Words Matter

How to increase our self-knowledge and improve our relationships

Contents

Introduction

At first glance, the series of exercises described in these Teachings might seem like a utopian proposal. Faced as we are with widespread violence and international tensions that threaten the uneasy peace we have, it might seem like a digression from the seriousness of our problems to insist that words matter. It might not seem worthwhile to consider the value of the words we use.

However, we believe that the focus of working on how we use language is realistic; its aim is to reconsider the value we give to what we say and to understand the effect we produce with how we talk.

We don't always remember that language is the basis of interpersonal communication. How we use it determines not only the nature of our relationships but also the quality of what we feel and what we generate in others and the environment we share.

For this reason the way we use our words is very important to our development as individuals and as a society. It is with words that we create or destroy relationships, it is with words that we learn and teach, it is with words that we create to a large extent the world in which we live and the way we live in it.

If we consider the process leading to interpersonal problems, misunderstandings between couples, and even conflicts between social groups and communities, we find that it all begins with words: what we say, how we say it, why we say it and how others interpret what we say; what we declare, what we proclaim, and what we don't say about what we think and do.

If we say unwise or ill-timed words, we can't erase them nor can we avoid their consequences; likewise a silence loaded with passion is not easily forgotten, and its effect can sometimes last a lifetime.

Those of us who yearn to unfold our possibilities look for ways to expand our ideas and contribute to human advancement, but we don't always pay attention to how the language we use and the way we express ourselves affects our relationship with others. That is why it's really worthwhile to pay attention to our words.

We discover that language gives us a valuable tool for mastering our emotions and especially our moods. We gradually understand that we can use our words to master what we feel and then what we do.

The way we express ourselves can also show us aspects about ourselves we are not always willing to explore. For example, when we're talking to someone about how we think or feel, or even if we're chatting idly with them, we might often find ourselves speaking as if we needed to protect ourselves from an attack that threatens our feelings of self-worth and identity. In other words, we discover our automatic verbal defenses. As these can strongly influence our moods and relationships, we will dedicate space in these Teachings to this topic. Perhaps when we're reading this we'll recognize some of our verbal defenses. We might even get discouraged if we think of them as defects we shouldn't have. They aren't. Our defenses are natural responses that allow us to maintain a certain inner balance and we will doubtless continue to have them even if we faithfully practice the exercises suggested in this course. But when we exaggerate those defenses, or use them incorrectly or inappropriately, instead of helping they affect our moods, cloud our discernment and damage our relationships.

We will be describing exercises of stopping as a way of working on those defenses.

We call them *exercises of self-knowledge* because, when we deliberately stop our automatic impulses, we allow forces and motivations to surface that we previously ignored or rejected. If we learn to let them surface, we can see not only what's in them, but also what's behind them and behind our acquired notion of who we are.

We also call them *exercises for living in harmony*, because they teach us to consider and appreciate those who are kind enough to listen to us. Our close relationships will greatly benefit from our practice of these exercises.

These exercises will also help us stop the impulse that compels us to talk without thinking or considering how our words will affect others.

Of course, the exercises proposed here do not replace conversations, but they certainly can be helpful.

Conversation is an art that we very seldom practice or try to learn. Instead we transmit information by talking about things that happen to us or others, expressing our memories or plans, or sharing our problems and sufferings. We may talk to reinforce our opinions with those who already think like us, or argue these opinions relentlessly with those who do not share them. Sometimes we learn something from the words we exchange but at other times we learn very little.

The exercise of reflecting on what we say helps us converse in an interesting, entertaining, and even instructive way. This is how we discover that conversation creates the fabric of our relationships. How we consider and choose our words, along with the intention and attitude behind them, determines the quality of that fabric.

Exercises of introspection, as well as those of reflection and meditation, allow us to step back from our actions in order to know ourselves and decide how to direct our efforts so that our lives will follow the desired direction. Our words, on the other hand, place us at the moment of action, at the instant when we actually decide where we want to go. The way we use words can calm a mood or exacerbate it. They can help us attain an insight or lose it. We could say we manage a great deal of our unfolding with the words we use, and our future along with it.

One of the purposes of these Teachings is to emphasize the importance of our words and offer tools for working on them.

Verbal Defenses

First Teaching

We defend ourselves in many ways, not only against things which threaten our life, health or well-being, but also against whatever we perceive as an attack on our self-concept, i.e., who or what we believe we are, think and do. Here we will limit ourselves to considering only some of the verbal defenses that we tend to use to protect ourselves in situations that make us feel tense or threaten our self-image.

We believe it is important, especially from the point of view of our unfolding, to become aware of our verbal defenses. While on one hand, these defenses help us face the circumstances of life; on the other they impede our advancement and the possibility of knowing ourselves better.

We are so identified with our verbal defenses that, even if we're aware of them, we don't recognize how they blind us to how we really are, why we are that way, and what we generate in others and the environment when we use them. Since we think the way we talk is because of the way we are, we feel we're free to say whatever comes out of our mouths. We think we're being spontaneous, without realizing that we're obeying impulses which drive not only the words themselves, but which also establish the quality of our entire system of relationships. It's logical, then, to work on language as a way of working on our unfolding and our relationships with those with whom we live.

When a situation reveals our problems or touches a sore spot, we react in many ways, from physical aggression to the silent treatment, from mockery to formulating a theory of reality. In any case, the way we defend ourselves always highlights something we don't accept in others or in ourselves, or situations we can't solve or prefer to ignore.

Moreover, despite our precarious certainties, we feel the need to be absolutely certain of what we think and believe, not only about life and the world but especially what we think of ourselves. Anything that threatens or casts doubt on these certainties automatically activates defenses that generate emotions and reactions which we usually express in words.

Many of our conversations serve more to relieve our tensions and reinforce our self-image than to establish successful communication with others.

Talking as a de-stressor is a way of defending ourselves from ourselves and others. If something bothers us too much we use language to channel the strength of a reaction that we're unable to master. Since we find it hard to acknowledge our weaknesses, we're in the habit of pointing out—with words—all the reasons we lack control.

In our interpersonal relationships, many of our conversations are also more like escape valves than real means of participation. For example, when we are going through a difficult situation, we look for someone to talk it over with. When we unburden ourselves, we feel better afterwards, without noticing or caring whether that person has time to listen to us, or whether they're sufficiently prepared or strong enough to handle what we've told them. Nor do we consider how much we will upset their day—or their life—with what we tell them.

Our verbal defenses are also self-justifications. Expressing our anger when others criticize us is a way of affirming ourselves in what we think and do. When we criticize others we feel superior to them, justifying the way we are and strengthening our belief that we're right.

In the context of how we use our words, we can identify two types of automatic defenses.

The first we call *Limiting Defenses* because they cloud our perception and understanding, for example, when we justify ourselves, refuse to listen, or complain.

The second kind we call *Aggressive Defenses* because we use them as weapons to attack. Examples of these would be sharp words or condemning judgments.

What should we do about our verbal defenses so that they don't become obstacles to our unfolding or damage our relationships? A simple way to work on them is to make them evident. Seeing them as they are makes it obvious how futile they are and the low level of consciousness that they imply. The exercises of stopping described below have this aim in mind.

Exercises of stopping can also be very valuable for learning about ourselves. If we practice them not only when we notice our verbal defenses but also at other times, we can become much more aware of ourselves and our situation.

When we stop what we're thinking, feeling or doing, what happens in us is like what happens when a loaded vehicle stops suddenly. Whatever is loose is thrown forward, while whatever is fastened down tightens the straps that hold it in place.

In the same way, when we stop ourselves interiorly, whatever is "loose" in us is projected onto the screen of our mind: habitual thoughts and feelings, associations, memories, grudges. Whatever is "fastened down"—pre-conceived ideas or prejudices—may become even stronger. With practice, and perhaps spontaneously, we begin to understand why we think and act as we do.

The habit of observing impartially what's inside us helps us to understand why it's there. This prompts us to expand our view of things, to deepen our notion of being and to harmonize our relationships.

To be able to practice the exercises described in this course, it's good to make a plan, including what exercises to practice, as well as how often and for how long. The characteristics of each exercise will suggest when to use them.

It's also good to complement these exercises with exercises of reflection.

An exercise of reflection consists in taking distance from our reactions. Since our reactions are spontaneous and habitual, we tend to identify them with our way of being rather than seeing them as aspects of behavior that we can analyze by thinking about them.

For example, at a moment of peace and quiet, we can reflect on the various ways we reacted to events that day. We don't label these reactions; we simply observe them and try to identify what sometimes motivates us to react in ways that hurt the people we care about—reactions that also hurt us, even though we might not realize the harm we're doing to ourselves.

Another exercise consists in reflecting about what we experienced when we practiced the suggested exercises. As in the previous exercise, we

find a quiet and peaceful moment to go over what happened during our exercises. We observe our inner reactions and the way in which those around us react when we do the exercise. For example, we reflect on what happens inside us when we don't say something that we feel the impulse to say. We also observe what happens in others when we give them space by not talking too much. And we draw conclusions.

There are exercises in the following Teachings that can reveal our verbal defenses to us. In the last Teaching there are some guidelines to help us organize our thoughts, assimilate concepts, make our conversations more enjoyable and, especially, develop empathy and participation with others.

All the exercises go together. Each of them is an aspect of a single exercise that can be summarized as an attitude of inner freedom and respect for those around us.

Listening

Second Teaching

"You just don't listen!" How many times have we said these words and how often have others said them to us? The truth is that very often we don't feel listened to when we talk. Another person tries to follow what we say, but it is clear that our words have no effect on him. He continues to have the same judgments, views and explanations as if what we said were of no value and not worth paying attention to in the least.

The habit of not listening is a way of defending ourselves from what upsets or hurts us. For example, if someone tells us something true that we don't want to openly admit, one way of defending ourselves is to keep on talking as if we hadn't heard them.

Another way of not listening is to give explanations when others tell us what we don't want to hear. If someone tells us that we have behaved tactlessly, for example, we respond by saying we didn't mean it, that we did what we thought was best, and so forth. Obviously we not only failed to listen to him, we didn't perceive how he felt about our behavior either. By failing to do so, we keep alive a disagreement or dispute that will progressively damage our relationship with him.

In some situations, we don't listen because what others are talking about seems boring or uninteresting. We make associations, think about other things, or decide what we'll do when that person stops talking. We don't realize that it's important to the speaker, even if it's something we already know. For example, someone might say something about a movie we watched together, maybe because she thinks there are parts we didn't notice. Rather than allowing ourselves to blank out, we could say something about an aspect of the movie that would steer the conversation in a more interesting direction.

When someone tells us something that doesn't interest us at the time, it is good to realize that she is using words to reach out to us. She is telling us something that *is* interesting to her because she wants us to understand and support her. If we don't reach out to her in turn by being interested in and attentive to what she's saying, we're destroying a bridge which could have strengthened our relationship. Avoiding this

conversation could imply indifference and a lack of empathy toward someone who doesn't share our tastes.

Mentally escaping a conversation is not the only way we avoid listening to what someone says. Not talking and sometimes not looking at someone who's speaking is an aggressive way of withdrawing from a conversation or separating from the group.

Someone might not even tell us they think we're not listening to them because when they previously told us that—either directly or indirectly—we acted as if we didn't hear them. If we pay attention, we will surely notice that something is hindering our relationship.

In such cases it's a good idea to simply ask what happened and, when we hear the answer, not to use justifications to explain away the disagreement we've created.

In short, we hear but don't always listen.

Similarly, we see things but don't always speak as if we had.

To keep silent about something reprehensible, as if indifferent to it, is like expressing implicit agreement, which is how others perceive and interpret that silence.

But it's not always the right moment to say what we think or feel about something that's happening. It's good to be attentive and choose our comments prudently.

Depending on the situation, to criticize or openly condemn something we find reprehensible might not be the best way to express our opinion. This is especially so if no one has requested or expects our opinion—either because it's not the right time or place for it, or because we are not called upon to judge such a situation at that particular moment.

If we want to know when to speak and the best thing to say, it's good to learn how to listen.

Listening is not limited to paying attention solely to what others say, but also to what is being "said" by the situation, moment, environment and attitude of those present.

Listening means letting what we see and hear penetrate, and understand that our best response is the one that shows we've been listening.

If we don't do this, we might give an ill-timed critique that aggravates an already difficult situation. Not listening well could lead us to make baseless critiques that neither shed light on others' opinions nor hide our own lack of criteria. It could also make us stick to a line of reasoning that shows we're rejecting what others are saying.

Listening also means noticing whether those we are with will be receptive to what we might say. Sometimes we launch into a lengthy story that interests us but not others, or at least not at that moment.

Listening means paying attention when someone introduces a subject that others seem to find interesting. If a particular subject awakens mental associations in us which cause us to interrupt the speaker and talk about some trivial thing that happened to us, awakening further associations, we make it impossible for the others to return to the original subject that they were all interested in.

Listening also means listening to ourselves while we're talking, noticing whether we're making rigid judgments or if we are condemning others with our opinions. It means noticing if we have gone off on a tangent to the point that even we have trouble remembering what we were talking about, much less others. If this ever happened, it would be clear that we were also oblivious to the eloquent silence of those we've forced to listen to our ramblings.

Listening to ourselves is particularly difficult when we have the habit of talking all the time, whether invited to speak or not. We don't give ourselves time either to think about what we are going to say or reflect on what we've already said, and it's unlikely that our conversation will be interesting or instructive to anyone.

Within a broader context, listening means—at the very least—trying to understand the message conveyed by our experiences and the circumstances of our sphere of action, as well as the events that humanity experiences on a daily basis. If we receive news without responding to it, maybe we are blocking out every piece of information that could disturb us, or are being indifferent and oblivious to events if they don't directly concern us. In these cases, responding to news goes beyond words; it means acting in a way that shows our solidarity and participation, according to circumstances. Even when we can't help or collaborate directly, either because we aren't trained to do so or because it's not

within our sphere of influence, we try to remain aware of all of life's ups and downs until we have the spontaneous feeling that whatever happens anywhere in the world is also happening to us.

We could very well refer to the attitude of not listening as *close-mind-edness*, because we deliberately obscure our understanding by refusing to recognize the meaning of the words that are spoken to us.

The exercise of listening consists in:

- Curbing the reactions that make us either reject what we hear or interrupt the speaker
- Reflecting on what we have been told
- Validating what we hear
- Responding and acting in a way that reflects this validation.

We hear and speak spontaneously. But listening does not happen spontaneously; it is an art that is good to learn. This exercise and the following descriptions are some means that help us master that art.

Productive Complaints

Third Teaching

When we complain, we are giving voice to what bothers or distresses us, or expressing resentment toward or dissatisfaction with someone or something. Depending on the nature of the complaint and the results we get when we express them, complaints can be divided into:

- Grievances
- Justifiable complaints
- Unproductive complaints

An example of a grievance is the right to complain when someone fails to provide a service for which we have hired them. When our grievance is acknowledged and we receive the service, we call that complaint productive.

Several situations exist in which our complaints are justified. Some of these include:

- When we express our grief at the death of a loved one or the breakup of an important relationship
- When we complain of pain to the doctor in the attempt to find a cure. This complaint is productive because it provides the professional with the necessary facts to be able to recommend a treatment.
- When we voice our distress because someone arbitrarily hurt us. Although complaining in this case might not be productive, at least we intend it to be, since we're complaining to someone so that they'll stop hurting us.

But our complaints are not always productive. If our grief increased to the pathological stage, it would become a treatable disorder rather than a productive complaint. If we are constantly preoccupied with our actual or potential ailments, our complaints to the doctor won't always be very productive. If we overreact and get angry when someone inadvertently hurts us, our irritated complaint is unnecessary; the person who unintentionally hurt us feels remorseful without needing us to reproach them.

We don't just complain about things that hurt us. When something doesn't go our way or turn out the way we would have liked or hoped it to, we get upset and express it with complaints without analyzing what we gain or produce with our protests. In these cases, it would have been more sensible to figure out how to fix what bothers us, and then fix it.

We even complain when we already know beforehand that it won't be productive.

When we keep complaining, even if we know it's useless, we might well call our complaints *self-pitying laments*. These complaints are not only useless, they're annoying and harmful.

They're annoying because people will hardly want to be close to us if all we have to say is a litany of laments. They're harmful because they create stress in the environment and make the situation even more uncomfortable than we have already made it. The habit of complaining also puts us in a bad mood, which makes us—and everyone we live with—miserable.

Unproductive complaining causes us a lot of stress. Perhaps we like to think that when we complain we are doing something to change a bothersome situation, knowing very well that these laments don't change anything.

For example, we complain because someone doesn't show up as planned, or because someone we don't want to see shows up. Or we complain about someone who isn't present, or perhaps is no longer alive, and we express our complaint to anyone willing to listen and who won't or can't do anything to make us feel better. We can even complain about the weather, how time passes and the situations in life that nobody has been able to avoid, at least up to now. In short, we complain about situations that complaining won't change.

Although unproductive complaints allow us to release some of the tension that's upsetting us, the fact remains that these kinds of complaints only cover up reality. We don't want to accept the obvious in life, in our relationships and in our place in the world. Until we accept reality, we live blindly, bumbling, fearful of what could happen.

The self-pity implicit in most of our complaints undermines our ability to react positively to the setbacks that are part of life and to the difficulties we encounter when striving to reach our goals.

Imagine an athlete running a marathon complaining about how much it hurts to run. It's unlikely that this attitude will help him or her reach the finish line. By complaining unproductively, we likewise generate feelings and attitudes that hinder the possibility of fulfilling our desires, of enjoying life and our achievements.

To stop complaining teaches us to look at facts as they are rather than rejecting what we don't like about them. This allows us to discern what we can do about the causes of our suffering and design a plan of action for a solution.

The exercise related to complaining goes as follows:

- Stop the impulse to complain when we experience a setback
- Discern what we can do to resolve the source of the complaint or alleviate it
- Do something, if we can
- Don't complain about whatever upset us, once we've done what we could
- Don't complain out loud, if there's nothing we can do
- Don't complain mentally when we remember what happened
- Leave the incident behind; don't return to it mentally

However, if the habit of complaining is very ingrained in us, we might continue to complain even when we understand the futility of some of our complaints and practice this exercise. If this happens, let's try to realize that, though complaining might make us feel better, it's like trying to retaliate against whatever hurt us. While we complain we're paying attention only to what hurts, without seeing everything that could make us happy, if only we realized it.

When we start complaining about something, it's worthwhile to try to broaden the context and perceive all the good things we have and everything good that happens to us, as well as all the painful things that could happen to us and don't. At the very least, let's think of something

else besides the source of our complaints, so that we stop torturing ourselves and those who are listening to us.

If we are able to avoid dramatizing a situation and can reflect calmly about it, we'll be more likely to find ways to overcome or at least alleviate it, no matter how hopeless it seems. We will then be able to relate more clearly with what occurs, understand better what happens around us, and what happens to us as life moves forward.

Necessary Explanations

Fourth Teaching

Explanations are one of the most common ways in which we defend what we think, feel or do. Although they're not always necessary, we feel we have to explain when a comment or a situation highlights one of our mistakes or flaws, or that we have to ask for explanations when we think we perceive failings in others.

Obviously we have to give explanations when others have the right to request them or when we have the obligation to give them. For example, in job situations, or when we have made changes in our work that affect the work of others. However, when we give explanations even when not obliged to do so it's good to reflect on why we give them, and also why we ask for them, if we ever do.

When someone does something different from what we expected, we tend to react with annoyance. Instead of clearly expressing our displeasure we ask for an explanation that we don't really want to hear. For example, we say: "Why did you do that?" When he gives his reasons, we reject them and start arguing. It would have been better to tell him briefly exactly how we felt about what he did.

The same thing happens when, instead of telling someone what we felt or thought of their behavior when they did something we didn't like, we ask for explanations. This person often gets more irritated than if we had pointed out a mistake or an oversight, and starts giving explanations in order to avoid taking responsibility for his behavior. On one hand we sound reproachful. On the other, we feel not listened to because the other responds with excuses. It's sad when we systematically react this way in our relationships. It results in a lot of tension and misunderstandings.

When someone points out something about the way we do our assignments, we might even give explanations to hide our shortcomings and avoid judgments we don't like to hear.

These kinds of explanations are justifications, one of the most common forms of self-defense. Such justifications impede self-awareness because we use them to cover up our flaws and weaknesses. They also

undermine our ability to work on aspects of ourselves that we can or should improve. But what's most important is that, if the person is right that our decision or behavior was mistaken, our justifications are a way of refusing to accept that truth.

In other words, we refuse to think about and examine our behavior or decisions. This is one of those cases in which we cause those who are talking to us to exclaim: "You don't listen!"

When we leave room for justifications or when we require unnecessary explanations from others, we're also encouraging them to defend themselves and weakening the chances that they will come to understand their behavior.

For this reason, the exercise of not giving explanations also implies not asking for unnecessary explanations.

Explanations are also a way to relive the satisfaction of our good decisions while forgetting about our mistakes.

When we do something well, we usually want to share and explain what we've done. Every time we do this, we relive the enjoyment of our original success.

We also often feel the need to explain why we haven't fulfilled some obligation when the failure to act was simply due to apathy or a lack of good habits. Every time we explain it away, we convince ourselves that outside forces prevented us from doing what we should.

Such comments impair conversation and damage our relationships. There is not much chance that our listeners will like our attempts to get them to admire or feel sorry for us.

The exercise regarding necessary explanations consists in:

- Not commenting on our actions, either to praise or validate them
- Not justifying ourselves when someone criticizes something we've done
- Nipping feelings in the bud as soon as we find ourselves getting inwardly upset
- Expressing clearly that we recognize our blunders or mistakes

The first consequence of this exercise is that we remember facts as they are which helps us to avoid repeating mistakes.

The second consequence is that we free up a great deal of mental space, since we no long fill our minds with a continuous line of argument to justify ourselves or condemn the behavior of others.

We also gain concrete time because we don't waste it in giving long explanations that don't change anything that's happened.

The third consequence of this exercise is that we get used to seeing and understanding things as they are and not as we wish they had been.

It would be ideal to stop feeling the need to give unnecessary explanations. We can begin by accepting our limitations and those of others and get used to not wasting our time or that of others by giving unnecessary explanations.

Another objective of this exercise is to make ourselves vulnerable so that we can learn.

Being vulnerable means recognizing how little we know, not only about the great unknowns of reality but also about how we appear to others, especially those with whom we live. When we are able to be vulnerable, instead of getting angry or offended when someone says something that doesn't match how we think of ourselves, we open ourselves to learn what impression our attitudes and actions make on others. That impression defines how others see us in the environment in which we live.

A book is understood not by the written word but by what the reader understands as she reads it. Perhaps what she understood does not exactly match what the author wanted to say, but this understanding is the basis on which the reader judges the book. Similarly, it's not what we think of ourselves that should matter to us but the way others perceive and interpret our words and actions. Those around us are the mirror we need if we want to learn about ourselves.

Leaving Center Stage

Fifth Teaching

In the context of what we are considering here, leaving center stage means ceasing to feel that we're at the center of it all. As a way to leave this imaginary center stage, it is good to try a simple exercise that will give us a broader view of ourselves and events: namely, not to always talk about ourselves.

When we first hear about this exercise, we might ask, "Then what will I talk about if not myself?" We are very used to focusing all discussions on what we do or did, on what's happening or happened to us, on what we want, on what makes us happy, and what bothers us. We even get together with others for the sole purpose of talking about our respective lives, feeling that this kind of sharing does us good.

To be sure, this kind of conversation is not only valid but is also advisable when we are under a lot of stress or feeling somewhat unclear about how to act or behave in certain situations. But we have to admit that limiting the subject of a conversation to ourselves doesn't do us or our listeners much good, especially if we do it on a regular basis. Neither does it do any good if we always boast, or always go back over the same problems, complaints, and criticisms. And if we entertain ourselves with bad news without doing anything to solve the problem, we do nothing but sow seeds of sadness and discord.

Besides, persistently talking about ourselves and our concerns reveals how important we think we are and the limited scope of our interests, concerns, and even aspirations.

The truth is that we're the center of most of our conversations. Even when we complain about others, criticize them, or don't listen, we are expressing an aspect of ourselves that we think is very important to show.

In order to stop feeling that we are at the center of all that happens it is good to practice an exercise that helps us break the habit, if we have it, of continually bringing attention back to ourselves by referring to what we feel, think, do or experience.

This exercise can later extend to an even more deeply-ingrained habit, that of making myself the point of departure of every consideration, evaluation, interest and decision, without considering anything but how it will satisfy or benefit me or, occasionally, those I care about. In other words, turning myself into the center of life and the world, even though I know it's obvious that I'm not.

When this aspect of the exercise becomes a habit, it changes the way we are and how we express ourselves. And, it becomes very easy for us to expand our ideas and feelings, something very important for our unfolding. How we think about others and events becomes an ever-widening circle of inclusion.

This change also motivates us to expand our field of interests, so that we gradually stop being exclusively concerned with our own particular interests and more general and universal areas of concern start to matter, until our problems cease to be so important to us while those of others and of society become more so.

This does not imply that we ignore our problems and stop working on them but that they cease to be the center from which we evaluate everything.

The exercise of not talking about ourselves can be practiced as follows:

- When we are with someone else or in a gathering, we set aside a pre-determined amount of time, based on the entire length of the gathering, in which we choose not to talk about ourselves—what's going on in our lives, or our feelings, actions or wishes
- We dedicate more time to listening than to speaking
- We pay attention to what others are saying and talk about subjects that are interesting to them
- We stop the habit, if we have it, of always focusing on what's happening in our lives
- We stop the habit, if we have it, of stubbornly and capriciously defending our points of view

To expand our field of interest:

- Before we suggest or do something, we reflect on ways this suggestion or action could affect others
- We pay attention to what happens outside ourselves and get involved—either directly, if it is something that concerns us personally—or by participating inwardly with the suffering that so many people endure and that we do not always keep in mind

Naturally we need to avoid falling into the habit of continuing to talk about ourselves by changing only the way we do it.

Sometimes people think they don't talk about themselves because they have undertaken a plan of action that involves other people or a sector of society or aims to solve social or global problems.

While it's certainly good to worry about and work towards solving bigger problems, the mere fact of joining a group or carrying a banner that proclaims a beneficial work doesn't imply that one has stopped feeling one is the center of the world.

At other times a person thinks he isn't talking about himself when he's talking about others—not so that he can learn from their qualities, experiences and achievements, but so that he can then make judgments about them, their behavior, and their decisions. We don't realize that when we do this we are very firmly placing ourselves in the center from which we judge life and the world. Nor do we realize that, by criticizing others behind their backs, we're revealing aspects about ourselves that we wish we didn't have, or at least weren't so obvious.

Not talking about ourselves spontaneously keeps us from thinking continually about ourselves and seeing everything from a narrow, limited and personal viewpoint. As a result, our inner movements, goals, desires, relationships, and evaluations lose much of the passion with which we had imbued them. By passion we mean the energy we put into what we feel, say, do and think, and that generates in us the desire to possess or achieve something in particular, something exclusively ours, whether it be possessions, privileges, fame or success.

When we leave center stage, our decisions, judgments, desires and actions stop being colored by the underlying intention of defending ourselves, justifying ourselves, or accomplishing something that supports the vision we have of the world and life.

The other exercises in this course are a preparation for this exercise, since each focuses on one of the many ways in which we talk about ourselves.

This exercise, like the previous ones, stimulates the expansion of our consciousness. While perhaps at first we don't perceive that expansion, it is real by the way it is expressed: Our interest, love and the limits that we place on our lives all start to expand. Our possibilities also expand. We fulfill not only what we want for ourselves but what others need us to do for their good and that of society.

Moreover, practicing this exercise helps us discern why we are talking about ourselves when we choose to do so. For example, when we tell others something about our life, we need to see clearly whether we are doing so because our experiences can help those who are listening to us, or if we are talking just to awaken their sympathy, or admiration, or because we feel so important that we need them to pay attention to and be very aware of us.

When we reach this level of discernment, the exercise is no longer necessary because we remain aware of why we're talking, and we direct our words so that they're beneficial to our listeners.

Taking Distance from the Past

Sixth Teaching

The past that we remember is a collection of experiences that we have to keep very much in mind if we want to avoid repeating mistakes and improve the direction of our life.

The past tends to be a source of suffering, remorse, complexes and inner obstacles. The past finds its way into our present and sometimes covers it so much that we aren't able to clearly see and evaluate what is happening to us. Past experiences can even bring about disorders that require professional treatment.

But whatever our past may be, we tend to talk about it, and with the passage of time we find ourselves looking back more than we look forward. As we do, we refer mainly to events, successes, failures, joys, sorrows and surprises. That is, we narrate facts. We stop at the circumstantial, the sequence of impressions that were left in our memory. When those impressions are strong, they are deeply engraved not only as facts but also as emotions and judgments. But this doesn't mean we have understood the experiences and messages that are always contained in the events we remember.

The aim of the suggested exercise about the past is to put distance between ourselves and our history. To achieve that distance, we practice the exercise of not getting carried away by the tendency to refer to our past.

The habit of not talking about our past accustoms us to stop regarding ourselves as the reference point for all things, while at the same time highlighting in our minds what is essential in that past.

Not talking about the past also helps us play down the subjective importance we give to past events and the occasional consequences they produced in us in terms of emotions, reactions, decisions, and judgments. It especially helps us not to revive and intensify possible resentments that need to be overcome. When we stop paying so much attention to the anecdotal aspects of the events of our lives, the teachings contained in those events begin to stand out.

Why have we included this exercise here, under the general theme of limiting our defenses?

We often take refuge in the past to hide from the present. We also do it to justify our present circumstances.

For example, if we are going through a difficult time, and what we're doing isn't turning out well, we tend to console ourselves by remembering—and talking about—our past successes. Or we justify ourselves to others by recounting past events that made our present troubles—or our reactions—inevitable.

In short, when we take refuge in the past we isolate ourselves from the present. As long as we talk about what already happened, we not only miss what is happening now, but so do our listeners because we're limiting their present to our story about a past that's not theirs.

Since the present continuously becomes the past, the habit of not always talking about the past goes together with the habit of not always talking about what is happening to us. Both produce a similar effect: We are able to be impartial observers, insofar as possible, of past and present experiences. We then stop giving such importance to the anecdotal and we can begin to discover the message and teaching that life is continually giving us.

The exercise of putting distance between ourselves and the past is an extension of the exercise of leaving center stage. It consists of:

- Getting out of the habit of speaking about our past, except when it is necessary, advisable or appropriate, as when we wish to share something we learned, for example, or we want to enliven a conversation
- Dropping the habit, if we have it, of always talking about what is going on in our lives

The exercise of placing distance between ourselves and the past helps us control our mental escapes. It also helps us perceive what's happening here and now, within a larger context than that of our own person. It especially helps us to be really present with those we're talking to, so that we can listen to and understand what they're really saying.

Peacefully Silencing Ourselves

Seventh Teaching

A fairly common characteristic that often impairs relationships is how easily we tend to feel affronted or offended for trivial reasons; in other words, being overly touchy.

We all tend to feel defensive and react when we're provoked or attacked. However, we're not all equally touchy. Some of us overreact and remain on the defensive, even though this attitude prevents us from seeing aspects of ourselves that we can or need to work on.

It is well known that those who wish to improve their performance routinely hire experts to show them how to correct or change what they do, but we so easily forget that knowledge. When someone points out a mistake or something awkward in our behavior, we tend to respond by justifying ourselves. Perhaps we get irritated and criticize them, even if their comment was meant to be helpful. We might also point out others' mistakes as if to justify our own.

A touchy person is ready to react at even imagined offenses.

For example, when a conversation mentions someone who was observed walking carelessly and shuffling his feet, the touchy person imagines he's the one being referred to, and immediately says how much attention he pays to the way he walks.

The touchy person also craves attention and attaches great importance to what others think and say about him.

For example, someone in a meeting might say in passing that the rain made him late for work. A touchy member of the group quickly responds that she is never late for any commitment, even if the weather is very bad. She thinks that pointing that out will improve her image in the eyes of others.

A very touchy person sometimes imagines ulterior motives and interprets harmless comments as veiled criticisms. Since he has trouble recognizing the extent of his defensiveness, he is easily offended and his responses tend to be aggressive. His comments tend to be sharp and

his opinions critical. Without realizing it, he’s copying what previously offended him or hurt him.

If someone present at a gathering is very touchy, conversations often don't end well, or they create a climate of tension that causes others to be on guard against what that person might say.

Excessive defensiveness can make us turn ordinary conversations into personal and aggressive criticisms. For example, in answer to an innocent question such as, "What time is it?" we might ask, "Why? Are you in a hurry? Do you think I’m wasting time?" In another example, in response to the question, "What are you doing?" we could respond provokingly, "Do you think I’m doing something wrong? You always think you know more than everyone else."

How can we free ourselves from the acute touchiness that saddens our life and deteriorates our relationships? We could try some of these exercises:

. Be vigilant when we speak. Don’t respond immediately when we hear a comment that makes us react

. Keep our mouths closed and reflect on the responses that crowd our minds: What bothers me? What am I defending?

. Why am I reacting? What good is it doing?

Touchy reactions hinder us from perceiving two opposing conflicts: one with ourselves, because our low self-esteem makes us self-critical, and one with others, until they acknowledge our worth.

Let’s realize that nothing that anyone says about me changes what I am, what I can do, or my worth. Let’s also realize that defending myself from what seems like an unjust comment doesn’t increase my value or the esteem others might hold for me. On the contrary, my responses are more likely to damage the image others have of me. What sense does it make to begin a rant that is always going to harm us? Is the satisfaction of ranting so great that it compensates for the low impression that others will have of me? Don’t we want to improve rather than worsen that impression?

If we are ever able to succeed in the exercise of controlling our automatic defenses, we’ll see that the more we do it, the easier it becomes. By being quiet and letting conversation flow, the mental and emotional

whirlwind of our first reaction abates, and we gradually discover the joy of silencing ourselves in time and remaining inwardly peaceful.

Peacefully silencing ourselves is the exercise that can help us moderate the excesses of our temperament and, especially, generate peace wherever we are and with whomever we speak.

Transmuting Aggravations

Eighth Teaching

We don't feel well when things don't go the way we want. If this discomfort continues it becomes an aggravation and may end up causing a prolonged bad mood.

Yet it's not always an annoyance that puts us in a bad mood. We can be in a bad mood without knowing why.

For example, let's say you get up early to do volunteer work for someone who needs help. As soon as he opens the door he says, "You are arriving now? Obviously *you* don't like to work!" He might continue with "Pay attention to what you're doing! You've come here to help, not cause problems!" You never gave him any reason to talk to you like that. It's clear that this gentleman got up in a bad mood.

Bad moods make us disproportionately aware of the negative side of things. Nothing satisfies us, we become irritated for the slightest things, and we make it difficult for others to relate to us. This affects the family environment as well as the workplace. Here's what is most serious: bad moods are contagious. Even if nothing in particular caused our own bad mood, it's the source of the bad moods we generate in those around us.

It's good to learn to transmute our aggravations so that we don't end up in a bad mood. This is an important conquest because when we are aggravated we lose efficiency in action as well as in thought. Our discernment is colored by our mood and our reasoning tends to be biased.

If we analyze the process of aggravation we are able to better understand what we can do to overcome it.

We feel bad the moment something happens to annoy us. Afterwards, even though the incident has passed, remembering it aggravates us.

The cause of the aggravation might be something we felt bad about a long time ago. Since then life has continued and circumstances have changed, yet the memory of what happened continues to upset us. We are resentful.

We don't realize that we are keeping a bad feeling alive that we didn't want to have in the first place, and that we're suffering for something

that's not happening now. This resentment isolates us from what is actually happening and diminishes our ability to benefit from the events we are living right now. We also damage our relationship with others because, instead of responding to what's happening at the moment, by expressing our resentment to others we force them to engage in a situation from our past that has nothing to do with them or what they're doing.

Even though comprehending all this helps us understand that it's senseless to feel aggravated and resentful, understanding is not enough to make us overcome those feelings. When we find ourselves feeling resentful or stuck in old annoyances, we can help ourselves transmute them by doing an exercise such as this one:

- When our thoughts return to something that aggravated us in the past and we relive the aggravation, we can stop our thoughts to become aware of the harm we are doing to ourselves by what we're thinking at that moment.
- We observe the bright aspects of our existence. For example, we can focus on the present, not only on what we have and what's happening, but also on all the setbacks and hardships we are not experiencing right now, and we can feel grateful for that. If we think about it, no matter how little we might have, we each have something that can make us happy.

When we feel a surge of impatience at what someone says or does, we can try out this exercise:

- Refrain from graceless gestures and disparaging words
- Use friendly gestures and words

A four-year-old girl once told her parents, "I'm grumpy today." She was aware of her mood. By expressing it, she made space for a dialogue which ended her bad mood and got her laughing at herself. If a child can make this change, surely we adults can do the same if we overcome the defenses that we have been creating throughout our past.

The simple exercise of switching a negative expression with a more positive one quickly improves our relationships with others and especially our moods. Just as laughing cheers us up, acting with friendliness and

cordiality makes us friendly and cordial. A practice becomes an attitude and a mood which rapidly become spontaneous.

Maybe at first it won’t be easy for us to exchange an unconscious negative reaction with a deliberately positive one, but after a short time of practicing this exercise the change will be easier to achieve. Begin by replacing a hasty gesture with a smile; that alone is enough for the path to become clearer and easier to follow.

Thoughtful Judgment

Ninth Teaching

Making a thoughtful judgment means analyzing something closely, comparing and evaluating various interpretations of it, and reaching a conclusion that is free from prejudices and preferences.

Thoughtful judgments do not happen spontaneously. In fact, we tend to turn our opinions into judgments that are far from thoughtful. In other words, we tend to make judgments "just because".

When we make a thoughtless judgment, we apply to others the standards that we use for our own way of life, ideas, and goals, without taking into account the time, place, customs, or situations that affect what we're judging.

To be able to judge thoughtfully, it helps to practice the exercise of not judging impulsively. This exercise consists in:

- Not making thoughtless judgments, especially about people, without any other reason except that it occurs to us

This exercise reveals the habit of projecting our personal system of values onto others: what's good or bad for me is good or bad for everyone else.

How often do we hear someone say, "That's terrible! I would never have done that!" Yet obviously, for the person being judged, having done what someone else "would never have done" either seemed natural or inconsequential at the time.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't have or use our own judgment. It does mean that it's practically impossible to understand what doesn't fall within our system of thinking unless we stop projecting our personal vision onto the whole of reality.

The exercise of not judging impulsively shows us that the point of view we hold within our own system of thinking is just as limited as the viewpoint we criticize in others.

Besides, judging others means we place ourselves above them. We feel that our discernment and judgment are superior. By not acknowledging

that no one gave us the power to judge, and by not realizing that it is we (and perhaps only we) who have such a high opinion of ourselves that we are qualified to judge others, we don't perceive that we are projecting an image of ignorance and arrogance by judging for no reason. These are traits that we would do very well to distance ourselves from.

Judging others impulsively means failing to recognize that every human being is free to feel, think, and act in their own way, as long as this doesn't affect the freedom, rights and well-being of others.

To be able to practice the exercise of not judging impulsively, it's indispensable to drop the tendency to appraise everything with a critical eye. That's why the exercise that follows is one of avoiding aggressive criticism.

Constructive Criticism

Tenth Teaching

In its original definition, criticism means the discerning and thoughtful application of judgment as we consider something. Yet we commonly turn criticism into condemnation and disapproval.

In some cases we attack in others the shortcoming we don't recognize in ourselves or the problem we don't want or can't solve in ourselves. For example, a person who has the habit of justifying herself might criticize someone else for the doing the same thing. Or someone might complain about someone else's complaints or criticizes her because she's critical.

A conversation might occur in which someone gives an opinion, expresses an idea or presents a plan, and one of his listeners immediately opposes what the speaker said and whatever else he or anyone else says afterward. She might even feel a certain pleasure in assuming the classic role of antagonist in any interchange of ideas.

Unhealthy criticism is one of the first manifestations of aggression. If the aggressive action stops there, it might not unduly harm the relationship. But if it becomes a habit of aggressive criticism, it tends to grow increasingly stronger, eventually leading to a desire to suppress what is being criticized. This is what happens when condemnatory criticism is taken to the extreme.

Condemnatory criticism is conclusive; there is no way back. When someone critically condemns another person—their opinions or actions—the relationship is destroyed. On one hand, the person who so criticizes makes evident that he has such a high self-concept that he appropriates the power to make indisputable judgments. On the other hand, he shows such a deep scorn toward the other person that no degree of good manners could hide it.

For example, to respond to a comment with, "Don't talk nonsense. You *never* understand *anything*!" is so discrediting to the speaker that it's unlikely that he'll want to continue participating in the conversation.

Another form of condemnatory criticism occurs when a speaker underrates the opinion that someone else just gave and continues talking or changes the subject as if he hadn't heard what the person has said.

There is a type of aggressive criticism that, since it is not said with words, we could call "criticism by omission."

If in a group we never address one of its members, we make it obvious that that person doesn't exist for us, at least at that moment.

This could happen, for example, when a group gathers and some people talk a lot while others remain silent. If those who talk don't address the ones who are quiet, and continue speaking as if they didn't exist, they show their indifference to the non-speakers, since the conversations would be the same regardless of whether the silent ones were present or not.

There could be a situation that's opposite to the one described above. For example, a person criticizes by omission when he doesn't speak at a gathering even though he is invited to do so, because he decides to show his disagreement with what is being said—or his displeasure with one of those present—by being mute and unyielding.

Another case of aggressive criticism by omission occurs, for example, when you present a project to your team that you have worked on for a long time and you receive no opinion about what you have done. In this case you certainly feel excluded from the group. You would even have preferred a bad critique to no comments at all, because it is as if you and your work didn't exist.

The exercise of not criticizing aggressively keeps us alert not to restrict ourselves within the confines of our prejudices and pre-conceived ideas. The practice of this exercise broadens our perception of people and of what happens beyond those confines, and it makes our interpretation of events, opinions and ideas more integral. This broader perception motivates us to make our criticism constructive.

The exercise of constructive criticism begins by validating the opinion or suggestion we receive.

Validating means:

- Explicitly acknowledging points of view that differ from our own

- Valuing those points of view
- Including those points of view as we analyze the subject at hand

Starting by validating in the ways mentioned above, our criticism is constructive when:

- Basing ourselves on the opinions we receive, we contribute ideas or options that enrich, improve or complete those initial opinions

The exercise of criticizing constructively is one of the healthiest within the system of our relationships. It preserves the mental health of others as well as our own. It makes interactions pleasant and favors the development of companionship and mutual understanding. It also softens our character and preserves good habits.

Constructive criticism sparks creative debate and generates an ambiance of camaraderie and optimism, not only in the workplace but also in gatherings that are purely social in nature.

Fruitful Discussions

Eleventh Teaching

Discussions would be valuable to our understanding and relationships if they really were a play of opposing analyses that weighed the pros and cons of a decision or the rights and wrongs of a suggestion. They would be fruitful discussions, since we wouldn't be taking sides but only trying to single out the best choice or truest point in the matter under discussion.

But that doesn't always happen. We usually argue to make our opinion and reasoning prevail. In these cases the discussion is empty and useless, because we are unable to either convince or silence those who aren't in agreement with us unless we can exercise some power over them which prevents them from expressing their disagreement.

Ordinary discussions are nothing but the comparison of contradictory points of view, where each person insists that the others listen to their point of view or explanations.

Many times even ordinary conversations seem to be arenas for the clash of personalities. The exchange of words resembles a struggle in which each personality tries to impose itself but rarely succeeds. To win would mean getting others to acknowledge that my opinions are the most valid or getting my listeners to accept them without necessarily agreeing with them. But one thing is certain: arguments seem to strengthen our positions rather than predispose us to accept those that are opposed to them.

We can help ourselves avoid useless arguments and reflect on our judgments by practicing the exercise of not arguing for its own sake. This exercise is an extension of the exercise "not giving unnecessary explanations".

When contrasting opinions exist, the exercise of not arguing for its own sake consists in:

- Not getting into the game of insisting that others pay attention to my opinions
- Not getting similarly trapped by the person I'm talking to

This exercise requires us to be attentive, because we may have the habit of trying to convince, at all costs, those who don't agree with us. Let's pay attention to our conversations to discover whether we have this tendency, and to notice how many of our conversations are actually arguments.

Someone may start an argument with us, not because they disagree with what we're saying, but because they don't feel comfortable in their relationship with us. If this is so, the necessary response would be to have a friendlier attitude toward them. If instead of responding with a better attitude we insist on arguing with them, we add new elements of friction instead of improving the relationship.

Sometimes it's just the opposite. You think that anyone who argues is against you without realizing that you're the one with the habit of arguing. Then it seems like others are always against you because "they always argue with me."

It's not always easy to practice the exercise of not arguing for its own sake. At first, it may mean interrupting only the verbal debate but not the mental one.

A verbal argument automatically generates a more serious mental argument. Because of this, arguing may quickly turn what started out as an innocent and friendly conversation into a series of reactions that make it very difficult to keep the relationship at an acceptable level. Even when we manage to soften the dialogue, a tension has been introduced into the relationship which tends to increase. When arguments penetrate a relationship, little by little the relationship can become transformed into clashes of opinion, condemnatory judgments, and verbal attacks that create hard-to-undo conflicts.

If we combine the exercise of listening with the exercise of not arguing for its own sake, we approach situations from a broader and more inclusive perspective.

We tend to not really listen to opposing ideas during an argument because we put all our emphasis on getting others to pay attention to our reasoning. When we acquire the habit of listening, not only do we learn to think about situations from different points of view, we grasp other experiences and discover aspects above and beyond the topic we are

discussing. Above all, we discover the desires and motivations of others, the forces that fuel the arguments. This helps us respond effectively to their needs rather than spending our energy responding to their lines of argument.

Our habit of not arguing for its own sake exerts a great influence over others. By not introducing elements which could incite a fight, the relationship unfolds in peace. Those around us are more predisposed to better understand various perspectives and keep the relationship at a level more conducive to the unfolding of the group. This sparks the beginning of calm, reasonable and fruitful discussions which will almost certainly create a model for exchanging ideas that we can all put to good use.

Useful Defenses

Twelfth Teaching

We need to defend ourselves when our safety, health, well- being or rights are threatened. We rely on society, as well as medical advancements and legal resources for such protection.

Not only do we effectively defend ourselves from what we feel is a direct attack, such as an illness or an injustice. We defend ourselves automatically, and not always effectively, from everything that a setback or annoyance implies. These sufferings may be caused by persons or events that affect a whole human group.

There are also situations in which we try to defend ourselves in ways that are not only ineffectual but sometimes actually damage our self-esteem and the esteem others have for us.

There are many ways we can defend ourselves ineffectively; for example, with complaints, bad moods, anger, arguments, explanations, escapism, and isolation.

We first need to identify the habit of defending ourselves and then note how we most commonly defend ourselves. We then have resources to stop or avoid defending ourselves ineffectively.

If we habitually get defensively angry when something bothers us, or when someone uses hurtful expressions against us, we express our anger—more or less violently—in words. Since our anger prevents us from clearly noticing what we're saying, our words may fail to express what we normally feel—that we love those with whom we are angry, for example—and when we calm down we wish we hadn't used those words. But the people who heard our words don't forget them, and this incident will keep marring our relationship with them.

Anger is not only useless, it's actually really harmful to ourselves and others. It can even generate a chain of violence that may be very difficult to stop.

A good way to free ourselves from our anger is to prevent it, and to develop a strategy to stop our outbursts in time.

To prevent anger—or bad moods, arguments, or any other form of defense—it behooves us to stop for a while to ponder a conflictual situation before responding to it. If we feel bad about what someone says during a conversation, let's not react immediately. Let's take a while to calm ourselves down and figure out whether this is the best time to respond. If it is, let's also figure out how to speak so as to reach a better understanding.

It's often better to wait for another opportunity in which, rather than reproaching the person who disturbed us, we can calmly express how their words made us feel. This way, we could begin a friendlier dialogue than if we blamed them for offending us.

However, it's not always easy to avoid uselessly defending ourselves. Sometimes we like to get angry because it's a way of affirming ourselves, and of feeling we're getting even for what was said or done that seemed unjust. We don't realize how much we're hurting ourselves. As long as our anger lasts, it overshadows our days and affects our health and relationships. Who wants to be with someone who's angry? Let's be on guard that no one will ever say of us, "You can't tell her anything because she immediately gets angry."

We should realize that, in many situations in which someone makes us angry, we're not the ones with the problem—they are. If we aren't aware of this, we hurt ourselves more than the person who made us angry. After only a few minutes, he might totally forget the situation he created, while we could remain angry for a long time, maybe even resentful for the rest of our lives.

Anger produces strong emotions so, in addition to practicing exercises of not defending ourselves, we can work on our anger by taking occasions of anger as examples of our own foolishness. Laughing at ourselves is often more effective than getting upset with our inability to avoid getting angry, or depressed because we do get angry. The important thing is to remain aware of what happens to us every time we react impulsively, because without that awareness we will be defenseless against those reactions.

The exercise of not uselessly defending ourselves begins by:

- Creating the habit of not verbally defending ourselves

- Discovering how the absence of outer defensiveness becomes inner defensiveness. The arguments we don't verbalize tend to multiply in our imaginations and so do the explanations we refrain from expressing out loud
- Stopping this imaginary argument

Later on, the exercise includes the habit of stopping the other ways we defend ourselves by giving or not giving explanations.

For example, if we notice that our colleague finishes her task faster than we finish ours, we explain it away (to others or ourselves) by saying (or thinking) that this doesn't mean that she works better than we do. Or if in a conversation someone mentions a way of working that's different from ours, we feel impelled to explain why we do it our way, even if no one was thinking of us when they spoke.

The habit of uselessly defending ourselves can damage our relationships. For example, if we don't promptly stop the useless defense of reacting with arguments and explanations whenever we are contradicted, we make enemies of those we are fond of. If we defend ourselves with useless excuses to avoid a difficulty, we generate mistrust in those who are not fooled by what we say. If we isolate ourselves so that we won't be bothered, our isolation is also useless because it doesn't help us avoid life's setbacks and sorrows, and it also separates us from others.

When we defend ourselves uselessly, we damage our life and the lives of those who live with us. On the other hand, defending ourselves in a useful way affirms our well-being, our rights and a state of justice.

More about Listening

Thirteenth Teaching

While the words we utter are very valuable, so are the words we don't verbalize with our lips or form in our minds. Unsaid words are the key to the art of listening.

To be able to listen, we need to pay enough attention that we don't get distracted while others are speaking to us. We also need to avoid putting up barriers between what we hear and what we understand.

The exercise of listening, therefore, consists in:

- Developing attention
- Developing the ability to leave aside our own intention

There are several stages in this exercise.

The *first stage* is developing the ability to pay attention without getting distracted.

Developing attention goes beyond being careful about what we are going to do or say, and beyond improving our concentration. Besides realizing what's happening, it's important to understand the message that events transmit in and of themselves.

We develop that attention by lessening our habitual mental restlessness. When our mind is restless we can't perceive the message others are transmitting to us. We hear words but we don't perceive all that they mean. We can repeat the words but we don't perceive what's behind them. Likewise, we perceive events but not what they mean.

How can we quiet our minds? Exercises of restraining our verbal defenses are very valuable toward the goal of mental tranquility, since they accustom us to avoiding being carried away by impulses, outbursts or wild ideas. Reflection exercises also bring us mental tranquility because, as we perform them, we gain distance from our reactions and thus develop the ability to restrain and guide them.

Yet when we are able to pay attention without major distractions, we notice that our mind continues an independent, parallel discourse.

Therefore, the *second stage* of listening is restraining the flow of our minds. If we are unable to calm our minds, at least it's relatively easy to move our continual mental flow into a deeper plane so that it doesn't interfere with our attention or the ability to understand what we're hearing.

For example, when something gets our attention, such as an interesting movie, it's notable that other thoughts don't disrupt our ability to attend to and remember what we're hearing and seeing.

This example shows that what's important in listening is to be really interested in everything we're told. If we dismiss what others say, or if the only thing that matters to us is what we want to say, we will certainly not be listening even if we have developed a great ability to pay attention.

Listening reaches its full scope when we learn how to leave aside our intention. We say "leave aside" because we always have an intention: something we want, expect, or fear.

The *third stage* of listening is to be without an underlying intention that filters the information we receive while we're listening, and which typically conditions what we understand and how we respond.

Behind every act, every word we say, every instant we devote to listening, there is a series of desires that form a well-defined intention. It's easy to see that in ordinary conversations people are mainly talking about what they want.

That's basically our intention as listeners, too.

When we want something, we close ourselves off to every message we could receive from the person who's speaking. We choose from that message only what serves our purpose at the moment, and reject what opposes it. We can't escape the fact that when listening we are interpreting what we're told in terms of whether it is "pro" or "con" what we want or think. Consequently, our response is marred by the intention of justifying what we think or want, or to rebut a stance that we interpret as contrary to our desires or ideas. When this happens, the conversation is usually over—because we're not listening—or it quickly turns into an argument.

The *fourth stage* is the consequence of the previous three stages.

When we listen without interference we develop the ability to comprehend beyond what we hear. We understand not only the meaning of the spoken words but also what they really tell us or really mean: in other words, whatever motivated those words in the first place.

The *fifth stage* is the expansion of this exercise.

The habit of listening without allowing interference develops the ability to perceive without interference.

Everything around us—everything that happens around us and to us—is continuously telling us something. To be able to hear that message, we first need to discover that it exists.

The exercise of listening can help us discover this message.

Judicious Opinions

Fourteenth Teaching

To give an opinion is to express how we see things from our point of view.

We form our points of view in reaction to what happens. But what we understand through those reactions depends on the way our minds process them. Therefore it is good to keep in mind that our images of the things we remember aren't exact transcriptions of what we perceive with our senses. That perception is just as affected by previous experiences as it is by later ones; by our prejudices and also by the influence of society, since "groupthink" can influence our memory and our decisions. We arrange events as we perceive them to match our image of the world, so that our memories will be consistent and make sense to us. Then, after the fact, we tack on information that we receive from other sources. Over time those bits of information become so intermingled that we can't remember exactly where the details of our memories come from.

In other words, our minds project their ideas of things upon the screen we call memory. However, as happens with all projections, those ideas are really a transformation of things and not the things themselves. That's why it's not surprising to hear different eyewitness accounts of the same event.

When we know how our minds work, we also know that our points of view, no matter how right they seem to us, are only points of reference that we need to compare and reconcile with different points of view. Knowing this, we might arrive at a closer understanding of things as they really are, the way they really happened.

However, we are used to giving our opinion indiscriminately. Some people give their opinion continually, without discerning whether anyone asked for it or whether it is well received or not. Moreover, since everyone has their own point of view, rarely do differing opinions completely agree. This leads to arguments, tensions, and an unsettling situation.

Let's learn, then, to be judicious.

To be judicious is to discern what's evident from what's conjectural; certainty from belief; an opinion from that which simply is.

Let's start learning to give a judicious opinion by stopping the flow of automatic opinions that appear in our minds—and in our words—in connection with anything we see or deal with. To achieve the ability to stop, it helps to practice the exercise of not giving our opinion if there is no need to do so.

The first part of this exercise is to:

- Break the habit of automatically verbalizing our viewpoint

The practice of this aspect of the exercise has these immediate effects:

- It teaches us to listen better and thus discover other viewpoints
- It teaches us to entertain and appreciate different viewpoints
- It motivates us to ask for other viewpoints and ask for advice when we need it
- It motivates us to universalize our vision of things, promotes interpersonal understanding, and helps us understand the limitation of our own interpretation of things

The second part of this exercise is to:

- Cut short the inner opinion we automatically form about everything, whether we voice it or not, which makes us subjectively label all aspects of life

The first way that previously-formed opinions become manifest is with the automatic reaction "I like it" or "I don't like it." This is followed by a more general and definite evaluation: something is "good" or "bad." Finally, it hardens into something that must be "accepted" or "rejected," "supported" or "opposed."

Of course, we can't avoid reacting to stimuli. We can, however, avoid subjectively evaluating a reaction.

The habit of not giving our opinion indiscriminately—which is still only an exercise for most of us—is standard practice in all scientific research. Using a scientific approach, every reaction can be observed and sought to be understood in terms of what is being observed, without subjective

evaluations. If we adopt this method of research we will have the chance to discover what we didn’t know and we will learn something.

The practice of this exercise makes a remarkable change in our habitual relationship with others, and also in our relationship with the different situations of life. What is equally important, it has a deep and positive influence on the process of our inner unfolding.

Appropriate Advice

Fifteenth Teaching

We call advice appropriate when it is a responsible response to a request for advice.

A request for advice may be formal, such as when we request it from a professional or seek a medical opinion. It may also be informal, such as when we ask for an opinion in an ordinary conversation about a decision we need to make.

If we don't keep this in mind, we can fall into the habit of responding with advice, even instructions, such as "do this," "don't do that", when someone tells us what's happening to her, her problems, plans, and indecisions. On those occasions, our advice would be inappropriate. Just because someone opens up to us about herself doesn't mean she's asking for our advice.

Nevertheless, inappropriate advice-giving is common in ordinary conversations. No matter what we happen to be talking about, someone only has to mention what she did or is thinking of doing for us to respond not only with advice but also with instructions. Although we may be moved by a good intention, sometimes we even seem to want to give that person a lesson, evidenced by our emphatic way of speaking and the way we go on and on about it.

We give responsible advice when we are well-versed in the subject that another consults us about.

We don't always take into account that, in order to give a piece of advice, it is necessary to have enough knowledge and experience about the matter in question. Since we already have a pretty complete repertoire of opinions on most common subjects, when someone asks us something we answer automatically according to our previously formed viewpoint without considering whether we are competent enough on the subject to give a well-based opinion or not.

Moreover, if we give an opinion or advice on just anything anyone tells us, we are invading the lives of others and intruding into their affairs without assuming responsibility for what we say.

Keeping all this in mind, let's say that advice requires:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Prudence

Respect means, in the context of advice-giving, acknowledging that people have their own private lives.

The fact that someone tells us something about their life doesn't mean that they're opening the door for us to enter that life. If they do ask for our advice, respect means remembering that giving advice is only suggesting what to do or not do, without criticizing what the person has done.

Respect also implies recognizing the limits of advice. Giving advice means giving an opinion in response to a matter or situation, and that's all. Advice doesn't give us the right to follow up with questions or criticize the subsequent actions of the person who received the advice. This makes the person who asked for advice feel free to follow it or not and, if they choose to follow it, free to decide how.

Responsibility is what we take on when we get involved in the course of a person's life after they have followed our advice.

Prudence, within the context of advice-giving, means recognizing whether or not we are sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced to truly back up the advice that is asked of us. If we aren't, we don't really have the right to give advice.

Prudence also means recognizing how much we know about the situation of the person requesting advice.

When the request for advice refers to relationship situations or problems, we are hearing only the point of view of the one who is consulting us. Even if we were qualified to give such advice, it would be imprudent to give it if we didn't know the opinions of the others involved in the situation or problem, or the context.

It is also prudent to discern the seriousness of the person who's asking for advice and what motivates him or her to request it. People who ask

for advice are not always really asking for it, nor are they always willing to do what we advise them to do.

Sometimes a person wants to mask a decision she has already made, asking for advice only to gain support for what she's already decided to do. If the person who has been asked for advice is not alert to situations of this type and advises the person to do something different from what she wants to do, he will easily get into an argument to convince her—unsuccessfully, of course—that it's good advice. The result of this advice is the deterioration of their relationship.

If the person who did not follow the advice happened to fail in what she had already decided beforehand to do, it would be a big mistake to hold this failure against her. This would add constraints to an already strained relationship.

At other times, the person who consults us is only seeking our validation of what he did or said. These situations do not call for any advice-giving whatsoever.

Prudence also means being careful how we give advice. Constantly telling people what to do is rarely the most appropriate way to give advice, especially if we have not been asked explicitly for it. Nevertheless, some of us have the habit of telling everyone around us, all the time, what to do and even how to do it, criticizing them if they don't do what we say. If these instructions are not part of a consensual program of apprenticeship, it is most likely that these persons, tired of our continuous instructions, will seek to distance themselves from us or, if they are unable to do that, will become resentful of us. It would be sad if this state of affairs led them to automatically reject everything we say even when we have something valuable to tell them.

It is also prudent to restrain the impulse to give our opinion immediately when asked for advice, because we very often tend to say what we would do in the same situation. We don't always discern that that person isn't like us or that they would know how or want to do what occurs to us to advise them at that moment.

Prudence also means being alert as to when to respond to a request for advice.

Even if we have meditated on the requested advice and are qualified to give it, it will fall on deaf ears if we give it at the wrong moment. This will happen even if the person is open to receiving counsel. When our advice is not timely, the person who receives it either does not hear it or does not follow it, and will probably not ask for our advice in future.

Within the realm of what we consider appropriate advice, the exercise of giving it consists in:

- Giving advice only when it is explicitly requested—and only if we're sufficiently knowledgeable about what we are asked to advise on
- Making it clear that, if we won't give the requested advice, it's because we don't have the necessary knowledge to do so

Of course, if someone tells us they are going to do something that, in our judgment, according to our knowledge or experience, could be harmful to him, it would be appropriate to warn him. This does not mean telling him what to do, but sharing what we think or know about what he has said, in case he wants to take it into account.

Moreover, as indicated above, we always need to keep in mind that by giving advice we share the responsibility afterward.

At times we might be asked our opinion on a relatively urgent decision regarding a matter about which we actually are qualified to respond. If, feeling rushed by that sense of urgency and without familiarity with the situation beyond what they have told us at the moment, we were to immediately say, "Do this", we would be deciding very lightly over another person's life, and this we have no right to do. If we gave them advice and they didn't like the consequences of doing as we said, that person would be right to blame us for their bad luck. In these cases, as with so many others, it's most prudent to invite the person—and help him—discern his options and reflect on the consequences of each of those options, were he to follow them.

Focusing advice like this is as beneficial to the one giving it as to the one receiving it. Both learn and, above all, strengthen their relationship.

If someone were to approach us, all anxious, asking us what to do to solve his problem, the first thing to discern would be whether this is a

situation requiring professional help; if so, our advice would be to suggest getting that help. But the person really could be asking, not for us to tell him what to do, but to help him vent his tension and anxiety. In this case, rather than giving advice we need to listen to him, be open to his pain, and share it. Only then can we try to guide the conversation toward helping him see his problem from different angles, unburdened by the weight of his previous despair. In the end, this person will very probably let us know that he has come to his own wise decision.

Generally speaking, a good way to help someone who needs advice is to help her elicit this advice from within, as a consequence of her understanding and good attitude. Only then will any advice of ours find fertile ground to germinate, because advice really only consists in clarifying what that person has already discovered for herself.

There are many ways of helping, and one of the wisest is knowing how to wait for the propitious moment to offer what the other might need. Let's imitate the good farmer who prepares the ground well and waits patiently for the right sowing conditions. He's not idle while waiting: he watches over his seeds and is careful not to miss the best opportunity for sowing them. He doesn't complain if the weather isn't right and doesn't despair if he's unable to sow. He knows that a good time to sow seeds and reap fruits will always arrive.

Empathy, and the prudence with which we measure what we say, are the seeds we sow in pursuit of the same outcome in our relationships.

Measured Words

Sixteenth Teaching

Speaking comes so naturally to us that, unless we are dealing with weighty matters, we usually don't stop to think or measure what we're going to say. We allow words to rise to our lips that are motivated by what we feel, want or believe at the moment, with mixed results as to the clarity of what we express.

Sometimes a speaker feels good about the way he speaks, while we as listeners find it difficult to understand what he's saying. The same thing can happen to our listeners, whether because of our pronunciation or because of the disorderly way we organize our sentences and thread our subjects together. We would gain a lot by making an effort to improve our language and the way we organize and express what we think. The practice of the exercises suggested in this chapter can be valuable in helping us speak clearly and efficiently enough that we don't need long discourses to say something, and are pleasant to listen to.

In some cases, either because our thoughts are not orderly or because we aren't sure how the other will take what we want to say, we beat about the bush to hint at what we could have said in a much shorter way. This pussyfooting makes conversation heavy. Our listeners have trouble paying attention and understanding what we say.

At other times, although we know what we want to say, we say it in a roundabout way, whether because we're afraid of others' retorts or because we don't want to stand out too much or seem too out of place in the group. Instead of stating explicitly what we feel or think, we give broad hints about it. Maybe we imagine that by talking this way no one will say that we are criticizing, or that we don't want to do something that's difficult for us. Or perhaps we think that if we talk that way they won't realize that we haven't understood or followed the conversation. In these situations, our hints are not well received, either because they confuse our listeners, who tend to ask themselves "What was she trying to say?" or because those who actually did understand us are offended that we have not been honest enough to speak without pretense.

The exercise of speaking with measure helps us to express ourselves clearly and to overcome the tendency to beat about the bush. This exercise begins with:

- Saying what we want to say directly, clearly and simply.
  - Speaking directly means keeping our preambles short

We use preambles to place our subjects in context. When a preamble gets too long, it turns into digressions that tire our listeners, who are looking forward to hearing something meaningful.

- Speaking clearly means not adding information or parenthetical asides that are unnecessary for others to understand what we say

Sometimes when we're talking about something, we give more explanatory information than necessary, without realizing that this takes us far from the heart of the issue at hand. At other times, the associations we make get us so sidetracked and are so distracting that we end up having to stop and make a summary before we can get back to what we really want to say.

- Speaking simply means pronouncing clearly, speaking with good diction

When our tone of voice is too soft, or we don't pronounce our words clearly, we force some of our listeners to strain to hear us, or ask us to repeat ourselves, or to pretend that they've heard what we said when they haven't.

- Speaking simply means speaking slowly enough

If we speak too fast we also make ourselves difficult to understand.

- Speaking simply means using words that everyone understands

If we use scholarly terms or words that are not commonly used, we leave those who don't understand us completely in the dark, in a way that may seem smug on our part.

- Speaking simply means talking in short sentences

Sentences that are too long make it difficult to follow what's being said.

- Speaking simply means pausing between sentences

Pauses leave space for thinking about what we are hearing and also for asking questions about what has been said.

- Speaking with measure also means we stop talking when we've finished what we wanted to say

Often, after recounting what we wanted to say, we begin flitting from one subject to another, disconnected from the original point of our conversation. Sometimes we go on so long that the person who's listening starts asking himself when we're going finish. He might even end up forgetting why he joined us, since the subject he's interested in got lost in our many digressions.

By practicing these exercises we learn to organize our thoughts and develop the capacity for synthesis, which can be a very valuable skill if we ever have to speak in public.

Moreover, the practice of speaking with measure and without beating about the bush—during any part of the conversation—makes our conversation lively and pleasant. We feel well after talking, and so do our listeners, because our words were clear and left everyone time to continue conversing on other subjects of general interest.

- Speaking with measure also means speaking respectfully and courteously

Sometimes we believe that our good speaking manners show respect for our listeners but that's not always so. A mild and calm manner can be used with words that are wounding and offensive. By the same token, people may speak courteous words with a cynical or aggressive attitude, perhaps without being aware of how distressing they are to those who are listening.

- Speaking respectfully shows that our listeners matter to us

We show respect as we speak by keeping in mind the time we are taking when we talk. Even when we are dialoguing with only one person, not to mention when we are conversing in a group, the time we take to talk is time we're taking away from those who listen to us, time in which they can't speak.

Moreover if, when we're in a group, we take too long a turn to speak or if we speak too often, we turn the others into a captive audience for a

big chunk of the time, which makes it difficult for them to share in a conversation that is pleasing to all.

If we take advantage of a chance meeting to give the other person a lengthy account of our troubles, we don't leave much time for them to tell us anything. That person may be tired of listening to us and is very possibly waiting for us to finish babbling so they can say goodbye and go on their way.

- Speaking respectfully also means not interrupting the person who is speaking

When we interrupt we break the flow in the other's train of thought, and it won't be easy for them to pick up the thread exactly where they left off. Interrupting can lead to digressions, sometimes making it impossible to return to the discussion of the subject which we have interrupted. The appropriate thing to do is to allow the speaker to finish what he's saying, or to pause in a way that allows someone else to comment on it.

Neither should we interrupt a lively, enjoyable conversation. If we want to introduce a new subject, it's good to wait for a better moment to change the conversation.

- Speaking courteously shows our affection for our listeners

We show courtesy when we listen directly to someone who's speaking. If, because we think we are capable of multi-tasking, we read a book, flip through a magazine, or let our eyes wander while someone is talking to us, we are letting them know that neither they nor what they are saying matter to us very much.

We show courtesy in a gathering when, for example, we speak in a friendly way to someone who has been silent till then. To encourage them to participate in the group conversation, we ask them questions on a subject that they are interested in or know well.

Our words demonstrate affection when they not only leave room for opinions that are different from ours, but actually foster them. It's when we are contradicted that we prove how much we love the pathways that our understanding opens before us.

By contrast, though our words may be interesting and intelligent, if our speaking style is so categorical that we don't leave room for other points of view, it becomes more of a monologue than a conversation.

Moreover, respect and courtesy in conversation are not banal matters, as they would be if we used them merely to conform to conventional norms of good breeding. These norms would allow us to seem pleased with what others are saying while mentally getting distracted, criticizing, and judging or rejecting what they're saying. By contrast, exercises of attention and reflection, as well as exercises of restraining our verbal defenses, teach us to listen without escaping mentally and without judging. This means listening, understanding, valuing and assimilating, word for word, what others say—whether we agree with it or not—as well as what the situation reveals at the moment.

The exercise of speaking with measure, along with the standards of respect and courtesy described above, go way beyond the rules of diction and recommendations to maintain a good atmosphere and pleasant conversation during a gathering.

Speaking with measure turns conversation into an invaluable means of progress, as much in our individual unfolding as in our interpretations of people, events, and life itself.

The respect and courtesy we show express our inner participation with those around us, our genuine interest in what transcends our own little circle of interest. Thus we not only learn from each other but open ourselves to perceive the reality that surrounds and contains us. The understanding that reality is not an extension of ourselves penetrates us ever more deeply, suggesting that we are, perhaps, less than a particle in the immensity of life. We come to understand that, within the human context, there are countless points of view, opinions that are just as valid—or as little valid—as our own. It's up to us not to limit that expansion of our consciousness.