

**SACRIFICE**

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# SACRIFICE

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## ***Introduction***

As we read the titles of the teachings of this course, we may feel a bit uneasy. Our first concern perhaps, will lead us to ask why it is necessary for us to make sacrifices when modern society offers us all the means to obtain well being. Is it not better to live well, without suffering, without having to make sacrifices? We may think that suffering and sacrifice are things of the past. But can we avoid sacrifice? And what's more, is it good to avoid sacrifice?

Suffering is inherent to life as we experience it. It is with us even in moments when we feel well and happy, because we know that our happiness is short-lived and that no matter how long and healthy our lives may be, we will inevitably die. Besides, suffering is present around us and it hurts us. Wherever we look we find lack of understanding, lack of resources, sickness, misery and afflictions of all kinds. We have a natural tendency to try to avoid suffering that is likely or sure to come. Countering this tendency and facing the suffering that is inevitable, as this course suggests, lead us to renounce the illusion that by shutting our eyes to the pain of life we are spared or will be spared suffering.

When we suffer pain we react according to our attitude toward suffering. We can bitterly complain, feel that life is punishing us unjustly, accuse someone of being the cause of our suffering, or submissively withstand the pain. Another attitude is that of valuing the painful experience, because we choose to suffer it in order to realize a noble goal. This last attitude toward suffering is what we currently understand as sacrifice. In order to reach this meaning, the idea of sacrifice underwent a great evolution.

Ritual sacrifice had a central role in ancient religions. There are many stories of sacrifice in both Western and Eastern religious traditions. Even though currently these forms of ritual sacrifice are no longer practiced, it is certain that the concept of sacrifice remains present in humanity. In one way or another, to sacrifice oneself for a noble cause or to gain divine favor continues to be an ethically desirable and appreciated behavior in society, even though today there is a general tendency in society toward self-centeredness and complacency.

Sacrifice, in its traditional sense, can be carried out in a personal and private way in acts in daily life or can be a part of liturgical ceremonies. In current religious circles, besides the practice of individual and private sacrifices, we find ritual sacrifices; for example, fasting, pilgrimages and ceremonies of the Eucharist.

In this course, we expand the idea of sacrifice by placing it in the greater context of human experience as it manifests in each instant. In reality, this expansion of the meaning of sacrifice corresponds to the Latin root of the word: sacer+facere; that is to say, to make sacred what we do and experience. When we speak of pain in this context, we speak of pain that, given our

current human condition, we cannot avoid. We do not include within the idea of sacrifice the pain that our state of consciousness allows us to avoid.

In the following teachings, we understand sacrifice as the ability to keep ourselves conscious of our human condition of being unable to avoid pain, whether we experience it personally or not. Sacrifice occurs when we transform this pain into a means that drives our unfolding, promotes our participation, and unfolds a relationship with ourselves as well as with others that is ever more harmonious. Instead of waiting either for good fortune to free us from suffering or for destiny to make us suffer, we resolutely establish a positive and permanent relationship with the aspects of life that cause us pain and that we cannot avoid. This relationship helps us to understand that our life is a unity, in which we cannot separate the distressing from the happy experiences. Happiness and sorrow are an indivisible pair in our own becoming. When, for example, we feel great happiness at the birth of our children and in seeing them grow and mature, we also know how much effort it will take to provide for their needs and how much we will have to suffer from the vicissitudes that they will have to go through in their lives.

On the other hand, let's take into account that the mere fact of staying alive, of having to overcome inertia in order to go ahead, of overcoming adversities, of obtaining what is necessary to live, of fulfilling our responsibilities, of responding to those who depend on us and to the society that protects us, demand sacrifice of time, affections, goods, and likes. As a whole we can well call this "the sacrifice of living."

Certainly, we do not consider doing all that is possible to stay alive a sacrifice, but we know that every effort requires that we renounce to other things that we wished we could do<sup>1</sup>, the illusory pleasure of doing nothing, or remaining ignorant of painful situations. We also know that when we accomplish what we set out to do, we feel fulfillment. We do not consider the renouncements we had to make or the pain we had to suffer to obtain our objective too costly or a loss. Rather, we feel they are true achievements that will benefit our advancement and the expansion of our consciousness.

Combining in a deliberate relationship the sacrifice of living with the joy of living, we harmonize our relationship with life as it presents itself to us through time. Then, each instant acquires its unique, full and sacred character.

The themes of the course are not only points of reflection on the suffering that afflicts us, but also give suggestions of practices that can help us use suffering to stimulate our unfolding. Having this in mind, we can use the suggestions according to our own criteria and will. It is certain that, in order to expand our consciousness, we need to incorporate into our notion of being all the aspects we perceive in reality, including those which we cannot avoid suffering. We can take advantage of all circumstances, especially the painful ones, in order to understand ourselves and to develop an ever expanding vision of life and the world.

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<sup>1</sup> "Half of knowing what one wants to attain is to know what one has to leave aside in order to obtain it." Sydney Howard, English author (1884-1946).

The course includes some quotes from known authors that are related to the themes of the teachings. The conceptual content of these quotes is not given as a fact or as an article of faith. The purpose of presenting the thoughts of some authors of recognized paths is to help enrich our reflection and put on the table of dialogue our points of view and to compare and contrast them with others.

## THE MYSTERIES OF SACRIFICE

### *First Teaching*

"The universe is so vast and so ageless that the life of a human being can only be justified by the measure of his/her sacrifice."

*V. A. Rosewarne (1916-1940), British Pilot; last letter to his mother. Inscription in the portrait of "Young Pilot", in the museum of the Royal Air Force.*

Suffering is always present in our lives in spite of all the advances of civilization that make existence more bearable. The words of the Apostle Paul when he said that the human being's life upon earth is struggle and pain are as applicable today as they were two thousand years ago.

Western religions, particularly Christianity, have exalted the concept of pain to make it more bearable. On the other hand, certain Eastern philosophies have said that pain is an illusion, a mental mirage. However, neither the exaltation nor the denial of pain has conquered it; pain remains present in the world.

Ancient rites encouraged devotees to bear the woes of life through vocal prayer and mantras. Even today, the Sannyâsîs of India wear necklaces around their necks made with fruit seeds which they move as they count their prayers. Christians have a similar practice, the recitation of their rosary. Each one of those seeds or beads symbolizes an aspect of the pain that we suffer.

What should we do in the face of pain? Should we resign ourselves to it or deny it? What is the meaning of sacrifice in relation to pain?

Generally speaking, sacrifice is an offering when we embrace pain out of love of God and beg for His assistance. It is an act of abnegation when we choose to suffer a mortification that we could avoid, including offering our lives with an altruistic intention.

The Teaching calls sacrifice the attitude of recognizing pain as an undeniable and unavoidable fact of our existence so that, based on that acknowledgement, we may transform pain into a means that drives us to participate in life as it presents itself. This point of view expands the sense of offering and abnegation that we habitually give to sacrifice and it is directly related with the concept of spiritual unfolding.

In the Temple of the Divine Mother we find this axiom: "Overcome pain by submerging yourself in it." In other words, let us neither ignore the pain that is present in the world nor reject the pains we cannot avoid or alleviate. The Teaching describes sacrifice as an attitude; that is to say, our relationship with life in its painful aspects. It is important for us to face this and work on it, because it is a basic aspect of our relationship with the whole of life.

Of course, the attitude of sacrifice regarding pain does not mean that we will seek it or that we will not make the effort to alleviate it. On the one hand, the practice of sacrifice implies the effort to produce the spiritual unfolding which will prevent the sorrow caused by our ignorance and, on the other, the acceptance of the sorrows we cannot avoid because they are inherent to life. Besides, it implies not reacting negatively against them or deflecting their effects in order to avoid our own suffering.

Sacrifice is to embrace effort and pain completely, with serenity. This attitude causes us to know pain as well as ourselves better, since it reveals our habitual reactions to what makes us suffer.

The way we relate to pain takes on different hues according to our unfolding and our circumstances.

Why is facing and embracing the pain we cannot avoid called sacrifice? Because, just as the sacrifice implicit in an act of abnegation demands from us the difficult decision to suffer for a noble cause, so too the sacrifice that the Teaching describes demands the courageous decision not to flee from or deny the pains of life, but to recognize and embrace them totally in order to expand our consciousness and to know ourselves.

We cannot separate from life the parts we do not like. Nor can we separate our notion of being from the vicissitudes of being alive. Thus, facing life in its totality means to face who we are in our totality. In this way the practice of sacrifice clears the road to self knowledge and alleviates the pains we cannot avoid with the balm of understanding.

Sacrifice transforms even deprivations, illnesses, and the most intense confusion into mild nectar. Sacrifice transforms our sufferings into serenity and participation. In this way we overcome pain. The Resurrection of Jesus after suffering on the cross as well as the Rosicrucians' cross enveloped in a crown of roses or with a rose in its center symbolize that transformation. The acceptance of pain transforms us; a marvelous flower blooms among the thorns.

The different aspects of sacrifice can be represented as a mental rosary divided into fifteen mysteries. We call them mysteries because the source and reason for pain are a mystery to our minds. Nevertheless, sacrifice enables us to unveil the mystery and know pain by embracing it. This is like a glimpse into eternity. The following teachings refer to the fifteen mysteries of sacrifice.

## **TEDIUM**

### *Second Teaching*

“Human beings can endure anything, except the succession of ordinary days.”

*J.W. Von Goethe (1749-1832), German writer and philosopher.*

We can enjoy good health, material goods and the entertainments offered by society. Nevertheless, even though we might have everything, we sometimes become discouraged when seeing how quickly time passes, how uncertain the future appears, how fast life slips through our fingers, and above all, how heavy routine is in our daily effort to live. Tedium comes to meet us, bringing with it the suffering of having to continuously confront the existential void.

Even those of us who persist in our inner unfolding cannot avoid the sensation of tedium and weariness that sometimes overcomes us.

If we escape from tedium through superficial distractions, we become its victims, for when we become used to it, this habit determines our behavior. If we cover tedium with compulsive work, our life becomes unbalanced, causing us to neglect our loved ones and, especially, our spiritual needs. If we escape tedium by indulging in the senses, we turn toward unconsciousness and hedonism and neglect our unfolding. But if we develop an attitude of sacrifice towards tedium, we can conquer it. When we talk about an attitude of sacrifice, we mean we learn not to fear it, to know it and to analyze it. When we confront tedium consciously, it shows us an invaluable way toward knowledge of ourselves and of life as it reveals itself in everyday experiences.

There are many repetitive activities that produce tedium, but there is a situation in which tedium seems almost intolerable: when we apparently don't have anything else to do but to wait for something desirable to happen. Nothing seems to make sense and the hours seem interminable.

Not being able to do anything while we wait for something to happen, triggers in us various reactions: boredom, digressions, depression, impatience, upsets and even exasperation. However, this time of waiting, apparently empty, provides us with the appropriate context to reflect and deepen into our reason for being; especially to become conscious that in those moments—as well as in any other moment—the most extraordinary thing that is happening is that we exist. The exercise of contemplating the mere fact of existence, and nothing more than this reality of existence, can not only transform tedium into an enriching experience, but also open our inner sphere to an expansion of our state of consciousness.

Life gives us moments of joy and happiness, as well as sadness and unease. It also gives us moments in which happiness and sadness are left behind, so distant that it is as if they had not occurred, leaving us only the emptiness of routines which we don't see where they are leading us. When we confront this apparent emptiness, the inner door opens us to the fullness of life.

The tedium of empty hours is the way in which time challenges us to fill them with consciousness. To confront tedium makes evident our escapes, our excuses, our fears; it also makes apparent the immensity of the context of existence and the wonder of becoming aware of our participation in this immensity.

When we escape tedium we escape from ourselves and miss the possibility to give a transcendent meaning to our lives. When we face tedium with an attitude of sacrifice, it clears the road toward liberating experiences.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

### *Third Teaching*

“Work distances us from three great evils: boredom, vice and need.”  
*Voltaire (1694-1778), French writer and philosopher. “Candide”*

Tedium is not the only thing that makes us suffer. At one time or another, in one way or another, even though we may have noble feelings, we suffer the pain that results from both an exacerbated instinct of self-preservation and the struggle to earn a living for ourselves and our family.

The intensified survival instinct sometimes prevails over our capacity to reason and can even lead us to destruction and death. Don't we behave sometimes as if we wished to obliterate those who get in our way? At the risk of over-generalizing, we could say that the stronger being wants to prevail over the weaker one. This eagerness to dominate and possess can be evidenced even in those who have apparently reached high degrees of love.

Sometimes we boast about our material achievements in the belief that winning and conquering give us inner strength. Nevertheless, that struggle for winning and conquering carries with it the temptation to enjoy possessing and subjugating. This causes us misfortunes and also disrupts the social balance. We need, therefore, to spiritualize our effort for survival, transforming the sorrow caused by the struggle for life into a source of understanding, participation and happiness.

Sacrifice teaches that the sorrow caused by the desire to prevail at any cost and to have more and be more than others is transcended by overcoming ignorance and by participating. We manage to advance on the path of peace and wisdom through the knowledge of ourselves and of the surrounding world, by working hard to find our place without taking the place of others, and by offering a part of what we have in order to assist those in need.

Sacrifice teaches us to step out of the race to prevail, dominate and win at the cost of others. It teaches us to participate and thus understand and accept the human nature that is common to all of us. Moreover, when misfortune assails us, sacrifice gives us strength to endure it without wavering.

Sacrifice allows us to know our own strength and the responsibility we have to face life's demands. We discover our strength when we accept feedback and dive within in search of self-knowledge. We discover the responsibility we have when we act with serenity and fortitude. In this way we also learn to distinguish between the sorrow inherent in life and the sorrow produced by ignorance and selfishness.

Although the effort that daily work demands is sometimes a source of pain for us--as well as for others, especially when we allow ourselves to be carried away by the competition to stand

out and take advantage--this same effort also allows us to stimulate the potential we have. If life were so easy for us that we did not need to study, acquire skills, discover and produce resources and use them to make it more bearable, what would the pace of our unfolding be? To what extent would we develop our intellect, discover our ingenuity and acquire capabilities? To have in mind that the struggle for life is actually one of the means to promote our progress helps us to give transcendent meaning to daily efforts and frustrations.

The struggle for life is a source of suffering as well as a source of knowledge and happiness. It is suffering because it consumes most of our energy, often requiring us to make gruelling efforts, and it demands great commitment from us. It is a source of knowledge and happiness because it impels us to sharpen our intelligence, to know ourselves and to provide what is necessary for the well being of our loved ones.

## CONTINUOUS CHANGES

### *Fourth Teaching*

“For everything you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something else.”

*Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), American writer and philosopher.*

The Universe, as we perceive it, expresses itself in continuous change. Nature, as well as societies and individuals, is in constant becoming. Nevertheless, in our search for a permanent good, we lean toward the static. This discrepancy between a world of continuous changes and the human yearning for permanence brings us suffering.

We change. Yesterday we conquered our status as adults; today youth is lost; tomorrow our material well-being is in danger. Friendships and loved ones change. When it is not need or death, circumstances or lack of affection separate us from our loved ones. A very wealthy man lost his beloved; he then consulted a clairvoyant to find out whether or not she would come back to him. Receiving a negative reply, he became annoyed and moved by arrogance he retorted, “I have money; I can use as much as necessary to get what I want, and so I will.” However, as the clairvoyant had predicted, even his abundant fortune could not help him recover his beloved.

Customs change; those which today seem good are discarded tomorrow as inadequate. It is difficult for us to conform to a system of relationships which change continuously, because it makes us feel out of step.

The environment changes; what is considered healthy and safe today will no longer be considered so tomorrow. We have to adapt to the insecurity that is implicit in unpredictable situations.

Interpretations of the world and life change. The understanding of reality that made us feel safe yesterday is no longer enough to respond to today’s challenges; we have to become flexible in our way of thinking and develop new visions of the reality in which we live.

Many other changes are also beyond our control. There are bonds which, when broken, cannot be reestablished and goods which, if spent or lost, cannot be recovered.

The attitude of sacrifice, by bringing us to acceptance, can transform the suffering caused by those changes and losses into serenity, understanding and consolation.

Although we cannot avoid the changes that are a part of life, we can turn them into a source of understanding and wisdom, as they teach us to discern the difference between transitory and permanent goods. If we accept the continuous disattachment forced upon us by changes, we

develop the capacity to discover permanent goods such as disinterested love, reverence, participation, and the habit of supporting ourselves on those permanent goods.

The experience that expands our state of consciousness, the understanding that increases our knowledge and the degree of love that we have reached, are beyond what we can lose. On the contrary, we can broaden and deepen them. The expansion of our state of consciousness is ours forever, even though the years pass, health declines and customs change.

On the other hand, if we understand that changes--including those seen at first glance as negative--are factors that stimulate our progress and that of society, we stop fearing them. The continuous changes that life exposes us to are one of the sources of the development of our possibilities. It is precisely the existence of possibilities which allows us to advance in all respects, as much in our understanding of nature and our surroundings as of ourselves.

A possibility is simply an indication that we can produce a change. A change is not necessarily a threat or loss. If we meditate on what changes we can produce and we work to implement those which bring benefits to ourselves as well as society, we turn changes into a true engine of human unfolding.

Opening to continuous change is opening to the flow of becoming, and on that foundation we base our work of unfolding. This applies not only at the level of spiritual unfolding, but also at the level of physical survival.

## THE PAST

### *Fifth Teaching*

“Let us be the fathers of our future rather than the offspring of our past.”

*Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), Spanish philosopher and writer.*

According to Marcus Tullius Cicero (Roman politician, philosopher, writer and orator; 106 BC-43 BC), “He who does not know his history will be a child his whole life.” But what do we do to know our history? Our teaching suggests an attitude of sacrifice regarding our past that leads us to disattach ourselves from it to learn from both our individual and collective experiences.

But other questions arise. Who can disattach from his or her past? And even more, who can leave aside the conditioning produced by his or her experiences through lives and deaths?

The conditioning produced by the past is one of the first challenges we encounter when we try to unfold spiritually. The past is such a heavy burden that it sometimes makes us feel powerless to advance as we wish to. Many times we hear, “I would like to be better, but I cannot; I always return to being as I was.” Even those who are very dedicated to their inner work frequently confront the past as a terrible enemy in the form of impulses, memories and habits which hinder them from moving forward as they yearn to.

“I have always been like this;” “I was taught this way;” “This worked for me;” “I already tried that and failed,” are a few of the countless excuses we find to absolve us from and entrench us in what has already happened.

Krishnamurti used to say, “To remember is to live the past and tie oneself to it.” Binding ourselves to our past makes us persist in our mistakes or in our pride for triumphs gone by. These attitudes have psychological roots, since they help us to justify our errors with reasoning that exonerates us or to feel important by recalling our successes. However, these same attitudes prevent us from seeing the possibility the present offers for achieving the changes that could help us in our unfolding.

On the other hand, studying the past with disattachment and objectivity teaches us to correct our mistakes and improve the things we have done well. The past is the feedback which gives us perspective on what is happening to us in the present. As the well-known adage goes, “Those who do not study their history are condemned to repeat it.”

Not everything that happened to us in the past was unfortunate or frustrating; we have also had successful and stimulating experiences. Nonetheless, we need to leave behind those positive experiences as much as the negative ones in order to continue learning. Yesterday’s success turns into true success when we build upon it in the present and keep ourselves open to enriching it with a vision that is ever more ample and inclusive.

The process of maturing and expanding the state of consciousness presupposes both learning from the past and also letting go of it.

From a practical standpoint, the attitude of sacrifice helps us to not tie ourselves to our past with feelings of guilt or pride, to not fear yesterday's consequences, and to cut the memories blocking our maturation process. In other words, sacrifice allows us to gain a certain degree of objectivity in analyzing our past.

From a broader point of view, an attitude of sacrifice teaches us to understand and place our past within the context of human unfolding. The past of each one of us is no more than a link in the chain of humanity's unfolding, a spark in the context of eternity. Our past teaches us when we see it as an integral part of the life of a person, a family, a nation and even all humanity. Individual experiences are part of the human experience and cannot be separated from it. Not binding ourselves to our past consists of understanding and placing our past experience within frames of reference: the immediate, intermediate and universal milieus.

To keep an attitude of disattachment regarding our past is to contemplate our own personal history as a good belonging to all humanity. This attitude gives us the freedom we need to understand and overcome habits of thinking, feeling and acting that limit us. Thus, we can create more suitable forms of thinking and feeling to attain our unfolding.

To disattach from our past is to learn to see ourselves without blaming, justifying, or boasting. It is to understand, and to be silent; it is to be ready to change as needed in order to unfold.

This attitude of disattachment is indispensable for both our own and humankind's advancement, since everything that has happened to us teaches us about ourselves, about our system of immediate relationships—our personal context—and about the system of relationships in the broad context of all humanity.

## THE UNCERTAINTY OF TOMORROW

### *Sixth Teaching*

“The quest for certainty blocks the quest for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition that impels man to unfold his powers.”

*Erich Fromm (1900-1980), German writer and thinker naturalized in USA.*

To let ourselves be carried away by fear of the uncertainty of the future inhibits us from unfolding our possibilities; it causes us continuous suffering; it encloses us in our selfishness; and it ties us to what our fearful mind considers security.

Even though we may make plans and try to foresee everything, rarely does life manifest itself exactly as expected. Even death, the most foreseeable aspect of the future, is a cause of uncertainty since we do not know how or when it will occur.

Events anticipated with joy are also clouded by uncertainty. The happiness of having a child is overshadowed by countless fears about his or her health, possibilities and happiness. A person may have today power and wealth but tomorrow may see his or her world collapse in loss and discouragement. When seekers of truth think they have found an answer to their doubts, a new discovery makes their trusted ideas obsolete, showing them that the definitive truth is still beyond their reach.

We cannot even be sure of our own behavior. Often we discover that we are living differently from the way we had chosen, acting in a way we thought we had overcome forever. Even in certain cases, we deny the ideals we had embraced for life. This is why those of us who sincerely and humbly work on our unfolding ask for Divine help to persevere in our vocation.

How can we free ourselves from the burden and limitations that the fear of uncertainty produces in us? Accepting that the uncertainty of tomorrow is the only certainty we have. To do this, which is so easily said with words, requires us to traverse the long road of changing the attitudes of our daily life.

When do we begin to take the first steps leading to acceptance of the uncertainty of tomorrow?

- When we study our past actions and see the good or painful fruits that those actions produce in us in the present, we learn to build a better future
- When we become responsible for the consequences of our actions
- When we do not waste the suffering caused by yesterday's ignorance with complaints, laments, and accusations

- When we use pain as a sign pointing to what we need to change
- When we do not condition our present to the fear of what could eventually happen in the future
- When we begin to understand the weakness caused by our pride
- When we work having in mind the common good and do not base our actions on the possible rewards we could get
- When we begin to understand the deception of pretending to seek our own good at the cost of the common good
- When we accept that the true and lasting satisfaction we can experience is a function of both our well being and the well being of those around us

To work having in mind the common good without conditioning our behavior and choices on possible personal advantages and rewards we could achieve at first sight seems to be a mortification. However, the practice of these attitudes gives us strength and a broad-minded approach. It helps us to free ourselves from the burden of the fear of the future, and it smoothes the road toward the realization of our real possibilities.

When we make decisions with a broad-minded approach to include the common good, when we love to pay attention and have interest in what we do without worrying so much about possible rewards, we find such great plenitude that we do not fear what may happen in the future. There is no greater reward than living the present with plenitude. We trust that what might happen in the future is for the best and that it will find us with the necessary strength to face it. Our best chance to live a full and serene life is to live the present in the best possible way.

On the other hand, let us remember that the consequence of the attitude of sacrifice with respect to the uncertainty of tomorrow is the wisdom to foresee for the future, to live prudently and moderately, and to accept the pain that neither our best inner disposition, our will, nor our present knowledge can avoid.

## **BLOOD TIES**

### *Seventh Teaching*

“Father and Mother, and Me,  
Sister and Auntie say  
All the people like us are We,  
And everyone else is They.”

*Rudyard Kipling (1865 - 1936), English writer and poet born in India.*

The aspects of Sacrifice described in previous Teachings often pass unnoticed since they take place in our interior. Other aspects of sacrifice are more visible since they imply direct interactions with other people.

Blood ties represent the sixth Mystery of Sacrifice. Such ties are valuable supports because they help us protect each other, assimilate experiences accumulated over generations, and transmit culture. But they also cause us suffering due to the emotional strain and the affective, biological and economic dependency that accompany them.

Lack of sufficient objectivity in family relationships prevents a thorough understanding of those we love most, and this is one of the greatest causes of our suffering. Parents tend not to understand their children, spouses often do not understand each other, and children find it difficult to understand their parents' points of view. Examples of this are the different views on an issue created by the generation gap and the large percentage of estranged families. Besides, what we see clearly in other families is difficult to perceive in our own.

Blood ties also cause suffering when they unite people who have little in common culturally and spiritually. If there is not enough communication and affinity in fundamental objectives, problems of intolerance and deep disagreements occur.

The influence of blood ties on society can be either positive or negative, depending on how the biological and psychological forces that unite individuals are oriented.

Blood ties cause suffering when they give free reins to the instinct of preservation in all its harshness. This causes families to themselves as closed nuclei that work only for their own good, increasing the separativity that already exists in the world.

When blood ties are transmuted into an expansive love, the family is a source of material, mental and spiritual well being for its members as well as for society.

The attitude of sacrifice causes us to create a family that, by practicing renouncement and making an effort to unfold spiritually, works toward becoming a source of well being for many. Family relationships, when based on mutual respect and reverence for the divine, on tolerance

and reciprocal help among its members, on diligent and efficient work, are a source of individual and social, spiritual and material good. Blood ties in themselves are neither an individual nor a collective good. But when they are nourished in positive and spiritual family relationships, blood ties are the beginning of a society which is more just, well-balanced, and more participatory.

In a family dedicated to developing as a spiritual nucleus there is room for communication, mutual help and assistance to others. Expansive love impels us to overcome selfish objectives that oppose our own good to that of others. Expansive love teaches us to participate with humanity.

In working to unfold our family ties we have to be careful not to confuse disattachment with selfishness or indifference. The effort to attain our own unfolding, when it is well oriented, shows us the responsibilities that we have to our family. To transcend does not imply to neglect. To cut selfish ties is not to stop loving or neglect responsibilities. On the contrary, it means to love more deeply and to do whatever is necessary for the good of all.

The more universal the objective that moves us is, the more it impels us to transcend the circle of the attachments of blood ties. To free ourselves of the attachments that enclose and limit us expands our love and teaches us to include more and more human beings in the circle of our affections. To make the sacrifice to stop being “we” as opposed to “they” gives us the possibility to create a “we” in which we are “all” and “each.”

The attitude of sacrifice of blood ties has to be nourished during our whole life. Let us not expect to finish this work rapidly, even if we are as diligent as we can be with it. Let us also remember that loves well never stops loving, although that love may be in certain cases a source of tears and in others a source of happiness and participation.

## WHAT OTHERS WILL SAY

### *Eighth Teaching*

“Those who care neither for the praises nor the fault-finding of others have great tranquility of heart.”

*Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), French writer.*

No matter how hard we try to harmonize our daily actions with the most altruistic principles and objectives we profess, the opinion of others towards us is beyond our control; criticism and gossip are usually inevitable.

It is a painful test to be the object of gossip and censure and even healthy criticism is painful. However, in order to work on our spiritual unfolding we have to be prepared to endure this pain and use it for our growth.

We have to distinguish between the feedback that helps us to know ourselves and the malicious criticism that destroys us, the gossip that makes us lose inner peace and the praise that corrodes our capacity for self-knowledge. The attitude of sacrifice with respect to what others will say begins with this discernment.

Malicious criticism is not the only thing that makes us suffer. Misunderstanding does too. As each of us has individual characteristics, we are not always well understood by others. Even our companions on the path may unintentionally hurt us intensely. As an ancient saying goes, “Good people make good people suffer.” It is not inconvenience, nor work, nor setbacks that afflict us the most, but feeling misunderstood by others, especially by those whom we love the most.

Rarely were those who benefited humanity recognized in their time. Society extols its benefactors after their death, but in most cases it ignores them and even vexes and disdains them while they are alive. Since this happens to remarkable beings, what can we expect--we who do not aspire to be extraordinary, but work humbly for the good of all? Even the noblest and most upright acts can be misinterpreted and criticized. One must accept beforehand the suffering implied by the lack of understanding of others.

Gossiping and criticizing greatly harm the one who gossips, because thinking badly of others can become a habit. Gossiping harms the one who is the object of gossip because it damages his/her reputation and hurts his/her feelings. The attitude of sacrifice in respect to criticism and gossip is expressed, on the one hand, by not falling into the vice of judging and censuring and,

on the other, by continuing toward the chosen objective without hesitation, accepting others' judgments as a reality we cannot change.

If we avoid flattery, if we accept the lack of understanding and feedback from others as a means of self-knowledge, and if we, ourselves, do not fall into gossiping and malicious criticism, this attitude of sacrifice gives us the necessary inner strength to live our life in accordance with our spiritual ideal.

## MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

### *Ninth Teaching*

“Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.”

*Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist.*

No matter how hard we may dedicate ourselves to cultivating our spirit, there is no excuse for neglecting our material needs.

Sometimes the daily effort we make to survive seems to be an obstacle to our spiritual progress. Nevertheless, as soon as we begin to analyze the situation, we realize it is not so. Developing the capacity to attend to our own personal material needs as well as to those who depend on us, while not neglecting our inner work, maintains the balance indispensable for our spiritual unfolding. Moreover, when consciousness of the economic situation confronting humankind awakens in us, the need to strive with efficiency and dedication in order to survive is transformed into a means for participating and working for the good of all. This work for the common good is inseparable from the work that we carry out for our own spiritual unfolding.

The eighth mystery of sacrifice represents the effort we have to make to earn our living. For the immense majority of human beings, a great part of their time and energy is consumed by their work to obtain food and shelter. In spite of this and the advances achieved in the field of productivity, a large part of humanity lives in scarcity and large sectors of people suffer hunger and chronic malnutrition.

When the deprivation imposed by material circumstances is very great, we have no other option than applying all our energy to the effort to survive. Nonetheless, as soon as we reach a little material comfort, the temptation to live without effort, to escape the persistent demand of daily work, appears. Sometimes we dream of changing jobs, moving somewhere else or carrying out tasks that we consider more important than those we are doing. Or we might think that if only we did not have to struggle to take care of material needs we could fulfill our dreams of spiritual liberation. Changing the work we do not like, for one we do like or leaving one place to go somewhere nicer, does not always give us the hoped for results. Although moving or changing jobs might give us new possibilities, it might also cover up an inability to face difficulties.

The attitude of sacrifice regarding material circumstances teaches us to confront those challenges that open up possibilities for us. It also helps us to accept the effort of staying with what we are doing, transforming our work into a means for spiritual unfolding. When the desire to move from where we are living or to leave a job or profession appears, the attitude of

sacrifice gives us the needed perspective to evaluate our options and distinguish between genuine possibilities and dreams of escape.

A temptation that could appear when we attain material comfort is to spend as much as we earn or we wish to earn more in order to spend more. Little by little, dispensable goods turn into indispensable ones. Nothing is ever enough. Our income is no longer enough to make us feel satisfied with what we have. We do not even consider the possibility of saving for future needs or for helping those who need assistance. This is how we lose our capacity to discern between the necessary and the superfluous.

The attitude of sacrifice regarding material circumstances teaches us to place limits on our desires and, consequently, on our way of living and consuming. Each material circumstance helps us to understand the situation, the difficulties and sorrows of millions of human beings. There are people who, though able to live comfortably, choose to live very frugally out of participation. They renounce the possibility of an easier life in order to participate with those who cannot choose to live better. Referring to this aspect of life, a spiritual master used to say, "I would never live differently from the way I live now, even when I could have many more goods than I use now."

To busy ourselves only with what comes easiest or what we like most could be hiding our indifference towards what others must do so that we may survive and unfold. It is good, therefore, to do some tasks that we do not like, rather than avoiding them. This helps us to value and dignify work, as well as to understand those who, in order to survive, cannot choose anything but the work they can find, however mortifying it may be.

When we strive to do better both what we like and do not like to do, we start losing the habit of dividing life into the pleasurable and the disagreeable and discover the beauty of acts that are well-done. To do very well what we have to do gives meaning even to those actions that seem to be insignificant.

The continuous effort to satisfy material needs is, for some more than for others, a painful aspect of life. We say "for some more than for others," because this effort depends on our economic situation, our education and our personal characteristics. But when we embrace work with love, dedication and happiness, it is transformed into an invaluable means of participating, understanding and uniting with all human beings. Moreover, working to satisfy material needs and solve life's problems balances out our spiritual work. Our inner unfolding is expressed in our growing capacity for resolving the practical difficulties of life.

## COMPASSION

### *Tenth Teaching*

“The basic human problem is lack of compassion. As long as this problem persists, all other problems will persist. If it is solved, we can look forward to happier days.”

*Tenzin Gyatso, Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet (1935 - ).*

Each one of us responds to human pain according to his or her personal characteristics and degree of spiritual unfolding. The more selfish we are, the more we separate ourselves from human hardship either by shielding ourselves with indifference or by reacting with sentimentality. We then quickly forget and continue living as if such hardships did not exist. Indifference plunges us into insensitivity and curtails our possibilities of unfolding spiritually. Sentimentality squanders our energy in vain; it is an emotional reaction that neither relieves pain nor awakens consciousness.

In the measure in which we unfold spiritually, our perception of the needs and suffering of those around us increases, and our response to pain gradually becomes more genuine and compassionate.

Well-intentioned people try to relieve pain through good works. Hospitals, shelters, and charitable institutions are organizations that respond to the human being's physical, economic and emotional needs. Although all of these efforts mitigate evil, they do not always have an impact on the root of suffering itself. At least some of us have to be willing to transmute suffering into compassion, understanding and participation so that the pain that can be avoided is avoided; alms are no longer needed as we develop the capacity to build more just societies; and each one of us learns to occupy just one place in the world and not two.

Compassion changes us. It makes us intensely feel the suffering of those around us and makes us ask ourselves, “Why do we human beings have to suffer so much? Why are we so blind and continually hurt each other?” Above all, it leads us to ask ourselves, “What can I do to alleviate the pain of others?” Answers to this last question may vary, but all of them, if genuine, lead us to commit ourselves and to give ourselves, not only our possessions.

A Buddhist legend says that when the Buddha's heart opens and he looks at the world, pain is relieved, sorrow is soothed, crying ceases, and for an instant happiness reigns. In the same way, although we can take the comparison only so far, in the measure in which we feel the suffering of humanity in ourselves, we are creating the foundation of a more harmonious and happy world, since that feeling makes us respond in a vital way by offering ourselves.

When we consecrate our lives to the good of souls, we begin to really alleviate suffering in the world. We alleviate it spiritually through participating inwardly, and in practical terms through

perceiving the good we can do in our surroundings and the resulting action we take. Embracing the ninth Mystery of Sacrifice, we experience one of the deepest aspects of spiritual life.

## **WISDOM**

### *Eleventh Teaching*

“He who is ignorant affirms, he who is wise doubts and reflects.”

*Aristotle (384 AC-322 AC), Greek philosopher.*

While the ninth Mystery of Sacrifice, at its highest level, is to experience compassion in all its depth, the tenth Mystery of Sacrifice is to experience the wisdom that leads us to respond with inner participation and effective help.

Although we cannot eliminate the pain inherent in the laws of life, we can do much to avoid the suffering caused by ignorance and lack of spiritual unfolding.

Besides developing the sensitivity to perceive evils and respond to them with direct actions, we need to understand the greater context in which life develops and find the causes from which suffering originates. This is the task that, step by step, we begin to carry out when we decide to unfold.

It is good to remember that in The Ten Words of Spiritual Unfolding knowing comes after silencing, listening, remembering and understanding. The uncontrolled impulse to act moves us to judge, give opinions and act before knowing. The consequence of this attitude is inefficient and maybe, counterproductive action. Instead, effective and wise action is possible when, by silencing, listening, remembering and understanding, we perceive each situation as it really is, and we are then able to respond to real needs in an effective way.

If we yearn to develop wisdom and apply it to the common good, we have to begin by becoming aware of our tendency to judge without knowing and, by avoiding centering our attention on our personal problems, thereby unfolding our vision to an ever more expansive milieu. We also need to at least study and learn what others know about the needs we wish to satisfy.

The solution to present-day problems requires not only good will but also the wisdom that gives us the ability to discern essential qualities and relationships in the surrounding reality so that we can intelligently apply what we have learned.

Wisdom, which presupposes knowledge and compassion, goes together with respect and gentleness in the way we treat people. Good is not imposed and roughness destroys the kindness of intentions. Unselfish love is a force that allows us to help without wounding.

We could ask why understanding the sorrow of each human being can imply sacrifice since the act of understanding is accompanied by inner plenitude. This is true, but when we understand a

person's sorrow, that sorrow becomes ours. Moreover, when we understand the sorrow of the whole of humanity, the sorrows of others enter into our own heart.

Sacrifice teaches us to maintain a universal vision in the presence of individual sufferings. This means incorporating all human beings, one by one, within ourselves, without preferences or exclusions. It also means to understand and love each person without reproaching or turning our back on anyone. In order to attain this degree of sacrifice, it is necessary to work on overcoming our sentimentality, passion, attachments and dependency with regards to what we consider good or bad. It is necessary not to take sides, not to separate into groups of those who are just and those who are unjust. In other words, in order to understand and learn what to do about suffering, we have to control the impulses of our heart that sometimes make us intolerant and biased and, instead, focus on making the arguments of our mind clearer and more precise.

Sacrifice is not to yield to the temptation of wanting to resolve problems from a position of power and authority. Sacrifice is to accept that, even though we understand and even know the solutions to problems, each human being has to walk his or her own path to arrive at understanding and knowing by himself or herself.

Sacrifice opens the road toward the wisdom of not judging, of having the capacity to discover the deepest causes of suffering, of working on them and helping ourselves to solve the part that corresponds to our own limitations. Sacrifice makes us understand because nothing is alien to us. It makes us extract from each experience the means to help where and when such help is possible, beginning with our own life.

Above all, wisdom leads us to the awareness that what is good is to follow the most altruistic ends, making use of the most excellent means.

## PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

### *Twelfth Teaching*

“I was lucky to have chosen to work in theoretical physics, because that was one of the few areas in which my condition would not be a serious handicap.”

*Stephen Hawking (1942- ), British physicist, 1988. Hawking suffers from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis.*

Some of the mysteries of Sacrifice we have described so far, such as compassion and wisdom, seem to open a door to the understanding of the suffering many people endure due to physical limitations. They also help us understand that, to the suffering that physical limitation itself brings is added the pain of self-pity and resentment. Yet, perhaps, what they most teach us is that when we suffer a loss, we usually develop the capacity to generate a good that compensates for it.

The acceptance of our lot in life, the trust that we possess all we need to unfold, and our dedication to attain that unfolding, transmute our self-pity and resentment caused by our physical limitations into an opening to new and true possibilities. From a broader point of view, all of us have limitations as well as capabilities. When these capabilities are well cultivated, they amply compensate for the limitations that cause us so much suffering.

None of us can say we are physically perfect. In fact, some people who are physically beautiful suffer greatly for what they perceive as defects. For example, a great actress who, in spite of being physically very beautiful, tries not to have pictures taken of one side of her face, because she cannot accept something in her features. This might seem to us mere vanity, but it is a cause of great suffering for those who perceive something defective in their bodies.

Physical limitations cease to be determining factors in our life to the extent we develop enough understanding and wisdom to place ourselves in a context larger than the personal and understand that everyone has possibilities, but none of us has all possibilities. It is a matter of developing enough discernment in order to know which are our real possibilities. Helen Keller is a good example. This great person, assisted by Anne Sullivan, her friend and educator, not only overcame the isolation from the outer world imposed by her deafness and blindness, but also fulfilled an outstanding role in the effort to educate and offer possibilities to the handicapped.

Moreover, at times, physical defects seem to favor the blossoming of extraordinary faculties. Beethoven, in spite of his deafness, perceived such incredible melodies that he might well be called the Musician of Wisdom. Roosevelt’s paralysis helped him develop his mental powers.

There are many examples such as these. Who remembers today their physical limitations? What we remember are their accomplishments.

In present-day society, we recognize that all of us have both limitations and possibilities. Advances in medicine and biotechnology, as well as the implementation of laws protecting the rights of persons with physical disabilities, have allowed us to productively relate to each other and to develop our capabilities, always recognizing each human being's value without either diminishing or exalting anyone.

Understanding the pain and difficulties of those who suffer physical limitations and having the wisdom to respond to their pain and difficulties without discrimination and with the means those persons need to fulfill their potential, make for a more just and harmonious society.

The recognition that each one of us and society as a whole give to those who suffer physical limitations, as well as the respect we show for their rights, are precious incentives that help all of us transform pain into maturity and inner expansion in our own individual context, and into participation and happiness in the social context.

## SICKNESS

### *Thirteenth Teaching*

“Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

*Susan Sontag (b. 1933-2004), U.S. essayist, *Illness as Metaphor*, preface (1978).  
Foreword, p.3.*

The mysteries of sacrifice we have enumerated thus far are universal, since in one way or another they are the human being's companions on the road. The twelfth Mystery of Sacrifice is not exempt from this norm, since no one is free from suffering illnesses.

From youth on, a fierce and hidden struggle is let loose in the organism between pathogenic agents and the body's defense system. Some of the mental allies of pathogenic agents are fear, stress and anxiety. The ally of the defense system is the attitude of sacrifice, which teaches us to maintain the health of our body by working at two levels. At the physically level, living a healthy, frugal and balanced life; and at the mental level, learning to manage fear and accepting pain when it cannot be avoided.

The body becomes vulnerable to illness through fear, stress and anxiety. Instead of focusing the mind in such negative states, we need to generate positive and stimulating thoughts. Moreover, we need to live wholesomely, physically as well as spiritually.

It is important for us to harmonize mind and body through a healthy and simple method of life. Habits of physical and mental hygiene, an adequate diet, a good disposition, noble thoughts and right intention help us maintain the health of mind and body.

If we suffer an illness, besides treating it medically, it is good to accept the situation and face it courageously. Inner strength and the understanding that what is happening to us is part of the human condition, help us face illnesses with a positive attitude in order to overcome them.

There are cases where mental strength and a spirit of sacrifice—though they cannot defeat a serious illness—do create defenses that limit it and do not let it progress. Yet there are also cases of people who overcame apparently incurable diseases through their stoicism and capacity to live with noble and expansive objectives. During the struggle for South American liberation, General San Martin was afflicted with bleeding stomach ulcers. Even though he lacked effective medical treatment, his sickness did not stop him from giving himself completely to his military tasks. He once said, “I want to finish my work before dying; I do not care about my sickness.” Later on, his ulcers healed and he lived to be 72 years old.

Sickness, when lived with an attitude of sacrifice—taking care of our health and accepting the inevitable—keeps us alert and stimulates our spiritual development. Stephen Hawking is a remarkable example of this. In spite of being physically immobilized and unable to pronounce any words, this scientist continued teaching classes and doing research in physics. According to him, his illness gave him the freedom to use his mental faculties better.

Preventing disease is an aspect of our individual and social responsibility. Accepting the illnesses we cannot avoid is an aspect of our spiritual work. Health and illness are two aspects of our lives. The attitude of sacrifice helps us understand this condition which governs living beings, and allows us to discern what we can avoid, change and control, and what we have to accept.

## SEPARATIVITY

### *Fourteenth Teaching*

“Unity is variety and variety in unity is the supreme law of the Universe.”

*Isaac Newton (1642-1727), British mathematician and physicist.*

Nature reveals itself with marvelous splendor but, as soon as we observe it in detail, we notice that living organisms are engaged in a permanent struggle for survival. This struggle, which we call the instinct of self-preservation and which helps us survive, is also the cause of suffering, destruction and death.

We generate the separativity that makes us suffer so much because of the way in which we respond to the self-preservation instinct.

Each one of us belongs to an ethnic and social group, holds certain beliefs, has a certain economic level and moves within certain circles but not within others. If we do not become conscious of the limitations that this sense of belonging to a certain group imposes upon us, it is transformed into a good to defend as well as a need to prevail and subjugate. When the sense of belonging to a group becomes exclusive of any other group, when it makes us intolerant of differences, when it makes us fear or reject those who are different from us, it produces a sorrow that makes us react against one another, unleashing violence, wars and persecutions.

It is common for us to profess that all human beings are equal; but in practice, we each maintain our own separativity. More often than not, those who possess material goods believe that they are better than the poor; those belonging to a certain ethnic group feel superior to those belonging to other groups. Separativity is at the root of who we believe we are, and of our identification with certain personal characteristics and attributes.

Separativity sometimes impels us to carry out heroic acts based on the eagerness that our human group may prevail over others. However, the sacrifice that would make us march to our death as defenders of a cause does not redeem or elevate. Instead, it is the sacrifice of renouncing separativity that produces this change, understanding the role that our own characteristics play in the entire human group, so that we may unite and build together a society that includes all human communities.

We cry out in vain for peace in the world and human fraternity if we are not willing to have an attitude of sacrifice, renouncing separativity. By sacrificing separativity we can avoid the suffering we inflict on ourselves and others when we fight with each other.

Lasting peace is possible when we, through our own unfolding, discover our true identity as members of a universal and spiritual community. Distinctions and barriers that divide us

disappear and peace becomes an attainable goal when we begin to see each human being as a unique individual and discover that all of us deserve to be treated equally, respecting our own individuality.

## GOOD AND EVIL

### *Fifteenth Teaching*

“Reason is the offspring of imperfection. In the invertebrate world everything is programmed. We are not! Imperfect as we are, we must resort to reason, to ethical values: to discern between good and evil is the highest degree of Darwinian evolution!  
*Rita Levi-Montalcini (1909- ), neurologist, Nobel Prize Laureate in medicine in 1986.*

How great is our suffering due to our lack of discernment between good and evil! These sufferings are caused by those of us who believe we are good and therefore become censors and condemners of the behavior of others as much as by those of us who, without thinking of the consequences, act unscrupulously and with indifference, even finding satisfaction in the pain of others.

Good and evil are qualities we attribute to objects as well as to our own actions and thoughts. In order to determine if something is good, we analyze its benefits. In order to determine if something is bad, we analyze the damage it produces. However, this distinction, which at first glance seems simple, is not so. The distinction between good and evil is the main subject of ethics. Philosophers, as well as theologians and mystics, have spent their lives trying to clarify this topic.

The objective of this teaching is not to enter into academic digressions, but to help us discern which attitude to develop in our daily lives in order to be able to promote good and avoid evil. This attitude will help us promote peace, harmony, and our own good as well as the good of those around us.

The Roman thinker Pliny the Elder (23-79) gives us very practical advice in this respect. He tells us to always act in a way that will assure us the love of our neighbors. We could also say that if we want to live in peace we need to stop generating discord. We need to avoid betrayal and lies if we want relationships based on honesty and loyalty. We could continue pointing out values, altruistic behaviors, behavioral codes that are consistent with ethical principles, but what fundamental principle should guide us so that we do not confuse good and evil in our daily actions?

As a mystery of sacrifice, discerning between good and evil is directly related to the principle of spiritual unfolding: the unity of all human beings and the shared destiny of union with the divine. From this point of view, good is what unites us as human beings, leads us to respect diversity and the individuality of each person, and brings us closer to the divine. Evil is what plunges us into separativity, leads us to subdue others and to want them to conform to our will, and separates us from the divine.

In practice, this implies the great sacrifice of scrutinizing our actions, intentions and thoughts, evaluating our conduct, and developing the necessary will power to continuously discern what would be good or bad to do at any given moment. This discernment will progressively lead us to more altruistic and loving feelings.

The distinction between good and evil is not a good we achieve and possess once and for all. It is a sacrifice continuously renewed in each decision we have to make. It is easy to feel we are “good” and criticize the “bad” ones; to feel we are on the side of the good and that there are wicked people who are full of evil. It is easy to focus attention on people with serious moral deviations and feel that we are above them. However, there is no human being with an evil in his/her soul that all of us do not share to a certain extent. This is why the distinction between good and evil is a life-long project that demands all our honesty, capacity for self-evaluation, and strength to live according to our convictions.

Discernment between good and evil has some bitter enemies: selfishness, indifference, intolerance, and haughtiness. Its most valuable ally is also very powerful: the process of spiritual unfolding.

## DEATH

### *Sixteenth Teaching*

“Death, being a universal fact, is yet so personal, that we could say it is the moment in which human life is spiritually condensed.”

*Angel Ganivet, (1865-1898), Spanish writer, essayist and narrator.*

The fifteenth Mystery of Sacrifice is death. It is the most universal of the Mysteries since all of us must face it. The pain of death knocks at every door.

However, in practice, many of us live as if we were never going to die, as if we were the only ones worthy of escaping this law of life. Some of us do not even want to hear about death; we avoid any conversation about it.

No matter how much we try, we cannot avoid the passage of time; we cannot prevent health and youth from slipping through our fingers. Some of us suffer because we see we have fulfilled very few of the illusions of our youth. Dreams of great works, conquests, and realizations fall away little by little, leaving disillusionment and bitterness behind. Others find the happiness of their triumphs clouded by the loss of their energy or mental faculties. The aches of old age prevent them from enjoying the pleasure of victory.

The more conscious we are of the process of maturation we experience throughout our lives, the more we understand that life is brief and that old age and death will surely knock at our door.

The years of physical decline are a long and agonizing period for those of us who are attached to the beauty of the body. A few prefer to die rather than see their own aging. Phyrne, the Greek beauty, threw herself into the fire so as not to see her beauty decay. Most of us, however, choose to deny the aging process by various artifices, rejecting the reality of physical decline and death with the illusion of being able to ignore it.

It is not only physical decline that disturbs us. The loss of professional prominence, family authority and social relevance are also deaths we must face. But this reality, which we often perceive as a loss, is amply compensated for by opening the path to deepen our individuality and our consciousness of being.

How can we learn to die with serenity and wisdom? The sacrifice of looking at death face-to-face allows us to conquer fear, which is the painful aspect of death.

When we accept our mortality, we transform our vulnerability into strength. The sacrifice of thinking about death helps us to become familiar with it. Death ceases being something terrible

and mysterious and becomes a friendly figure who teaches us how to live, as well as how to grow old and die well.

Consciousness of the brevity of life makes us careful with our time, acts and decisions. The certainty of death gives depth to our experiences. The acceptance of death grants us the gift of living without fear, with depth and intensity.

It is said that Trappist monks prepare their own grave by digging a shovelful of dirt every day. Making an analogy, it is good to remove every day a shovelful of the dirt that the fear of death and ignorance of our human condition have placed in our minds. In this way we set free in ourselves the concept of death as it is: a dream that becomes peace and tranquility by virtue of the attitude of sacrifice with which we decide to know death and accept it.