

Part One: Understanding Relationships

Chapter 6: Our Relationship with Choice

*To unfold spiritually one must limit oneself
voluntarily and consciously within a method of life.*

We are continuously making choices, some conscious, others unconscious, all of which form a kind of line, a trajectory of our lives.

It is fundamental to realize the kind of trajectory we are tracing with our choices and the results they bring to ourselves and others.

We are not always aware of this trajectory. We might get distracted with the success or failure of our endeavors. But it is actually more important to understand the extent to which our choices determine the quality of our lives. The trajectory that we trace can be consciously changed through the wise use of our capacity to choose.

Each instant presents us with options, but we rarely make real choices. Usually what we do is react to situations before us. Other times we simply

follow old habits and the mental currents of the time. Sometimes we think that we do not need to choose, and other times we think it does not matter what we choose. But in spite of what we might think, each choice, conscious or unconscious, has its effect on us and others.

There are times when we look at the choices we've made and we feel dissatisfied, unhappy with our lives and the stretch of road we see ahead of us. We imagine how we would like to live, what we would like to be, what we would like to achieve.

Although dreaming about our possibilities may bring us sweet moments of illusion, we still have to face life, which is sometimes difficult, sad and seemingly impossible to change.

Instead of abandoning ourselves to a dream of what we would like to be and do--which moves us to reject what we are and what we do--we need to learn to discern the difference between the illusions created by the imagination and the real possibilities we have to choose from, moment by moment. In other words, we can establish a conscious and continuous relationship with choice which, we will discover, is the way to live our lives fully.

To be able to choose, we have to have a clear idea of what we want. If we were to ask several people what they wanted to attain in life, their answers probably would be summarized very simply: they would like to satisfy their desires, feel happy, be fulfilled.

But each of us is different, and we define these longings differently. In our imaginations, we think of the companionship, the achievements and the success that this sense of fulfillment and happiness would bring.

Meanwhile, what happens most of the time is that we dislike our present situation which, like any situation, implies limitations, difficulties and a certain amount of suffering.

This contradiction between what we want and what we actually have produces a continuous feeling of discomfort in us.

What can I do?

First, I can review my present situation and identify those things I cannot change. I cannot change, for example, my age, my experiences, those things I have done and not done during my life, my real capabilities. Nor can I change my commitments, such as those to home and children. The only way to liberate myself from a commitment is to fulfill it--that is something I cannot change.

To accept what I cannot change is a matter of common sense, and it helps me to stop daydreaming about impossible fantasies and illusory escapes. It would not make sense, for example, to imagine that I don't have any obligations when it is obvious that I do. Nor is it realistic to imagine that I have a particular talent when it is apparent that I do not.

To accept what I am is simply to accept my past. That, in itself, cleanses my mind and heart of something that may seem like a limitation but which really is the foundation on which I can constructively move ahead. *I have to learn to use what I cannot change.* Knowing this enables me to determine what my options are, what my real possibilities are.

Then I am ready to choose.

How then do I choose well? Some people, facing the real choices before them, ask: How can I choose if I am not sure? Shouldn't I try different things, investigate all options, until no doubt remains about what I want?

Certainly it is helpful and necessary to investigate. But if we wait to make a decision until we are absolutely sure, until there is no doubt left, it is not likely that we will ever fulfill anything of value.

Our choices always imply an element of risk, a margin of uncertainty. Doubt is ever present in the human condition. Sometimes doubt is hidden in a corner of our minds and only surfaces at moments of great difficulty. Yet there remains only one thing that is certainty in human life: we are going to die. It is this certainty that in fact generates all our insecurity, doubts and vacillations. "Doubts" are really an aspect of our certainty, a condition of our reality.

Sometimes we do not face a decision because we would rather play around with our imagined possibilities, with all the things we would like to have and make. But nothing is achieved if we don't make a clear choice, and then make the effort needed to fulfill our choice.

In life, there are two kinds of fundamental choices we make.

The first we could call *exterior choice*. It is the choice of how I am going to use my life: what I am going to do, how I am going to do it, how I will support myself. Exterior choice implies career decisions, training, commitments to other people, lifestyle, and concrete accomplishments in work and human relationships.

But my real possibilities are much broader than the realization of my exterior choice. That is why, regardless of the success I might have in the realization of my objectives, I so often do not attain the happiness and fulfillment that I hoped for. After all, nothing can prevent me from growing older, declining physically, and gradually having fewer exterior possibilities.

We usually think that career, work, success, will bring us the fulfillment we always wanted. But the moment comes when we realize that we are missing something, that *there must be something else in life* besides the exterior choices we've made. We discover that there really is another kind of choice.

This new choice is no longer an exterior commitment, either to others or to some particular thing I want to do. This new choice (perhaps the most important one I ever make) requires a commitment to myself, to my inner life. I have to choose if I will commit myself to the development of my integral being, to giving spiritual meaning to my life.

We call this choice *inner choice*.

Our inner choice is fundamental, and it marks a decisive moment in the life of every human being.

It often requires us to reevaluate all previous choices and sometimes completely changes our lives.

The inner choice is made only once in life, and it is permanent.

But we can fulfill this choice only if we are continuously conscious of it. It is not enough that we do something; we must resolve to remain inwardly aware, conscious of our inner processes and our tendency to find shelter in pretexts and justifications--our tendency to avoid facing the contradiction between what we do and what we know we yearn to do.

It is not enough to study texts, to practice exercises or to talk about inner life. We need concrete means for working innerly, and we have to apply these means wisely and perseveringly.

On the path of spiritual unfolding, we need a method of life, spiritual direction, and continuous effort.

Every means, every method, implies a limitation. To unfold spiritually one must limit oneself voluntarily and consciously within a method of life. Spiritual realization, like any other realization, is attained through responsible and conscious limitation within the method and path appropriate for each person and for the chosen objective.

Spiritual direction is likewise indispensable. We all need the help and guidance of those who have already traversed the path we have chosen.

And without persevering effort, no realization is possible. No matter how high one's aspirations are, these aspirations in themselves are no more than a dream until each person makes them a reality through a conscious, permanent, responsible effort.

Throughout our lives, we are continuously making choices. We tend to think that only some of them are important, but that is not so. All of them determine the trajectory of our lives. Yet it is the inner choice that we each make which gives meaning to our lives.

Knowing how to choose spiritually produces a clear relationship with all our other choices in life.