

PRACTICES OF UNFOLDING

2019 Edition

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Practices of Unfolding

Prologue

The word “unfolding” comes from “to unfold”: to unwrap something and reveal what’s hidden there. In terms of our human condition, unfolding means discovering and developing our possibilities. Humankind has developed in many areas, but not to the same extent in all of them. It’s indisputable that humankind has achieved progress in knowledge, information and material development. We have also achieved some advancements in the moral sphere, but not enough to avoid the conflicts and misfortunes we create among ourselves. Sometimes we say that if we’re all able to reach agreement about a way to live justly and equitably, we will attain a world of peace and tranquility. But it will be an illusion until we realize that the world we create reflects who we are. We need to work on ourselves so that we can recognize that we create our own conflicts and calamities. In other words, we need to become conscious of what we already know about the consequences of the way we believe, feel, think and act so that, based on that consciousness, we will be able to use our acquired power wisely and compassionately.

Our state of consciousness expands when we become aware of something. This expansion gradually deepens our sense of who we are, and it also gradually leads us to develop a better relationship with what we call the “world.”

“States of consciousness” are what we call the ideas we have about ourselves and our situation in the world as we grow older. This is a spontaneous process from the moment we’re born, but as time goes by there is a common tendency to stop that process as we consolidate the idea we have of ourselves, and as we affirm ourselves almost permanently in a set of opinions about ourselves as individuals and our role in society.

The way we think of ourselves has more to do with a sense of belonging than it does with individuality: we belong to a culture and group that have particular beliefs, opinions and a social status. Once we feel sure of belonging to our culture and group, we rarely examine why we have certain beliefs and opinions. We incorporate the information we receive about the world and our place in the universe in a way that doesn’t meaningfully affect how we think of ourselves or our way of thinking in general.

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This work will describe some exercises and practices to help us get to know ourselves better and expand our consciousness. Depending on how successful we are in doing this, we will be able to align the way we think, feel and act with our ideal of world peace and harmony

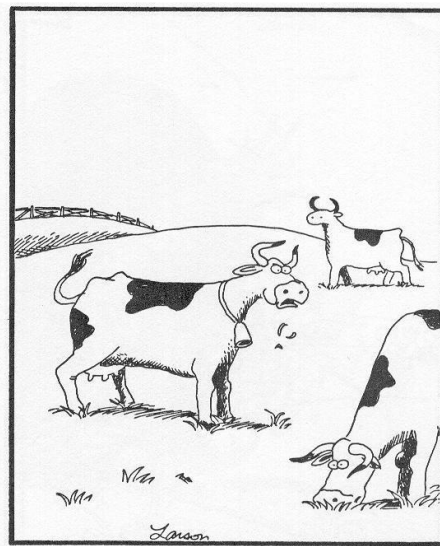
Though the practice of exercises and increased knowledge are necessary, they aren't enough to develop our consciousness. We need to learn to reflect more deeply on ourselves, on our human condition, and our situation in life. In other words, we need to become aware of what we know and what we learn.

Every awakening, however small, is a step in our unfolding. It's to be hoped that the means described in this work help us awaken and unfold.

J.W.

September 2019

PART I REALIZING



"Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!"

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Do we really realize?

At first glance, it might seem redundant to speak about “realizing.” We are overflowing with information; what else do we need to know?

While it’s true that we are very informed, this doesn’t mean that we grasp the whole picture of what this information means. The rapidly changing, never-ending news cycle makes it hard for us to sort and categorize the various pieces of information. We store them in our memory without consciously understanding what they mean.

It’s possible for us to have a great deal of information without necessarily operating from a broader state of consciousness than that of our regular thoughts and reactions. Information isn’t the same as knowledge. Because this is so, we seldom use what we know to guide our behavior. This leads us down a long and bumpy road of unfolding. It could be that we need to suffer before we can incorporate a valuable piece of knowledge into our consciousness.

We can sort the information we receive into two types. One is explicit information, which we receive from media sources and which we study, listen to, and see around us. The other type of information is implicit and is contained in the consequences we cause in ourselves, in others, and in our surroundings with the way we think, feel and act.

The way we process that implicit information determines how aware we are of who we are, what we’re like, the world around us, and our place in that world. Such an awareness might be different from how we think of ourselves, the society we live in, and how the way we are affects our life and other people. We can be cognizant, but that’s not enough to develop consciousness.

To be *informed* means having knowledge of something; *understanding* means mentally grasping it. *Knowing*, on the other hand (in Spanish, “saber”, from the Latin *sapere*: to perceive and sample or taste) is related, among other things to tasting: it’s what we know after tasting or trying something—we experience it, we live it.

A [Full Moon] Message says the same thing:

“. . . in the context of spiritual unfolding, understanding isn’t the same as knowing.

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“The action of understanding is temporary. Knowing, in contrast, is an aspect of our state of consciousness. Our consistent actions become habits, and those habits are transformed into the way we are, the way we functionally express our state of consciousness. We no longer need to make an effort to behave as our understanding tells us to.

“Our knowing shows in the way we are and the way we act; it’s no longer a question of remembering what we have learned from our mechanical memory; our memory has now become our behavior.”¹

It’s therefore important to become aware of—to realize—what everything that we know implies. If we didn’t, we would keep living as if we couldn’t learn, either from positive experiences or from the hardships we unleash and the wrongs we do each other.

We can distinguish two aspects in the idea we have about ourselves, our environment, our situation in the world and what we provoke with our behavior. The first defines our present state of consciousness. It shows in our preferences and choices, in the way we react to inner and outer stimuli, and particularly with respect to the contents of our usual thoughts. In short, we can say that our state of consciousness is limited to what we usually have in our minds.

The second aspect refers to the information we append to what we already have in our minds. For example, what we know because we have studied it, or because the people around us have told us, or what we gather from the information we receive about our society and the world in general. Although that information should influence the way we think of ourselves and our situation in the world, this doesn’t happen as often as it might.

At each stage of life, we assign different values to that information. We tend to pay attention only to the information that relates to what matters most to us at that moment and discard the rest. Although we’re able to remember the information we receive, in practice we think and act as if we didn’t know it existed.

For example, when we were children, we watched our parents leave for work, get home late, and then take care of us. But we weren’t aware of what it means to

¹ Messages IV - *“The Ten Words of Spiritual Unfolding”*, 3. Knowing How to Want

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work and have children. We paid attention only to what we were interested in at that age. As adults, we become aware of that and other things, but are not aware of all the meaningful information we receive. Nor do we give much importance to the reactions we cause in others and the environment with our behavior. We get used to a certain degree of friction and conflict and close our eyes to the effects of our behavior on the surroundings in which we live.

We tend to reject criticism and even good advice that doesn't validate and accept the way we feel, think and act. We don't realize that what happens as we relate with others and the effects of our actions are mirrors in which we can see reflected, from several different angles, the way we are and the way we act. Even the things we use show us the care—or carelessness—with which we treat the things and people around us.

There are conflictive situations in which, although we know we're part of them, we continue acting as if we weren't aware of them until something happens, perhaps something painful, that makes us aware of the situation we're in and our part in it. But it's too late to do much to fix it. For example, when someone tells us that what we're doing could damage our relationship with our loved ones, we might say we know it, but continue doing what we're doing until a falling-out is inevitable.

In other cases, we are very aware of an aspect of our behavior, but we don't want to realize what its effects are until we suffer the consequences of what we do. Time and again we only change habits that make us suffer when the suffering is so advanced it can't be cured. We cover our awareness with stratagems, knowing they're pretexts. In cases like these, to really "realize" we need to become aware of what we're doing. That is, internalize what we know in such a way that it stops being something to remember, and is so embedded in the way we think of ourselves that it guides our behavior.

In other words, we can turn the information we are receiving, moment by moment, into a great deal of learning. Learning of this nature would become an uninterrupted process of expanding our awareness. It's certainly a challenge to achieve, but definitely worth the effort of trying.

Let's also consider to what extent we realize who we are, what our situation in the world is and—why not? —who we are in the universe.

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By now we know a lot about cosmic space and the amazing system that governs us. But we don't often ask ourselves deeply about the fact that we're tiny astronauts on spaceship earth for the miniscule duration of our lifetime, compared to the infinity and eternity of the cosmos.

Even though the mystery of existence is our real context, we need courage to look that mystery in the face because it challenges our perception and intelligence. However, it's something worth doing with that in mind, not so much to get answers to the question implicit in that mystery, but to start realizing what we are and where we are, so that we're then able to act in consequence.

The process of becoming aware is gradual and depends on how much we incorporate information and stimuli into the way we think of ourselves. It particularly depends on how willing we are to do it.

Even if we're wise in techniques, arts, and information, we can be ignorant of our real situation in life and our community. This shows in the rigidity with which we might think of ourselves, our beliefs and our opinions, in spite of the problems and difficult situations we create among ourselves. We can help ourselves and help each other by realizing what is beyond our momentary interests. For example, we can pay attention to the reactions we create in others with our behavior or because of the way we are. We can notice the barriers we build between ourselves and others by the rigid way we think and our use of labels. And we can especially realize how much of what we think, feel and does depends on how we think of ourselves.

The process of becoming aware shows us that the way we think of ourselves depends on what we have in our minds. If I remain centered on myself, I think of myself as being-in-my-body-in-the-small-world I have in my mind. As we gradually become aware, the world we have in our minds also expands, and the way we think of ourselves becomes increasingly more profound.

For this to happen, we also need to realize how we defend ourselves against the things that don't confirm our ideas or beliefs, as if our identity were being attacked. It's not easy to keep an open mind to incorporate new visions of reality, which include new views of ourselves. We are one of the many ways we could be if our circumstances, experiences and education had been different. The way we think and believe is only one among many that exist in society.

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How can we begin to open our minds and hearts? We can already start working to create a better world with the means we have been given by the advancements in science and technology. But to attain this, we also need to become aware of how much our beliefs have separated us from and antagonized others. We don't realize that beyond what we believe and think, the most important thing is to respect each other to open the way to a better world.

Regarding the way we think of ourselves, it's worthwhile taking a close inner look at ourselves to unearth the experiences that molded the way we are and the way we think, to become aware of the characteristics of our personality. From that starting point, we'll be able to realize why we're the way we are. If we gain this awareness, we will be able to take some distance from what we think we are. That distance, however minimal, will lead us to discover in ourselves a way of thinking about ourselves that is deeper and more inclusive, and it will also broaden the way we believe and think.

Of course, we can't achieve this vision from one moment to the next. "Realizing" is part of a process of becoming more aware. At first, realizing is only information. For example, when we know we're flying when we travel in an airplane; we're simultaneously aware that we're on earth and admire the landscape. But what we see out the window doesn't yet tell us that the earth is our home, the home of all human beings. To reach that awareness, we also need to be aware of our situation; we need to surmount the barriers we tend to place between ourselves and others, as well as between what we think we are and what our knowledge of the universe tells us. *In short, we need to become aware that we are a tiny and temporary particle in the infinitude of space and time. And as we participate in everything that exists and happens in the world and with those who inhabit it, what we think, do and feel has an impact on everyone and everything. To the extent that we attain this awareness, we express it in our behavior for our own good and that of the human family.*

The process of becoming aware is inclusive. Every time we expand our consciousness, we include everything new that we encounter as we expand. From the spiritual point of view, this process is mystical. We call it the Mysticism of the Heart because it encourages love.

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We will now address four subjects that deserve our attention, though we don't always associate them with love: Gratitude, Empathy, Friendship and Participation.

We will then talk about practices that can help us develop positive feelings and our capacity for love.

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Gratitude

As we work to unfold, we don't always include gratitude among the virtues we wish to practice. Apart from prayers of gratitude to God, the Divine Mother, or whomever we revere, we tend to limit our gratitude to fulfilling positive social norms. For example, when we say "thank you" when someone gives us a gift, or when we acknowledge a favor someone has done for us. But we don't always feel grateful for having things we like, or for good experiences. We usually think of ourselves as lucky or deserving of what we have or have received.

In the process of unfolding, feeling grateful is basic; it leads us to recognize what we receive from others and assume responsibility to help others in our turn. Gratitude moves us to look beyond ourselves, to establish connections and collaborate with others. Cicero said long ago that gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.

We can identify several degrees of gratitude, depending on the scope of the context in which we feel grateful. This can be confined to feeling grateful to someone for helping us out at some point, or broad enough to encompass whatever it is we feel grateful for.

Sometimes we need time to feel gratitude. For example, we might not feel grateful for what our parents and relatives did for us until we ourselves are raising children. But these are not the only ones who deserve our gratitude. If we take into account all that we have learned and benefited from throughout life, we realize what a vast source of gifts that has been.

We have lots of reasons to feel grateful for the possibilities, knowledge, and material things we enjoy. What we know, and are able to accomplish, we owe to countless generations of human beings who created our civilization little by little. Besides this, when looking at what we have within our reach, how can we not feel grateful and deeply responsible if we remember that, right this moment, large numbers of human beings lack even potable water and enough food to live on, and are undergoing mistreatment, discrimination, persecution, and death?

Moreover, gratitude, or its lack thereof, greatly affects the backdrop of our relationship with life.

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Feeling grateful makes us feel responsible. It improves our relationships with others, and it especially improves the relationship we have with the events of our lives. Instead of alternating in delight for what pleases us and pain for what hurts us, we learn from our experiences. Each of these, and especially the painful ones, encapsulates a teaching.

Becoming aware of everything we receive leads us to be thankful, no matter how much difficulty or suffering we undergo. This thankfulness moves us to participate and work for the good of the whole human family.

Since gratitude is not always a spontaneous feeling, we can develop it with some prayer exercises. For example, praying for the wellbeing of those who have helped us in the past and those who are currently helping us; in other words, trying to keep in mind the countless beings, and their efforts, that are hidden in the things we enjoy.

But we don't limit ourselves to praying and remembering; gratitude goes hand in hand with actions. For example, collaborating, offering help, accompanying others in their difficult moments, or doing good deeds.

Saying "please" when we ask for something and "thank you" when someone does something for us is a good start to expressing gratitude. But we don't always realize how many times we don't express it when we should. Sometimes when we're paying special attention to what's going on or on what we have to do, we don't take note of what others do for us or whom we rely on to talk to about our concerns. But this is not the only thing we need to keep in mind. In spite of all the things that might bother us, let's count those that don't, and we will have many reasons to be grateful.

Feeling grateful is also a form of meditation. Don Santiago Bovisio said that when he walked along a sidewalk, he mentally thanked those who laid the cobblestones, and this helped him realize how much farther he had to go to unite with the people who had worked and continued to work so that he could live as he lived. This tells us that gratefulness can be more than a feeling and a verbalized acknowledgement. It can also be an inner opening to others and to what we receive from life. Realizing this possibility opens the way to empathy and participation.

Moreover, it's been proven that expressing gratitude, being kind, and focusing on what's good for others is beneficial for ourselves as well as others.

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Empathy

We aren't often attentive to the quality of our daily interpersonal relationships. We don't realize how we affect each other. We remain distant without noticing either the suffering we inflict or the suffering we cause with our attitudes. We judge a person by their name, background, behavior, position in society and beliefs. We still need to deepen into the fact that every person is, just like ourselves, an individual and unique human being. And every person needs to be seen with his or her problems, sufferings, shortcomings, and yearnings.

Becoming aware of who each of us is goes beyond comprehending; it implies a process of inner union that begins with empathy.

We don't all have the same degree of empathy. The amount we have depends on various factors, for example, the affection—or lack of it—that we have received throughout our development, the examples of people who served as role models for us, the social interaction we have had, and our temperament. But no matter the degree of our empathy, we can always develop it more.

We can consider empathy from various approaches. In terms of the unfolding of consciousness, we can distinguish three states of empathy:

- . *Sympathy*: Feeling affection for others. Also feeling sorry or happy for what happens to someone
- . *Emotional attachment*: Feeling what the other person feels
- . *Mental openness*: Understanding and validating others' experiences, beliefs, ideas and points of view

Sympathy moves us to relate with those we're attracted to and, in many cases, distance ourselves from those for whom we don't feel sympathy or who don't think the same as we do. It also causes us to approve of the way certain people are and what they do because we feel a sympathy with them, and to ignore or criticize those with whom we don't click.

Emotional bonding starts like an emotional contagion. This is evident in small children who cry when they see or hear other children crying. This also happens when we get emotional about what affects others; for example, suffering when we see someone else suffering and laughing when others laugh.

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A deeper bonding takes place when it's enough to know that others are suffering for us to become sad and empathize with them. This emotional bonding awakens compassion. It tends to be linked to self-pity, when we think about how we would feel if what happened to others happened to us, and also with gladness at not having to suffer what they're going through. Although we might associate this bonding with a paternalistic attitude, it's the basis of what we typically call compassion.

But feeling compassion doesn't protect us from making others suffer, including those we commiserate with.

We might empathize with the suffering of someone we love without realizing they're suffering because of something we said and the way we treated them. We might empathize with a sick person whom we are tending and yet in another situation hurt them with our words or attitudes.

The same thing can happen when we find out about the sufferings of those who are persecuted or segregated. At that moment we suffer for them, but at other moments we might have an antagonistic attitude toward them for their ideas, beliefs, or lifestyle. It's hard not to react negatively toward what's not in keeping with the way we think and feel. Instead of applying discernment to tell the difference between back stories and contexts, we allow ourselves to be led by emotional reactions.

The practice of prayer and meditation exercises in this course can promote the development of empathy.

Having good thoughts about others and praying for them helps us connect inwardly with them and also with those we don't know directly, such as when we pray for the good of those who suffer in the world.

Meditation exercises help us to work on our habits and ways of thinking to motivate us to act with equanimity, to broaden our minds, and generate states of empathy in ourselves.

Having emotional empathy doesn't mean we understand another person's perspective on things. Mental openness happens when we really place ourselves in the mind and situation of others. This requires us to leave aside our own history, beliefs, culture and points of view so we can understand things from the history, culture and situation of others.

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It's generally easier to acknowledge the perspective of those who have had experiences similar to ours. Keeping this in mind helps us understand the point of view of those who have had different experiences than we have.

Moreover, let's not confuse broad-mindedness with adopting, without discernment, the opinions and judgments of others. That's a contagion it's good to guard ourselves against.

The usual signs of broad-mindedness are:

- . The ability to understand someone else's state of mind
- . The ability to accept and understand other opinions and beliefs

We can do some daily practices to boost our empathy, for example:

- . Forgiving
- . Avoiding accusations of others or toxic criticism of them
- . Avoiding arguments
- . Observing what others are feeling and the reactions we cause in them. Making it evident that we have realized this
- . Listening open-mindedly to different opinions and points of view. Making it evident that we have been listening
- . Working with others whenever possible

Let's begin with the first goal: forgiving, so that the disgruntlement we feel doesn't turn into distress and then into a resentment that embitters our life. This will affect not only ourselves but also others, since it's a common tendency to vent on others what "we can't forgive."

But we can forgive. Let's begin by realizing that forgiving liberates us from the harmful desire to pursue justice while becoming poisoned by what we're feeling. Let's therefore work to become aware of how badly we need to cleanse our mind and heart of resentment and rancor. Praying for the good of the person who made us miserable is a good start on the road to forgiving them.

The following guidelines are based on being well disposed toward others—*all* others—and opening our minds and hearts to them, beginning with those nearest us. Under any circumstances, being well disposed to others opens a path to not hurting, not criticizing, listening, and working together as a team. Being "gracious," then, can be a mantra that keeps us alert so that we express it with our behavior. For example, we can repeat "Be gracious" when we find ourselves with someone

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who has upset us. We can also do it when we think others believe or act differently from the way we do. This practice helps us to empathize with them.

We need to work on ourselves to keep alive the development of our empathy. Let's make an effort, therefore, to perceive others beyond the affinity we might feel for them, to understand them as human beings who, like us, have their history, misfortunes and yearnings.

Realizing how antagonism and the will to prevail produce the afflictions that we cause also helps us to empathize. Instead of having to experience hardships that oblige us to be aware of something that, although we knew about it, we hadn't internalized it, we understand the effects of our actions, thoughts and feelings, and change before it's too late. That is, we exchange opposition and rivalry for empathy and solidarity.

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Friendship

Friendship is usually defined as a relationship of mutual affection between or among two or more persons. This relationship develops according to age, and to the degree of love we have attained.

When we're little, friendship is based on physical proximity and the opportunity of sharing, first with one friend and then with more. It's based on entertainment and shared pleasures; for example, the pleasure of playing in groups. At this stage, friendship awakens a certain empathy and helps us learn to solve small problems in collaboration with one or more persons in our group.

During adolescence we make friends more spontaneously; friendship is mainly based on common interests and doesn't depend so much on physical proximity.

In middle age, we make friends based on the affection we give and receive, based on companionship and emotional support. A tension between friendship and competition also tends to appear--perhaps at work, in business dealings, in politics, sports and, sometimes, in affection. It's easier for us to make friends under conditions or in areas in which we don't feel moved to compete with each other.

We value friendship more and more as we get older.

But it's not quite friendship if our relationships with others are based only on convenience, pleasure, similar tastes, ideas, beliefs, or things we have in common. The friendship that strengthens and lasts throughout the years is based on common values and life plans, such as family, altruistic objectives, good works or a mission of some sort. But even this relationship can at times be tinged with personal interest or convenience.

How can we cultivate friendship? Let's remember that the word friendship in Spanish, "amistad," comes from the Latin *amicus*, which is a variant of the verb *amare*, "to love." In other words, friendship is connected to love. But what do we call love? Love is a word with many nuances and a broad gradation of meanings.

The attraction or feeling of union we commonly call love, or being in love, are not enough to establish a friendship. When we need to trust someone, we usually go to a friend instead of someone we say we love. We need to go beyond emotional

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empathy, attraction, and even broad-mindedness to reach a high degree of love to what the teaching of Cafh calls friendship ².

"Let's begin cultivating friendship by following some simple norms, for example:

- . Treating everybody with respect and dignity, especially the people closest to us
- . Being faithful to, straightforward with, and loyal to each other, in the various circumstances and happenings of life, especially at difficult moments"

The Method of Cafh also gives us some guidelines on how to cultivate friendship:

"They deepen friendship by cultivating good habits, unpretentiousness, and spiritual enrichment in their relationships.

"They guard friendship as a precious treasure, spiritualizing it through loyalty, wholesome affection, timely assistance and honest advice.

"They do not try to ingratiate themselves with others by emulating frivolous habits or pretentious behavior. They center their behavior in honesty and decency, which are the foundations of self-respect and respect for others.

. . . .

"They are alert to the common tendency of criticizing those who seem different. Mental openness allows Sons and Daughters to consider things from various points of view and to enrich themselves with the experience of other persons, cultures and ethnic groups. They do not reject the ideas or contributions of others out of prejudice, or simply because they do not want to hear anything that is painful or that contradicts their own opinion. It is good for Sons and Daughters to remember what history proves: that intolerance, rejection and indifference are destructive forces that cause pain, misery and misfortune; while tolerance, acceptance and love are constructive forces bringing peace and happiness to individuals and society as a whole." ³

² Course Spiritual Unfolding, 12^a Teaching, The Twelve Rays of Love

³ Method, Chapter Sixteen

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Participation

“Participation leads us to recognize ourselves within our context. A solid basis for spiritual unfolding is to stop considering myself the center of the world and to evaluate my own difficulties and problems in the light of the shortcomings and problems of others and of the world. I begin to express this by considering what’s mine (i.e., my possibilities, difficulties, talents, abilities and possessions) within an increasingly comprehensive vision, until my context is reality as a whole.

“At first glance, participating looks like a work of charity, since the first step we take toward participating allows us to discover, in our immediate context, those who need more than we do, and who need more of us. This moves us to act in response to that reality, and that is charity. However, the next steps of participation are much more than giving something to someone else—for example, affection, kindness, resources, or time. In its highest expression, participating means including the totality of everything in one’s own state of consciousness. As a process, participating means gradually erasing the edges of separativity until we are able to define ourselves within the context of reality as a whole.⁴

Developing empathy leads us toward an inner state of participation. In this state, the way we see ourselves is as *being-part-of*.

We well know that we are all part of something: culture, family, community, and country. But we don’t always internalize that knowledge. In other words, we don’t realize we are participating in this way. We often leave the stage, upon which we are actors in life, placing ourselves in the audience, looking at what’s happening onstage as if we were separate and independent from the action, without responsibility for it and with the right to be critical and demanding.

⁴ Addresses 1993-2000

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It's one thing to know that we are in a scene, but it's a very different thing to *be-part-of* that scene. It's the difference between receiving information about something that happens in our environment or in the world and consciousness of what that information is telling us.

Participating means awakening to the fact that we're part of something greater. First, that we're part of our immediate context, then of increasingly broader contexts, until we become aware of what we are within the great context of time and space that encompasses us. For this to happen, we need to work on ourselves to overcome the primal instincts that remain in us, beyond the point at which we could still say, at any given moment, "I am the world; the only thing that matters is what happens to me," despite our high ideals. This is why both ethical codes and spiritual teachings emphasize that it's fundamental to attain enough self-control to prevent our base impulses from distorting our love and diverting us from what we yearn to attain.

How can we discern whether what we feel or want to do is consistent with the awareness of being-part-of something greater than ourselves? Here's an exercise that could help us with this:

- . *When something makes me feel like acting or feeling intensely, I stop for an instant to discover whether what's prompting me to act or feel this way is coming from instinct, selfishness, or a desire to participate*

Participation is an aspect of our state of consciousness. It develops in stages, in synchrony with the expansion of our love. Every degree of love shows us the limits of our participation and awareness of what is beyond whom we love, what gives us pleasure, and our allegiances. It also shows us how much information we have truly included in our awareness of being-in-the-world, or in life.

We have teachings, periodic retreats, and spiritual guidance to help us advance in this process. If we add prayer, meditation, introspection, and exercises such as the ones below, we will surely advance in the process of participation and the expansion of our consciousness.

II PRACTICES

Practices of Unfolding

Prayer

Despite learning increasingly more about how our minds and bodies function, we are still ignorant about what matters most to us: what we are essentially, as human beings; where we come from; and what happens to us when we die. This ignorance makes us feel contradictory things. On the one hand, we are afraid of what's coming—our future, death—and on the other, we have hope in the wisdom of the intelligence that governs us. Both feelings move us to pray; that is, to relate inwardly with God. Ancient symbology⁵ gives the name “Divine Mother” to the manifestation of the eternal. The teachings of Cafh use the words God and Divine Mother interchangeably.

Prayer is the oldest means we have of relating with the mystery of the unknown. Though every belief system assigns a name to that mystery, all of them refer to a being, a superior intelligence, or a cosmic consciousness that governs the universe as well as our lives. People who do not adhere to a belief system can do no less than acknowledge the fact that, though with our current means we're unable to demonstrate the existence of a cosmic consciousness, we can't demonstrate that it doesn't exist, either. Everything is possible.

Whether we adhere to a belief system or not, we can all pray and revere the mystery of existence. This reverence is the essence of prayer.

It's worth remembering what the teachings on prayers have to say:

“Prayer is the way to find God. Harmony between the feelings of our heart and our mental energies is the element for attaining it.”

“Prayer, then, is indispensable for spiritual realization. It is the fulcrum upon which spiritual life rests, and it is the success of that life.”⁶

“Any thoughts that stand out in our imagination, even the most varied and materialistic ones, take on the nature of prayer if the soul observes them, analyzes them and give them their real meaning.”⁷

⁵ See the course, Commentaries on Archaic Symbology

⁶ Course Mystical Asceticism, 7th teaching

⁷ Course, The Good Road, 12th teaching

Practices of Unfolding

Praying helps us recognize our smallness in the greatness of creation, and it shows us a path to follow: the path of expanding our consciousness. It doesn't matter how little we are able to accomplish in this area. Every little expansion of consciousness gives meaning to our life. And in every one of those advances we become aware of aspects of our reality that we didn't give much importance to until that moment.

Prayer connects us to the divine unknown, especially when, as we say God, Divine Mother, or whatever word we use to name that which transcends us, we pay attention to what those words mean to us. That attention helps us to be ever more aware of what we're saying when we pronounce them.

Let's also remember that thought is energy. That energy can be beneficial or harmful, depending on the intention we have when we're thinking. When we are moved by love, our thoughts are beneficial for both others and ourselves. If our thoughts were aggressive toward others, they would also be harmful for us. That's why it's important to be aware of what moves us to think and feel as we do.

When we pray for the good of others, those prayers help us develop empathy and participate with people we don't even know. Moreover, the tenor of those thoughts has a marked influence on our moods and on our physical and mental health.

Prayer may be practiced in three ways:

1. *Operative prayer*
2. *Vocal prayer*
3. *Mental prayer*

“Operative prayer is carried out through constant self-discipline in work, turning all tasks into a spiritual realization, due to the absence of desire and a humble offering to God.

“Vocal prayer helps us elevate our thoughts and purify our affections through the prolonged, repeated vibrations of the words we say. The value of liturgical songs, sacred hymns, and well-known prayers is indisputable.

“Mental prayer is achieved by continuously observing external or internal things until focusing on them allows us to know their essence.” (This would be considered an exercise of concentration.)

Practices of Unfolding

“Constant application in the exercise of prayer conquers the mental lethargy we fall into when we have neglected for some time to put the relevant brain centers to work. Our mind, impelled by willpower, pushes aside negative movements and images and creates new neural pathways, habituating our thoughts to center on divine matters. Through steady effort, mundane emotions migrate to the brain and, in the light of analysis, lose their primary value. Sentimentality is mastered, and imaginative mental forms become ideals or unique images that help the meditation exercise rather than harming it with distractions.”⁸

- . Operative prayer broadens the usual focus we give our work. We commonly consider work as the means for supporting our lives, even if we think of it as an artistic or scientific vocation, or a vocation to assist others. Or we may feel work is a burden we would like to escape. But we can focus work in a broader way.

Let's first be aware of the countless services others provide for us with their work: the cashier who rings up our purchases, the driver of whatever means of transport we use, those who produce what we buy in stores, those who clean our roads, those who build what we need to live and work. In other words, each job is a service. So is our work.

This awakening of consciousness moves us to be grateful when we receive a service and to give a noble meaning to the services we render through our own work. This moves us to do what we have to do in the best possible way, and to offer it as an example of our gratitude. Gratitude and offering go hand in hand as pairs in our operative prayer.

We can also make a prayer of our relationship with what we use and benefit from. We usually only pay attention to how we can use something, while disregarding the fact that every object contains the history of those who imagined it and those who made it. We can take these as points of support to thank and pray for those to whom we owe them. And it's not only the objects we can refer to. Everything we use contains histories of individuals. As we cross a street, that path leads us to the histories of those who made that road for us. In fact, everything around us can be a reference point for prayer and gratitude.

⁸ Course Mystical Asceticism, 7th teaching

Practices of Unfolding

Another aspect of operative prayer is expressed in our relationships with others. We can be praying a lot for other people without realizing that we don't relate well with them, sometimes even those we love.

How can we turn our relationships with others into a prayer?

Naturally, this prayer would have to be based on the fact that others really matter to us. We pray for them by treating them with respect and friendliness, brightening the time they're with us without saddling them with our burdens or meddling in their lives. By acting this way, we are thinking about others' wellbeing more than our own. This expression of love can seem too simple to be thought of as prayer, but it is enough to practice it to discover its profundity.

What's good about operative prayer is that it doesn't require a special time to be set aside for it; everything we do becomes prayer.

- . Vocalized prayers consist in vocalizing hymns and mantras as well as in reading or saying prayers.

Mantras are the slow intoning of phonemes, syllables, words, or groups of words that may or may not have a literal meaning. They are considered sacred prayers. The mantras in the Vedas are over 3,000 years old.

In Cafh's symbology we find prayers that may be considered mantras. They are in the Arypal language ⁹. The Hymn to the Divine Mother, the Oms, and the Mantras may be considered examples of mantras. Some of these prayers are habitually said before sleep and during journeys.

In oral prayer, we also habitually say what we're feeling or wanting, and the intention that moves us to supplicate.

- . Mental prayer can be carried out in several ways. The simplest way is to say in our minds the words we would say out loud in prayer. Other forms of mental prayer are meditation and concentration.

⁹ A forgotten language of unknown antiquity

Practices of Unfolding

About thinking well, the following sentence from the teaching gives us, in simple language, what we could call a “golden rule” for our unfolding:

“Our unfolding begins when we send out one thought of love after another, until we have created the habit of right thinking.”¹⁰

We don’t need to dedicate special time to having good thoughts. When that’s already how we think, those good thoughts turn our life into a prayer.

It’s good to remember that the method for spiritual unfolding is individual, suited to a person’s characteristics. The different ways of praying, meditating, and practicing the method correspond with this principle. We might tend to be active or introspective, to be inclined toward service or worship, to the abstract or the concrete. Everyone finds the way to work on him or herself to expand their consciousness and thus help to create a better world.

¹⁰ Course The Good Road, 4th teaching

Practices of Unfolding

Meditation

The exercises of meditation in Cafh are part of a method that leads to meditation and contemplation.

Meditation exercises help us to know ourselves, use our discernment with growing clarity, and expand the awareness we have of ourselves and our situation in the world.

The practice of meditation benefits the body and the mind. For example, it alleviates stress, anxiety, depression, and pain. It also improves our perceptiveness and leads to wellbeing and inner peace.

Meditation also helps us work on the way we act and relate, so that our behavior benefits our physical and mental health and that of those around us.

There are several exercises that prepare us for meditation. The simplest is reading meditation. In this meditation, we choose a writing we are interested in. We dwell on each paragraph, thinking over what it says. Little by little we can discover meanings that go beyond the words we read. This exercise is particularly good for studying teachings.

Spiritual teachings often express ideas in condensed form, without elaborating on them very much. Reading meditation helps us discover further meanings. It's amazing what we can learn when we concentrate on a concept for a certain length of time. The attention we give it keeps it in mind; then, even when we're not thinking about the concept, understandings come to us that we hadn't perceived when we were reading about it.

We need to meditate to learn how to think. I say this because we tend to confuse thinking with giving our opinion based on our tastes, prejudices and tendencies. Or we limit thinking to remembering, associating, or projecting our desires. To think freely, we need to train ourselves how to think. Meditation exercises help us give our thoughts direction and order. Moreover, they teach us to work with our emotions, master our moods and acquire habits that promote our unfolding.

Meditation exercises are also ways of praying. They lead us to relate with what transcends us. They also lead us to realize who and what we are, within the group we belong to as well as within humankind and the vastness of the universe. Just

Practices of Unfolding

as with practices of concentration, meditation exercises open the way for contemplation, a state of consciousness that brings us closer to the Union that we so yearn for.

It's good to remember that the effects of a meditation are influenced by the reason we're meditating in the first place. We might meditate to isolate ourselves from the world, to feel better, or to participate with humankind. Discovering why we meditate is to discover what we're looking for in life.

METHODIZED MEDITATIONS

The meditation exercises we encounter in the teaching of Cafh are as follows: Discursive Meditation, Affective Meditation, Potential Meditation, Sensitive Meditation, and Concentration.

The Discursive, Affective, and Potential Meditation are on themes that correspond to the seven stages of spiritual unfolding and the symbols from the course “Archaic Symbology.”¹¹ They are related to the effects we wish to achieve in the exercises of meditation:

<i>Theme:</i> The Black-Veiled Lady	<i>Effect:</i> Abhorrence
The Two Roads	Disattachment
The Standard	Election
The Golden Temple	Consolation
The Veil of Ahehia	Joy
The Resurrection of Hes	Bliss

These themes also correspond to aspects of ourselves and our situation in the world and in life. For example:

- . The Black-Veiled Lady refers to our selfishness, our primal instincts, and the habits we would like to change
- . The Abyss refers to our situation in the world
- . The Two Roads refers to the attachments that stunt our unfolding
- . The Standard refers to the direction we give our life
- . The Golden Temple refers to our afflictions
- . The Veil of Ahehia refers to our perception of life
- . The Resurrection of Hes refers to our focus on the divine unknown

¹¹ For the meaning of these symbols and suggestions on how to meditate on them, see the Course Commentaries on Archaic Symbology

Discursive Meditation

The discursive meditation is a dialogue between us and God, the Divine Mother, or whomever is the focus of our reverence. It consists of three steps: Invocation, Silence and Response. Each step lasts five minutes. For beginners in this practice, it's good to do the meditation aloud. Once we have practice in it, we can do it mentally.

It's good to meditate every day upon awakening in the morning, before our daily occupations grab our minds. We may also meditate before going to sleep at night. It's good to meditate in a place where we won't be intruded upon or distracted. The posture we take is to sit naturally, with a relaxed body, straight back, head a bit raised, arms relaxed, hands joined at the fingertips and resting on one's thighs.

We then choose the theme for that day's meditation, take a moment to silence our mind, and elevate our thoughts to that which we revere. It might help us to imagine that we are in the divine presence, or in the presence of what is purest in our consciousness, that which represents our highest values.

The invocation should be clear and simple, without reasons or justifications. We don't need many words to state what is happening to us or what we wish to attain. Nor should the invocation be a lament for what we're feeling or what's happening to us. We simply state what is happening to us or name our inner state and what we yearn to understand or accomplish, in accordance with the theme we have chosen for our meditation. In short, we open up to ourselves without hiding anything. It's as if we lay ourselves bare, inwardly speaking, in the presence of that which we revere.

The time of silence begins at the end of the invocation. If we aren't able to achieve mental silence, we step back to observe what's passing through our mind, as if we're watching a movie, without allowing ourselves to be caught up by what's going on there, while remaining open to the response we are waiting to receive.

During the time of the response, we allow the voice that comes to our awareness to flow. In this voice we will find the guidance to attain what we yearn for.

At the end of the meditation we say Peace.

The chapter on the meditation themes gives some guidelines on how to work with each of the themes, both in the invocation and the response.

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In this meditation, it's possible that we don't receive an immediate response, especially when we have to make a decision that will alter our life, such as the way to fulfill our vocation or life plan. In these cases, it's good to keep meditating several days on the same objective. If we are sincere in our quest and genuinely willing to do the best we can, at some moment we will surely become aware of the response we were waiting for, not necessarily during the time of meditation.

The discursive meditation can also serve as a moment of respite. In the invocation we place ourselves at the feet of that which we revere and remain there for a moment. Then we express our difficulties, problems, or sorrows, without saying how we would like to be able to avoid suffering from them. It's enough to be able to unburden ourselves of what hurts us and remain there, in the peace of the silence of the next step. That peace and silence allow us to gain distance from the situation that's troubling us, to better discern what's happening and what we can do to overcome it. In the response step, we express what we have understood.

The discursive meditation helps develop the habit of cross-checking our behavior and reactions with the general values we hold. In other words, we become used to dialoguing with our consciousness at each moment of life. When we have to decide something or when we react to a stimulus, the voice that talks to us is the one we have awakened in ourselves in the meditation. And that voice continues talking to us at each step we take in life.

Therefore, even if we have attained high states in other meditations, it's good to return now and then to the discursive meditation, since in that meditation we are seeking the essential words to sharpen our discernment.

Practices of Unfolding

Affective Meditation

The affective meditation has five steps: Invocation, Imaginative Picture, Sensations, Purposes, Consequences, and a Summary. This meditation takes half an hour. We carry it out using one of the previously mentioned themes.

The steps of that meditation mirror what happens to us when we receive a stimulus. For example: we want to eat a piece of fruit (Invocation). When we put the fruit in our mouth, we notice that it has gone bad (Imaginative Picture). We feel repugnance (Sensations). We discard the fruit (Purposes). We always check the condition of what we're about to eat (Consequences). This analogy shows that this meditation can help to adjust our behavior, improve our habits, and feel what we want or need to feel in certain circumstances. For example, to feel consoled when we're hurting, joy when we're feeling depressed, or rejection of things that attract but harm us. We can also improve and change the habits that we wish to overcome. For example, exchange thoughts or feelings that we know harm us or harm others for thoughts and feelings that we wish to have.

In just a few words, the affective meditation helps us have greater mastery over our life.

We do this meditation out loud while we're learning it. After enough practice, we do it mentally. We shouldn't worry about the monologue; what's important is to say clearly what we're seeking, feeling, or proposing, without too many words or digressions. It's alright to repeat what we say, without worrying that by doing so we're detracting from the meditation.

We choose the theme we'll be meditating on before we start meditating. In the invocation, after we have elevated our thoughts for a few moments, we say what's happening to us and what we would like to do about it, without being too lengthy.

After that, we create an imaginative picture that we can associate with the theme we have chosen. We shouldn't enter into too many details. We concentrate instead on the complete picture in order to perceive its whole message, like the ones that come to us when we look at good photographs. As with the invocation, the imaginative picture is brief. We only need to describe it clearly enough for it to have an impact on us.

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In the sensations, we say what we're experiencing as we contemplate that imaginative picture, without digressing or explaining reasons. In the purposes, we say how we are moved by what we've felt, especially what we propose to do to attain what we're seeking, according to the meditation theme. At the consequences step, we express what we have learned from the imaginative picture, or how we have internalized its message. We end the meditation with a brief summary of the meditation steps. Then we say Peace.

Potential Meditation

This meditation consists of two steps: Invocation and Imaginative Picture. During the latter step, we concentrate on a single image for as long as we can. We keep in check the emotions, associations, memories, or ideas that this image may evoke in us. This concentration allows the image to be engraved in our memory.

As with words, images are very powerful. We are very familiar with the recurring images of things that made us suffer or fearful when they happened to us. This also happens with the image that we delineate in the Imaginative Picture. It is working, on its own, in our interior. We have to try to get that image to come back to us during the day so that, little by little, it helps us become aware of what it means and what it is asking of us, in our behavior as well as our goals.

For example, in order to learn the consequences of our attitude and behavior, in the imaginative picture we project images that show us our behavior and the reactions we create around us. To develop our sense of participation, the images can be things that happen within our own context, or things that happen in the world. To see the harm we may cause helps us to open our minds and hearts to everything that's going on, since everything we see and every piece of news we receive are messages from life that we need to accept, understand and be aware of.

Sometimes we don't want to see images of the calamities we cause among ourselves. But if instead of thinking they are others' problems or accuse others of them, we make them ours, becoming aware that nothing is alien to us. This moves us to assume responsibility for what happens in the human family—we are inseparable from it—and to do something to fix our misfortunes.

Practices of Unfolding

Passive Meditation

“When the meditator becomes increasingly bored with repetitious imaginative pictures and tired of too much wordiness in her meditations, but not because of any physical or moral reasons, she practices the passive meditation. This meditation is slow, and the meditator almost unwittingly pauses at each word. The less she says, the more she benefits.

“She needs to keep reducing the number of words she says. Instead of trying to find phrases to enrich the picture. She needs to try to eliminate all extra meaningless words. She needs to strive for a single image only, and no more than that. Sometimes a single word is enough to fill the entire time of meditation.”¹²

When we meditate in an active way, we say the words we use in everyday conversations, whether we speak them out loud or silently. After we get some practice at it, we can say those words unhurriedly, paying attention to each word we say. Little by little we will be able to discover the wealth to be found in each word or combination of words.

For example, when in ordinary conversation we say someone’s name, that name is no more than a fact. But that name is much more than a fact when we say it as we think about the person, because then we establish an inner connection with them, as if they entered our mind and heart. The same thing happens when we gather words to express something and pay attention to each of them to allow them to speak to us.

Let’s remember that words are largely symbols; it is worthwhile to try to deepen into what those symbols mean when we speak them. Let’s pay attention to what such words as *listen*, *participate*, or *love* say to us, not in a literal sense but in all their meaning. To what extent do we realize everything we’re saying when we pronounce them?

¹² Course Mystical Asceticism, 8th teaching

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The steps of the exercise are slower in the Passive Meditation. We gradually decrease the number of words and increase the time between words, until only a few words are necessary for the duration of each step.

For example, when we say in the meditation, Divine Mother, we pause on *Mother* and allow the whole potential meaning of that word to enter us. When the effect of that word dissipates, we move on to the next ones. These pauses, however short, help us create the habit of paying attention to what we say, until we get to the point of not needing to say many words to express what we desire. We likewise learn to encapsulate in a few words, perhaps only one or two, the yearning for unfolding that goes beyond words.

With practice, we reach the point of not needing to concentrate on more than a single word so that, little by little, it reveals itself to us in all its fullness.

In the imaginative picture of the affective meditation, we concentrate on a single image until it produces a response in us, not in words but in an understanding or awakening.

The practice of the passive meditation, especially the meditation where we concentrate on what a word can reveal to us, is a gateway to meditation and contemplation. In these meditations there is no discourse, only attention. The key to being able to go beyond what is already in our minds is to listen without expectations. To be anxious to achieve something, including wanting to understand, is the greatest obstacle to contemplation and, it goes without saying, to attaining Union.

Exercises of concentration and meditation are practices that prepare a person to meditate. This means placing one's attention on a concern, a subject, a word or image, until it gives us a response or reveals what it has to tell us. The exercise of concentration implicit in the Passive Meditation is a quick route to reaching meditation.

For example, when we meditate on a specific subject, we leave aside what we think of it so that we can go beyond what we know. Simply stated, we concentrate on the subject and give our mind time to do its work, without rushing or wanting a result.

The passive meditation also helps us arrive at the power of synthesis. It often happens that, when we go to say something, we get off the subject and have to circle back several times to what we want to express. The habit of paying attention to

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every word we say helps us express what we want to say in just a few words. This makes it easier to understand and remember what we've said. The power of succinctness is valuable—it's indispensable, in fact—in conversations where there are many participants, and when we're analyzing ideas and proposals.

Sensitive Meditation

The sensitive meditation has five steps, each dedicated to one of the five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing.

“The sensitive meditation is very necessary for some souls. The meditator takes his or her senses, invigorating them and then steering them to what is spiritually desirable for him or her. If you wish to meditate on a rose, for example, look at it closely until your eyes are permeated with its beauty. Breathe in its fragrance, try to feel its freshness in your mouth, imagine caressing its silky petals and listen to the poem of a single day, which only a rose knows how to recite.”¹³

The sensitive meditation helps us to make better use our senses. When we concentrate on a task or when something really calls our attention, we spontaneously block out any potentially distracting stimuli. Although this mechanism helps us study, perform delicate tasks, listen closely to what others tell us and enjoy what interests us, it doesn't allow us to perceive all that our senses are telling us. For example, while we're watching an exciting movie, we perceive very little of our surroundings, including the passing of time. When we're engaged with the colors of a landscape, perhaps we don't hear the birdsong; if we're only interested in the birds, we might not perceive the beauty of the trees they are perched in.

Apart from the moments in which we have to or want to pay attention, we tend to remain so enclosed in ourselves that we don't stop to heed the messages our senses are sending to us. Apart from what we might perceived through them, each sense gives us one or more messages. Every single thing that we see, hear, smell, touch, or taste, tells us much more than what we receive through our senses. Behind every single thing that we see, or use is someone who thought of it or made it. There is a human being behind the form that we see or hear. Behind the images of nature are the beauty and perfection of the laws that govern them. Our senses not only connect us to life; they are also vehicles for their messages.

¹³ Course Mystical Asceticism, 8th teaching

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One variation of the sensitive meditation is to leave aside our emotional reactions to what we perceive and focus solely on the perception of the feeling we're concentrating on. This helps us learn how to perceive without judging. This is valuable not only in the realm of feelings but in the realm that encompasses the whole spectrum of perception, such as when we are looking at or listening to someone. This technique consists in internalizing what we are perceiving, just as it is, without distorting it with our emotional reactions. Only then will it be possible for us to formulate a more-or-less impartial judgment about what we're perceiving and receive the message it contains.

For example, when we smell something we don't like, we concentrate on it instead of judging it; when we see something we like, we leave enjoyment aside and concentrate only on what the sight is telling us. By discarding the judgments and reactions that are the result of a stimulus, we can discover more clearly what our senses are telling us, since they are always sending us a message.

We can also apply the technique of the sensitive meditation to the imaginative picture of the affective meditation, tailoring it to the various meditation themes.

For example, smelling something that nauseates us or tasting something that repels us might move us to abhorrence; hearing the sobs of helpless children might lead us to desolation; the sound of tolling bells might lead us to pity or compassion; a spiritual chant, to election; the murmur of a fountain, to feeling peace and consolation; the scent of flower, to a feeling of joy; the delicate hint of a breeze, to perceiving the transience and eternity of the present instant.

Practices of Unfolding

Concentration

This exercise consists in fixing one's eyes and attention on a point, a figure or an object, and concentrating for a time on what we're looking at. Although this is an individual exercise, it may also be done in a group. For example, you can place a small object in the middle of a table or other surface so that everyone can concentrate on it. When the exercise is over, everyone evaluates their experience.

Concentration exercises increase our ability to keep our attention fixed on something and they give our thoughts strength. This is important, because if there is nothing that very strongly calls our attention—a good movie or a game we're enthusiastic about—we don't become accustomed to staying alert for more than a few minutes at a time. A high school teacher used to say that his students' average attention span was only four minutes long, maximum. For this reason, those who transmit ideas and knowledge frequently make use of external resources such as examples, anecdotes, or humor that draw their listeners' or readers' attention to what they're saying. These people also try to keep their talks to no more than 20 minutes long, because it's hard to keep the attention of an audience even when using outside resources. This shows us how necessary it is to practice concentration, which will help us keep our minds from wandering.

Concentration exercises aren't limited to specific practices. We may practice concentration continuously if we make an effort to concentrate, in an interested way, on each thing we do during the day, subject by subject, thing by thing.

We can also train ourselves to keep to a single line of thought when we're in a conversation. We tend to move from one subject to another without stopping to realize that we're making associations that lead us to other subjects, without ever rounding off any one of them. This can even happen when we meet with others to talk about a specific subject. Soon after starting, we tend to make digressions that not only get us off-topic but sometimes lead to subjects that have nothing to do with the reason for the meeting in the first place. Becoming aware of the way our thoughts deviate when we need to keep them focused helps us to develop our attention. It's good to check how much time we're able to be attentive without getting distracted, because this will motivate us to give importance to exercises of

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concentration and meditation. These exercises also develop our capacity to pay attention and direct our attention to the things that really matter to us.

Attention is indispensable in all aspects of life, since only by paying attention to the things that happen around us and to us can we understand and benefit from them. It's good then, to cultivate our attention so that all our steps remain on the life path we have chosen.

Moreover, concentration exercises help us cleanse our mind and make room there so that the way we think of ourselves will be expressed in an increasingly less conditioned way.

MEDITATION THEMES

Commentaries applicable to the meditation exercises that are described in this work

The Black Veiled Lady

The theme of *The Black Veiled Lady* helps us master the impulses and desires that come from the basic instinct of self-preservation and the will to predominate. In the meditation on this theme, we also work to discern and overcome the things in us that obstruct our unfolding and our relationships with others, or which stunt other aspects of our lives. Becoming aware of what we're not always willing to recognize in ourselves helps us to perceive our effects on those around us, our work, and also our moods.

We find the name *Black Veiled Lady* in the course *Archaic Symbology* of the teaching of Cafh. Its connotation is related with the ancient belief that there exists a malign force that is opposed to the force of good that emanates from God. This belief relates that strength with the figure of the Devil, which is common to most existing religions. The Black Veil indicates that we don't distinguish where the impulses come from that move us to think, feel or do something that is opposite to what we yearn to fulfill.

This malignant force exists, not because there actually is a Devil but because we generate that force with the thoughts and feelings we have when we allow ourselves to be carried away by instinctive impulses that move us to destroy each other. But just as feeling and thinking badly creates a negative force, we also create a positive force with thoughts of love and participation, especially when we develop empathy not only with those we love but with any person; we are all part of the human family.

When we meditate on *The Black Veiled Lady*, we are working on what we want to overcome in ourselves. For example, lapses in our self-control, impulses to prevail, selfish aims, desires that distract us or divert us from the objective we want to fulfill. Or when we realize that we are wasting parts of our lives by not becoming aware in time of what we're doing and that every minute we waste is irretrievable.

Moreover, we need to recognize the influence we have on others with the way we are, act and think, just as the tendency to be concerned only about ourselves contributes to generating the hardships we experience in this world. Only when we come to understand our role within our own circle and in society will we be able to work for the benefit of the whole human family, which is also to our own benefit.

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In short, in this meditation theme we work on the awakening of consciousness and the abhorrence of:

. Our instinctive impulses

Mastery over instincts is basic for maintaining our discernment. Although we may believe we have our instincts under control, it is good to keep in mind how easy it is for us to be swept away by sexual impulses, anger, hatred, the hunger for power, for wealth, or to obtain what we don't need. These surges cause us to lose control over our life and we fail to regard the sad consequences we generate for ourselves, our loved ones and society.

. Our mental habits

We don't always realize that our impulses to defend our opinions antagonize those who don't share them, and that our dogmatism—which we rarely acknowledge—prevents us from gaining an understanding beyond our opinions and preconceptions.

. Our emotional habits

A flood of emotions can move us to magnify what happens to us or others. This way of reacting leads us to judge and work in unjust or inappropriate ways. Moreover, excessive emotionality makes it hard for us to maintain inner serenity.

. Certain habits of life

We don't always understand how much we are influenced by the habits we have unwittingly created, habits that tend to hinder our plans and our unfolding. It's worthwhile analyzing them one by one, discerning their pros and cons with the purpose of changing them for habits that help us live the way we want and attain what we yearn for.

Of course, we can't achieve self-mastery so quickly. The aim of meditating on this theme is to help us understand how our impulses and habits influence our life and those around us. Moreover, the purposes we make in the meditation start conditioning our reactions to the stimulus that moves us, tailoring them to what we know we need to do. The affective meditation has a step that accentuates those purposes, in this case, abhorrence; the discursive meditation has the step "response" to induce abhorrence.

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Why do we want to generate abhorrence for the things we discover that harm us? When we limit ourselves only to understanding that something is harmful to us or others, we easily leave aside that information and move forward as if we hadn't had that understanding. Sometimes we do something when we know it is harmful to our health or wellbeing yet keep doing it because we like doing it. We need to exchange those likes with a rapid response, such as the automatic response to avoid burning ourselves. In other words, we don't only need to understand what is harmful to us; we also need to feel a deep aversion to it; we need to abhor it. An intense feeling helps us internalize something we have understood. From then on, that awareness causes us to react spontaneously and positively, like when we move quickly to avoid a blow without needing to think about it.

The Abyss

An abyss is an unfathomable, dangerous, and almost incomprehensible depth. In the meditation, we associate this image with the painful human situation: ignorance of the fundamental questions; the inevitability of suffering; decline and death; the afflictions we cause each other. This meditation leads us to review our relationship with the fact that we are human beings in this world.

We can meditate on this theme in several ways. For example, from any of the following points of view:

- . Our inner solitude
- . Our basic ignorance
- . Our sorrow for the suffering in the world
- . Our own sorrow, living in this world
- . Our inner participation with those who suffer
- . Our impotence at the wrongs we would like to right

When we speak of solitude, it's obvious that we're not alone. On the contrary, unless we have secluded ourselves so as not to have contact with other people, we can't avoid being immersed in a growing population—in numbers and in conflicts. However, we can't escape our inner solitude. Advice from others can help us, love we receive can encourage us, but we alone must face our decisions and their consequences, even if others want to accompany us in the process. If we decide to follow someone else's advice, that decision is completely ours, alone as we are with our uncertainties. This is true even when we say that we did something because we were told to do so,

When we suffer, we do it alone, even if others want to console us. And we are alone as we face our destiny, awaiting what is to come, even if we are accompanied.

We feel alone when we know—even if we don't want to think about it—that at some moment our loved ones will leave us, without knowing when that will be.

And we are alone when we realize that all the knowledge that we so appreciate and that gives us security will become obsolete, as has always happened with the purported knowledge of past generations. Now it becomes obsolete at a very fast pace.

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How much more alone do we feel as we seek answers to basic questions. No matter how much we hold on to our name, social position and beliefs, deep inside we don't know who we are, why we are where we are nor where we will end up. And we feel even more alone when we have to make our way in life without knowing which way to go. This brings us a deeper desolation, not caused by sufferings this time, but because we don't know the meaning of our life.

But desolation, as an effect of this meditation, may be caused by the sufferings of others, not only the loneliness of our own.

In the invocation of the discursive meditation, we can remember those sufferings. In the response, we can keep them in mind to remain united, in desolation, with those who can't avoid their sufferings.

In the affective meditation there are scores of imaginative pictures to produce desolation. It's enough to show the calamities we cause, or the ignorance in which we live.

When we are able to tear our gaze away from ourselves and dare to include the world of others, we develop empathy. This is the beginning of desolation by participation. We no longer feel desolate only for ourselves or for our solitude and ignorance, we also feel it for the permanent pain of the human family we belong to.

In these cases, desolation prompts us to leave aside our habitual inner self-centeredness to open our minds and hearts to develop a love that will include all humankind.

The Two Roads

The theme of The Two Roads reminds us that we need to disattach ourselves from what takes away our inner freedom, including disattaching from what pulls on us, in order to be able to discern each step we take in life, since at every instant we are choosing, yet again, our destiny.

Ancient symbology tells us that when the yearning to improve ourselves and give meaning to our life awakens, we have two roads before us. One of them is smooth but very long. It implies many lives, sufferings, and interminable experiences to attain, at last, the realization of the dreamed-of idea. The other road is short but steep. It takes us very quickly to the end if we work on ourselves to expand our consciousness. It doesn't avoid us the trials and sorrows of life, but it does avoid us many self-created sorrows, and it teaches us to understand and advance more quickly. In short, on this road we learn not to repeat experiences uselessly but to make of each of them a new step in the development of our consciousness.

Why are we seeking disattachment when we meditate on this theme? Because what holds us back is what we don't want to leave behind, even as we glimpse the horizon of what is pulling us forward. For example, the attachment to people and affections, the attachment to seeking only what gives us pleasure or satisfaction, the attachment to protecting ourselves from the sorrows of others, the almost unshakeable attachment with which we cling to our opinions and prejudices. In short, the very common habit of self-absorbed thinking and living.

It sometimes terrifies us to think about death, as if by not remembering it we can eliminate its existence or postpone its arrival. We don't know if we or our loved ones will cease to be alive in the next instant. We hang onto things as if we'll never have to let go of them, and we seek triumphs that dissolve with the passage of time.

Knowing that we always have two roads before us makes us feel how subject we are to our attachments and to maintaining the illusion that we'll be able to keep what we have, value, love or believe we need.

It's natural to become attached to who we love, what we have, and where we live. These attachments don't hinder us when we remember that those ties are

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temporary. Realizing this—and keeping it in mind—allows us to savor the intensity of living each instant of the present instead of suffering or becoming sad because everything passes. When we know each instant is unique, we don't allow ourselves to ignore it or allow it to disappear as if it were some sort of debris. By paying attention to the irrecoverable present, we transform each of our experiences into a continuous “realizing” of what takes place to us and around us. Every instant offers us a teaching.

Becoming implies a continuum of disappearance and appearance, of the instants themselves, and also what we experience in those instants. It is really a continuum of death and rebirth. Nothing is permanent in the continuum of the present.

Therefore, we shouldn't confuse disattachment with throwing away what we have or withdrawing from the people we love. Disattachment means overcoming the illusion that what we have, and treasure, is forever: the illusion of possession.

Moreover, disattachment prompts us to realize that we are in this world to learn and move forward.

This leads us to pay attention to the fact that, day by day, we learn by living, and that we need to leave everything behind that we attempt to seize in our life on this earth. According to the teachings, we forget everything when we die: the information we have received, the study we have accomplished, and the experiences we have lived. Perhaps the only thing that remains in us is the awareness that we were able to develop throughout our life. This leads us to understand that, if we want to evaluate our life, besides counting the good works we have done—and that we will forget—what shows us how much we have advanced is how much our awareness has expanded.

It's good then, to sometimes pause to discover how much of what we have learned and lived we have transmuted into moments of awakening. This will help us realize that our life has meaning.

In the invocation of the meditation we bring to light our attachments so we can see how they hold us back. In the discursive meditation, the response is supposed to motivate us to disattach by attaining the inner freedom we crave. In the affective meditation, the imaginative picture needs to show the attachments that hold us down and hinder us from fulfilling our purposes. The sensations are supposed to

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center us in the inner suffocation to which our attachments confine us. Feeling this suffocation is enough to give strength to the purpose of disattachment.

The Standard

A standard is a symbol with various meanings, one of which is protection—that which we receive and that which we seek. The person who carries a standard holds it aloft, as if imploring heaven. In the bible, we find the phrase, “Yahweh is my banner,” as if to say, God is my refuge, my protection.

In terms of these meditation theme, the standard represents our ideal: to expand our consciousness from what we have understood about ourselves, life, and the world, in the meditations on the themes above.

I might not think much about the meaning I give my life, but there are moments in which I ask myself what direction I’m going to give my life, or if the direction I’m taking is a good one. These are good moments to understand that we can give life a meaning that transcends the one it has now, which is based on the way we have lived and the objectives we have given ourselves to fulfill.

In the meditation, the standard represents the ideal we have chosen, the ideal we wish to subordinate our interests to. We have, of course, already made that choice. However, since the demands of life require us to concentrate on what we have to do in order to respond to them day by day, we need to dedicate at least a moment to discern whether our day-to-day actions and objectives are in harmony with that election.

Let’s remember that, whether we realize it or not, at each moment our actions give our life direction, not only because of what we do but the way we do it. We commonly allow ourselves to be led by our temperament without paying attention to how it’s influencing us, what we do, and our environment. It’s not easy to realize that our behavior influences our well-being and unfolding, and also those of others. We need to develop an introspective frame of mind that helps us regulate what we tend to call “the way I am.” Daily meditation, and especially the meditation on the Standard, are a way to examine ourselves retrospectively to ascertain or discover whether the way we live corresponds to the vocation of responding to our ideal. If they match, we reaffirm our habits and purposes; if they don’t, we correct them so that what we do guides us in the direction of what we want to fulfill.

We can also invoke to reaffirm the objective we give our life, or to discover that objective. Or ask for help to be faithful to the choice we have already made.

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In the discursive meditation, the response can be like a rediscovery of the ideal that moves us, that which strengthens our decision to respond to it.

In the affective meditation, the imaginative picture can show how at every instant multiple options are before us, out of which only one matches what we have decided to do with our life. In the sensations we perceive the voice of awareness that doesn't stop alerting us about the path we need to follow. The purpose can be, for example, keeping that voice alive, without allowing our attachments and desires to extinguish that awareness.

The Golden Temple

One of the benefits we receive from The Golden Temple is encouragement to sustain us when we're faced with the pains of life and our struggles to fulfill what we yearn for. Meditating on this theme helps us to understand that, whatever might happen to us, everything has meaning because we are protected by the law that governs existence. In traditional terms, it shows us that we are blessed by that which is the source of life and the pillar of all creation.

Busy as we are in response to the demands of a life that is difficult and pressured by the tension caused by the personal and social problems that beset us, we need to obtain at least one moment of peace. The Golden Temple theme answers that need.

Just as we feel peaceful when we enter a lovely, tranquil place, we also feel peaceful when we mentally enter our inner being, that intimate and expansive space that is the vastness of our consciousness, inseparable from the consciousness that nourishes life. There we encounter an inner peace that is expressed in consolation. Golden Temple is what we call that inner space.

In the invocation of the discursive meditation, we leave aside what is agitating or bothering us, and focus only on the peace we are seeking to achieve. In the response, we allow ourselves to be taken to a place that inspires peace in us, and we stay there to the end, finalizing the step with the word "Peace".

The invocation in the affective meditation is similar to the one in the discursive meditation. In the imaginative picture, we can visualize ourselves in a silent temple; or we can watch ourselves passing through an atrium, beyond which is the sacred space, unperturbed by what happens in the world. We can also choose an image that we associate with silence and peacefulness according to our experiences. We remain in that image, imbuing ourselves with silence and peace for as long as possible. The purpose could be to remember that we always have that peaceful refuge to go to, even if we're feeling tense. The consequences could be that we can achieve inner peace if we make it a purpose to do so.

When we get used to meditating always in the same place, we turn that place into somewhere that makes us feel peaceful and that leads us to deepen that peace in meditation.

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Another way we can focus this meditation: to accept what happens to us, which is the first step to achieving consolation.

Accepting means becoming aware that what happens or could happen to us is an aspect of the law of life. In order to find consolation, therefore, it is necessary to accept the moment as it is, without rejecting it because it doesn't meet our expectations, or complain because of how it makes us suffer. Let's try to look serenely at things as they are, and rest in the inner peace of knowing that every sorrow contains a teaching, and that if we accept it, we will be able to understand it.

On the other hand, we can take the opportunity which this meditation gives us to become strong in anticipation of what could happen to us. Not everything matches our expectations or hopes. Accepting beforehand that things might not go the way we'd like them to helps us, on one hand, to accept our uncertainty about these things and, on the other, to value the present moment. This acceptance is peacefulness in relationship to life, a peace that we can certainly call consolation.

In the invocation of the meditation, we can imagine that we are looking at an image that represents the law of life, like the figure of a woman holding a scale representing justice. The response of the discursive meditation could be to recognize that there is justice in everything that happens, in what happens to us as we get older as well as what follows the law of consequences. If we take into account the consciousness we have today as humankind, we shouldn't be surprised at the sufferings we generate among ourselves.

The imaginative picture in the affective meditation could represent a situation that can cause us pain; in the sensations, feeling that this pain contains a teaching; in the purposes, understanding that that teaching is to accept our experiences; in the consequences, being at peace because of that acceptance and because we know, no matter what happens, that we will continue to live according to our principles.

At the end of this meditation we can slowly repeat the word "Peace" until we are infused with that peace.

As we meditate on this theme we can discern whether the consolation we're seeking is only for ourselves or if we are also seeking consolation for all beings, so that we can project our consolation over others as a mantle of peace.

The Veil of Ahehia

“The Veil of Ahehia is an image of life as a result; it is the manifest effect of a hidden cause. Everything in the Universe is an image of the Divine Mother, from the celestial bodies to the tiniest grain of sand.”¹⁴

The theme of the Veil of Ahehia opens our eyes to the limits of our perception. Although we know we don't register everything that exists, we sometimes feel and opinionate as if that limitation didn't exist. This leads us to convince ourselves that things are the way we believe they are when, in many cases, we don't know how they are or why they are the way they are.

The first step in pulling back the Veil of Ahehia that hides reality from us is to recognize that we don't really know what we think we know. The belief that we know acts as a cloak that plunges us into ignorance.

From the perspective of that ignorance, there are several approaches we can take in this meditation theme. One approach is to pay attention to aspects of life that we don't always notice and to feel joy in discovering their beauty. We can begin by becoming aware of the beauty and harmony of existence in all its aspects, even in those that might not appeal to us, or that cause us vexation or pain.

We don't need to go to beautiful places to find beauty; we are surrounded by it. All expressions of life are beautiful. We only need to pay them attention to discover them. We can begin by leaving aside our ideas about beauty and how we associate beauty with our typical likes. However, when we try to do this, we can't stop feeling satisfied by the things that give us pleasure and unpleasant feelings at or rejection of what's painful. Meditating on this theme helps us to rise above these reactions as judges of what is beauty and what is ugliness and discover that everything has beauty. One researcher might find beauty in organisms that would repel us, while another might find beauty in compounds that can harm or destroy us. Artists find beauty in shapes that we would have discarded; sculptors find beauty in works in which we find no meaning; musicians find beauty in sounds that are different from those we associate with music. And what about the beauty of many aspects of

¹⁴ Course Archaic Symbology, 13th teaching

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nature that we pay no attention to, and the beauty of each and every human being? Beauty exists in everything we perceive.

In the invocation of the discursive meditation, we express our yearning to discover beauty in all aspects of life. In the response, we pay attention to find it in something that never interested us until that moment. In successive meditations we seek the beauty that's hidden in what we dislike.

When we begin to do the affective meditation, we create imaginative pictures that bring us joy. Later on, we create pictures that we are indifferent to. Further on, we create pictures that we might not like.

In short, the Veil of Ahehia keeps us aware that what we perceive is like a veil that we can try to pull back and that teaches us to enjoy existence in all its aspects.

Moreover, let's remember that the symbology represents the Veil of Ahehia with figures that symbolize the attributes of wisdom, without showing who has attained wisdom.¹⁵ If we keep this in mind, we see that the effect we're seeking in this meditation can have more than one aspect. Just as we can associate joy with the gladness we feel toward the beauty and wisdom of nature, or when contemplating the vastness of the universe, we can also take the Veil of Ahehia as a symbol of wisdom. If we do this, we can discover the joy of the serenity that is attained by those who attain this quality of knowledge: they don't lose discernment or inner calm because of what happens or could happen, either to themselves or to others.

¹⁵ See the course Commentaries on Archaic Symbology

The Resurrection of Hes

Hes is what the teaching calls “the hidden cause” of the divine manifestation.

The theme of the Resurrection of Hes guides us to go beyond what we perceive with our senses and to try to unite with constant becoming. It leads us to delve, so to speak, into the eternal present.

In the discursive meditation, a good way to focus the invocation is the quest for inner silence, in pursuit of the awareness of who we are that is behind our mental and emotional movements. It is good to invoke using just a few words, leaving a significant space between them, to give room for silence to enter our interior. In the response step, we can imagine a voice that whispers from within, telling us ever more silently, “Here I am. . . here I am,” until we identify with the plenitude of the ultimate silence.

An imaginative picture in the affective meditation could be the image of what is called, in symbology, the “Tomb of Hes” (the Divine Mother asleep): a black stone in the shape of a cube. This stone has no colors or inscriptions, nor does it contain anything that is visible to us. The cube symbolizes the material world and stability. In the spiritual order, it symbolizes truth and wisdom. As a symbol, the color black has several interpretations. In ancient Egypt it symbolized fertility, life in its dormant state.

Even if we don’t find anything in this image, we contemplate it for as long as we can. We know that the seed of life is in its apparent darkness and immobility. Surely thoughts, memories and perhaps other images will appear in our minds. We let them pass by, while our awareness reposes in a silence they can’t alter.

On the one hand, this imaginative picture leads us to perceive the spirit or the unknown force that precedes manifestation. On the other, it invites us to pause our mind and remain in silence, as if we were atoms of consciousness in the infinity of existence.

There are other imaginative pictures that can also help us in this meditation. For example: I am in infinite space and a very powerful light, like the sun, approaches me. I am a small light that travels toward it; as I approach, I see that it’s composed of countless little lights. When I arrive, I unite with them; I feel that I am part of this immense and powerful light that illuminates infinite space.

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Bliss arises from the feeling of being part of the whole and the creative energy that reaches the whole universe. In this imaginative picture we feel united with the manifestation of the eternal. If from that point on we remain expectant, we will then be able to come to intuit its potential aspect.

The Resurrection of Hes also symbolizes spiritual realization. In Archaic Symbology, the image of this symbol shows the person who has attained that realization, with its attributes. But the person's face does not appear, since his or her individuality is beyond the limits of their personality. If we use this image as we meditate, we try to take distance from ourselves as we seek who we are behind what appears in our mind. We don't do this to unveil a mystery but to remain centered in the apparent darkness of not knowing. From there on, we expand a wave of love that covers the human family and expands toward the mystery of existence.

These examples can also be used for the discursive meditation, when we are meditating on this theme.

We mustn't get discouraged if we are unable to advance rapidly in the meditation on the Resurrection of Hes. Any way we do it will lead us to an ever-deeper self-knowledge that is freer from the ideas we have formed about who we are.

EXERCISES OF PAUSING I

Exercises of pausing are one of the ways of practicing introspection. These exercises help us to observe our thoughts, feelings, and behavior objectively, and to evaluate what we observe in ourselves and what we produce in our surroundings. We could say that the exercises of pausing are meditations that are condensed into a few instants.

Retrospective Examination

We are used to judging our responses to the stimuli we subjectively receive, but those who witness those responses tend to judge them differently. These discrepancies can cause confusion, and even aggravation with or resentment toward us. Is there any way to avoid confronting each other this way, or of arriving at a fair hearing among ourselves? We rarely find it to be so or, if we do, we rarely apply it.

Exercises of pausing can help us not to be so subjective; not to judge how we feel or how things seem to us, but to see them in a way that's closer to how they really are. These exercises consist in pausing inwardly to take some distance and contemplate ourselves impartially and also what happens, without preconceptions or defensive reactions.

As happens with sight, we can't see much when we're very close to the object we're observing; only when we step back does the panorama expand, the more so as we gain more distance. In the situations of life, as well as when we're paying attention to what's happening, taking some distance from ourselves allows us to place what happens to us within a broader context, and it does the same for what happens beyond ourselves.

The retrospective examination helps us develop the habit of observing ourselves impartially and objectively, without allowing us to get engaged by emotions about what happens to us or what happens in general, both in the present and the past.

The retrospective examination fulfills several functions. For example, it helps us develop our memory, improve our mastery over our mind and become aware of what we're doing with our life.

This exercise implies an inner pausing. We pause the mental stream that we bring from the day, and we take distance to observe, impartially, what has happened.

We look at each act without rating it, so that our actions can speak for themselves and help us realize how our decisions and reactions mark the course of our life. As with other exercises of pausing, the retrospective examination shows us how we are and what we do with our time and energy.

This exercise can take us further when we contemplate a specific time period, or our whole life. That perspective gives us an awareness of being-in-life, a sense of

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being that becomes accentuated to the extent that we take more distance to distinguish ourselves in the boundless flow of existence.

Besides doing this exercise before going to sleep at night, we can also do it at a moment during the day, to look at something that happened and draw conclusions that teach us to evaluate without judging.

Carefully choosing our words

We don't always note the power that words have. We use words somewhat nonchalantly, without realizing what we produce with them.

With words we can make someone happy or sad, show appreciation or be offensive, be respectful or disparaging, consoling or distressing. However, we are used to using words without noting the effects we create when we speak, especially when we vent or express our judgments and annoyances. It is therefore good to pause an instant before speaking, to consider what we're going to say and the effect our words can have.

To get used to creating moments of pausing in order to think about what and how we're going to say something, it's good to include in our meditations some meditations on the way we speak. This will help us become aware of how, with words and silences, we create the atmosphere which we live in and share with others.

Besides those words of pausing, it's good to learn to express ourselves in just a few words. We don't need to tell a story to say simply what we wish to be known. If we don't want to abuse the use of speech, it is good to keep in mind that, for the whole time we're talking, others are unable to express themselves.

We also need to be careful with the content of what we're going to say. We sometimes use conversation to vent to others about our heartaches and problems, without remembering that we don't have the right to saddle others with what is weighing on us. It's a good idea to ask someone if they're willing to listen to us before sharing what's bothering us. If they say yes, we should add something positive after we finish telling them about our afflictions, so as not to leave them sad when they don't deserve that.

We commonly feel moved to share not only our afflictions but also our joys. This is good when we're with people who will be happy to hear our good news. But it would be selfish and even cruel to make a festive commotion about it when we're with people who are suffering some deep grief. They need us to listen to what they're going through; they don't need our jubilation at that moment.

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Stopping for a moment to discern what we're going to say helps us discover the world we create with our words and then use it well. This makes us increasingly circumspect and careful in the way we speak.

We don't need a special block of time to practice this exercise. We just need to be attentive when we have an urge to say something.

It's good to accompany this exercise with the practice of dialogue.

Dialogue helps us not create bad moments or conflicts by what we express when we talk, as would happen if we complained, argued, or criticized.

A complaint is justified when, for example, we pay for a service but then don't receive it, or when something saddens us, such as when a loved one is suffering. But if we have the habit of complaining, we can always find something to complain about; anything can be a reason for complaining. Dialoguing on this subject can help us understand that this habit makes the faultfinder sad and even bitter. It also saddens and embitters those who listen to those complaints.

Dialogue is also helpful to the person who has the habit of arguing. Dialoguing makes it evident that an argument will probably not change anyone's mind. On the contrary, it will probably strengthen everyone's position and make it hard for them to get along with each other.

Criticizing means analyzing a situation or a subject objectively, so that we can reach a solid conclusion afterward. Such criticism is good and often indispensable to figure out what to do next. But this analysis requires preparation and planning in order to decide the subject to be discussed and the best time to have that discussion. In contrast, the habit of criticizing leads to disparaging, perhaps even offensive remarks about the person being criticized. Dialoguing on this not only brings to light how hard it is to maintain a good relationship with the person who has this habit. Dialoguing can go so far as strengthening the relationship by showing the way such criticism affects that relationship.

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Contrary act

The way to practice the contrary act is to stop the desire to do something, whether because we are used to doing it, because we like doing it, or because we have the impulse to do it even if there is no need for it.

One reason to practice the contrary act is to reserve our energy. We use energy to keep our body alive and to do what we need to do, but we also waste it in various ways.

“Reserve the energy of your words.

“Words need to be the clear and concise expression of the idea you wish to express.

“Vocal energy is spent with emotional or irate expressions and with the habit of immoderately laughing or crying. But a great deal more energy is spent in malicious gossip and lies.

“For this reason, it is advisable not to speak very much, or to speak in a way that words are a source of good and contribute to the realization of the Great Work.

“Reserve your visual energy as well. A great deal of energy escapes continuously through our eyes.

“A useful exercise for the student who wishes to learn to restrict what they look at is to count, at night, the number of faces they have seen during the day.

“By accustoming our eyes to being discreet, we gradually learn to direct our attention inwardly, to our very being.”¹⁶

Another reason to practice the contrary act is to learn how to stop our impulses so that we can distinguish them and have greater mastery over our reactions and behavior.

“We can save precious energy by monitoring and measuring all our actions, by depriving ourselves of what is most pleasurable, by being measured and discreet in the satisfaction of our basic needs, and by keeping an eye on our thoughts and words.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Course Spiritual Unfolding, 5th teaching

¹⁷ Course Spiritual Unfolding, 9th teaching.

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We need to recognize to what extent we're dominated by the habit of doing or seeking out what we like, and of rejecting what doesn't tempt us or what upsets us. But we can't avoid aspects of life we wish we didn't have to go through, many of which come about by only doing what we like to do. There are always circumstances we have to face even if we do everything possible to postpone them.

No matter how well we guard our health, we can't avoid illness, decline, and death. Nor can we avoid these things for our loved ones. Regarding our mental and emotional health, we need to learn to face painful or unpleasant situations so we will be prepared for when they arrive. The practice of contrary acts helps us with this, as well as helping us overcome fears.

Of course, we shouldn't do things that entail unnecessary risks, but it is good to dare to do what we would like to do or need to do, but don't dare to do because we're afraid of what others will say or because we are afraid to do it. We can begin to face these fears by doing small acts that are contrary to our tendency to shrink from or shy away from what scares us.

All circumstances, both the pleasing and painful ones, are part of life. Of course, it's not a question of trying to be happy about what upsets us, but of getting used to not always doing what gratifies us, so that we can maintain a minimum of balance in our relationship with what happens in life.

Practicing acts that are opposite to the ones we would do spontaneously, without thinking about what we're doing, trains us to reach that balance. We don't need to have a plan to put that into practice. There are countless situations in which we can do something different from what we would like to do without detracting from what we're going to do. For example, not always choosing foods we like; not insisting on going where we want to go when someone suggests going somewhere else; being quiet when we feel like arguing—and without arguing inside ourselves—getting together with someone with whom we have no affinity; visiting a sick person when we know that visit will make us suffer.

When we get used to practicing even the smallest of contrary acts, we realize how much our fears shrink and how much our self-confidence grows. We also become aware of the inner freedom we have achieved with which to face life.

This is another exercise that need no extra time dedicated to it, since it entails using our good judgment to discern what to do at each moment.

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Taking mental pictures of ourselves

This exercise consists in taking mental photographs of our behavior. It's like taking a selfie in our mind. We practice it at any moment, either when we're by ourselves or with others. A picture says so much to us when we look at it attentively. The same thing happens when we take a mental photo of our behavior and attitudes.

We're used to doing a similar exercise when we observe the behavior of others. Based on how we see someone acting, we form an idea of how they are, and we rely on that idea to evaluate and define them. We don't take much time to do this. We do it in one or two quick glances. In the same way, we learn a lot about ourselves when we take mental pictures of ourselves, and we also learn how our behavior causes others to think of us as they do. When we're doing this exercise, it will help us if we remember the saying that it's easy to see the mote in another's eye and difficult to see the beam in our own.

It's also good to take mental pictures at times we think of as routine or unimportant. The exercise consists in distancing ourselves inwardly from ourselves so that we can see ourselves as others would. We just observe without evaluating ourselves. What we see will speak for itself.

We can take other moments for pausing as we enter our bedroom or workplace. The exercise is to observe the place as if we were a visitor. The way we arrange and leave things tells us a lot about our habits, just as what we see in others' spaces tells us a lot about them.

If we're not able to take a mental picture of ourselves when it would be most helpful to take it, we can do it at another moment of the day, or before the retrospective examination. We make a mental image of something that had an unusual effect on us, or others, and we hold it long enough to be able to clearly discern what happened and our part in it.

Self-evaluation

We can think of self-evaluation as a contrary act, because we tend to resist doing it, especially in the presence of others. It's important to uncover the reason for this resistance, since it can reveal aspects of ourselves that we need to recognize and work on.

The self-evaluation exercise is a moment of stopping to observe ourselves objectively, and to judge what we see in ourselves, and what we provoke by our way of doing things and even our way of being, as impartially as possible. For example, we can evaluate how we relate with family members, friends, and strangers; how we fulfill our responsibilities, commitments, and vocation. It's especially important to evaluate the aspects in ourselves where we know we have conflicts, or the aspects that others say we have. It is good to self-evaluate consistently over time, so we can observe how our responses evolve. For If we evaluate ourselves in areas that are not those that need our attention, we will defeat the purpose of self-evaluation because we won't make any progress when we do it.

It's also good to periodically carry out a self-evaluation on decisions we have already made, to know if they align with our chosen ideal or objective. We can carry out a yearly self-evaluation that covers our whole life.

To get good results from this exercise, we need to start by recognizing our limitations. However efficient and successful we might be in certain areas we, like most people, are probably not successful in many areas, much less in all aspects of our lives. Having limits isn't a flaw; it's natural in our human condition.

Besides accepting that we're limited, it's good to clearly recognize where those limitations are. When someone points out something we could improve on, let's not keep acting as if we're excellent at it.

Let's also be careful not to be always content with the way we are and the way we do things. Our optimistic viewpoint shouldn't be because we don't care whether the way we are perturbs others or has a negative impact on our responsibilities and work. Therefore, every time we hear a criticism or someone draws our attention to something, it's worthwhile to pause a moment, separating ourselves inwardly from the situation to be able to observe it objectively and discern what we need to learn and then apply it in those cases.

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Let's not expect to feel very happy with the result of our self-evaluations. We will always find something that we need to improve or change, and we should be happy to have these discoveries, since they show us pretty accurately what we could do to continue on our path in a hopeful manner.

We shouldn't get discouraged, either when we're criticized. On the contrary, criticisms allow us to learn about ourselves. We should even be asking for them and thanking those who give them to us. People who relate with us are always evaluating us—just as we're also evaluating them—and they see in us aspects that we didn't think we had, or which we didn't own to having. It's good to recognize and work on those things.

EXERCISES OF PAUSING II

Practices of Unfolding

Pausing inwardly to observe the flow of our mind and its effect on what we feel

Pausing like this is useful to us when we seek distractions because we're bored or listless, because it seems like nothing's happening where we are, because we can't bear to be alone, or because the only thing we can do at those moments is wait, like when we're waiting in a doctor's office, or traveling from one place to another. Let's observe, therefore, how our mind wanders and the emotions we feel without letting ourselves be carried away by them. Instead of saying, "I think this," or "I feel this," let's take distance so as to be able to say, "This is a thought;" "This is a feeling." When we stop identifying with what we feel and think, we can better know how we think and feel. Moreover, this way of relating with what happens in our minds induces us to deepen the way we think of ourselves beyond what we usually think and feel about ourselves.

This exercise also helps us not to dodge what we must confront, for example, solitude and silence. It can also reveal where that dodging comes from and help us to overcome it. Regardless of the reason behind our evasions, it's worthwhile to get used to silence and solitude, because they help us understand that a great many of the things we do are only distractions to avoid thinking about and facing the challenges we need to recognize and meet.

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Pausing our emotional reactions

We practice this exercise when what we feel stirs us more intensely than usual, since this is when we tend to make subjective judgments about what happens and to respond impulsively.

If something irritates us, we get upset; if it delights us, we tend to get excited. These are natural and spontaneous reactions, but they give us information that is loaded with judgments. The exercise consists in calming our emotional state, pausing our judgments, stepping back inwardly from the situation that is triggering this response and observing what's happening to us.

For example, instead of thinking, "*I feel bad*," we think as if we were someone looking at us from outside: "*She's feeling bad*." Instead of thinking, "*I'm jumping for joy*" we think, "*He's feeling excited*." This is more than a word game; it's seeing ourselves the way others say what they see in us at these moments. By observing ourselves the way someone else sees us, we can evaluate ourselves from that point of view. This helps us to attain serenity and good discernment when we tend to lose them.

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Pausing our judgments of others

Other occasions in which it is good to pause inwardly are when we judge someone.

When meeting someone for the first time, we make spontaneous judgments about them. Then this judgment becomes set, according to the interaction we have with them and this soon becomes consolidated into a solid opinion about that person. When we encounter that person later on, we no longer see her as she is at that moment. We see her in light of the judgment we previously made about her. Every time we see her again or think about her, we tend to associate her with that judgment, regardless of how subjective and incomplete it might be.

We all have experience of this. How many times have we wished that someone would see us as we are and not the way they once thought we were because of something we did or said, and which, for us, was limited to that moment and that's all.

This exercise consists in pausing judgments and looking at the person as if we were meeting them for the first time, even if we have known them for a while. This helps us to discover them just as they are at that moment. For example, when someone tells us something, instead of thinking, "He always talks about the same thing," let's concentrate on what he wants to tell us at that moment and try to understand why he's saying it.

Pausing our excuses

It's good to keep in mind the difference between apologies, justifications, and excuses.

We apologize when we humbly acknowledge we have made a mistake and expressly beg pardon. It's good if we make this acknowledgment the end point of an experience that has caused us pain, so that we can transform our mistake into a learning that helps us not repeat that mistake—and not look back, so we can avoid becoming guilt-ridden.

A justification is acceptable when there are clear reasons that validate it. In fact, in many cases we have the obligation to provide a justification, for example to justify an absence at work due to illness. In contrast, we give excuses when we want to evade an obligation or a deserved reprimand.

It's a common practice to give excuses to oneself and others when we know we have made a blunder. This spontaneous reaction is a product of our defense mechanisms. But this doesn't help us to know ourselves, or to acknowledge the upset and tense reactions of others when we justify ourselves using unacceptable excuses. For example, it doesn't make sense for us to give excuses for situations that most of us have to go through, such as heavy traffic, fatigue, a heavy workload, many things to do, not feeling like doing something that, regardless, we will have to do, as happens in most workplaces. And it makes even less sense to make excuses for the things we forget. Of course, there are many more occasions in which we tend to give excuses; we each know which ones we use.

When we tend to seek excuses to feel good about ourselves or to get on someone's good side, we need to curb that impulse and take some distance, judging ourselves as others would—or as they already do. This keeps us honest. This exercise can also be valuable when we consider events from the past that have made us suffer, or those in which we made others suffer. Let's examine how much responsibility we assume for our part in these events. Even if we don't think we have any, let's remember that everyone has their share of responsibility when there is an interpersonal conflict.

Of course, it may be that we suffer due to situations that, since they were outside our control, justify what we feel about them or the way we live because of having

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had experienced them. But if, for reasons that no longer exist, we continue suffering for something that's over, it's best if we understand those experiences within their context, and concentrate on living each instant anew, with our minds and hearts clear of any aftermath, resentments, excuses and justifications. Remaining tied to past experiences and living in distress as if we were still undergoing them would be an attempt to escape from life. The expression "turn the page" is easier to apply when we leave aside excuses that attempt to justify our current shortcomings and acknowledge that the past is past and that there is no reason whatsoever for it to dictate how our present should be.

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Attentiveness to the Method

We have seen, above, practices we can carry out to promote our unfolding, but there are aspects of our unfolding that we don't think of as ascetic practices. We think, "This is the way I am; this is the way I live." But if we analyze the way we act on a day-to-day basis, we see that "the way I live" is the method we apply to our life. It's worth thinking about, so we can verify whether it is consistent with the ideal we profess to have. Paying attention to our habits is also an act of pausing.

To help ourselves in this, let's remember the habits that the Method of Cafh recommends. When we practice them out of love, they are the hidden mystical asceticism in daily life. For example, an ordinary habit such as bathing daily is an act of love when, besides wanting to be clean, we do it with the intention of not distressing others. Besides doing physical exercises because it's good to do them, we're also motivated by the intention of not burdening others with our health problems. It's an act of love to prioritize the present moment by not absenting ourselves mentally when we're sharing time with others, and to moderate our behavior so we don't discharge our self-indulgence or outbursts onto others. In short, when we stop being centered on ourselves, the way we act turns into expressions of our inner participation with others, because we are doing these practices out of love.

Following is a compressed summary of practices that are recommended by the Method of Cafh:

Practices

1. Prayer and meditation
2. Daily bath
3. Physical exercises (*)
4. Spiritual exercises and readings

Home

1. Mutual affection
2. Planning expenses without exceeding our means; foreseeing future needs
3. Neither luxury nor ostentation
4. Order and cleanliness (our house is our temple)

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The table

1. Frugality (leaving the table with a little appetite)
2. Eating a healthy and balanced diet
3. Not always eating what we like best

Attitudes and Behavior

1. Treasuring the present moment
2. Moderation
3. Courtesy
4. Respecting and validating opinions and customs that are different from our own
5. Teamwork
6. Dialogue
7. Being thankful
8. Sowing peace

Relationships

1. Fidelity to friendships and commitments
2. Expressing what we think and feel with actions more than words

(*) Regarding physical exercises, let's remember the two traditional exercises we have in Cafh: the 10-30-20 and the Hammer.

The 10-30-20 exercise is as follows: Hold your right nostril closed with the index finger of your right hand. Then breathe through your left nostril for 10 seconds while raising your left arm overhead until it's vertical. Then close your left nostril with the index finger of your left hand and hold your breath for 30 seconds. Raise your right arm to the vertical position and then lower it to your side while exhaling through your right nostril for a period of 20 seconds.

It's good to do this exercise several times in a row, depending on the practitioner's ability.

The Hammer exercise consists in making quick, strong contractions of the abdominal muscles, forcing the breath out with each contraction. Beginners are recommended to start with a just few repetitions, working up, in time, to several dozen.

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Attentiveness to daily and formal ceremonials

We don't always pay attention to the habits we have acquired, even though they show our character. We might be aware of some of our harmful habits, but we rarely pay attention to the way we usually behave.

We form our habits in various ways. Some we formed by imitating those who took care of us when we were children. We formed others by copying the behavior of friends or the behavior that was in vogue at the time. We also create habits according to our degree of mastery over our emotions, since they move us to react in a particular way to similar stimuli. We also develop habits without realizing, simply by repeating ways of doing things without giving much thought to them.

It would help us a lot in our unfolding to consider that, just as a ceremonial is a set of acts carried out in a particular ceremony, our set of habits is the ceremonial of our life, more or less refined, more or less beneficial for ourselves, and more or less pleasant for those around us. Every detail is important in a ceremonial. Being familiar with our own particular ceremonial shows us the habits we need to work on so that we, as well as those who accompany us, have a more rewarding and happy life

We can separate our habits into categories. We have ordinary and informal habits, such as those we create with our habitual movements and attitudes. We also have solemn habits, such as those in formal ceremonies.

We may have developed a third category of habits if we behave a certain way when we're with friends and strangers, and another way when we're with the people we live with. This isn't good either for us or for others. This creates a façade to hide how we really are from others, or to show what we're not. We might also mortify those around us with improper behavior, or make them suffer if we don't respect them as much as we respect friends and strangers. That's why it's so important to work on ourselves so that we behave the same no matter who we are with. It is also good to pay attention to our habits when we're alone, since they show the extent of our self-respect.

Regarding ceremonies, one of their purposes is to stress the importance of what is being celebrated, and to engrave that moment in the memory of those who are carrying it out.

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Whether or not we feel an affinity for ceremonies, we all experience them. These go from informal, such a handshake, a hug, gestures and exclamations in celebration of events, to formal ceremonials such as liturgies, stately events, funerals, festive events, commemorative events, etc. Ceremonies accompany us through our lives, in accordance with our beliefs. For example: when we're born, there may be a baptism or circumcision. When we reach pre-adolescence there might be communion or bar/bat mitzvah. We also have ceremonies of graduation, weddings, and funerals. We are always experiencing a more or less formal ceremonial.

Cafh's ceremonial is of a spiritual nature, and it also accompanies us throughout our lives, in daily ways and on special occasions.

It's important to remain aware of the reasons we carry our ceremonies and to know how to carry them out. This is especially because the Ceremonial is one of the spiritual gifts we receive in Cafh.

The Ceremonial includes verses and prayers for times we don't usually think of in connection with ceremonies: words of greeting, prayers upon leaving home, prayers upon taking a trip, vocalized prayers, and even verses for when we speak too much or commit a fault. These interjections can help us perform acts of pausing that teach us to pay attention to acts that already are significant acts of pausing, both from the spiritual perspective as well as the relationship perspective. These pauses remind us of the reasons why we do what we do. For example, when we say, "Let us follow God; let us walk in peace" as we leave the house, we remember how important it is to remain peaceful so we can carry peace wherever we go; and also that we continue on the road we have chosen for our life path, for our own good and the good of those around us.

Why else would we practice exercises of pausing in the ceremonial of our lives? Because the prayers and verses help us to become aware that everything we do marks a path we can't retrace, and that each person and thing deserves respect; that is, consideration, kindness and caring. Respect also implies conservation—of nature and things. We could add these guidelines to our self-evaluations.

We can also do this exercise every time we meet with someone or when we get together with several people. These moments of inner pausing help us to feel respectful and give true meaning to what we do on every occasion. They also help

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us become aware of our habits and tailor them to the circumstances. We can likewise pause a moment when we realize that we are about to do—or have done—something wrong.

The ceremonial of Cafh includes vows. By taking those vows we publicly expressed our willingness to fulfill what we said when we took them.

The vows are instruments we need so that we don't have to depend solely on our good intentions to do what we intend to do. When Gandhi decided to dedicate his life to practice and teach nonviolence, he took a vow that committed him to that mission. At the end of his life he said that, without that vow, he would not have been strong enough to fulfill his mission.

The ceremony of a vow is solemn not only by what happens during it but because it is a key moment in our life. Therefore, it's good to pause a moment every day to inwardly confirm our vows and renew our commitment.

The Rule tells us that the Ceremonial is our invisible and visible emblem. Our ceremonies are visible. What we have in our minds and hearts is invisible, but it becomes visible as our emblem through our behavior.

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Spiritual guidance

Drawing upon spiritual guidance completes the practices we can do to promote our unfolding. We receive orientation from those who have experience on the path we wish to walk. Their mentoring helps us to clarify what we want in life, including how to accomplish it.

The work to unfold spiritually is in keeping with our individual characteristics. Those who give us spiritual guidance keep in mind that “one reaches divine union, or spiritual freedom, by four paths: the path of Real Love; the path of Assistance and Work; the path of Mystical Asceticism; or the path of the Teaching.”¹⁸ They also keep in mind that “what is very good for one person might be counterproductive for another.”¹⁹

In other words, we might have a predisposition to devoutness, reflection, action, or abstraction, and we need the matching guidance. Each person travels their path in their way and according to their possibilities. But no matter what our characteristics may be, it is prudent to try to balance them. For example, if we tend to the theoretical, it’s good to learn to put what we think into practice. If we remain entrapped by what happens to us, it’s good to learn to consider our life in a broader context.

Though spiritual guidance helps fulfill our vocation, it doesn’t direct our life. Therefore, the person who gives spiritual orientation:

- . Doesn’t tell us what to do nor does he or she get involved in our life
- . He or she doesn’t tell us how we “should” be
- . He or she doesn’t rate us with criticism, reproaches or reprimands
- . He or she does not make us feel ashamed for any reason

¹⁸ Course *The Becoming*, 14th Teaching

¹⁹ Course *Spiritual Unfolding*, 2nd Teaching

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What does provide us with spiritual guidance is:

- . Advice, when we ask for it ²⁰
- . Alerts, when we might make decisions that could harm us or others
- . Mentoring in spiritual practices
- . Clear ideas about the teaching, and practical ways to carry out those ideas

At the moments we receive spiritual guidance we are candid with ourselves and see, as if we were looking in a mirror, how we are and what we make of our life. The function of those who mentor us is to help us discern the best things we can do for our own good and the good of others, and to hold to the path we have chosen. They are our companions on the road. They are at our side throughout our life, and they celebrate each step we take toward the fulfillment of our spiritual ideal.

²⁰ See: Words Matter, Chapter Appropriate Advice

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Yes, we do realize

When we get used to practicing exercises like those of meditation, pausing, and managing our behavior, feelings and thoughts, we realize that we are still unaware of who we really are. We also realize that, just as it is important to become aware of who we are, it is also important to realize how much we still have to work to achieve that awareness. After all, that is the first step toward expanding one's consciousness.

That we know who we are in our everyday surroundings is obvious: we have a name, family, a background, and our place in society. But we're not always aware that our idea of ourselves comes from what we've learned about ourselves since birth. We were given a name, told who we were, and what our place was in our little world. Later on, we reinforced this idea of ourselves with our experiences with our caregivers and teachers, with what we did and what happened to us in life. We came to be sure of who we were without becoming aware that our idea of who we are is something we acquired. This makes us so sure of who we are and what we think and believe that we can't help but be in conflict with those who have acquired a different way of thinking of themselves, and what they think and believe. Once we have reinforced the way we think of ourselves, we also do it with the way we see things, the way we view the world. From there on, it's unlikely that we'll change, no matter how much events and the information we receive indicate that we need to take a closer look at what we think and believe.

Even so, we can't avoid asking ourselves now and then, Who am I really?

Perhaps we are only miniscule lights of incipient consciousness in the complex weave of the lines of life. But what we can be sure of is that we are not fully conscious of what we are beyond our identification with our bodies and with what we think and feel. It's worth trying to maintain some distance from what we normally think we are. For, perhaps by means of that distance, however minimal and temporary, our individuality can start to reveal itself. We will realize it when that happens.

III APPENDIX

Love and Renouncement

In the course *Spiritual Unfolding*, we find two teachings that provide the foundations for the process of spiritual unfolding: Renunciation and The Twelve Rays of Love. The latter describes love according to these categories:

Animal love

- . *The first ray of love* is the animal instinct that drives the preservation of the species
- . *The second ray of love* is defensive, and it develops individual self-awareness. Defensive love extends to the edges demarcating the needs of the defender: defense of him or herself, their offspring, their food and what is indispensable to their life
- . *The third ray of love* is love of one's own body
- . *The fourth ray of love* seeks to give the body all the animal pleasures of life

Human love

- . *The fifth ray of love* moves the individual to feel for others what he or she feels for herself
- . *The sixth ray of love* is attraction: love requires love
- . *The seventh ray of love* extends love to several persons; it can even encompass a community
- . *The eighth ray of love* is expressed in compassion

Divine love

- . *The ninth ray of love* is loving for the sake of loving; one gives of oneself for the sake of giving, without expecting anything in return
- . *The tenth ray of love* is so widespread that it covers everything without asking for anything
- . *The eleventh ray of love* is of ecstasy
- . *The twelfth ray of love* brings the soul back, via the path of the heart or the mind, to the prime universal source from which sprang the first expression of life, fed by eternal love

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The teaching on the Twelve Rays of Love tells us that love is the basis for the unfolding of consciousness. The more we expand our love, the more our consciousness expands.

The teaching on renunciation describes the renouncements that love fosters.²¹

We therefore see that the path of love and the path of renunciation are intertwined and differentiate an asceticism and a mysticism. Asceticism is what we do to advance in our unfolding: a method of life, spiritual practices and studies and, specifically, the renouncements that we are moved to make, out of love. Mysticism refers to the successive awakenings that we experience as we expand our consciousness. These attainments depend on the intention that moves us to practice asceticism. If our ascetic work were done to feel better about ourselves or to achieve personal advancement, even spiritual advancement, we probably won't expand our consciousness very much, even if we achieve what we were looking for. It would make us even more wrapped up in ourselves without producing any spiritual advancement. We could even end up exalting ourselves for the asceticism and prayer that is centered in love of ourselves. This is why it's important to become aware of what moves us to renounce.

When we want to attain something in everyday life, it's always necessary to renounce. We renounce our free time when we devote our time to our studies, job, and obligations. We renounce doing what we like when we take on commitments to others. We take on these renouncements as something natural; we don't think too much about them. But when we take a vow of renouncement, it is fundamental to be clear about what moves us to take it, to make sure that we are not seeking self-aggrandizement in our own eyes, or in the eyes of others; or to win prestige, power, or entitlements.

When our practices are based on love, they are linked to mysticism. From this perspective, not only our renouncements but also the other practices we carry out,

²¹ Message of 1952: "...la renunciación es fruto de un encanto incontenible de amor."

Mensaje de 1953: "...tu amor renuncia a la vida y vence a la muerte."

Mensaje de 1955: "...sólo el amor que se da, que no pide para sí, que se sacrifica y entrega al sufrimiento voluntario, puede redimir al mundo y salvar a todas las almas!"

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such as prayer and meditation, are aspects of the mysticism of the Twelve Rays of Love.

Every advancement in the expansion of our love entails a renouncement and vice versa: every renouncement we undertake should result in the expansion of our love.

It's always good to keep the ideal we wish to fulfill in mind. But we would be deceiving ourselves if we were to concentrate on that without paying attention to the step we need to take to advance toward that ideal. We can't attain a greater degree of love if we don't fulfill the previous stages. The same happens with the seven degrees of renunciation. Both processes are a unity, a step-by-step continuum of the expansion of love. This process fosters progressive awakenings in us that express themselves in equally progressive renouncements.

The different degrees of renunciation involve ascetic practices and mystical states since, as we will see below, they are awakenings. Let's see which practices, from those we have described here, can help us fulfill what the teaching says about the following degrees of renunciation:²²

1. Shattering our ordinary personality
2. Sincerely acknowledging our limitations
3. Shattering separativity
4. To work for the sake of working
5. To make no difference between what's pleasant and unpleasant
6. Spiritual liberation
7. The Eternal Hour

It's interesting that this description of the stages of renunciation makes no mention of the words "renouncement" or "renounce."

1. Shattering our ordinary personality

The teaching says:

"One's ordinary personality is a collection of ideas that enclose them within a circle of laws, beliefs, habits, customs and particular tendencies. Shattering that circle, coming out of the mental enclosure of believing that one can't be

²² Course Spiritual Unfolding, 8th teaching

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happy without all those preestablished concepts, is to take the first step toward liberation.”

Our ordinary personality tells us who we are, in society and to society, and how we are, due to our habits, ideas and beliefs. Although we need to learn to use our personality, we also need to stop allowing that personality to limit the way we think of ourselves, or to hinder our understanding of the ordinary personalities of those around us and harmonize our relationship with them. “Shattering” our personality doesn’t mean attacking it. It wouldn’t make any sense to attack our uniqueness. “Shattering” means opening a chink in the shell in which we enclose our mind so that we can feel sure of the way we think and believe. This gap helps us recognize the ideas and habits we have acquired. And it opens up space in our mind and heart to understand all human beings and unite inwardly with them.

It’s important to remember that we are the ones who create the “fracture” that allows us to distinguish the way we are. It would be an aberration to try to produce it in others by attacking the way they are, their beliefs and their points of view.

The exercise of taking mental photographs of ourselves helps us at this stage of renunciation. We can also take retrospective glimpses with the intention of becoming aware of the way we are. We observe what we have done and what has happened to us throughout the day, as if we were looking at someone else. We see our habits, the way we express ourselves, our reactions, judgments, and prejudices—in other words, the way we usually are. Little by little, we expand the context so that we can see ourselves in a group of people surrounding us and even beyond that, until we are looking at ourselves within the human group as a whole, as if we were being filmed by a drone; with every person expressing him or herself according to their personality, in accord with each other or in confrontation with each other. This retrospective glimpse gives a progressive awakening that shatters the limits of what keeps us enclosed within a particular way of seeing things, and acting as if our way was the only valid and correct way. Then we realize that the first renouncement—shattering the ordinary personality—is to become aware of the mental and emotional scaffolding that we use to cope in life and learn to use it effectively for ourselves

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and others. In other words, it is to move from egocentrism toward participation and empathy, the first degree of human love.

2. Sincerely acknowledging our limitations

Acknowledging means revealing something we had kept hidden. In our case, we acknowledge to ourselves how much effort we put into hiding our limitations, weaknesses and shortcomings. Perhaps we do this out of embarrassment or so as not to feel inferior to others. Or so as not to confess to ourselves how far we are from the perfection we yearn to reach. This idea of a perfection which is impossible to attain can embitter our life and the lives of others when we demand them to be the way we want them to be.

Of course, we need to develop our abilities and our ethics, as long as we remain aware that, regardless of how much we attain, we will remain “imperfect” in many other ways. “Selfies” and retrospective glimpses of ourselves make this evident. Acknowledging them to ourselves is also an awakening.

Moreover, acknowledging our limitations doesn't consist in feeling that we are worthless, or to become a nothingness. From the spiritual perspective, being nothing means breaking the limitations created by separativity and realizing the nothingness of each of us human beings within the larger realm of existence. This also helps us to place the personality we have acquired into context, with its judgments, opinions and beliefs. This awakening smoothens out the road so that we recognize that the “nothingness” that we are is inseparable from something greater, and that we can expand our consciousness toward the thing that we're part of. The greater our awareness is, in this sense, the deeper our sense of participation.

Recognizing our limitations is the first step toward understanding that we all have them. We express this understanding by not criticizing or undervaluing ideas, customs, and behaviors that are unlike our own.

Just as we are the ones who make the break in our ordinary personality, it's also we who admit our limitations to ourselves. It would be harmful for us to criticize the shortcomings we see in others, all the time thinking we were helping them.

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3. Shattering separativity

The exercise of looking at ourselves retrospectively helps us to broaden the frame of reference in which we place ourselves. We can no longer look only at ourselves nor can we have “self”-esteem. As soon as we see ourselves within the context of humanity, and especially, within the immensity of reality, we recognize the unity of all that exists. Shattering separativity is also an awakening. We express it in our behavior and the way we act. It’s beautiful to feel like brothers and sisters to each other, but the only way to validate that feeling is by behaving like brothers and sisters. This behavior is our ascetic practice.

4. Working for the sake of working

Working for the sake of working is the way we express love when we work for the good of all human beings.

Just as, objectively, we can’t “be” nothing, neither can we “gain nothing,” since everything we do gives us results, whether in experience, skill, knowledge, or material things. The meaning of “working for the sake of working” aims to make us aware that the value of work doesn’t depend on acknowledgment, payback or what we acquire through our efforts but resides in what we do. A retrospective examination of our life can show us this value—not only the value of what we have created with all our work but also the value of what we have accomplished in ourselves by means of that work and our inner work.

Of course, receiving recognition is a big stimulus to keep doing what we have set out to do; we all need it. But we also need not to depend exclusively on acknowledgment to do our work. That’s why it helps to place emphasis on loving what we do, no matter what it is, and to remember that working for the sake of working is the motto of those who dedicate their lives for the good of all beings. It accords with the love that the teaching calls “divine” and is expressed in “loving for the sake of loving.” Being aware of this helps us to identify the vision we yearn to give our lives.

The real prize for our work is to have done that work—and the satisfaction of knowing we did the best we could. We don’t need greater payment than this, especially when what we have done meets the objective we gave our life: to work for the good of all human beings. Working for the sake of working is one of our ascetic practices.

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We can associate the renouncements implicit in the “sincere confession of our limitations” and in “working for the sake of working” with what the teaching says about renouncement being “to gain nothing, to have nothing, to be nothing.”²³ This is true from the perspective of our inner life, since that teaching explains that “being nothing” “breaks the bonds of separativity and dissipates the mists of illusion.” That is, it’s an awakening; in no way could it mean obliterating ourselves as individuals. In practice, the person who renounces applies his or her freedom to think, choose, set goals and act discerningly toward everything in the best possible way, for his or her own good and the good of all beings in the world. One of the aims of the meditation and the other practices of unfolding is precisely to learn how to think and discern so that one’s own benefit is always secondary to that of others. Placing ourselves second expresses the degree of our love.

“To have nothing” refers to our relationship with what we have. Having nothing means remaining aware of the precariousness of what we believe we have, not only in terms of things but also of training, knowledge and skill, since everything we have is fragile and temporary. Remaining aware of this precariousness frees us so that we can place what we have in context, in all aspects.

5. Not drawing a distinction between what’s enjoyable and what’s not

What kind of love can help us not to make that distinction?

When love leads us to work for the sake of working, we no longer make a difference between what we might find nice or unpleasant.

Both the enjoyable moments and the unpleasant and painful ones help us to broaden our understanding and participation. No matter how much we would like to do so, we can’t avoid times of pain and suffering. By exercising the contrary act in terms of renouncing the pursuit of only what we find enjoyable, we become aware of how life really is. This awareness moves us to love life just as it is. It also moves us to become aware of the teachings that are contained in each expression of life, including the painful ones, since these show us where we need to work to expand our consciousness. Not differentiating between what’s enjoyable and what isn’t is already a high degree of love,

²³ Teaching *Spiritual Synthesis of the Ordination*

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since it's love for life just as it is expressed in us and what we observe. Then we learn to transform what is hurting us into a means for learning, participating, and awakening our consciousness.

The renuncements that come after that, which we call spiritual Liberation and The Eternal Hour, are awakenings that come as a result of the love that is implicit in the renuncements that came before.

What kind of love can lead us to that awakening?

Love for freedom:

“If people were to renounce out of a love for freedom, they would attain in their lives an unspeakable happiness, a serenity in the face of every trial, an indescribable state of natural ecstasy.”²⁴

Implicit in each of the seven degrees of renunciation is an inner renunciation that opens the way so that “renouncement” may come to be our state of consciousness.

Of course, renouncing goes beyond whatever we may be able to do to release ourselves from our illusions, since renouncement is a constant in life. To be able to choose, we need to discard options. Nothing is permanent; every instant ends with the previous one; that is the condition of becoming.

To choose discerningly how to respond to the changes that life brings us opens the way to our unfolding. If instead of resigning ourselves to the inevitable we realize that living is renouncing, moment to moment, we cause each instant to be full of inner plenitude. When we have to discard something, we also gain something; when we lose the instant that's giving us pleasure, we gain another to live in a worthwhile way, however that new moment may be.

Besides those inner renuncements, there are the outer renuncements we carry out to help others or to do good works: we renounce time, pleasures and things to dedicate ourselves to actions that benefit others and the world. Although these renuncements give a noble meaning to our life and predispose us to broaden our consciousness, we still need inner renuncements that are fostered by love, so that that expansion really takes place in us.

²⁴ Curso Desenvolvimento Espiritual, 8ª enseñanza

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When love is what moves us to renounce, we stop associating renouncements with deprivations and sacrifices. On the contrary, we feel the beautiful inner plenitude of doing what we love to do.



Exercises of prayer, meditation and concentration help us to understand and fulfill renouncement as presence, participation and reversibility when we do those exercises out of love. For example:

- . When we pray for someone, we are present with her, as if she were by our side. When we pray for the wellbeing of many, we are present with them. When we pray for the good of the world, we are present in the society we live in
- . When we meditate on the Black Veiled Lady, we are present with what obstructs human unfolding just as much as our own unfolding, in the spirit of overcoming it
- . When we meditate on the Abyss, we are present with those who suffer and unite with them
- . Meditating on The Two Roads keeps us present in the Present, which makes aware that at every instant we are choosing the course our life will take
- . In the theme of The Standard, we are present with those who dedicate their lives to bring about a better world. When we seek consolation, we are present with those who need it
- . In the themes that follow, we are present in life's becoming. Those moments of presence are also moments of participation and they encourage us to develop empathy and responsibility

There is a presence that we don't always perceive: the presence of countless beings who made possible what we enjoy right now. Behind everything we use, every idea we study, every piece of knowledge we acquire, every achievement we admire, every advancement we benefit from, are present the countless beings who made all that possible. As we have seen in a previous chapter, our best response to this invisible presence is deep gratitude. This leads us to another kind of meditation that needs no technique or time. It's enough that when we see, use, or benefit from something we inwardly thank those to whom we're indebted for it. This reminder is enough for us to participate with so many beings who have forged the

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world we live in. Let's remember that gratitude is a basic rung on the ladder of real love.

Exercises of concentration helps not to escape from the present moment. Not infrequently, when someone talks to us, we soon start thinking about what we want to tell them, and about what we associate with what they're telling us; in short, we are no longer present with that person; we have other things in our minds. The same thing tends to happen to us with what's happening in our immediate environment; we are so immersed in our mental discourse that we only pay some attention when something unexpected happens or when someone speaks to us.

Of course, we can use the time to think about what we want or need to think about, but let's be careful that that freedom doesn't isolate us so much from the present that it turns into a lack of interest in anything that happens unless it affects us directly. In other words, it's good to get used to keeping our attention open so that we're not so wrapped up in ourselves that we miss out on the successive opportunities to be present which are, when all is said and done, our life.

When love is what moves us to renounce, every renouncement is a state of participation.

- . Causing a fissure in our ordinary personality opens up the possibility of participating with everyone. Awareness of our limitations is the first step on this path, since it allows us to understand and participate with the people we tended to judge or criticize
- . Shattering separativity makes aware that we are united with everyone and everything, which expands our participation
- . Working for the sake of working teaches us not to live in expectation of results; this teaches us to participate with the present. Each instant reveals its richness and its teaching. The renouncements that come after that are states of deep participation, not only with other people and the world we live in but also with vastness of the universe that contains us

Concentration exercises can also teach us to understand and develop what we call reversibility. For example, noticing things from a viewpoint that's opposite to our own.

By concentrating on a point or an object, we try to become independent of what is happening in our minds, as if the thoughts and memories are husks that fall away

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from us, leaving us alone with the mystery of who we are. This helps us to free ourselves of ideas and prejudices that have become so ingrained in our minds that they hinder us from understanding ideas that are different from our own, and in due time change our vision of things.

As we are used to thinking and feeling the same at all times, we may not realize that a new situation requires us to change our viewpoint in a timely way, and act accordingly. We may even need to change to a conception that is the opposite to the one we had until now.

Only when we become aware of the limitations of the way we think will we have enough inner freedom to respond adequately to the challenges implicit in the continuous changes of becoming. Moreover, this freedom allows us to have critical thinking, about our own ideas as well as the ideas of others. But let's always remember that, no matter how broad our knowledge is, and no matter how on target our judgments might be, there is always something we don't know and that could overturn or reverse our view of things.