we integrate what we already know about life, humanity and the universe.

It's not necessary to "believe" in new points of view, new concepts, and new possibilities, but we do need to consider and study them. They may open up new avenues of experience and knowledge. The teachings that surround any experience give good results when we approach them as an investigator, open and free of prejudices. This attitude teaches us to listen, to open up to a panorama wider than dogma. To listen and become informed without deciding beforehand what we will think is an excellent way to expand our understanding and to renew ourselves inwardly.

Society has organized ideas into norms of coexistence, that serve as the basis of a method of life. Most of us have to make an effort to obey the laws and the rules of the social organization since those laws and rules follow principles which are more elevated than those we habitually follow. Even though we find it hard to accept, we must admit that only a reduced number of people follow a code of ethics higher than our laws. Even in these cases, we are frequently searching for ideas that promote greater harmony in our relationships with others, with our surroundings and even with ourselves.

When we discover an idea that is clearly useful, we need to look for a way to apply it in everyday life, so that it doesn't just become a passing idea. Even the simplest understanding requires an interior method of work if it is to become part of our lives. To practice what we learn for a while might be very satisfying; but to make that new understanding our way of living, we need to maintain an attitude of observation, experimentation and fidelity.

An attitude of observation allows us to understand inner processes without distorting them with subjective interpretations. In this way we can identify what we need to change or improve and what concepts we need to apply in each case, so that our understanding becomes permanent.

There are no set solutions for the challenges of life, nor are there fool-proof recipes to apply at each moment of human unfolding. The fundamental concepts of spiritual life have to be experienced by each person according to circumstances and individual characteristics. To experiment is, first of all, to choose a way to apply those concepts in our lives; second, to evaluate the results obtained and, finally, to

continue correcting and adapting our actions as needed to obtain the best results possible.

An attitude of openness protects us from the tendency to evaluate the consequences of our efforts as triumphs or failures. An undesirable outcome is not a failure but new knowledge which, if applied well, helps us to avoid making the same mistakes again.

If we want ideas and experiences to really teach us, we have to always be ready to expand our point of view. Not all points of view are equally valid, since an impartial opinion is broader than a selfish one. To tell the difference between one and the other, we need to universalize the way we think and to learn how to resolve differences through continually expanding our interpretations. Thus, we can learn from our experiences in a direct way. Just as we learn by studying books, we can learn from life every day if we are attentive.

We can, step by step, assimilate the teaching of life by maintaining an open and receptive attitude, and by appreciating our experiences and the ideas we receive. To cultivate the art of living, we don't wait for a great teaching, ideas or new doctrines to come along, because life is like an open book. When we know how to read it, it shows us how to understand our experiences and to know ourselves.

Relationship with Life

We relate to life through our experiences. The more conscious this relationship is, the better we understand ourselves and our experiences. But when our relationships exist at the level of unconscious reactions, we don't understand what happens to us, and we don't learn from life.

The type of relationship we establish with our experiences determines the dimension we give our lives. Life can be a matter of simply enduring whatever happens to us, or else it can be an opportunity to unfold.

We understand the meaning of our experiences depending on the degree of consciousness we have acquired. Thus, in order to deepen our relationship with life, we need to expand our state of consciousness. That is, we have to constantly redefine the meaning we give our lives.

When the expression "my life" is reduced to what happens inside the small nucleus of my personal interests, my relationship to life is limited to my particular circumstances. When "my life" includes the society in which I live, my relationship to life expands to include that society. When "my life" is all the reality I can comprehend with my consciousness, my relationship with life embraces all humanity, the universe and the divine.

In practical terms: What difference does it make whether I define "my life" in one way or another?

As long as our view of life is reduced to our personal circumstances, we identify with the things that happen to us. We fear the future, hold on tightly to our possessions and suffer in our ignorance and separativity. When experiences cause us to suffer, our relationship with life might become bitter, resentful and pessimistic. When others suffer, it matters to us only to the extent that it affects us personally. We see the evils of the world as something foreign, outside of ourselves, "out there." The problems that come from natural causes or which all human beings endure become personal tragedies, as if destiny were against us.

Misfortune takes us by surprise and makes us think that life is meaningless. But when we experience a personal triumph, we feel that life is meaningful.

Even when we have all we could ever need, we might still think our lives are meaningless. Self-enclosed as we are in our personal problems, we compare our fortunes, or misfortunes, with those of others and don't even appreciate the gifts we have. We are only concerned with what we think we lack.

Our idea of happiness is an illusion. We often think that to be happy is to avoid the laws of life such as not having to face adversity, uncertainty, decline and death. A harmonious and profound relationship with life leads to a universal outlook which includes simultaneously the particular to the general, the personal and the whole span of reality. With such an outlook, we are able to distinguish between the aspects of life we consider good fortune or bad fortune and the laws of life, between what we contribute with our personal effort and what we receive from others. We place our painful experiences within the suffering of all humankind and learn to accept what we can change and what we cannot.

When we have a conscious relationship with life, we learn to take what happens to us as a means of participation. This means that instead of interpreting something painful as a curse or something pleasant as a deserved privilege, we come to see the experiences of life as a means of sharing with all human beings. We accept each experience as an inseparable part of an event, which is, simultaneously, a universal, social, familial and personal happening. When we place our painful experiences within the suffering of all humankind, we discover participation and compassion. When we understand that all the things we have received from life are not for us to keep, we offer them to bring well-being and prosperity for everyone. For example, if we have been educated, are healthy and well economically, we offer those gifts and contribute to the well-being of all. We give part of what we have to help those who have less.

Many of our problems stem from our own behavior. In order not to repeat the same mistakes, we look to human history and to our own past, facing the consequences of our previous decisions and discerning the results of those we are about to make. This attitude brings peace, well-being and plenitude.

The direction we give our lives depends on our frame of reference. If we limit our world to our daily interests, we disconnect from reality. We can't understand our experiences or make decisions that take into account their effect of the whole.

When we see ourselves as an integral part of humanity, we change our attitude. Instead of asking, we learn to give. Instead of wanting to get something, we act selflessly. Instead of wanting to possess more and more, we direct our energy to necessary and creative activities. Instead of wanting to control others, we work to master ourselves and expand our participation. We want to consciously integrate ourselves with the world and life.

Some strengths help us expand our definition of our relationship with life. Some of these strengths are humility, disattachment, participation and reverence.

Humility makes us conscious of our limitations, helping us to recognize that our view of reality is partial and temporary. This helps us to learn from everything and everyone.

Disattachment makes us conscious of the temporality of an individual life. It frees us from our struggle against time, since we understand that nothing outside ourselves is permanent. Therefore, we understand that it's useless to try to get, keep and accumulate more than what we really need. Besides, disattachment from the results of our efforts allows us to stop depending on what is external and transitory and discover the eternity inherent in continuous becoming.

Participation makes us conscious of the human condition, helps us to extend the boundaries of the personal and to become one with the surrounding reality. When we participate, we integrate the particular with the general and we unify our life.

Reverence toward the things that transcend our understanding makes us conscious of our real possibilities. Reverence toward the transcendent keeps us open and permeable to the message of life, helping us to revise our interpretation of events and expand our view of reality.

To the extent that we harmonize the way we live our personal life with a global vision of life, we gradually understand the stages of our lives and the teaching provided by both sorrow and happiness. We distinguish between fleeting moments

of joy—the outcome of passing experiences—and lasting peace and happiness, which arise from understanding, acceptance and participation.

To remember aspects of our daily reality we usually overlook, such as that everything is transitory, is a good habit to develop. Other aspects that are also useful to remember are: pain is experienced, but it passes; a spiritual realization is without doubt a big step, but challenges remain. This exercise helps us to put our experiences in perspective. It also shows us how to overcome sorrow and unmask the illusions that keep us from attaining our highest possibilities.

The universal teaching flows through our daily experiences. The more harmonious is our relationship with life, the better we understand its messages. We take a great step in our spiritual unfolding when we become aware that each one of our experiences can lead us to fulfill our spiritual vocation or it can lead us in the opposite direction. Becoming aware of our experiences is important because it allows us to discern what's best to be doing at each moment. Let's use this awareness to be conscious of all our experiences and use our time and energy wisely for our spiritual and material development, as well as for the development of all human beings.

Relationship with Vocation

We discover and cultivate vocation when we ask ourselves the most fundamental questions in life: “Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?” As we can see, this use of the word “vocation” doesn’t fit the conventional definition which refers to a natural inclination, capacity or aptitude.

All human beings have a vocation, but not everyone has a clear notion of their vocation. Vocation is not one more choice among an array of possible activities. It is what gives meaning to everything we do. It is what leads not only to the development of our abilities but also ourselves, as integral human beings. Although this can be a passive way of understanding our vocation, it allows us to distinguish whether we really want to continue living in a particular way or if we wish to give a transcendental meaning to our life.

People have different aptitudes—some of us are better at some things while others excel at things we cannot begin to do. Very few have the same aptitude for everything and we tend to like what comes most easily and is more rewarding. The more we work within an area of aptitude, the more skillful we become and the more fulfilled. This might lead us to say that we have a vocation for this or that field—in art, science or any other type of activity. But an aptitude for doing something is one thing while the capacity for unfolding integrally as a human being is quite another. A person might be superbly gifted at some activity, yet be a beginner at the art of living, not understanding his experiences or relationships.

Training enables us to work well in an occupation. However, vocation implies broadening our state of consciousness and gradually adjusting our conduct as we unfold. For this reason, vocation is not one more choice among an array of possible activities; it is what gives meaning to everything we do. It is what leads not only the development of our skills but also ourselves, as integral human beings.

People have different aptitudes—some of us are better at some things while others excel at things we cannot begin to do. Yet every one of us is capable of developing our consciousness. Therefore, everyone has a potential vocation of spiritual unfolding. However, each one awakens to this vocation through a process of self-

knowledge, which takes time and effort. Our vocation is actualized when we respond effectively to our need to expand our consciousness.

We do not need extra time to answer the call of our vocation. Rather, we need to rearrange our values and priorities while at the same time, cultivate our discernment. But we can understand this only after we have managed to control ourselves in such a way as to produce an effective unfolding within. Until then, the effort of fulfilling our vocation is a specialized and distinctive occupation that competes with other occupations in our lives.

Vocation is expressed as harmony—the harmony between our everyday affairs and the total meaning of our lives. We can distinguish three stages in this relationship:

- Discovery
- Discernment
- Integration

The first stage starts when we discover that we do not need to follow the same roads others have taken. We can work on knowing ourselves and shape our own destiny in relationship to a reality that transcends our immediate objectives. The interest in new ideas that awakens in us with the discovery of our vocation has nothing to do with the desire to obtain a position or to have and enjoy more. Rather, it is moved by the desire to attain inner peace and better understanding, and especially by the yearning to give meaning to our lives.

This stage opens up a wide field of experimentation and discovery, but it also draws a dividing line between the interests of our daily lives and those of the new life that we glimpse within ourselves: the material on one side, and the spiritual on the other. Although we create a dualism with this attitude, in the beginning it is good because it gives us the needed determination to go change our habits and direct our efforts towards a more noble and transcendental end rather than that of self-satisfaction.

In the second stage, we understand that there is no real contradiction between our vocation and our daily life. Rather it is only the product of a state of consciousness marked by the inertia of outmoded interpretations that have already been overcome. We still do not know how to integrate the two opposing forces that move us: our true yearnings on the one hand and our instinctual impulses on the other. Neither determination nor the euphoria we experienced when we first discovered our

vocation are helpful supports. The only thing that sustains us now is the strength of our vows and our commitment of fulfilling our vocation. If we had not assumed this commitment, we could hardly be able to fulfill it.

This stage is characterized by reflection and self-study. We reexamine every one of our actions, feelings and thoughts and decide whether or not they further the fulfillment of our vocation.

We make sacrifices for our vocation of spiritual unfolding, but we still do not love it above all things. In spite of our constant attempts to actively answer to it, we are frequently prey to negative reactions and discouragement.

Responding to the vocation of spiritual unfolding often implies going against deeply rooted desires. We do not always understand the process of unfolding and project onto our vocation our disappointment when our conscience curbs our impulses of doing whatever we want at each moment. We interpret not being able to silence our conscience as the source of our difficulties and of our apparent lack of freedom.

Spiritual vocation does not create difficulties; rather, it makes them evident. In the measure in which we try to live according to our vocation, we discover what we have to overcome. We might discover in ourselves, for example, impatience or the tendency to react aggressively, and we know that this is where we have to work if we are to unfold. When we find ourselves overreacting, we learn to pay attention to the process unleashing itself within us. Instead of wasting our energy in harmful outbursts, we can get to know ourselves better and to transmute of that energy. But if we decide to close our eyes to our unfolding, we begin to think that our vocation is creating problems for us, taking up our time and interfering in our relationships.

Another difficulty that appears after a time of inner work is the tendency to become discouraged when we go through what is known as aridity. Since work on ourselves becomes routine, we do not find the motivation or the consolation that previously made things easier. On the contrary, the more we know ourselves, the more easily we discover painful aspects of life that we cannot eliminate or solve as we would like. Although we are able to discern our vocation, we still do not understand the nature of our spiritual work. This is disheartening and can make us vacillate in our resolve.

The third stage of our vocation begins when we decide to become totally responsible for our unfolding. After the painful experience of doubt, we come to understand that hesitation is regression. We are no longer waiting for some miraculous intervention that will set us free. The different aspects of our lives come together in harmony through our single intention and our will applied to our unfolding.

Our spiritual life and the task of living are one and the same. Love for freedom sustains our will, inspires our intellect and nourishes our emotions. We realize that unfolding is equivalent to understanding and knowing ourselves and improving our relationships at all levels. We see that meeting the demands of our vocation, instead of taking away our freedom, allows us to be really free and to express the best of ourselves.

To answer to our vocation does not eliminate uncertainty or pain in this life. However, it does teach us to live more wisely by fostering our self-knowledge and cultivating our best qualities. This helps us to face suffering, and even the most difficult circumstances on earth produce the blossoming of our best human possibilities.

It is in this third stage that we understand that fulfilling our vocation doesn't take away our time. On the contrary, time is multiplied because we learn to choose our priorities wisely, organizing our days more harmoniously and sensibly. We increase our capacity to pay attention to what we are doing, generating at all times the feelings that awaken the noblest and most beneficial responses for everyone.

There is no final point in the fulfillment of our vocation. Vocation refers to a way of life which develops our capacity to master ourselves, to live simply, to love, to be at the service of all human beings, and to expand our consciousness.

Relationship with Spiritual Counseling

Spiritual counseling is traditionally understood as the orientation given to those who ask for it in order to live according to their religious beliefs. In this course, we understand spiritual counseling as that which guides us to deepen our notion of being and our role in the world.

All human beings need some counseling: at school, at work, in sports as well as in the sciences and the arts. Thanks to the counseling we receive, we have advanced culturally. However, in spite of all our advances, wars, violence, anger, the frequent lack of understanding between people still continue. It is evident that we still need a different type of orientation.

We have enough knowledge to understand not only what happens among us but also our situation in the world and the universe. But this understanding has not helped us much to overcome our differences, especially in the sphere of our relationships and our behavior. We can still find arguments to justify one, as well as the opposite, position and way of acting. Our reasoning is not enough to allow us to become aware of what we do and think. It is evident that we need a kind of counseling that can help us not only to become aware, but also to become conscious of what we are like, how we behave and what we produce with our way of being. We also need a kind of counseling that can help us unfold as human beings. In other words, we need the type of counseling that can help us expand our state of consciousness. In this course, we call this help *spiritual counseling*. And we call the process of expansion of our state of consciousness *spiritual unfolding*.

The work of spiritual unfolding requires specific knowledge and wisdom. We receive help with this through spiritual counseling. We do not consider the counselor as a Teacher we have to follow, but as someone that can help us because they have walked the path of unfolding we yearn to take. Spiritual Counselors offer us their experience, their comprehension and the support we need at each stage of our life. They do not ask us to change our beliefs; on the contrary, they help us broaden our points of view, discern our vocation of unfolding, recognize our walk in life and use the means we have to follow it.

The fact of having searched for and chosen a spiritual orientation implies that we know what we are looking for and the manner in which we want to reach it. This knowledge helps us keep our intention to unfold spiritually up to date.

In spiritual counseling, both we and our counselor have active roles; we are companions on the path. In fact, spiritual counseling is a mirror where we can look at ourselves, discern our possibilities and choose our path in life. In practice, we find in our spiritual counselor someone who listens to us without judging us, advises us without expecting anything in return, and orients us in accordance to what we yearn to attain.

Asking for spiritual orientation shows that we have decided to look at our life directly. Saying what we feel and yearn for is a way of clarifying to ourselves our situation and our objectives. Spiritual counseling is the reference we use to evaluate our subjective states, our advances or stagnation, our choices and our possibilities. The spiritual counselor helps us objectify problems, discover options, make our point of view more universal and distinguish our path in the tangle of daily events.

In the same way as the physical body depends not only on the food we eat but also on its way of assimilating it, our unfolding also depends both on the spiritual counseling we receive and on our way of living it.

The manner in which we relate to our spiritual vocation determines the reach we give to the counseling we receive. It is necessary for us to have clear in mind what place our vocation takes in our life, to what extent it prevails over other objectives, and to what degree we are ready to commit our efforts, time, resources and possibilities to carrying it out. If spiritual vocation had a secondary role in our life, we could either apply the spiritual counseling we receive or decide not to, depending on our momentary interests. But if we center our life on our vocation, spiritual counseling becomes the source of advice necessary for our unfolding.

The result of spiritual orientation depends, to a large extent, on each one's discernment to understand it, efforts to apply it, trust to accept it and commitment to receive it.

We take advantage of spiritual counseling to the degree we understand it. Spiritual

counseling is like a voice inside ourselves, since the task of the spiritual counselor is to make explicit and clear to us what we really yearn for. When we follow spiritual counseling, we respond to our inner voice and acquire the necessary strength to persevere in the realization of our ideal.

The counselor's advice is based on our determination to work on our unfolding. The counselor assists us in the clarification of our options and encourages us to respond to our vocation. That is why spiritual orientation would be meaningless if we neglected our vocation or subordinated it to other objectives.

Spiritual counseling answers to the need and possibilities of each one in particular; it is the teaching one requires at that moment. This is why we are careful not to generalize the orientation we receive. We distinguish what is applicable only to the moment we are living from what is always valid. Besides, we know that the counseling we receive responds to our own characteristics and, though appropriate to us, it is not necessarily what others need.

If we generalized the way we apply the counseling we receive, it could happen that instead of bringing about some benefit, it would generate a reaction and resentment in others. For example, we might think that because we can discipline our life, we can demand the same behavior from those around us. We might treat harshly people who love us but think different from us, or we might try to impose on others the advice we receive. That is not the way to help. Instead, if we understand the limits of the spiritual counseling we receive and apply it with good sense, our behavior improves our relationship with family, friends and companions, and reflects positively within society.

To fulfill our spiritual vocation, apart from understanding the characteristics of spiritual counseling, it is necessary to make a permanent effort to practice what we understand. For example, we need to control impulses and desires in order to be able to orient our energy towards the ideal we have chosen. This implies paying attention to all aspects of our behavior and gradually improving the way we respond to stimuli.

On some occasions, we may tend to question the counseling we receive because at that moment we think we do not agree with it. If this were the case, it would be

important to discern if our reaction was due to not having enough willpower to apply the advice. For this reason, it is good to develop our willpower by persisting in our efforts. In this way, we can achieve the inner confidence that allows us to lead our life the way that we have decided.

Spiritual counseling is based on trust. The counselor trusts that we always aim at the highest good, and we are confident that counseling will safely orient us towards the fulfillment of our ideal. This reciprocal trust enriches us both and turns a relation of apparent dependency into a shared path.

We assume the responsibility for our unfolding at every moment because it is we who decide on our life and are ready to face the consequences of our actions and choices. Although the spiritual counselor gives us advice, we are responsible for our decisions. We do not do something because someone tells us to do it but because we decide to do it. Advice is not binding; it just shows options.

Spiritual counseling is not a panacea. It does not do away with the difficulties inherent to life, but it does help us to solve conflicts, avoid harm, develop the best possibilities and live experiences in a way that results in our own good and for the good of all.

With our request for counseling we express our decision to devote ourselves to fulfilling our spiritual vocation. By accepting the responsibility of spiritual orientation, spiritual counselors link their life to ours. They are not totally free, since their life is tied to the needs of those of us who trust in them.

Our confidence in spiritual counseling imposes an enormous responsibility on the counselor. By asking for counseling, we commit counselors to acting impeccably. Counselors leave aside their personality, with their particular preferences and opinions. Only by renouncing to themselves can they give us what we need, according to our possibilities.

When the spiritual counselors are with us, they remember that their voice should express only what we need to hear. When we are before our counselor, we remember that the only thing we can expect is a piece of advice in keeping with our spiritual vocation.

Relationship with God

When we work on improving our relationships with other human beings, nature, the universe and God, differences are made evident. Therefore, working on our relationships both unites us with others, but also shows us our differences. Therefore, from the spiritual point of view, working on our relationships is a means and not an end, and as can happen with any means, if our intention is not clear, we can lose sight of our real goal.

The end that we pursue in working on our relationships determines what we get. We may try to use everything around us to our advantage over everything that we define as “not myself,” or we may work to attain the highest degree of love.

For our work on improving our relationships to have a transcendent meaning, our intention and our aim has to be union with others and with our ever-widening environment. For this reason, our work on relationships has to respond clearly to two fundamental questions:

- Why do we work to harmonize relationships? What motivates us to do so?
- What do we want to achieve by harmonizing relationships? What's the end objective?

Why do we work to harmonize our relationships? It is because we want to overcome separativity and contribute to both our own development and the development of humankind.

What's the end objective of working on relationships? It is to expand our consciousness through an increasingly more expansive love. In other words, it is to attain union with God.

If our motivation is to unfold and our end is to unite with God, we harmonize our relationships with others to love them better. We improve our relationship with the Earth not to exploit it even more than we have, but to cooperate with others in healing it. We seek to transcend the notion of being a separate and opposing entity so that we may become conscious that we exist in participation and in union with God.

However, both the motivation and purpose of our work on harmonizing our relationships become apparent to us only gradually. We can distinguish two major stages in this work:

- Relationships directed toward survival and conquest
- Relationships oriented towards participation.

These stages affect both the relationship among human beings and our relationship with God.

In the first stage we can recognize periods of competition, but also tolerance and solidarity.

The struggle for survival and the desire for conquest are based on the division we make between what we believe we are and what we think everything else—other human beings, nature, the universe and God—appears to be.

The need to survive leads us to compete at any cost without considering the consequences, and makes our relationship with God one in which we strive to be assured that we will survive as a separate entity in this world and in the next. God must protect us in this world from natural catastrophes, diseases and enemies. We expect Him to protect us after our death in the next world as well, giving us a privileged place by His side. Since we fear God's anger and punishment, we make offerings to Him in exchange for His favors. We make a pact with God so that He will support us in our competition with our adversaries.

Although we have developed enough to be able to protect ourselves and obtain what we need to survive, we might still maintain a competitive attitude. Thinking we are separated from the whole causes us to try to manipulate everything and destroy whatever is opposed to our conquests. We might even compete unconsciously with the God we worship. But, in this stage of development, not knowing who we are or why we are alive, we humble ourselves and prostrate ourselves before God, asking for help and mercy. Our relationship with God is one of hope, on the one hand, and resignation on the other.

The suffering caused by this isolation and ignorance teaches us to measure the cost

of competition and to value tolerance, acceptance of others and also acceptance of the will of God.

Tolerance leads gradually to solidarity, the most beautiful period of this first stage. While we continue to maintain a division between ourselves and others, compassion raises the level of our relationship. We not only tolerate others, we even collaborate with them, assisting them in their needs and sharing what we have with them.

We also show our solidarity in respect for the Earth and its resources, in concern for their use, and in our effort to repair the harm we have done to the planet.

Solidarity opens the doors to participation with all beings and also with God.

At the stage of participation, we know we are part of a whole and we feel it. We express this spontaneously through our relationships. The answer to our need for unfolding is at the same time a response to what is needed for the advancement of humanity. Our personal good and the good of humanity become one.

Even though we perceive only certain aspects of the system of relationships to which we belong, the fact that we participate in it implies that we have the possibility of being aware of the whole system. Our work on our relationships makes this potential a reality and helps us expand our consciousness towards a state of union with the great context of existence. Awareness that we are participating in the totality of life is a state we arrive at gradually through a long process which does not seem to have an end.

Although we cannot explain union with God, we can observe that the process of moving towards union results in the gradual simplification of our relationships. This shows that improving our relationships does not mean more complexity and sophistication, but rather it's just the reverse: it leads to simplicity and transparency.

We learn to relate when we make the effort to connect with all the aspects of life. As our circle of interest expands, the boundaries that separate us from others disappear. A moment comes when we are not relating "with" someone or "with" God, but when everything acquires reality within us.

To deepen our relationship with God, our relationships must be based on selfless love. We need to renounce supports and let go of our preestablished ideas. We also need the determination to channel our efforts within a viable method that will help us expand our consciousness.

Working on the system of relationships is a fundamental part of our journey towards union with God. It is a work that can be done by all human beings since relationships are the very fabric of life.

About Cafh

“Cafh” is an ancient word that refers to our yearning for union with God. Its meaning implies the whole spectrum of the soul’s spiritual unfolding, from our effort to reach God to the divine grace of receiving assistance in that effort.

Cafh is a path of spiritual unfolding founded by Don Santiago Bovisio in 1937 in Argentina. It later expanded to countries in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Australia and Africa. Although Cafh can now be found across the world, this does not mean that Cafh functions as a large institution. Rather, it consists of small groups of people who gather regularly and share the common yearning to find meaning in life and to integrate this meaning into all aspects of daily relations and experiences.

Cafh offers its members the gifts of a Method of Life, teachings, spiritual exercises such as reflection and meditation, and individual spiritual counseling for those requesting it. Love for humanity, the yearning to transform oneself and the willingness to undertake the task are the only requirements for participating in Cafh.

For further information about Cafh and its activities, or to contact a member of Cafh, go to www.cafh.org