

**THE ART OF LIVING
IN RELATIONSHIP**
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Part One: Learning to Relate

Chapter One: Relationship and Spiritual Life

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

Nevertheless, the term "spiritual life" is generally associated with a belief rather than with the task of living. When we refer to spiritual life, we need to remember that no one's life is autonomous or isolated. We live in relationship, not only with other persons and our immediate surroundings but with the world, with time and with the mystery of not knowing who we are, where we came from and where we are going. Most especially we need to remember that we live in relationship with the fundamental principle of the Universe, that which we call God or the Divine.

When we say that we want to be happy, that we yearn for fulfillment, we are actually expressing the human need to unveil the mystery of the Divine. We know that explanations of life and the world are not enough. We find real

fulfillment and happiness only when the Divine becomes part of our self-awareness.

This realization is traditionally called "union with God." But the traditional definition does not include the fact that we are united with all of reality; we live in a great web of relationships that includes everything. If we were to think of the unfolding of the soul as a process that takes place only between the individual and the Divine, we would separate the human being from reality. Our relationship with others and with the world is not simply an arena where our spiritual transformation takes place. On the contrary, spiritual unfolding becomes possible when it is based on the harmonization of the relationship that we have with all human beings and with all aspects of life.

That is why the idea of relationship is so important to our spiritual realization. The human being is inseparable from the universe: we are and we live in relationships. Yet our relationship with the world is for the most part unknown to us; we are aware of only some of our relationships, especially those which we voluntarily choose.

We live in an environment that is as reduced or as ample as our consciousness. Our attitude, health, moods and the circumstances of the moment influence us, and the subjective dimension of our situation changes continually. Thus we may sometimes wish to relate with all human beings--our realm is the universe--while other times we do not want to have a relationship with anyone or anything--our realm is ourselves.

But we live in relationship whether we want to or not, whether we realize it or not. Nothing exists apart from us; everything exists along with us--it includes us. For a better society to be possible, we all need to learn to live together in harmonious relationships.

It would be good for those of us who yearn for a better society to look first at our own relationships and to put aside the belief that our originality and authenticity as individuals are expressed in an isolated, fixed or abstract way. This will help us perceive our individuality by the way we relate with the circumstances which actually include and shape who we are.

The spiritual tradition teaches the basic foundations of human relationships: not to kill others, cause others harm, humiliate others, or jeopardize their welfare. That is, we need to control ourselves enough not to cause injury. It also teaches practices that help us accept our neighbor: tolerance, patience, gentleness, compassion. Although these precepts show us the beginning of a basic human relationship, humankind as a whole does not yet live these principles. It is here, at these first steps, that we need to begin to become conscious of the character and level of our relationships in order to understand the task of harmonizing and universalizing them.

Spiritual practices lead to spiritual advancement only when they produce greater harmony in our system of relationships. To imagine that we are unfolding spiritually, while at the same time finding it hard to tolerate those we live with, would be to distort the meaning of unfolding. It would be a sad illusion if we thought we were on the road toward union with God if our behavior caused others to have to practice virtues to be able to live with us.

Effort is necessary to develop conscious and harmonious relationships. We need interior effort to work on the self-knowledge which will enable us to overcome the idea that we exist separated from others. We also need exterior control so that our conduct does not separate us from others but creates an unbreakable inner tie between ourselves and everyone else.

Although practices of self-knowledge such as meditation and ascetic exercises are recommended, they are not enough to produce real unfolding if our

objective is limited to achieving a separate personal realization. To be able to know ourselves and to harmonize our relationships, we need to apply in our daily lives a universal vision that we glimpse in moments of introspection.

The union of the soul with God is also union with all souls and with all that exists. We cannot embrace the cosmos without including all of its parts--that which is pleasing and that which is not. To attain the infinite we cannot reject or ignore the things that seem limited to us.

The art of living spiritual life is based on love and is expressed in relationships. To love and to relate are the same thing; as our relationships become conscious, we become conscious of love. The quality of our relationships shows the nature of that love. When we relate consciously and harmoniously with our reality--which is everything--our love likewise expands and embraces all that is.