

## **Part One: Understanding Relationships**

### **Chapter 7: Our Relationship with Personal Characteristics**

*Instead of imagining that one can change, that one can be  
"another" person, we have to contemplate our real  
possibility, which is the possibility to unfold.*

We all have characteristics: some are inherent, others are acquired. Together they shape the way we are and the way we express ourselves. Because characteristics are individual and vary from person to person, we will refer to them as "personal characteristics."

Just as everyone has a body--which enables one to be identified physically--everyone has a set of characteristics which distinguish him or her as a person. These characteristics reveal a person's temperament, traits, and the way he expresses himself and conducts himself in life.

There is no such thing as a set of perfect characteristics, although there is a certain consensus among us on what might be considered desirable characteristics. What usually happens is that when we think about our own characteristics, we identify the ones we feel are bad and those we think are good, based on what we want to achieve through them. Moreover, we usually say that a *person* is good or bad depending on the way his personal characteristics affect his relationship with us or with other people. Yet this way of appraising personal characteristics often leads to contradictions.

It might be that someone thinks he has a very good characteristic while those around him do not think it is good at all. For example, someone might feel very satisfied with his compulsive personality because it allows him to get what he wants from others. But we can be sure that those around him do not feel happy with the way he treats them.

It might be that another person is a hard worker and thinks that this is his best characteristic. But his capacity for work might negatively affect his relationship with those who cannot keep up with his tempo. He might even be continually comparing himself to others and criticizing them for not being able to work as he does. Besides, that characteristic--which might be advantageous in his office or shop--could prevent him from appreciating other aspects of life, such as being with his family, enjoying nature, sharing time with friends.

We need to know our personal characteristics because they are the means through which we express the way we work, relate to others and develop. They are also frequently the cause of many of the problems that trouble us.

What, then, is our relationship with our characteristics?

Since not all of my characteristics are good, often I am not satisfied with myself. And since it is very difficult for me to change these characteristics or even control them, I might become discouraged and think that no matter how great an effort I make, I cannot free myself from the limitations that my characteristics impose on me.

However, it is possible for me to establish a productive relationship with my personal characteristics. To do this, the first thing I have to do is to stop identifying with them.

Just as I do not identify myself with my eyes or nose or hands, I need not identify with other characteristics I have which, like temperament and character, express the way I act and react but do not show more than superficial aspects of myself.

It is helpful to remember that our characteristics are tools that allow us to perform the work of living. In this way, the distinction is kept clear between what one is and what one's achievements, occupation and characteristics are.

When I maintain this distance between myself and my characteristics, I have the possibility of using them fully and, what is more important, the possibility of improving them. But if I identify with my characteristics, I cannot get to know them well or work on them.

For example, if I am very emotional and identify with this characteristic of mine, I tend to think that my emotions really express my true feelings when, in reality, these very emotions are what confuse and cloud my discernment. Since I identify with everything I feel, I cannot distinguish the extent to which I am a slave of my emotional states. But if I am able to keep a distance from the way I react emotionally, I can discover a

deeper source of feeling, I can work better with the energy of my emotions and I can achieve a more serene and harmonious inner state, which lies behind my emotional ups and downs. Moreover, as this distance allows me to recognize the influence of my emotional characteristics over the way I think and relate to others, I can apply my judgment better, and I can establish my relationship with others at a more spiritual level.

Something else happens, too, when we identify with our characteristics: as we do not like some of them, we dream about being different, about changing. But this desire alone does not take us very far.

It is beautiful to see the desire to change, to be better, in a person. But this yearning needs to be well channeled if it is to lead to a true realization.

Instead of imagining that one can change, that one can be "another" person (which is usually nothing but a way of reacting against some of our characteristics), we have to contemplate our real possibility, which is the possibility to unfold.

In other words, instead of abandoning myself to the game of imagining how I would like to be, I have to dedicate myself to the concrete work of my own unfolding. Practically speaking, I have to begin by getting to know my characteristics and working on them.

Our relationship with personal characteristics, then, has to be one of knowledge and work.

First I must know what my characteristics are and how they express themselves. I have to discover which are helpful and which have a harmful effect on my unfolding. Then I must begin a systematic work on them.

At first glance it seems not only easy to recognize one's characteristics, but one actually thinks one already knows what they are. It is true that we

know some of them, but we don't usually recognize the ones that cause problems for us.

Let's continue with the example we gave before: a hard worker might think that he does not get along with his colleagues because they are lazy. But it is not really because he is a harder worker than his companions that he has problems relating. The real fact is that he is intolerant. An intolerant person rarely recognizes the full extent of his intolerance. It is unlikely that such a person will improve and deepen his relationship with others--he will always be thinking that others are responsible for his problems of relationship. It is only if he recognizes his intolerance that he will have the possibility of unfolding.

If I am very emotional, it is possible that I will not recognize this characteristic, but I will think of myself as sensitive. Then when I see that a certain circumstance produces a wave of emotion in me but does not awaken the same response in those around me, I might think that they are insensitive, and I might judge them in such a way that it hurts my relationship with them.

Or it could be, in another circumstance, that I think of myself as a very sympathetic, warm and friendly person, and I need a lot of attention and a show of affection from others. If they don't respond the way I expect them to, I might think they are being indifferent. Perhaps this is not the case at all. It could be that I really am not that warm and friendly, I really am quite selfish. I think mainly in terms of how others treat me. This, of course, prevents me from having harmonious relationships with others, and since I do not identify my real characteristic, I can't improve it even if I want to.

I might like to think that I am very spiritual and for that reason I do not trouble myself over material matters. I might even think this is my best characteristic. But actually it could be that I am irresponsible, and I don't want to make the necessary effort to keep my affairs in order.

The characteristics with which we are most identified are the ones that are hardest for us to identify. They are also precisely the ones we need to recognize and work on.

There is only one way that I can learn not to identify with my personal characteristics: to overcome my defensiveness. When I am shown characteristics that I am glad I have, I feel very encouraged. But if someone tells me that I have a certain characteristic I don't like, I don't want to admit it, I react, I feel mortified. I might even react negatively to the one who showed it to me. The tendency to be defensive is very strong in us, and it shows little spiritual maturity. If I do not transcend it, I cannot unfold my real possibilities. What I should really feel is gratitude when people or circumstances help me see more clearly my inner nature and discover characteristics that until then I did not want to recognize in myself.

I cannot work spiritually if I deceive myself about my characteristics, especially the ones I have to improve.

I remember a conversation I overheard once in which someone said to a person:

"It seems that you are a little defensive."

She immediately replied, "I? Defensive? How could that be?"

This anecdote might make us smile, but we could all ask ourselves how we would react and feel if someone said the same thing to us.

To recognize the characteristics I have is fundamental to my spiritual unfolding. This recognition must be profound and not cause reactions in me, either positive or negative.

It is natural for us to be happy about the characteristics that help us and to be sad about the ones we can't control. But if we react, we cannot work on our characteristics. So we need to keep alert so as not to react, not to defend ourselves. We also need to avoid criticizing the characteristics of others, which simply blinds us to our own.

All of us have characteristics that may harm us and also characteristics that harm others. The first thing we get to know about a person are his characteristics. At the same time, that person sees in us only our characteristics. It is very helpful to learn to see the soul behind the characteristics, the real person, and therefore relate on a level beyond the movement of attraction and rejection.

When we try to improve our relationship with others, we do not always know how to go about it. We often limit ourselves to demanding that others change the aspects in themselves that bother us. But when they ask the same thing of us, we think they don't understand us. It is very difficult to achieve a good relationship in that way.

Just as it is helpful if I do not identify with my characteristics, likewise it is very helpful if I do not identify other people with their characteristics. A person might have some extraordinary qualities and yet some of his characteristics can still bother me. On the other hand, another person might really attract me with his personal characteristics and yet we might not share the same values or spiritual aspirations.

In adolescence it is common that we are attracted by other people's characteristics. Later, as we mature, we find another way of discerning.

My relationship with the characteristics of others is to be based on understanding and tolerance.

In most cases when I feel hurt by others it is because I do not know how to relate with them on a deeper level than that of personal characteristics.

Let's take this example: the shortcomings of my own child bother me less than the same characteristics in my neighbor's child. This is because my relationship with my own child goes beyond his exterior characteristics.

To deepen our relationship with others, we need to spiritualize the level on which we relate. We begin by accepting each and every person with *all* his characteristics.

To accept a person does not mean that my relationship with him is based on my capacity to put up with him. This would show that the quality of my relationship is very reduced. My relationship improves when it is based on understanding and love.

To accept others is also to recognize that I myself hurt them often, usually without recognizing it and by overlooking the hints I receive that such a thing is happening.

When I accept a person, I accept her in her circumstances and in her history. I never know to what extent the events that happened in her life influence her relationship with me, or the influence her personal history has on our relationship. Above all, I have to understand that I myself influence the relationship to a great extent, and that many of the characteristics that bother me about her are really the result of the way that person reacts to my own characteristics.

When I feel irritation in my relationship with others I have to uncover the origin of my reactions, for there is where I have to work to be able to unfold.

No matter how good a relationship may be, there are always some difficulties, some unpleasant moments. To understand this is to accept the fact that all relationships entail some level of suffering.

When I accept the measure of sorrow that is always present in life, it become easier for me not to demand anything from others. This allows my relationships to be more harmonious and spiritual.

Our relationship with personal characteristics can be established on different levels. These levels, in turn, determine the ways on which I work upon these characteristics.

To keep it simple, let's consider three levels of relationship with personal characteristics.

The first is the level of education, not in the sense of instruction but in upbringing. At this level we develop the capacity to control ourselves exteriorly, and we form habits of conduct. Conduct gives the standards upon which every kind of relationship is developed, and it determines the objective characteristics of the relationship.

Education always consists in the acquisition of a degree of control over one's characteristics. This control keeps our characteristics from harming us or others. Moreover, that same control allows us to channel our characteristics through habits of collaboration, work and communication so that they promote harmonious living conditions and the unfolding of our possibilities.

The second level is the psychological one. One works inwardly to become conscious of the characteristics one has.

How do we spontaneously develop our characteristics?

We tend to develop some characteristics more than others. Some of these characteristics favor our unfolding and the deepening of our relationships, while others present an obstacle to it.

Therefore, on the psychological level, besides working to become conscious of the way in which we manifest ourselves, we work to unfold beneficial characteristics and to create habits through which we can control the ones which are not beneficial. This inner work gives as a result a real expansion of our relationship with others.

To be able to relate on a level of education and personal control is a big conquest. But our relationship would be limited if it were only on that level. Working at the psychological level helps us to understand ourselves and others, and it opens a channel so that the way we love may expand and become spiritual. But for this inner work to produce a real transformation in us, it must reach the spiritual level.

Our personal characteristics are the channels through which our energy flows. We say that a characteristic is good when it channels our energy in a way that will produce the result we desire, and that a characteristic is counterproductive when its result opposes the sought-after goal.

It is therefore necessary, when evaluating characteristics, to have a point of reference: where we want these characteristics to lead us. If we do not have an ideal in life, all inner work lacks meaning.

Moreover, without that ideal we don't know how to channel the energy we repress when we control some of our characteristics. If we do not transmute it, that energy turns against us and against others.

When I control an undesirable impulse--anger, for example--that energy remains in me. If I do not channel it in a better way, it grows in me until I can no longer control it, and then it either overflows unpredictably or harms me. In other words, if I discharge my energy I harm others; if I repress it I harm myself. What can I do? I can guide it, so that the strength of my impulses are transmuted into the expansion of my state of consciousness and in the way I relate and love.

All spiritual work is synthesized, in the end, in the wise use of one's energy. No spiritual realization comes from nothing. It always consists in the fruit of the transmutation of energy.

On the spiritual level, one also works on the notion of being.

We said earlier that we need to establish a distance between ourselves and our characteristics. In this sense, spiritual work consists in transcending our identification with them.

When we consider our characteristics we usually say, "This is the way I am," as if the situation were definitive. If I do not identify with my characteristics I understand that what I am is one thing, and the way I am is another--no more than one of the many possibilities that I have in which to manifest myself. I also understand that instead of wanting to change what I am, I have to discover who I am and I have to work on the way I manifest myself. When I understand this in myself, I also understand it in others.

When I establish a distance between myself and my characteristics, I transform them into instruments which I need--just as I need my body--to be able to express myself and unfold.

If I am not motivated by an ideal, it is very unlikely that I will persevere in my inner work. At one moment my enthusiasm will stimulate me to make an effort, but when my enthusiasm is exhausted I will have no reason to continue on in my effort.

What I need to do is to clearly establish the kind of unfolding I am looking for: what is the objective of my life? This is the only foundation upon which I can base myself.

The type of objective I choose also determines the level of my unfolding.

If what I am seeking is material well-being, it is possible that I do not need to work further than the level of education. If I also want my relationship with others to be more profound than the usual superficial relationships, I also need to work on the psychological level.

If I yearn for real peace and happiness, I need to understand that this is attained only on the spiritual level. To work on this level it is necessary to be motivated by the spiritual ideal.

We all want peace and happiness. Who doesn't? But not all of us understand that having peace and happiness doesn't mean we will always be enjoying life and never suffering. Instead of thinking of happiness as the opposite pole to work and suffering, we need to discover how to find peace and happiness within this very life, for we cannot evade life as it is.

The models of realization we know, which include those human beings who have brought us the material advances we enjoy as much as those who have indicated the spiritual realization we could attain, show us that these

realizations are based on continuous effort and renouncement. These persons not only show us our ideal, but also the road to realize it.

We all want to attain to realization. This is good. But the way we desire it is not always good. If we do not accept the fact that peace and happiness are the fruit of renouncement and sacrifice, we will never be able to understand why we do not advance in our unfolding.

These are all good: exercises, study, techniques, if they are well-applied. But they alone do not give us what we yearn for. Yes, we need to work on our habits, our relationships, our personal characteristics. But if we do not renounce to ourselves, all this effort does not help us to transcend the level of our daily set of problems. We change problems without ever reaching a definitive realization.

Our desire for transformation and realization needs to be based on the renouncement to our habitual personality: that is, the set of characteristics, of mental and emotional habits, with which we identify and manifest ourselves. In that way we will find the peace and happiness we yearn for.