

Relationship

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RELATIONSHIP AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

First Teaching

Spiritual life is founded on love, and love depends on the conscious and methodical unfolding of relationships. The idea that spiritual unfolding is a hidden process that only takes place between ourselves and the divine is untenable. Our relationship with all beings and with the world is not just the setting in which our spiritual transformation takes place. On the contrary, our spiritual unfolding is only possible to the extent that we unfold our relationships with all human beings and with all aspects of life. Thus, the process of spiritual unfolding is intricately connected to the development of relationships.

We are inseparable from the universe: we are in relationship and we live in relationship. Nevertheless, our relationship with the world and with the cosmos is, for the most part, still unconscious; we are only aware of some of the relationships we establish.

We live in an environment as narrow or as broad as our level of consciousness determines. Since our mental states are influenced by our attitudes, health, moods, and the circumstances of the moment, the subjective dimension of the context in which we act is continuously changing. Therefore, we sometimes wish to have a relationship with all beings—our context is the universe—and other times we do not want to relate to anyone or anything—our context is ourselves.

Yet, like it or not, know it or not, we live in relationship.

The expansion of our consciousness towards cosmic consciousness is through souls, all souls. We cannot embrace the cosmos without including all of its parts. It is useless to seek the infinite if we ignore or reject what seems limited. To think we are unfolding while our coexistence is, at best, a situation in which everyone tries to put up with everyone else is to fail to recognize the spiritual, and to waste the possibilities of our consciousness. Likewise, we live an illusion if we believe we are on a spiritual road and yet live in such a way that others have to practice virtues to be able to get along with us.

We dream about systems that will make society perfect. Yet, no exterior system can produce a better society unless each one of us learns how to live with others by consciously establishing harmonious relationships.

Whether we are seeking a better society or the possibility of unfolding ourselves, we have to begin by becoming conscious of our relationships and learning to live with others.

Spiritual tradition teaches us the minimum foundations for human relationship: not to kill, not to hurt, not to torment, not to affect adversely, that is, to control our passions¹ so that they bring no harm to others. Moreover, it teaches us to develop behaviors and attitudes that predispose us to accept our neighbors: tolerance, patience, gentleness, and compassion. Although these precepts indicate only the beginning of a respectful relationship, we have not yet realized them. It is here, at this first step, that we have to begin to make our relationships conscious, and develop them.

Making relationships conscious requires us to make an interior and exterior effort. We need an interior effort because establishing harmonious relationships demands a work of self-knowledge that will allow us to go beyond a view that makes us divide an indivisible reality. We

¹ In this text we use the word *passions* in its meaning of mood disorders or disturbances.

need an exterior effort because harmonious relationships require us to control our conduct so that our way of expressing ourselves and communicating does not separate us from others, but instead allows us to create union among human beings.

We need self-knowledge to unfold. We also need to apply, in daily life, the personal control granted by ascetic exercises, as well as by the basic principles we glimpse in the meditation. In this way, our interpersonal relationships are the means through which we cultivate love, participation, and shared growth.

Our effort to spiritualize daily life through the unfolding of relationships makes it possible for us to live harmoniously with others and, starting from there, to participate and expand our consciousness toward divine union.

POSSESSIVE RELATIONSHIP AND PARTICIPATIVE RELATIONSHIP

Second Teaching

The characteristics of our relationships indicate the extent to which we have unfolded spiritually: The more we unfold, the more expansive and participative are the relationships we establish.

Although spiritual unfolding is a continuum, we can, for didactic purposes, simplify the process relationships undergo by describing their two major stages: possessive relationship and participative relationship.

Possessive relationships impose dependence. We believe we can do what we want with everything, as if we were lords and masters of all that surrounds us, including other people, their lives, their feelings, and their thoughts. When we do not achieve this, we become annoyed and react against whatever escapes our control. Thus, offense, misfortune, and grief are the consequences of a possessive relationship.

Aggression occurs in possessive relationships when we impose our will on others. If we did not think of others as belongings, we would not be able to discharge our passions onto them. Therefore, even though possessive relationships are not always characterized by acts of physical violence, they do violence to others, to the environment, and to nature.

Possessive relationships undermine the human being's intrinsic freedom. Although at this level of consciousness we can conceive of a certain degree of freedom, in practice, we disregard all rights but our own.

The effort to dominate and get some personal advantage from a relationship results in deception and loneliness. The desire for possession separates rather than unites, and, eventually, it destroys.

The vicious circle of possession and destruction is broken when we recognize that we have the possibility of participation and we come to understand that we suffer because our eagerness to possess is hurting those we need to love. This awakening moves us to master our instinctive and selfish drives and to nourish our need to offer ourselves and participate.

We take the first steps in the expansion of relationships when we broaden the circle of our affections and learn to experience joy and suffering for others.

To love a greater number of persons, to work for the good of others without manipulating those we love, accustoms us to fixing our attention beyond our private interests. We thus discover our environment and develop respect for everyone and everything.

To respect is to listen lovingly, to give people and nature the opportunity to express themselves. This attitude allows us to discover the teaching that, until then, was veiled by our eagerness to have everything obey our own will.

When we respect, we discover the world in which we live, nature that nourishes us, and the life that throbs in what had no message for us until then. Through respect, we become humble and we learn how to learn.

When we are respectful, we begin to relate through participation. The way we respond to the circumstances of life and to all human beings changes too. Instead of reacting in favor of what pleases us and against what contradicts us, we learn to accept. Instead of suffering and

enjoying only what happens to us, we learn to participate in the joy and suffering of others. Instead of being centered on our everyday events, we learn to share in humanity's events. In other words, we embrace everything that exists with expansive love.

Relationship through participation is strengthened with appropriate practices. The basic work consists in generating an attitude of service by remaining attentive in order to perceive the needs of others. We don't need extra time and many goods to help others. We always have countless opportunities to help in a constructive way with understanding, with good words, and especially with deeds. Simple acts, such as cleaning what we did not get dirty, fixing up the mess we did not make, sharing what we have and what we know, treating someone else's things even more carefully than our own, helping someone else instead of giving in to ourselves, are good ways to begin learning participation.

When we participate, we know that we cannot be self-complacent. On the contrary, we work continuously with our minds and feelings, generating good thoughts and positive feelings toward all, as much for others as for ourselves. If we ever feel sorry for ourselves, we replace that emotion with compassion for those who have less than we do, and we remember that there is much to do in this world to alleviate human suffering.

These simple practices help to make the world alive within us.

Relationship through participation develops within us the consciousness of our union with all souls and with the world. At the same time, it generates reverence for the divine manifestation.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OURSELVES

Third Teaching

One of the mainstays of our spiritual unfolding is our capacity to know and understand ourselves within our environment. For this reason, when dealing with the subject of spiritual unfolding, the first relationship that we need to consider is our relationship with ourselves.

Each of us is a composite. Genetic and acquired characteristics mutually influence and modify each other. As they clash with circumstances, these characteristics generate a variety of emotions, feelings, and thoughts that are often contradictory: altruism and selfishness, love and indifference.

We believe we express ourselves in a genuine way. Yet, the more we observe ourselves, the more we understand that instead of being human beings who have coherent and harmonious behavior, we have many faces.

Sooner or later, this identity crisis impels us to try to find out who we are. A process of searching for our own identity then begins, a process that can be accelerated with the appropriate attitudes, standards of conduct, and practices. Some of these are described below.

We find our place in relationship to others and to the universe

We can polish what we already are without deepening into the idea we have of ourselves. We are not alone, nor do we live in isolation. Therefore, let's universalize our experiences, and place ourselves within human events with equilibrium, generosity, and a sense of reality.

We can access a more universal notion of being by taking distance from an experience centered in ourselves. We place ourselves in a context that is more aligned with our reality when we open our consciousness to the life of the universe and the world of all beings. We can then understand the range of our possibilities and gain the strength to fulfill them. Nevertheless, we can respond in other ways to this vision of ourselves. For example, when we contemplate the vastness of the universe, and our smallness within it, we may also diminish our own worth. Likewise, when we see the extraordinary value of our lives as an expression of the divine will, we can exaggerate our personal importance. In order to reach a harmonious relationship with ourselves—and with others, too—we need to take our understanding of our smallness and harmonize it with the vision of the grandeur of our destiny of divine union.

We are not the center of the universe; we are not even more important than other aspects of reality. Yet, each of us has a unique and indispensable place in the world, as well as a unique relevance in the life of the society in which we unfold, and in the lives of our families, friends, and those who depend on us.

In other words, we recognize our smallness within the cosmic dimension as well as the transcendence of our experience within the nucleus in which we live. This recognition leads us to the next point of our spiritual work.

We respect ourselves

Although we are not the center of the universe, we are an expression of the divine manifestation. From this point of view, our attitude should be one of reverence for the divine that dwells within us, and our intention that of becoming conscious of the spirit that inspires us.

Although we are free to live as we wish, our consciousness of our spiritual possibilities does not allow us to live however we please, to indiscriminately plunge into experiences, or to act according to impulses that are incongruent with our longing to expand our consciousness toward cosmic consciousness—to unite with the divine. Our way of life reflects this profound respect for our own possibilities

Respect and reverence set the trend in our relationship with ourselves.

We are truthful with ourselves

Self-respect leads us to look at ourselves objectively, to be truthful, to love truth above all things. Even so, we are so attached to ourselves that we are unconsciously inclined to self-justification, self-pity, and self-complacency. What we think, feel, and do is influenced by an eagerness to protect our self-image. In order to be truthful with ourselves, we have to transcend that tendency.

In order to be truthful, we need to keep a distance from ourselves and from what happens to us. By keeping a distance from ourselves, we can make a more complete and impersonal evaluation of ourselves, simply because we see ourselves objectively and consider the feedback we receive. By keeping a distance from what happens to us, time helps us understand experiences in their proper perspective and gives us the necessary serenity to clarify our own judgment.

We keep a distance from the vicissitudes inherent to life and to our unfolding

The more we identify with our experiences, the more our understanding becomes confused. We don't distinguish between who we are and what happens to us; therefore, we become trapped in our mental and emotional states. We live an illusion about ourselves. Our notions, perceptions, and evaluations are so subjective that our experiences are not as useful to us as they should be. We therefore repeat them, again and again, without thoroughly understanding them.

When we live centered in what happens to us, we live only for ourselves. We do not perceive other persons' points of view, needs, or preferences. When we decide to pay attention only to what happens to us, we throw away the possibility of expanding our consciousness and unfolding. Life slips through our fingers as we oscillate between feelings of irritation, exaltation, and discouragement.

It is counterproductive for us to be irritated when we make a mistake or believe we have failed, because annoyance does not erase mistakes or change reality. Mistakes are valuable when we learn from them; they become triumphs when they help us not to repeat errors.

It is counterproductive to get worked up when we succeed, because excitement does not improve the past, and it consumes the energy we need for the next step in our unfolding. When we use our triumphs to feel better than others or to live in our memories, we lose their fruit. Successes are realizations when we are thankful for what we've received and we move forward.

It is counterproductive to reject difficulties, because rejection does not help us to overcome the problem affecting us, or make reality more bearable. Life consists in a succession of events, some pleasant, others not. When we stop rejecting difficult experiences, we begin living in peace.

Let's relate with ourselves through acceptance, training, replacement of negative conduct, and positive stimuli, always giving ourselves what is necessary to reach and maintain inner balance.

When we make our relationship with ourselves conscious, we learn to respect ourselves, to be truthful with ourselves. Thus, we establish a relationship between what we know we are and what the different aspects of our compounds habitually make us believe we are. In the measure that this relationship deepens and is harmonized, the personalism that moves us to be enclosed within ourselves is weakened; our consciousness expands and gradually leaves room for our spiritual individuality.

STANDARDS OF CONDUCT IN RELATIONSHIPS

Fourth Teaching

We focus our interest on others and on the society in which we live to the extent that we become conscious of the reality that surrounds us. Human beings come to life as individuals with rights and needs, and society becomes more than merely the setting (more or less favorable) for our experiences. We also start to become conscious of the standards of conduct that we internalized in childhood. This consciousness allows us to reinforce positive standards and overcome those that are obstacles to maintaining good relationships with others.

Exteriorly speaking, our relationships are based on standards of conduct. Such norms have a decisive influence on relationships and should not be judged superficially, as if they were mere social conventions. Just as we need to speak the same language in order to understand each other, we also need standards of conduct that form a solid basis of respect in order to establish harmonious relationships.

Nowadays, not all of us give importance to standards of conduct, especially to manners. Although it is obvious that we can't live without standards, we often react against them. On the one hand, we do not want to control ourselves, but on the other, we do not want to suffer the consequences of other people's lack of control. Finally, despite our rebelliousness, we have to subject ourselves to standards that allow us to live with others with a minimum of peace.

A basic aspect of standards of conduct is the acquisition of good manners. In spite of our good intentions toward others, the problems that separate us are often due to tactlessness, rudeness, or inconsiderateness. We break precious bonds among us by damaging them through our lack of control or training. Good manners help us to surmount even the most difficult situations; they are a fundamental part of our work on relationships.

As we unfold, our conduct becomes balanced and we acquire modest and prudent manners:

- We avoid extravagant or affected ways, and maintain self-control
- We respect others. We do not use others for our own personal benefit, whether material, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual, nor do we use others merely to pass the time
- We treat others courteously
- We do not abuse others' good faith
- We avoid negative comments, even if there is cause for them

Standards of conduct encourage spiritual unfolding when they are always followed. To reserve well-bred manners only for special occasions, while in our everyday relationships we express passions and instinctual impulses, is to undermine our spiritual work. If we work concretely on what each human being means to us, if we acknowledge and validate each person's existence, and respect his or her space, it will be much easier to keep our ideal alive and conscious. We express this recognition in our relationships by respecting, validating, and understanding each person in his or her circumstance, as well as by working to collaborate with everyone, without discriminating and establishing differences.

Since we are working on our unfolding, we respect our vocations and their sustaining principles. We also respect the lifestyles, viewpoints, and decisions of others.

Pride and feelings of superiority—believing we know everything—are among the most pernicious aspects in personal relationships. For example, even though we have the good intention of helping others, we may confuse imposing orders with helping. This confusion leads us to work persistently to help others as long as they follow our directions, but to misunderstand and criticize them as soon as our advice is disregarded.

Disdain, lack of validation, and authoritarianism towards those we pretend to help—whether they are our children, spouse, friends, people we know or who depend on us—make our relationships with them very difficult. We transform the desire to help into a struggle to impose our own will and opinion. This attitude is often charged with despondency, moodiness, and resentment. It leads us to point out mistakes and defects, and forget recognition, stimulation, and appreciation. We are not showing a clear path to follow and we are demoralizing the persons we wish to help.

Respectful relationships lead us to compassionate love. Instead of selfishly asking ourselves, “*What can others do for me?*” we ask ourselves, “*What can I do for others? To whom are my life, work, and experience useful?*” An attitude of service replaces the attitude of judging.

We also remember that in order to help others we need more than correct manners and clear judgment. Our efforts to do good need to be accompanied by a positive attitude and unselfish love.

Our attitude is positive when it stimulates unfolding, breathes energy into those we want to help, and transmits love through actions and advice that are beneficial in everyone’s eyes.

Our positive attitude supports and nourishes those around us, instilling confidence in their capacities to unfold and giving them the courage to face their difficulties. Moreover, a positive attitude generates a healthy joy in our relationships, which is, in itself, a great help, especially during moments of trials and discouragement.

A positive attitude is much more than optimism before the vicissitudes of life. It also generates the yearning to work and sacrifice for noble causes, in ourselves as well as in others.

A positive attitude is based on our faith in divine providence and our capacity to love and offer. Therefore, even if we have reasons to feel happy or sad, loved or rejected, triumphant or disappointed, instead of seeing life as a dichotomy, we choose to see it as a challenge that impels us to give our all in order to live better, help more, and make those around us happier.

It is not easy to express joy when we are going through painful circumstances, or to transmit energy and faith when we are undergoing illnesses and trials. Nevertheless, we can take these experiences as challenges to participate with others who are also suffering, and to develop understanding, tolerance, and love.

Seeing the immense work that humankind has to carry out in order to unfold and achieve peace, prosperity, and happiness, we encourage this work by transforming the vicissitudes of life into understanding, strength, and hope.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY

Fifth Teaching

We establish relationships with ourselves and with society. Actually, these relationships are two aspects of the same relationship and unfold simultaneously.

In the measure that we know ourselves and develop our consciousness, we also become conscious of the existence of human society and our responsibility to participate in it. By observing the unfolding of our relationship with society, we can study the process of how we spiritually recognize that we are an integral part of humanity.

For didactic reasons and for the sake of simplification, we could say that as long as we feel separate from society and look at it from the outside, we expect everything from it. Later, when we realize that our life is an integral part of humanity and we recognize everything we have received from it, we discover our responsibility toward society. We feel that we are debtors, rather than creditors.

As long as we live governed by our compounds, we have an egotistic relationship with society. We obey the law because we fear punishment and comply with social norms in order to receive the benefits of being a member of the group. Yet, we don't feel committed to social needs and problems. We try to obtain the greatest possible personal benefit from our education and privileges, and we believe that these privileges are rightfully ours. We live for ourselves, separating our life and interests from those of the great human society. When society protects us, we call it "our" society; when we feel exposed to sanctions, we call it "society."

Observing society is like facing an abstraction: We're accustomed to living in a kind of nest formed of the few people with whom we relate on a daily basis, and we ignore everyone else. We look for warmth and contact within this nest, and we establish our level of identification there. Everything else tends to be an ideal reality.

When does concern for society awaken in us? Concern awakens when we want to improve society. As we project our interests onto our environment, we fight to change what does not support them. According to what suits our interests, we alternately defend, attack, or ignore society, as if we were separate from it.

This stage is one of ambivalence; we relate to society according to the ups and downs of our daily events, needs, moods, and convenience. When society is "our" society, we defend it and identify ourselves with it. Yet, when we want "another" society, we attack, rebel against, and criticize it.

Society can't be defended or attacked; it is not "my" society or "that" society. Society is formed by a group of human beings who have similar characteristics, interests, and histories, and it reflects the process of human relationships. To attack or defend this process is to attack or defend ourselves. Our ambivalence regarding our relationship with society adds more problems to those we already suffer and more pain to the tragedies we undergo.

Discourses that proclaim the need of a just society, one without evils and without suffering, are of little use. Society improves when we work on ourselves and participate through concrete actions that unite our forces and produce goods, resources, education, health, and knowledge.

We build a more harmonious society through our own unfolding. The more we advance in this process, the more we know ourselves, the more conscious we are of our relationship with society, and the better we can work for it.

A participative relationship is based on our consciousness of being an integral part of society. Such a relationship implies a constructive attitude regarding our individual unfolding as well as concrete work for the good of society as a whole.

There are three basic aspects to our work on improving society:

- Overcoming the illusion of personalism
- Carrying out in ourselves the good and the changes which we want for humanity
- Assuming the responsibility that pertains to us for alleviating human problems and creating opportunities for unfolding

Working towards a better society implies offering our energy, placing our creativity at the service of the common interest, giving our time and work, and, above all, not blinding ourselves with self-complacency.

When we no longer have *my* life, *my* objectives, or *my* energy to spend, we stop separating our pain, possibilities, and vicissitudes from those of others. We live what human society lives, in all its contingencies.

Since we yearn to build a more harmonious and equitable society, we don't complain, escape, look for privileges, or criticize. We carry out the necessary action, and when we see some negative aspect, we exert ourselves to transcend it. We know that we can't ask others to do what we ourselves can't or don't want to do. Thus, we begin by training ourselves to overcome within ourselves the separativity, indifference, and selfishness that we discover outside ourselves. Our inner work expands to our surroundings and produces a progressive chain reaction of good thoughts and good works.

We work for the good of society without being confrontational, but rather by acting quietly and tenaciously within it.

Our constructive attitude toward society leads us to work productively and efficiently. Today there are large sectors of society that don't have access to what is necessary to live with dignity. If we apply our energy in working to produce what society needs, and we do it efficiently—in the smallest amount of time and with the greatest yield—we will be contributing to the common good and behaving as an integral part of society. We can do the same with our thoughts, feelings, and judgments, with the acceptance of differences, and with the attitudes that determine our actions: we place everything we are, we have, and we long for at the disposal of the common good.

Our constructive attitude toward society leads us to educate others and ourselves. When we speak of educating, we generally think we have to get someone to think or do a certain thing. We confuse education with indoctrination and with adherence to specific causes. However, to educate is to stimulate. It implies teaching how to think, to discern, and to choose; it implies revealing what is veiled by our ignorance.

We can't remove from society those whom we consider mistaken or responsible for our misfortunes. History shows us that this method has never worked, that segregation and persecution deepen and intensify the conflicts that people try to overcome by these means.

Moreover, the measures imposed by laws, no matter how necessary, have not eradicated offenses, crime, or violence. Society is made up of human beings; the evils of society that become evident in certain persons or groups only reveal the deficiencies that we need to overcome by promoting the unfolding of society.

To renounce to shutting ourselves off in our personal world, and to work actively on our unfolding, is much more effective in producing social change than is applying coercive techniques to force others to do what we tell them.

We participate by unfolding our relationship with society through:

- The reserve of energy
- Effective productivity
- Providential economy, sensibly practiced
- Work on ourselves
- Dedication to the transmission of the teaching
- Completion of works for the good of humanity

In this way, we give life to the ideal of spiritual life and place this ideal within the reach of all beings.

OUR RELATIONSHIP TO WORLDLY ATTITUDES

Sixth Teaching

We human beings usually live as if we were immortal, as if miseries and needs did not exist, and as if love were just another good to exploit. In the context of spiritual unfolding, we use the term “worldly attitudes” to identify a stubborn and feigned ignorance of evident reality, a blind impulse to pleasure without consideration of the consequences, the trivialization of love, and, in general, all the expressions of selfishness and hedonism.

Moreover, in every sector of society we can find the illusion of pleasure without effort, life without work, and enjoyment without worries. The attraction of that illusion is so powerful that even indescribable tragedies and sorrows are not enough to make us conscious of how dangerous some behaviors are to ourselves and to society as a whole.

Since worldly attitudes are an ever-present force, we need to remain alert. An inner force impels us to fulfill new spiritual possibilities, but at the same time, worldly attitudes move us toward inertia and negligence, as if we had the right to enjoy the goods of the world indiscriminately, without assuming any responsibility.

There must be no truce in our relationship to worldly attitudes. We either advance in the development of our consciousness and love, or we waste our time and energy, plunging down the steep hill of selfishness and unconsciousness. This image is not just figurative; it is what really can happen in our lives if we are not vigilant.

Spiritual unfolding is not a linear ascending process; deviations and regressions are possible. Just a little carelessness and we slip into worldly attitudes, and lose the fruits of our efforts to unfold.

We have to be cautious no matter how good our intentions are, because the worldly is not on the outside; it is in our attitude. Stinginess, intemperate drives, and selfish actions are aspects of worldliness that sometimes appear forcefully within. If we keep watch, we counteract those tendencies with generous feelings, constructive thoughts, and noble actions.

Worldly attitudes can appear in us, even though we diligently practice spiritual exercises.

We may imagine that we have transcended worldly attitudes because we have an orderly life, work with dedication, and are generally moderate in our habits. Of course, these habits are good, but a disciplined life in itself does not free us from worldly attitudes. We can be ascetic and worldly at the same time. If we have a selfish attitude, we spend the fruits of methodical work and the energy saved through temperate habits in self-satisfaction. We live with sacrifice and measure for a period; then we spend our energy in self-complacency and begin the cycle again, alternating times of responsibility with times of irresponsibility.

We remember, then, that as long we live on earth, we are not free from worldly attitudes, because one of the conditions of our human nature is to let ourselves get carried away by the dream of an easy and unconscious life. Therefore, we remain attentive in order to control worldly attitudes throughout our whole life.

We need to recognize worldly attitudes and to practice a certain level of exterior asceticism to counteract them, but this is not enough. Our exterior work of sobriety in our habits and responsibility in our obligations stimulates our unfolding when we base it on inner work and spiritual objectives.

Our inner work is two-fold. On the one hand, we observe our attitude honestly, facing our tendencies and choosing the road of love and participation. On the other hand, we develop a technique of inner work to control our selfish impulses with appropriate exercises.

We spiritualize our objectives, placing the good of all before our own convenience. Love for human beings moves us to use our energy towards altruistic ends and to work for the common good. Rest helps us recover strength and order our thoughts. Recreation is not a means of dissipation. We learn to enjoy activities that enrich us while allowing us to relax. The meaning of recreation is spiritualized in us, since we find joy when we give joy.

Controlling worldly attitudes does not imply depriving ourselves of the satisfactions and joys of a full life. On the contrary, when we overcome the attraction of the worldly, we find the plenitude granted by a simple, healthy, and productive life. We learn just as much from pleasant experiences as we do from difficult ones. Our joy is found in being useful to those who surround us, in enjoying human creativity and ingenuity, and in collaborating in human unfolding.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Seventh Teaching

In order to unfold spiritually, we need to know and harmonize our way of thinking and feeling.

Ways of thinking and feeling are largely determined by heredity and environment. However, regardless of the current of ideas and the milieu we find ourselves in, the quality of our thoughts and feelings depends on our level of consciousness.

The lower our level of consciousness, the more we identify with the most worldly mental currents of our milieu, and the more our mind is subject to our impulses, passions, and desires. In this situation, our life is determined by thoughts and feelings we neither choose nor are able to control. We stubbornly defend them without even considering if they reflect what we really believe in and yearn for.

Our feeling and thinking are determined by social and instinctive conditioning during a long stage in our unfolding, keeping us in ignorance and producing struggles, anger, and pain.

Although thoughts and feelings are very closely connected, their relationship is not always harmonious, especially when selfish impulses and thoughts move us in the direction opposite to the ideal glimpsed in our moments of greater understanding.

Expansion in the way of feeling usually takes place more slowly than expansion in the way of thinking. Selfishness and passion often dominate our understanding. For example, we may accept intellectually that all human beings are equal. However, we may continue to identify with some people, and reject or look down on others. This tendency is disconcerting and painful for the victims of our attitude, and it has a negative effect on the whole spectrum of human relationships. To think one way, and feel and act in another, is an obstacle to the development of consciousness and the building of a world of peace and well-being.

Through the practice of a suitable ascetic method, we learn to think and feel in accordance with our spiritual objective. Our systematic work on will and attention, plus our control of energy through useful intellectual activity and productive work, are practices of an asceticism of the mind and heart that aid us in our effort to achieve harmony. Our feelings gradually respond to our awakening consciousness of good and our thoughts gradually become subject to our will.

In addition to harmonizing the *contents* of our thoughts and feelings, we need to develop the *way* we think and feel. A good technique to begin with is the practice of substituting noble thoughts and feelings for selfish and aggressive ones. Another way is to cultivate logical thought.

Although we cannot avoid having selfish or aggressive feelings and thoughts sometimes, we can counteract them before they can do any harm to us and to others. For example, when a negative thought arises, we observe it with the greatest objectivity possible, so that it may consume its own energy. Then we immediately generate the highest thought we can have at that moment and we reclaim the reins of our mind again. If we have a negative thought about someone, as soon as we become aware of it, we generate a positive thought toward that person. We can say a prayer for her, or imagine that we cover her with a feeling of peace and love. If we are consistent in using this technique of substitution, we gradually replace the habit of reacting hurtfully with the habit of responding lovingly.

Another technique for controlling the way we think is to generate a liking for all our obligations. Unselfish work causes our mind to remain on the chosen center and, simultaneously, to be alert to what is happening around it. This habit produces a great power of attention and perception. When we control the incessant distraction of associative thoughts and unconscious impulses, we perceive what happens, understand experiences, and expand our feelings. Every moment of life is transformed into an enriching experience.

These techniques are simple to apply. However, practicing them depends on our determination to attain inner freedom. This determination must be strong enough to generate a change in the ways of thinking and feeling that define us as separate personalities.

Upright intention and inner work are, in the end, the best allies in developing a harmonious relationship between our thoughts and feelings. When we attain harmony between mind and heart, we are free to think and feel in accordance with our vocation of unfolding. We have in our hands the necessary tools to build a world of peace and happiness for all beings.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SHORTCOMINGS AND STRENGTHS

Eighth Teaching

Our personality is, among other things, a composite of emotions, feelings, thoughts, and desires. We call shortcomings the aspects of that composite that hinder our spiritual unfolding. Strengths, on the other hand, are the aspects that help us transcend our limitations and expand our consciousness. From this point of view, shortcomings are our field of work and strengths are the tools we use to cultivate that field.

We usually are ashamed of our shortcomings and boast of our strengths. However, it is not good for us to become entangled in this game of identifying with our compounds. On the contrary, working on our shortcomings, which are the habits that breed our ignorance, and cultivating strengths, which grant us the necessary inner strength to know ourselves, will finally lead us to overcome those compounds.

When we embark on our journey of unfolding, we discover the value of strengths and, in contrast, the harm of shortcomings. However, we are aware of only some of our shortcomings, perhaps not even the fundamental ones; besides, our ostensible strengths might be nothing more than the other side of our shortcomings. For example, eagerness to work may hide ambition; disattachment, indifference; meticulousness, intransigence; determination may hide excessive self-love. Thus, we feel it so necessary to be faithful to an appropriate method of inner work; otherwise, it is very difficult for our inner outlook to be clear or for us to look at ourselves objectively.

The more we know ourselves, the more self-critical we become. Consequently, we may feel overwhelmed by the array of shortcomings that becomes evident and by the few strengths we can marshal to fulfill our ideal. To avoid discouragement, we should center our work on one or two of our most troublesome shortcomings and gradually move on from there, bolstered by our small triumphs.

It is not necessary to struggle against all our shortcomings all at once. A serious shortcoming generates many others, which are expressed in different situations of our life. Trying to overcome one shortcoming helps us eradicate the root of other ones that appear in isolation. Selfishness, for example, can produce indifference, insensitivity, and impatience. When we work to overcome selfishness, we gradually and imperceptibly overcome our indifference and other related shortcomings.

We should avoid extremes in our relationship with our shortcomings. To be depressed by our shortcomings shows excessive self-concern and the vanity of not accepting our shortcomings. On the other hand, it is not good to deny our shortcomings; nor is it good to ignore others' remarks when our shortcomings affect them.

Because we love unfolding, we recognize our shortcomings and learn to use them as a means to participate with all human beings.

Our work to overcome our shortcomings and, simultaneously, to accept them as part of the human condition leads us to accept each person just as he or she is. Our experience in working with our shortcomings and deficiencies prepares us to assist and accompany others in their efforts to master and improve themselves. Working on our shortcomings transforms them into a means of fostering unfolding and participation.

Besides, no matter how effectively we may control our shortcomings, we should not believe we have totally conquered them; it is good to be watchful of our tendencies so that we don't repeat mistakes.

Just as sincerity, 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 shows us that an eagerness to reveal our strengths is actually the shortcoming of wanting to feel superior to others. To use our good qualities to strengthen our self-esteem would be counterproductive to our own good. Everyone has good qualities; if we discover some in ourselves, we should not regard them as exceptional strengths but as a means to help us fulfill our vocation.

We do not boast of our strengths, since boasting would distort our good qualities. When we achieve harmony in our conduct, nothing stands out independently. Real virtues unite us to others; they do not segregate us according to who is better and who is worse.

Our relationship with our strengths is to be based on responsibility, for good qualities are gifts and we are responsible for their use.

Our strengths are the point of support by which we develop our consciousness and we assist those who need us. When we do not cultivate strengths, we forfeit them as tools, and we waste the possibilities that we can fulfill through them. A beautiful strength, such as patience, for example, can become indifference if we use it as a means to avoid being hurt by others or circumstances. Yet, if developed, patience is the way we respond positively to painful stimuli. Instead of reacting by attacking or withdrawing inwardly, the strength of patience allows us to learn, accept, love and transform difficult circumstances into means to irradiate peace and help others effectively.

Our inner work on our shortcomings and strengths helps us overcome the dichotomy of strength-shortcoming and reveals to us that both are aspects of our reality. Accepting our shortcomings as inherent to the human condition transforms them into means of participation, understanding and tolerance. Consciousness of strengths as tools for work protects us from the inner blindness produced by pride and vanity. Sincerity in admitting our own limitations is the engine that propels us in our spiritual unfolding. Accepting our good qualities reveals the potential that exists in every human being and moves us help everyone to achieve their best possibilities.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Ninth Teaching

Living is like walking on a path that sometimes climbs steeply or passes through rough terrain; at these times it requires a special effort to keep moving forward. To keep the path from becoming impassable, we need to clearly discern between difficulties that are inherent to walking the path, and problems we ourselves tend to create.

Difficulties are part of life; they characterize the moments that demand the most attention and effort. No one is free of difficulties; we have to struggle to support ourselves; we all are subject to accidents, illnesses, natural catastrophes, societal limitations, aging and death. Difficulties point out the obstacles we need to overcome in order to continue unfolding.

We create problems, on the other hand, when we do not know how to face difficulties.

By observing our own attitude, we can easily know when we are facing a difficulty or when we are facing a problem.

If we are faithful to our yearning to unfold, when we face a difficulty we accept the challenge it represents and respond to it. We understand that what we suffer is part of life and seek resources within ourselves that can help us overcome the difficulty. We also understand that we need help and advice, and we seek it with an attitude of openness, prepared to work.

By contrast, when we face a problem, we seek solutions outside ourselves. This moves us to blame others and, above all, to fail to heed the advice that encourages us to discover new options, develop our discernment, and generate within ourselves the solutions to the problems that we ourselves have created.

When we have a problem, what we want is to stop suffering. We wish above all for something or someone to change so that the cause of our suffering will be eliminated. This attitude often brings us up against our own impotence, since we are very seldom able to change circumstances or persons by imposing our wishes. When anguish and reaction do not allow us to overcome the problem, we create a greater problem out of the collection of problems our attitude generates.

One common cause of problems is the attitude of trying to achieve goals without having to traverse the path that leads to them. It is easy to make an effort as long as there is enthusiasm, but when enthusiasm wanes, we often begin to think that life owes us something, that we deserve privileges, or that life is too tough, and we become discouraged. This attitude turns natural difficulties into insoluble problems, since no one and nothing can give us what we want, which is to not have to make an effort.

Another difficulty that is usually turned into a problem is the passage of time. The difficulties inherent to aging are natural and evident to anyone willing to see them. But when we do not want to face those difficulties and manage them, the solution we choose is to pretend that we will always remain young and not suffer the inconveniences of old age. Since this is impossible, when aging brings difficulties, we turn them into sources of fear and resentment and we seek ways to avoid facing our situation.

It is obvious that there is no solution to these problems, that the way to overcome difficulties is to face them, accept them, and work on them. Not accepting the roughness of the road is not accepting the road; not accepting difficulties is the same as not accepting life.

There are problems that are not related to the difficulties inherent in life, but which are generated by the characteristics of our present state of consciousness. Sadly enough, they are the problems that weigh on us most heavily: violence, cruelty, destruction, hunger and indifference. There is no magic remedy for these problems. The only way to overcome them is to unfold our state of consciousness, both by working on ourselves and by working to educate and assist the rest of humanity, all of it, without exception.

No matter what the reason for our problems is, in order for our relationship with them to be positive, it must be frank and energetic.

The road of self-knowledge is the only sure and certain road we have toward understanding our problems and the role of our attitude in their origin. It does not help us much to know whether we have a reason for complaining. Our problem will not be eliminated by punishing a guilty party or by expecting a change in something that is not in our power to change. By working on our attitude we can eliminate our problems, since within ourselves we have the power to change, improve, understand and fulfill.

If we understand that the origin of our problems is in our attitude, these problems are gradually simplified until we are able to view them as the difficulties intrinsic to life, the ones that show us the steps we must take in order to unfold. When we understand our attitude, we steadfastly search for and encounter propitious advice, needed assistance, and inner strength that lead us to overcome our difficulties.

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

We are humble when we understand and accept our limitations. We know how to recognize the slight percentage of events we can control, and accept the rest as a challenge so that we may extract the teaching they hold. We also know that the law of life cannot 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, because by looking at life without arrogance we clearly see the road that lies ahead.

An honest relationship with difficulties makes us simple, because we love truth more than we love the image we make of ourselves.

When we yearn to know ourselves, we leave no margin for over-elaborated speculations or superficial interpretations created in order to justify ourselves or to avoid making an effort. We look at ourselves just as we are, with strengths and shortcomings, with limitations and possibilities.

An honest relationship with difficulties makes us courageous because it leads us not to spare any effort in order to overcome them. We know we have the strength within to consummate our life in all its fullness, and we work with all our energy for our own good, and for the good of all beings.

When we know that the secret of our strength is to be found in our attitude toward difficulties, we stop dreaming of an easy life and set to work to traverse our path firmly until the end.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR BODIES

Tenth Teaching

The body is a crucial and indispensable instrument in our unfolding. We express ourselves, have experiences, and learn via our bodies. Therefore, it is necessary that our relationship with our bodies be constructive, based on self-control and responsibility.

Controlling our bodies implies mastery over our instinctive impulses and the tendency toward self-satisfaction. When the impulse toward self-satisfaction takes precedence over love, loneliness and troubles grow within us, even when “we have everything.” Thus, it is important to understand the symptoms and the consequences of this impulse.

Laziness leads to the pursuit of excessive comfort and to the loss of control over our conduct in general. Gluttony is the lack of control over our need for nourishment.

Sexual impulses are expressions of the survival instinct of the species. When these impulses are directed by consciousness, they bear fruits of well-being. When they are dominated by aggressiveness and blindness, they bear fruits of pain. When consciousness governs our instinctual impulses, we are able to see our possibilities more clearly and to better discern our direction in life.

Excessive preoccupation with our bodies and the fear of physical suffering make an end out of a means. Instead of making instruments of our bodies, we meekly place ourselves at their service. Indulged bodies subordinate us, and leave us dependent on their sensations. Fear of suffering weakens our physical stamina and our tolerance for discomfort and pain. But when we learn to treat our bodies as instruments, we give them the care they need without indulging or debilitating them; we develop inner strength and become less susceptible to suffering.

Controlling our bodies implies curbing demands that exceed what is necessary and sensible for staying in good health. An overindulged body becomes a tyrant. But, if we look after our bodies and train them to work and be productive, we can begin to see them as efficient means to our unfolding.

Control of the body is not an end in itself. It would be futile for us to exercise great control over our bodies if, at the same time, we did not know how to wisely use the energy generated from that control. Knowing what to do with energy is just as important as learning how to reserve it.

We are responsible for our energy on both the personal and social levels.

We have a personal responsibility because our bodies’ span of usefulness can be significantly shortened if we do not pay attention to our habits. Our responsibility is to make sure that our bodies yield their full potential.

Our responsibility has a social dimension because what we do with our bodies affects society. If we use our bodies sensibly, we transform them into constructive social elements. By contrast, if we satisfy all our desires and indiscriminately follow impulses, without taking into account the effect of such behavior on our bodies, we run unnecessary risks. We either expose ourselves to accidents or contract chronic, perhaps even fatal, diseases. Sooner or later, we become a burden on others, and they have to assume the consequences of our conduct.

The fact that we dedicate ourselves to doing good works does not absolve us of responsibility for our bodies. Helping others is praiseworthy, yet does not excuse a lack of personal control, knowledge, or attention to eradicating habits that predispose us to suffering preventable ailments and disabilities. We take back our offering, plus more, if, through imprudence or lack of personal control, our body gets prematurely sick or disabled, requiring other people or institutions to spend resources and time caring for us until we die.

We do not need extra time or extraordinary resources to care for our bodies. On the contrary, sensible self-discipline and knowledge, with less attention, enable our reason to rule our impulses and allow us to keep our bodies manageable, healthy, and useful, with less attention.

Sensible self-discipline in bodily care prevents us from falling into one extreme—neglecting our bodies—or the other—making them the main center of our attention and preoccupation.

Knowledge of bodily care makes it possible for us to respond to our bodies' real needs and avoid sickness and accidents caused by ignorance.

When sickness comes and we cannot avoid it, we have to accept and use it to our spiritual advantage; meanwhile, we do what is possible to overcome it.

We sometimes suffer intensely for what appear to be ordinary things: another birthday, a few more gray hairs, minor ailments, or physical inconveniences. Wanting to help us, good-willed people ask, "Why are you experiencing so much conflict and pain, if you have everything you need?" In such cases, it is good to observe the extent to which we are identified with our bodies. We tend to base our self-esteem on what we think about our bodies. Depending on whether we perceive our bodies as beautiful or ugly, we may feel superior or inferior. According to the way our bodies respond to our desires, we may feel useful or useless. We may also classify others according to their external characteristics. All the above bring suffering and confusion.

Our identification with our bodies conditions us to such an extent that we associate our personal value with our appearance and physical state. Our spiritual values can even be subordinated to contingent and secondary values.

Identification with our bodies leads us to associate success with youth. When our physical bodies are developing and their energies are on the rise, we feel full of possibilities and yearnings to lead meaningful lives. But as soon as our bodies get sick, fail, or age, we believe that we have no more possibilities, and we sink into despondency. Yet, by changing the focus of our lives, we can overcome our sorrow.

In order to unfold harmoniously, we need to develop a sound relationship with the ways our bodies change over time.

The physical body is born, grows, matures, declines, and dies. Good handling of the relationship with these changes is one of the basic aspects of our inner work of understanding the meaning of life and death, of being happy, and of the deepening and spiritualizing of the objectives that move us.

We need to recognize, accept, and assimilate the process of our lives in order for aging's physical changes to become a source of teaching. Besides concretizing material and social

objectives, we also need to meditate on the meaning of our experiences, understand life as a whole, and give it meaning throughout its entire trajectory from beginning to end.

If we accept the laws of life, and if we develop the habit of controlling our instinctive impulses and placing limits on our appetites, we will be ready to let those who are younger take our place when our bodies begin to fail. We then will be free to concentrate our energy on mental and spiritual work, without ceasing to make an effort to use our bodies and keep them as agile as possible.

When we relate to our bodies as goods that we are responsible for, before ourselves, before society, and before the whole of humankind, we learn to accept death serenely. Since we do not know when death will come knocking on our door, it is wise to concentrate our energy on developing lives that are full of meaning, love, and creativity.

Being in control of our bodies, and being responsible and using common sense in caring for them, helps us maintain clarity with respect to the spiritual objective of our lives, the values that sustain it, and the sense of participation with a world to which we owe our contribution.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Eleventh Teaching

We are part of a universal system of relationships. Our actions, thoughts, and feelings influence our immediate reality. Gandhi, a poor and apparently frail human being, influenced millions of people by the simple act of fasting. The imprudent action of one individual can cause an accident and unleash an ecological catastrophe, affecting families, industries, and immense areas of precious land and waters. Although these two examples are dramatic, they give an idea of the influence—both positive and negative—of individual actions on the whole world.

We are not always aware of the effects of our actions on the environment and others. In some cases, whether from ignorance, indifference, or deliberate decision, we do not analyze the consequences of our acts honestly enough or profoundly enough. Yet, no action is unimportant. 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, affect the environment and society.

Although, from the spiritual viewpoint, we are responsible for our influence on the world, we understand and accept that responsibility according to the level of our unfolding.

We gradually assume responsibility. In the first years of our life, we can't even take care of ourselves. We begin taking on responsibilities as we grow. When we are adults, society expects us to take charge of our family and ourselves. However, society does not determine the limits of human responsibility. It is just as possible for each one of us to fail to meet the minimum expectations of society as it is for us to go far beyond what anyone could ask. That is, to offer our life for the good of all souls.

Responsibility has three aspects: individual, social, and spiritual.

Individual responsibility defines what we do with our life. No matter how much we may do for a person, we cannot live that person's life or die that person's death. People receive the fruits, sweet or bitter, of their decisions, and even of their indecisions. Ultimately, we all live our experiences, do or do not fulfill our possibilities, and trace our own destinies.

From a more specific point of view, and providing we are in good health, individual responsibility implies that we produce at least what we consume, utilize time and energy with discernment, and respond for the goods we receive.

Since a sense of individual responsibility is very subjective, it leaves room for interpretations that do not fulfill basic social expectations in many cases. This text calls attention to two ways of interpreting individual responsibility, which create problems in one's own unfolding and in the unfolding of society: first, intermittent or sporadic responsibility and second, the abuse of our social heritage.

Intermittent or sporadic responsibility leads us to reduce responsibility to the fulfillment of a few external obligations, and to the belief that we are free to act on whim toward everything else, even in an obviously irresponsible way. For example, we may be responsible at work and negligent in our private life; we may take care of our children while we are married and abandon them after being divorced; we may burden our children with over-protection, and neglect or abandon our elderly parents. A sporadic sense of responsibility is also expressed in aspects which seem minor but which still have a great influence on a person's life. For example, our

ways of relating with others influence the environment of our daily life. We might be courteous with some and uncontrolled with others; measured in personal contacts but imprudent and aggressive behind the steering wheel; careful with our own belongings and careless with what we consider someone else's. It is obvious that this way of understanding individual responsibility creates countless conflicts and makes relationships with others difficult.

The abuse of our social heritage is particularly unjustifiable in individuals who are given an excellent education, and are trained to fulfill a meaningful role in life, yet do not take on the responsibility expected of someone who has received much. We may be good at pointing out all that should be done to have a better world, but in practice behave selfishly or unwisely, letting others attend to our needs and solve the problems created by our lack of discernment.

By the simple fact of our living in society, we all enjoy the benefits brought about by the effort of countless beings whose contributions have enriched humankind throughout history. The spiritual tradition, knowledge, technology, and material progress are goods that we all receive with no more effort than it takes to reach out and take them. Therefore, we have an unavoidable individual responsibility.

Each one of us has the right to enjoy the heritage of society, but that right goes hand in hand with the obligation of taking care of it, enriching it and increasing it.

The second aspect of responsibility is social responsibility, which moves us to commit ourselves to the improvement of our society. We make an effort to produce more than we need and contribute the excess to support those who are not in a condition to be self-sufficient: children, the ill, the elderly, and the disabled. Though we may not be exceptionally gifted, our capacity for work increases to the degree we expand our sense of "being in society," since love and interest multiply effectiveness.

In order for society to function harmoniously, we each need to share our goods and our talents. Society needs the gifts of all its members. The capacity to create, to discover possibilities where others do not see them, to multiply the output of resources, should benefit everyone. No one doubts that the discovery of a cure for an illness is a good that should be shared. Just as the scientist who discovers a vaccine places it at the service of all, we offer the fruits of our personal gifts, whatever they may be.

It might happen that our sense of social responsibility becomes distorted due to excessive zeal. Generous and hard-working people—parents, teachers, preachers—make us feel responsible for others who, according to our opinions or beliefs, are misguided or spiritually lost. Sometimes we offer beautiful examples of sacrifice, thoroughly devoting ourselves to promoting social changes or to preaching and converting. Nevertheless, believing we have the duty to force someone to live in a certain way or believe in certain ideas is an arrogant and dogmatic way of understanding social responsibility, for it does not recognize the freedom of the individual. It is not good to mistake social responsibility for the subjugation of the free will of others.

The third aspect of responsibility is spiritual responsibility; that is, our responsibility for human destiny.

When we yearn for spiritual realization, we encounter responsibility. We do not stop at the mere fulfillment of our explicit duties, but accept new and growing responsibilities for ourselves, society, human destiny. Many people assume responsibilities prompted by ambition and vanity. How much more can we accomplish prompted by love!

Our yearning to attain real love expands our understanding and broadens our responsibility, moving us to give increasingly more of ourselves: to be better, to heal, to console, to participate. Our feeling of participation is constantly being updated, like a horizon that continuously moves forward as we advance toward it.

We begin to fulfill our spiritual responsibility by taking care of the quality of our inner life, which is the source of the whole system of relationships. We feel responsible not only for our actions, but also for the attitude that nourishes our feelings and thoughts.

Spiritual responsibility unfolds with our consciousness; it is not a static state, it is a path. We depart from a state of consciousness in which we are centered only in ourselves, with a sense of individual responsibility limited to our personal interests. Little by little, through our experience and effort to relate and to communicate, we begin to emerge from our selfish enclosure and gradually start to include society among our concerns. This expansion allows us to see the insignificance of our habitual set of problems within the context of collective suffering. We also see how our selfishness often overshadows our good works. On the one hand, we work for others, and on the other, our separativity continues to produce pain and misery.

We have taken a large step in our unfolding when we understand that we must find a solution in our own lives to what we want to correct in society. We comprehend that it is not enough to exert ourselves to create a better world if we don't overcome in ourselves the selfishness that causes misery; that it is not enough to wish for the end of war and violence if we don't put an end to the violence within ourselves; and that there is no union among human beings as long as there is separativity in our own heart.

In our path of unfolding, the beginning and the end unite. We depart from a state of consciousness centered only in ourselves, looking only at ourselves. At the end we return to our inner center, no longer blinded by our own problems, ready to discover the strength, vision, and courage we need to create within ourselves what we yearn to see concretized in society. We shift from a selfish attitude and a narcissistic vision to an inclusive vision and a participative attitude.

Our spiritual responsibility expands our consciousness and our participation in the world becomes integral through it. We first fulfill in our own life what we want to conquer for the world. Our exterior work reflects our inner participation, and our efforts give noble and lasting fruits to the world.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TEACHING

Twelfth Teaching

We use the word Teaching to refer to the wealth of knowledge that fosters our unfolding. We receive the Teaching to a certain extent through human culture and our life experiences. The members of Cafh have the additional gift of receiving the Teaching in a methodical way, through the oral teachings and spiritual advice. The Teaching of Cafh gives us the necessary tools to integrate cultural knowledge, personal experiences, and the fruits of our unfolding into a coherent unity that is consistent with our vocation.

We receive part of the Teaching through culture. Culture and spirituality go hand in hand. Spiritual principles are not opposed to the results of analysis and scientific experimentation. On the contrary, evident truths put the validity of spiritual postulates to the test; these, in turn, teach us how to use, in an appropriate way, the power knowledge grants. Humanity undeniably advances through scientific investigation and applied knowledge. The study of history and the sciences is fundamental in understanding the Teaching. Our vision of life becomes integral when we incorporate it into existing knowledge.

We receive the Teaching directly through our experiences. If we are attentive and alert, we learn from everyday life in the same way we learn from books.

Moreover, society has codified the basic aspects of the Teaching related to coexistence, and these form the basis of a method of life. Most of us have to make an effort to comply with the laws and codes that govern our society's organization, because laws and ethical codes often establish higher standards than we would usually follow on our own. However hard it is to accept, we have to admit that only a small group of human beings directs their lives by a higher ethic than the one established by the laws that govern society.

We receive the Teaching of Cafh through oral teachings. The Orators enrich the teachings with their experiences and skills, and they expound the teachings according to our characteristics and needs.

We receive the teachings organized into courses as aids for remembering and applying them. The texts of the teachings are periodically renewed to adapt them to our unfolding and the progress of knowledge.

In order for the teachings to benefit us, we need to be conscious of our relationship with them. Depending on our attitude, we might disregard the teachings, interpret them according to our interests, or expand them and incorporate them into our lives.

When our relationship with the Teaching is spontaneous and faithful, we become permeable to it and apply it to our unfolding.

Our relationship with the teachings evolves according to our unfolding. In this process, we can identify three types of relationship:

- The emotional relationship
- The dogmatic-argumentative relationship
- The silent-experimental relationship

These three relationships usually coexist in us to various degrees. We might say that we usually maintain one or another of these three patterns of relationship according to which one predominates in us.

In an *emotional relationship*, we are moved by the teachings but we do not practice them. We imagine we are living the teachings because we feel emotional when we receive them. Since we do not see any contradiction between the ideas we think are true, and the way we live, we interpret the teachings according to our desires and convenience, and always find arguments to justify our conduct. On the one hand, we stubbornly defend our beliefs. On the other, we reach the point where we deny them with our actions and even forget our precepts—such as love for our neighbor, forgiveness, and abstention from killing—justifying hate, violence, and revenge.

In an emotional relationship, the reactions of attraction and rejection powerfully influence the way we interpret concepts. We commonly generalize an opinion based solely on what attracts or repels us, labeling something good or bad according to our preferences. Moreover, since attraction and rejection stem in large part from our habits and upbringing, our emotional relationship with the teachings is also dogmatic.

A *dogmatic relationship* with the teachings reduces our vision of life to a single point of view. We think that our own beliefs are the only truth. We tend to project the evil of society onto those who have a different opinion from us, thinking they are the cause of the problems we suffer. This attitude leads us to separativity and hostility.

A dogmatic relationship with the teachings creates confrontations that lead neither to clarity nor dialogue, but rather to confusion and pain. Since we are convinced of our opinion, we are not looking for the truth; rather, we want to demonstrate the error of those who do not agree with us. We are referring to hostile confrontations, not to those discussions that lead to intellectual exchange and result in the coming together of different points of view.

An *argumentative relationship* with the teachings is another aspect of dogmatism and leads us to judge all the information we receive, taking as a standard the pre-established ideas we have adopted but never analyzed. If new information compares favorably with our ideas, we accept it readily; if not, we question and reject it. Dogmatic beliefs are like a prism through which we interpret life. All information is filtered through our system of beliefs. If that information validates our particular vision of reality, it increases our certainty of being right, and we accept it. Otherwise, we reject it, without really knowing what it is about.

We are not always conscious of our own dogmatism. Interpretations limit our vision to such an extent that they lead us to believe that our own way of thinking is universal, and that no other view of reality is valid and acceptable. When we hold this attitude, we systematically reject all that does not agree with our pre-established ideas, and we lose the possibility of broadening the way we think. A different vision from our own does not necessarily imply a wrong opinion; it is another way to view an issue. It is good to compare our own opinions with others', without arguing with or condemning those persons whose opinions are different from our own. In this way, we may better understand our own position and that of other points of view.

The third type of relationship with the Teaching is *silent-experimental*. Our work is not to weigh the teachings against our own opinions, but to open freely to them, leaving aside our preconceived ideas. Our relationship with the teachings is not one of agreement or rejection. In both cases, we reduce the teachings to a criticism of their content based on the ideas we already

have, and we don't learn anything new. In order to perceive the universality of the teachings, we have to receive them with an open attitude, with neither positive nor negative judgment.

The teachings are to be considered, meditated upon, and studied. The teachings give us good results when we have an investigative, open, and unbiased attitude. In this way, we learn to listen, to broaden our points of view, and to open to new outlooks beyond dogmas.

The courses of teachings are not meant to be texts of a solely informative nature. Although the teachings are based on information and understanding as a means to stimulate unfolding, understanding needs to be united with our thinking and acting, in order to bear good fruits.

When we receive a teaching, we look for a way to apply it in our everyday life so that it does not dissolve into a passing understanding. No matter how simple an understanding might be, we need an inner method of work to incorporate it into our lives. To practice a teaching for a while provides a rich experience, yet, to make a teaching our way of living requires us 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 distinguish what we need to change or improve, and those teaching concepts we need to apply in each circumstance in order to make our spiritual life a reality.

There are no ready-made solutions for the challenges of life, or prepared recipes to apply in every moment of our unfolding. The fundamental concepts of spiritual life have to be experimented with by each of us according to the circumstances and our individual characteristics. To experiment is: first, to choose the way to apply the concepts; second, to evaluate the results obtained; and last, but not least, to gradually adjust our actions in accordance with these results in order to get the best possible result.

An attitude of experimentation protects us from the tendency to judge the results of our efforts as triumphs or failures. An undesirable effect is not a failure: It is new knowledge, which, if we apply it appropriately, helps us to avoid falling into a succession of mistakes.

We are faithful to the Teaching when we not only understand and respect different points of view, but also consciously choose a way of thinking that enables us to have a clear and effective line of work. We adopt the Teaching of Cafh and its method as our path of unfolding, and we direct our energy within those limits in order to fulfill our spiritual vocation.

We receive the teachings adapted to our specific needs through spiritual advice, and these are often synthesized in specific recommendations. Since these teachings are concretized through our decisions and concrete efforts, we make sure not to generalize the guidance we receive. Advice that is valid for us is not necessarily applicable to others. Spiritual advice is a limited and particular way of applying universal ideas. The way to understand advice is through carrying it out in practice; the way to evaluate it is by examining its results within the confines in which the advice is applied.

An important aspect of our relationship with the teachings is to work to permanently expand our point of view, and to learn how to discern. Although all points of view are equally valid, they do not produce the same results, since an impartial opinion is broader and more beneficial than a selfish one. The teachings help to distinguish one from the other, and move us to universalize the way we think through increasingly broader interpretations of events and circumstances.

We love the Teaching. We know it is knowledge that, step by step, is incorporated into our very being through our open, faithful, and receptive attitude. We do not live in the expectation of a great teaching, since any teaching is the Teaching when it is applied fruitfully in our lives.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH LIFE

Thirteenth Teaching

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

Our interpretation of life depends on how conscious we are of our relationship with our experiences. Thus, we may fluctuate between two extremes: On the one hand, we reduce life to enduring what we suffer, and, on the other hand, we see in life the possibility of our unfolding.

If we assume that the meaning and fruit of experiences depend on our degree of consciousness, then deepening our relationship with life implies expanding our state of consciousness. In other words, it requires that we continually redefine the meaning of our life.

When the expression "my life" is reduced to what happens inside the small nucleus of our personal interests, our relationship with life is also reduced to the circle of our particular circumstances. When "my life" includes the surrounding society, our relationship with life expands to include that society. When "my life" is the whole reality we can grasp with our consciousness, our relationship with life encompasses all humankind, the universe, and the divine.

In practical terms, what difference do these levels of defining "my life" make?

When our view of life is reduced to our personal circumstances, we identify with what happens to us; we fear the future, hold on tightly to our possessions, and sow ignorance and separativity. If experiences bring us suffering, our relationship with life is tinged with bitterness and resentment, and we become pessimistic. The suffering of others matters to us only to the extent that it impacts our own personal affairs. We look upon collective evils as if they belonged to another reality. We suffer problems that are commonplace or arise from natural events as if fate had turned mercilessly against us. Misfortune takes us by surprise and makes us think life is meaningless. On the other hand, a personal triumph, even a short-lived one, makes us feel that life is full of meaning.

From the perspective of our personal problems, we remain focused on what we feel we lack, instead of valuing the gifts we possess. Therefore, we may believe that our lives are meaningless, even if we have everything, and regardless of how fortunate or unfortunate we are in comparison to others.

How many times do we find ourselves overwhelmed by the feeling that happiness is found in escaping from the givens of life: by not confronting adversity, uncertainty, deterioration, and death?

Having a profound and harmonious relationship with life grants us a universal outlook, which simultaneously includes the particular and the general, the personal and the whole reality we perceive—the human, social, and universal horizon. This outlook enables us to distinguish between what we categorize as either good or bad luck and the laws of life; between what we contribute through our own effort and what we receive from the efforts of others; between the dimension of personal suffering and that of collective suffering; and between those aspects of life we can change and those human willpower can't control.

When we consciously relate with life, we take what happens to us as a means of participation; we no longer interpret it as a misfortune in some cases, and as a well-deserved privilege in others. Each experience is an inseparable part of a universal happening: social, familial, and personal. If we place our painful experiences within the suffering of all humankind, we discover participation and compassion; if we understand our privileges to be part of the shared wealth of society, we transform ourselves into generators of well-being and prosperity for all. For example, if we have a good education, health, and well-being, we put these goods at the service of society: working diligently, contributing to everyone's welfare, giving part of what we have to meet the needs of those who have less.

Many of our problems stem from our own conduct. To avoid repeating the same mistakes, we remember human history and our own past; we confront the results of the decisions we've made; and we discern the consequences of those we're about to make. This attitude brings us peace, well-being, and richness.

The direction we give our life depends on the frame of reference we use.

If we live as if the borders of the world encompass only our daily interests, we disconnect from reality; we don't understand our own experiences; and we make decisions with no awareness of how they impact the whole.

If we see ourselves as integral parts of humanity, we change our attitude: Instead of asking, we learn to give; instead of wanting to win, we learn to act impartially; instead of wanting to possess more and more, we direct our energy to necessary and creative activities; and, instead of wanting to dominate others, we strive to master ourselves in order to expand our participation and integrate ourselves consciously to the totality of the world and life.

Certain strengths help us to expand the definition of "my life," such as: humility, disattachment, participation, and reverence.

Humility makes us conscious of our limitations, helping us recognize our view of reality as partial and temporary. This recognition leads us to learn from everything and everyone.

Disattachment makes us conscious of the transitory nature of an individual life. Disattachment also frees us from our race against time by granting us the understanding that no good outside ourselves is permanent. Thus, the blinding eagerness to obtain, safeguard, and treasure life is not worth the trouble. Moreover, disattachment from the fruits of our efforts allows us to discover eternity within continuous becoming.

Participation makes us conscious of humankind's condition, helping us to extend the limits of what we consider personal and become part of the reality that surrounds us. When we participate, we integrate the particular with the general and we bring unity to our lives.

The reverence we feel for what transcends our understanding makes us conscious of our countless possibilities, and keeps us open and permeable to life's message, quick to revise our interpretations of facts and expand our view of reality.

To the extent that we harmonize our individual life with a global view of life, we gradually understand the stages of our life and the teaching found in moments of both sorrow and happiness. We distinguish between momentary joys—the result of fleeting experiences—and happiness, which arises from understanding, acceptance, and participation.

It is good to make a habit of remembering aspects of life we tend to overlook in daily life. For example, remembering that everything that happens to us is transitory: A pain hurts, but it passes; a spiritual realization is an indisputable step, but challenges remain. This exercise allows us to gauge our experiences so they don't distort our view of life. It also teaches us to bear sorrow and unmask illusions, which cloud our understanding and divert us from the realization of our best possibilities.

The universal teaching flows within us through continuous experience. The more harmonious our relationship to life is, the deeper we understand its messages. We take a giant step in our unfolding when we realize that each experience steers us either toward, or away from, the fulfillment of our spiritual vocation. We take advantage of the full potential of this awakening when we live consciously and use our time and energy for our own, and everyone else's, spiritual and material benefit.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR VOCATION

Fourteenth Teaching

We go beyond ready-made phrases and acquired patterns when we seek answers to fundamental questions—such as, “Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?” In so doing, we discover and foster our vocation.

We express our vocation through the meaning we give to our lives.

Our term, “vocation,” means far more than a natural inclination, capacity or aptitude, which is how we generally understand this word.

People differ in their types and levels of aptitudes; they work easily in some areas and with difficulty in others. Very few of us have the same aptitude for everything. Therefore, we lean towards doing what we find easier, more gratifying, and more agreeable. The more we work within our area of aptitude, the better we master it; and the more skillful we become in what we do, the more fulfilled and confident we feel. We then say that we have a vocation for art, or science, or some other type of activity. But one thing is an aptitude to do something, and another is the capacity to unfold as human beings. We might be outstanding in carrying out some activity, and, nevertheless, not know how to live, not understand our own experiences or relationships.

Training ourselves in something leads us to occupations. Vocation, on the other hand, implies unfolding our state of consciousness, and adjusting our conduct to the unfolding we gradually achieve. Therefore, vocation is not one more option among an array of activities possible for us. Vocation gives meaning to all activities, so that they all produce our unfolding as human beings, as well as the unfolding of our skills.

Although we each have different aptitudes, we all are capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of developing our consciousness. Therefore, all human beings potentially have a vocation of unfolding spiritually. Yet, we each awaken to it through a process of inner knowledge that takes time and effort.

We actualize our vocation when we respond in an effective way to the need to expand our consciousness.

We don't need extra time for responding to our vocation. Instead, it's a question of reordering our priorities and values, and of cultivating discernment. We make this discovery, however, only when we learn to channel our actions so that they produce an effective unfolding within us. Until then, working on our spiritual vocation is a special occupation, differentiated from and competing with our other occupations.

Our relationship with our vocation expresses the degree of harmony between our everyday affairs and the spiritual meaning we give to our lives.

We can distinguish three stages in our relationship with our vocation:

- Discovery
- Discernment
- Integration

The first stage begins when we discover we don't necessarily have to follow paths others have traversed, that we can work on self-knowledge and forge our destiny in relation to a reality

that transcends our immediate objectives. The interest in new ideas that awakens in us has nothing to do with a desire to obtain a position, or to have and enjoy more. Rather, we aim at attaining inner peace, better understanding, and, especially, a meaningful life.

This step opens a vast field of experimentation and discovery to us. However, it also draws a dividing line between the interests of our ordinary life and those of the new life we glimpse within ourselves: the material on one side, the spiritual on the other. We create a dualism with our attitude, which is good in the beginning, because it gives us the necessary determination to change our habits and direct our efforts to a nobler and more transcendent end than that of self-satisfaction. Nevertheless, our commitment to ourselves is what really sustains us in our yearning to unfold. If we don't assume a formal and responsible commitment to respond to our vocation, it's unlikely we will accomplish our aim. The necessity of commitment is one of the reasons why paths of spiritual unfolding establish formal vows, encouraging us to fulfill what we say we're going to fulfill. The vows sustain us and give us the inner strength necessary to realize our vocation.

In the second stage, we understand that the apparent counterbalancing of our vocation with our daily lives is not real, but rather the product of a state of consciousness marked both by ignorance and the inertia of already outmoded interpretations. We still don't know how to integrate the two opposing forces that move us: our true yearnings on the one hand, and our instinctive impulses on the other. Neither the resolve nor the euphoria we experienced when we first discovered our vocation can support us now. The only things that sustain us are the strength our vows give us for fulfilling them, and our growing capacity for discernment. This stage is characterized by self-reflection and self-study. We review each of our acts, feelings, and thoughts to see whether they live up to the vocation we yearn to realize.

We make sacrifices for our vocation, but we still don't love it above all things. In spite of our continual attempts to actively respond to it, negative reactions and discouragement still frequently arise within us.

Responding to the vocation of spiritual unfolding often implies going against deeply-rooted desires. We don't always understand the process of unfolding, and, not understanding it, we project on the vocation our displeasure when our conscience curbs our impulse to do what pleases us at each moment. We interpret our not being able to hush our inner voice as the source of our difficulties and of our supposedly curtailed freedom.

Spiritual vocation does not create difficulties; it simply makes them evident. In the measure that we try to live in accordance with our vocation, we discover what we have to overcome. For example, disagreeableness and aggressive reactions are necessary points of work in order to continue advancing. If we pay attention to the process unleashing itself within us, we can know ourselves better and work more deeply at transmuting that energy. But if, conversely, we choose to close our eyes to our unfolding, we begin to think our vocation creates problems for us, that it takes time away from us, and interferes with our relationships.

Another difficulty that weighs on us is the tendency to become discouraged when we undergo periods of inner aridity. Work on ourselves becomes routine, and we find neither the stimulus that cheered us, nor the consolation that relieved us. On the contrary, we are more likely to discover painful aspects of life we can neither eliminate, nor solve, as we would like. Even though we're able to discern our vocation, we still don't understand the nature of spiritual work, which discourages us and leaves us in the dark.

We begin the third stage of our road of unfolding when we understand that hesitation is regression, that we can't become paralyzed waiting for some miraculous intervention to free us. We decide to make ourselves totally responsible for our unfolding. A single intention and a will applied to unfolding gradually harmonize all the aspects of our life.

Our spiritual life and the task of living are one and the same thing. Love for inner freedom sustains our will, inspires our intelligence, and nourishes our feelings. We realize that our unfolding is equivalent to understanding ourselves, knowing ourselves, and improving our relationships on all levels. We see that, instead of being stripped of our freedom when we meet the demands of our vocation, we are able to be truly free and express the best of ourselves.

Responding to our vocation doesn't eliminate either life's pain or vicissitudes. However, by fostering our self-knowledge and cultivating our best qualities, it helps us live more wisely and confront suffering in such a way that even the circumstances which appear most unfavorable produce the flowering of our best possibilities.

Only now, at this third stage, do we understand that living our vocation doesn't rob us of our time. On the contrary, it multiplies our time, since by better discerning our priorities, we organize our days more sensibly. We also unfold the capacity to evaluate our actions and to generate feelings that awaken the noblest responses in us, those that are most beneficial for everyone.

There is no final point of arrival in the fulfillment of our vocation. Instead, its realization implies a way of living that unfolds our consciousness through a simple, ordinary life of love and service.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR SPIRITUAL ADVISORS

Fifteenth Teaching

Spiritual unfolding is based on an open and healthy relationship with our spiritual advisors. The space we give spiritual advice in our lives depends, in turn, on the space we give to the vocation of unfolding.

Our physical bodies depend on the way we assimilate the food we eat, as well as on what we consume. Something similar happens in the process of spiritual unfolding, in which the way we process, understand, and validate experiences is as essential as what we experience. Spiritual advice plays a very important role in these interactions.

The way we relate to our vocation determines the scope we give to spiritual advice. In order to recognize that scope, we need to know how much our vocation takes precedence over other objectives, and to what degree we're ready to commit our efforts to our unfolding.

If our vocation plays a secondary role in our lives, or we subordinate it to other objectives, we may, or may not, use the orientation we receive in a spiritual consultation, depending on our interests at that moment.

If we center our lives on our vocation, spiritual advice becomes an important element in our unfolding.

Spiritual advice is the advice we receive, as well as our commitment to receive it; the discernment the advice reflects, as well as our own discernment to understand it; the trust we place in the advisor, as well as the trust we place in ourselves to apply that advice.

We benefit from spiritual advice to the extent we understand it as a reciprocal process between the spiritual advisor and the person receiving the spiritual advice.

The work of the spiritual advisor is, simply, to make clear and explicit what we really yearn for in life. Hence, to listen with an open attitude, free of prejudices and over-sensitivity, is indispensable in our relationship with our spiritual advisor. Our freedom to obtain spiritual guidance makes us responsible for the advice we receive, and gives us the necessary strength to respond faithfully to our vocation.

The function of the spiritual advisor is to stimulate us to fulfill the objectives we ourselves have established. This guidance acquires strength and meaning in the measure we resolve to work on our unfolding. The spiritual advisor helps us elucidate our options and stimulates us to follow our vocation. If we weren't determined to follow our vocation, spiritual advice would lose its meaning.

Spiritual advice is like a mirror in which we can see ourselves in relation to our vocation. It responds to our particular characteristics, needs, and possibilities. Therefore, we are careful not to generalize the advice we personally receive. What is appropriate for us may not be appropriate for others, and what is valid in one particular moment of our lives may not be valid in another.

When we generalize the spiritual advice we receive, or the way we practice our method of life, we run the risk of alienating others by trying to impose that advice or method as valid for everyone. The effects of our conduct on others reflect how well we understand the advice and the method. When we apply them sensibly, our conduct raises the level of relationship with our family, friends, and associates; improves the milieus we share; and has a positive impact on

society. If, on the other hand, we are dogmatic in our understanding of the method and advice, our conduct generates reaction and resentment in others, instead of benefits. For example, we may discipline our life with great willpower, and then demand the same discipline in those around us. Our zeal moves us to treat others harshly if they don't make the same effort we make, even though they may wish us well. Demanding is not the way to help. Our influence on our surroundings feels positive when we respect other people's will and decisions; when we grant them the same freedom of choice we demand for ourselves, and when we suspend judgment of them, and dedicate ourselves diligently to evaluating our own conduct.

We have to follow the prescribed treatment, as well as go to the doctor, in order to get well. Likewise, we have to apply spiritual advice for it to bear fruit. No matter how wise the advice may be, it is useless if we do not put it into practice. Continuing the analogy, patients may not get better because they don't want to make the sacrifices their treatment requires. They may then look for other doctors, because their doctor didn't "get it right" when trying to discover what was going on. Similarly, we may look for other spiritual advice, something more in accord with our lack of will to exert ourselves, when we don't want to make the sacrifices that spiritual advice requires of us. Of course, the results in our lives will be different from one case to the other.

In order to fulfill our spiritual vocation, we have to understand it, as well as make the effort to put advice into practice.

Spiritual advice is based on the reciprocal trust between our spiritual advisor and ourselves. In this relationship, it is indispensable that we recognize the suitability of the advisor, and, especially, that we believe that the advice we are given is a means for realizing our vocation. Moreover, it is necessary that we trust that the advice expresses the spirit of the Teaching. The spiritual advisor, in turn, trusts that we are trying to unfold. This mutual confidence enriches both persons, and transforms a relationship of apparent dependence into a shared path.

We assume responsibility for our own unfolding in each and every moment of our lives, because we are the ones who decide about our life and who face the consequences of our actions and choices. Although the spiritual advisor offers us guidance and counsel, we are the ones who are responsible for our decisions. We do something because we decide to do it, not because someone tells us to do it. Spiritual advice does not oblige; it simply presents options.

Spiritual advice does not eliminate the difficulties inherent to life, but it does help us to resolve them and to avoid falling into vicious cycles of negative conduct. Many times, it is impossible for us to see a way out, a solution, because we are both judge and party in considering our difficulties. Spiritual advice proffers us a voice, a vision, and an alternative to our own unilateral voice, vision, and alternative.

When we ask for spiritual advice, we're expressing our decision to engage our will in meditating on and evaluating the advice, and, when we find it adequate to our needs, applying it. That is, we're committing ourselves to taking the advice responsibly. When spiritual advisors accept their roles, they become responsible for acting with equanimity, with judgment based on reflection, and with a view to our welfare.

Our openness to advice places great responsibility on the spiritual advisor: impeccable conduct, spiritual preparation, and intellectual updating. In addition, the advisor must set aside

personal preferences and opinions. This attitude and conduct are indispensable in order to be able to transmit suitable advice and not interfere in our decisions and our unfolding.

When spiritual advisors are with the persons requesting advice, they express what those persons need to hear in order to take care of their vocation. When the persons asking for advice are with their spiritual advisors, they remember whom they are with and seek the counsel that orients them toward the fulfillment of their vocation of unfolding. This reciprocity of objectives, conduct, and attitudes ensures a relationship that is wholesome, open, and directed towards the spiritual good of all.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Sixteenth Teaching

The idea of relationship implies a difference between what we relate with and ourselves. Relationship both links, and indicates the difference between, the two components of the relationship. For that reason, from the spiritual point of view, relationship is a means, not an end. If we don't clearly understand this, we can lose sight of what we want to attain through the relationships we establish, and we may turn them into ends in themselves.

What we seek in our work on our relationships determines what we obtain. We can mention two extremes: on the one hand, more effectively manipulating our surroundings—which we define as “not me”—and on the other, attaining a higher degree of love.

Our work on relationships takes on a transcendent meaning when its purpose is to unite with one another and with an increasingly more expansive context. For this reason, it is important that we clearly respond to two basic questions in our work on relationships:

- Why do we work on relationships? That is, we establish our motivation
- What is our purpose in working on relationships? That is, we establish our goal

Why do we work on our relationships? We work because we want to unfold, and improving our relationships helps us to unfold. This “wanting” to unfold is our motivation.

What is our purpose in working on our relationships? Our purpose is to expand our consciousness through an increasingly more inclusive love. Ultimately, our aim is to attain union with God.

If our motivation is to unfold and our aim is union with God, we harmonize our relationships with others in order to love everyone. We improve our relationship with the Earth in order to integrate with it. We look for a more profound relationship with our vocation in order to transcend the notion that we are separate and opposed, to become conscious that we are beings in participation, and to unite with God.

Nevertheless, the motivation, as well as the purpose of unfolding our relationships, becomes gradually apparent to us. We can identify two major stages in the course of this unfolding:

- Relationship directed towards survival and conquest
- Relationship directed towards participation

These stages affect both our human relationships and our relationship with God.

The first stage can be divided into periods of competition, tolerance, and solidarity.

The struggle for survival and the zeal for conquest is based on the division we make between what we think we are and everything else, be it human beings, nature, the Universe, or God.

The need for survival leads us to compete at any cost, without considering the consequences. We seek a relationship with God to guarantee that we will survive as a separate entity in this world and in the next. God is supposed to protect us in this world from natural catastrophes, illnesses, and enemies. After our death, He is also supposed to protect us by giving us a privileged place at His side in the other world. We fear His anger and punishment. We

make a pact with God and then rely on His support in our competition with outsiders. We make offerings to God in exchange for His favors.

Even if throughout our development we can, to a certain degree, protect ourselves and obtain what we need to survive, we maintain a competitive attitude for a long time. Believing ourselves to be separate from the whole leads us to manipulate everything, to think that we can destroy what opposes our conquests and, even more, to compete unconsciously with the God we worship. Yet, not knowing who we are or what we live for forces us to be humble and to prostrate ourselves before God, asking for help and mercy. Our relationship with God is hope on the one hand and resignation on the other.

The sorrow of this isolation and ignorance gradually teaches us to measure the cost of competition and the value of tolerance, to accept others, and accept the will of God.

Tolerance gradually leads to solidarity, the most beautiful aspect of the first stage. Although the division between others and ourselves still exists, compassion raises the level of our relationship. We not only tolerate others, but also collaborate with them, assist them in their needs and share what we have with them.

Solidarity is also shown in respect for the Earth and its resources, concern for their use, and effort to repair the harm already done to the planet.

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

At the stage of participation, we know we are part of a whole and we feel it. We express this feeling spontaneously through our relationships. Our response to our need for unfolding is also our response to the requirements for the development of humankind. Our personal good and the good of humankind grow closer and closer.

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 conscious of the whole system. Our work on relationships makes this potential a reality and gradually unfolds our consciousness toward a state of union with the great context of existence. The consciousness of participating with the totality of life is a state that we reach gradually throughout a process in which we do not distinguish an end.

Although we cannot explain union with God, we can observe that this process of union yields the gradual simplification of our relationships as a result. This process shows that working on relationships does not go towards complexity and sophistication, but, rather, towards transparency and simplicity.

We form relationships in our effort to connect with all aspects of life; as our circle expands, the lines of relationship begin to fuse together. A moment comes when relationship is not “with” someone or “with” God, but rather everything acquires reality in us.

In order to deepen our relationship with God, we need to unfold relationships rooted in unselfish love. These roots deepen when we renounce supports, when we renounce ready-made ideas, and when we channel our efforts within a viable method that produces the unfolding of consciousness.

Work on our system of relationships is a fundamental part of our road toward union with God. This work applies to all people and all circumstances, for relationships are the very fabric of life.