

Paulo Coelho



The Warrior of the Light

Volume 3

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Paulo Coelho's website address is

www.paulocoelho.com

Paulo Coelho's blog address is

www.paulocoelhoblog.com

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Discovering true fear

A sultan decided to travel by sea with some of his favorite courtiers. They joined the ship in Dubai and sailed out into the open sea.

However, as soon as the ship moved away from land, one of his subjects - who had never seen the sea before, having spent most of his life in the mountains - began to be overcome with panic.

Sitting in the ship's hold, he cried, shouted and refused to eat or sleep. Everyone tried to calm him down, saying that the journey wasn't as dangerous as all that, but although he heard their words, they had no influence on his heart. The sultan did not know what to do, and the fine journey upon calm seas and under blue skies,

became a torment for the passengers and crew alike.

Two days passed without anyone being able to sleep because of the man's cries. The sultan was about to order the ship to return to port, when one of his ministers, who was known for his wisdom, came over:

- Your Highness, with your permission, I will be able to calm him.

Without a moment's hesitation, the sultan said that not only would he allow it, but that he should reward him if he succeeded in solving the problem.

The wise man asked that the man be thrown into the sea. Right away, content because their nightmare was about to end, several crew members grabbed the man struggling in the hold, and cast him into the ocean.

The courtier thrashed about, sank, swallowed plenty of seawater, returned to the surface, screamed louder than ever, sank again, and managed to surface once again. Just then, the minister ordered for him to dragged back on board.

From then on, no one heard so much as a single complaint from the man, who spent the rest of the journey in silence, and even commented to one of the passengers that he had never seen anything so beautiful as the sky and sea touching on the horizon. The journey - which had before been a torment to all those on board the ship - became a pleasurable, peaceful experience.

A short time before they returned to port, the Sultan went to see the minister:

- How did you guess that, by throwing that poor man into the sea, he would calm down?

- Because of my marriage - replied the minister. - I was always terrified of losing my wife, and was so jealous that I never stopped shouting and screaming like that man.

«One day she could take no more, and left me - and I tasted the terrible experience of living without her. She only returned when I promised never again to torment her with my fears.

«In the same way, that man had never tasted salt water, and had never known the agony of a drowning man. When he felt that, he understood only too well how marvelous it can be to feel the planks of a ship under his feet.

- Wise counsel - commented the sultan.

- In the Bible, a holy book of the Christians, it says: «all I most feared, came to pass.»

«Some people can only value what they have, when they endure the experience of loss.»

Two Zen stories about the search for happiness

The natural order

A very wealthy man asked a Zen master for a text which would always remind him how happy he was with his family.

The Zen master took some parchment and, in beautiful calligraphy, wrote:

- The father dies. The son dies. The grandson dies.

- What? - said the furious rich man. - I asked you for something to inspire me, some teaching which might be respectfully contemplated by fu-

ture generations, and you give me something as depressing and gloomy as these words?

- You asked me for something which would remind you of the happiness of living together with your family. If your son dies first, everyone will be devastated by the pain. If your grandson dies, it would be an unbearable experience.

«However, if your family disappears in the order which I placed on the paper, this is the natural course of life. Thus, although we all endure moments of pain, the generations will continue, and your legacy will be long-lasting.»

Each to his own destiny

A Samurai who was known for his nobility and honesty, went to visit a Zen monk to ask advice. However, the moment he entered the temple where the master was praying, he felt inferior and concluded that, in spite of having fought for

justice and peace all his life, he hadn't even come near the state of grace achieved by the man before him.

- Why do I feel so inferior? - he asked, as soon as the monk finished his prayers. - I have faced death many times, have defended those who are weak, I know I have nothing to be ashamed of. Nevertheless, upon seeing you meditating, I felt that my life had absolutely no importance whatsoever.

- Wait. Once I have attended to all those who come to see me today, I shall answer you.

The samurai spent the whole day sitting in the temple gardens, watching the people go in and out in search of advice. He saw how the monk received them all with the same patience and the same illuminated smile on his face. But his enthusiasm soon began to wane, since he had been born to act, and not to wait.

At nightfall, when everyone had gone, he demanded:

- Now can you teach me?

The master invited him in and lead him to his room. The full moon shone in the sky, and the atmosphere was one of profound tranquility.

- Do you see the moon, how beautiful it is? It will cross the entire firmament, and tomorrow the sun will shine once again. But sunlight is much brighter, and can show the details of the landscape around us: trees, mountains, clouds. I have contemplated the two for years, and have never heard the moon say: why do I not shine like the sun? Is it because I am inferior?

- Of course not - answered the samurai.
- The moon and the sun are different things, each has its own beauty. You cannot compare the

two.

- So you know the answer. We are two different people, each fighting in his own way for that which he believes, and making it possible to make the world a better place; the rest are mere appearances.

The creative process

All creative processes, be they in literature, engineering, computing - and even in love - always respect the same rules: the cycle of nature. Here is a list of the stages along this process:

a] ploughing the field: the moment the soil is turned, oxygen penetrates places it was unable to previously. The field gets a fresh look, the earth which was on top is now below, and that which was underneath has come to the surface. This process of interior revolution is very important - because, just as the field's new look will see sunlight for the first time, and be dazzled by it, a new assessment of our values will allow us to see life innocently, without ingenuity. Thus we will be prepared for the miracle of inspiration. A

good creator must know how to continually turn over his values, and never be content with that which he believes he understands.

b] sowing: all work is the fruit of contact with life. A creative man cannot lock himself in an ivory tower; he must be in contact with his fellow men, and share his human condition. He never knows, at the outset, which things will be important to him in the future, so the more intense his life is, the more possibilities he will create for an original language. Le Corbusier said that: “as long as man tried to fly by imitating birds, he couldn’t succeed.” The same applies to the artist: although he translates emotions, the language he is translating is not fully understood by him, and if he tries to imitate or control his inspiration, he will never obtain that which he desires. He must allow his life to sow the fertile soil of his unconscious.

c] growth: there is a time in which the work writes itself, freely, at the bottom of the author's soul - before it dares show itself. In the case of literature, for example, the book influences the writer, and vice versa. It is this moment which the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade refers to, when he states that we should never try to recover lost verses, for they never deserved to see the light of day. I know people who, during a growth period, spend their whole time furiously taking notes on everything which comes into their head, without respecting that which is being written in the unconscious. The result is that the notes, which are the fruit of memory, end up disturbing the fruit of inspiration. The creator must respect the time of gestation, although he knows - just like the farmer - that he is only partially in control of his field; it is subject to drought and floods. But if he knows how to wait, the stronger plants, which can resist bad weather, will come to light with great force.

d] the harvest: the moment when man manifests on a conscious plane that which he sowed and allowed to grow. If he harvests early, the fruit is green, if he harvests late, the fruit is rotten. Every artist recognizes the arrival of this moment; although some aspects may not have matured fully, some ideas not be crystal clear, they reorganize themselves as the work is produced. Without fear and with great discipline, he understands that he must work from dawn to dusk, until the work is finished.

And what to do with the results of the harvest? Again, we look to Mother Nature: she shares everything with everyone. An artist who wishes to keep his work to himself, is not being fair with that which he received from the present moment, nor with the inheritance and teachings of his forefathers. If we leave the grain stored in the granary, it will go bad, even though it was harvested at the right time. When the harvest is over, the time comes to share, without fear or

shame, your own soul.

That is the artist's mission, however painful or glorious.

Stories of masters and paths

Choosing one's destiny

«I am willing to give up everything», said the prince to the master. «Please accept me as your disciple.»

«How does a man choose his path?» asked the master.

«Through sacrifice,» answered the prince. «A path which demands sacrifice, is a true path.»

The master bumped into some shelves. A precious vase fell, and the prince threw himself down in order to grab hold of it. He fell badly and

broke his arm, but managed to save the vase.

«What is the greater sacrifice: to watch the vase smash, or break one's arm in order to save it?» asked the master.

«I do not know,» said the prince.

«Then how can you guide your choice for sacrifice? The true path is chosen by our ability to love it, not to suffer for it.»

Overcoming obstacles

A famous Sufi master was invited to give a course in California. The auditorium was full at 8AM - the time announced - when one of the assistants came onto the stage.

“The master is just waking up. Please be patient.”

Time passed, and people started leaving the room. At midday, the assistant returned to the stage, saying that the master would be starting the lecture the minute he finished talking to a pretty girl he had just met. Most of the remaining audience left.

At 4PM the master appeared - apparently drunk. This time, all but 6 people stormed out.

“I will teach you this,” said the master, ceasing to act drunk. “Whoever wishes to go down a long path, must learn that the first lesson is to overcome early disappointments.”

The town and the two streets

The following story is told by Sheikh Qalandar Shah in his book Asrar-i-Khilwatia (Secrets of the Recluses):

In eastern Armenia there was a little village with two parallel streets, called North Way and South Way, respectively. A traveler from afar walked down South Way, and soon resolved to visit the other street; however, as soon as he entered it, the merchants noticed that his eyes were filled with tears.

“Someone must have died on South Way,” said the butcher to the textile salesman. “That

poor stranger, who just came from there, look how he cries!"

A child heard the comment, and as he knew what a sad thing someone dying is, he began to cry hysterically. Before long, all the children in that street were crying.

Startled, the traveler decided to leave immediately. He threw away the onions he was peeling in order to eat them - that being the reason his eyes were filled with tears - and went off.

However, the mothers, worried by their children's weeping, soon went to find out what had happened, and discovered that the butcher, the textile salesman and - by this time - several other merchants, were all deeply concerned about the tragedy which had occurred on South Way.

More rumors began to spread; and since the town hadn't many inhabitants, everyone on

both streets knew that a terrible thing had happened. The adults began to fear the worst; but, since they were worried about the gravity of the tragedy, they decided not to ask anything, so as not to make matters worse.

A blind man who lived on South Way and didn't understand what was going on, decided to speak up:

“Why such sadness in this town, which as always been such a happy place?”

“Something terrible happened on North Way,” answered one of the inhabitants. “The children are crying, the men frown, mothers send their sons home, and the only traveler to pass through town for many years, left with his eyes filled with tears. Perhaps the plague has hit the other street.”

Before long, rumors of an unknown deadly

disease spread through the town. And since all the weeping had begun when the traveler visited South Way, the inhabitants of North Way were sure that that was where it had begun. Before nightfall, people from both streets abandoned their houses and left for the mountains of the East.

Centuries later, that ancient village where a traveler passed peeling onions continues abandoned to this day. Not far away, two settlements emerged, called East Way and West Way. Their inhabitants, the descendants of the former inhabitants of the village, still do not speak to each other, for time and legends placed a great barrier of fear between them.

Sheikh Qalandar Shah says: “all in life is a question of attitude towards things, and not the actual things themselves. It is always possible to discover the origin of a problem, or choose to enlarge it in such a way that I no longer know where it began, its true size, how it can affect

my existence, and how it is capable of distancing people I used to love.”

Zen Buddhism

As Ming Zhen Shakya explains, Zen is to Buddhism what the Kabbalah is to Judaism, contemplation is to Christianity, Sufi dancing is to Islam: in other words, it is the mystical practice of philosophical or spiritual teaching.

The Zen school began in China as a mixture of the Buddhism from Nepal with the local Taoist traditions (which we shall discuss later). Between the years 700 and 1200, monks travelled to Japan and there developed two types of meditation based on physical posture: the Rinzai style says that all human beings can achieve illumination if they live their existence with respect and sobriety, while the Soto style preaches the importance of lengthy training in order to reach this objective.

According to most religions, an illuminated man is someone who manages to free himself from his own egotism, understands that he is merely a small - but important - part in God's Great plan, and does everything possible to concentrate on the good working of this part. As he moves in this direction, superfluous things lose their importance, and with this his suffering recedes.

According to the Zen masters, we all have an intuitive knowledge of the reason for our existence. But most philosophical or religious teachings are nothing but ways of provoking, deep down inside us, the contact with the wisdom which is already there - buried deep in layers of prejudice, guilt, mental confusion and false ideas about our own importance.

Zen Buddhism - especially that which was elaborated from the Soto style - developed a se-

ries of techniques to enable man to reach this inner peace and comprehension. To us, with our Western vision of our inner search, these techniques are deeply related to the words of Jesus, in the Gospel according to Matthew: "when thou prayest, enter thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to the Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

Someone practicing Zen finds a calm place, and sits in a position in which he can keep his balance for a long time, but without support for his spine; therefore the best-known posture is with the legs crossed, the hands linked in front over his pelvis. At some monasteries I visited in Japan they use a type of leather cushion in order to raise the body slightly, and allow for better blood circulation in the legs.

Now one must try to remain motionless for as long as possible, while obeying a few sim-

ples rules. The head must lean forward, the eyes focused on nothing, but not closed, because that can cause sleepiness. One observes one's breathing, trying not influence its rhythm - it should be as natural as possible, for as the zazen (the name for this posture) is held, one's inhalation and exhalation tend to become more paused and slower.

Although many who claim to know the techniques of meditation think that one must "empty one's mind", we all - and all the great Zen masters - know that this is impossible. The main idea is not to try and control our thoughts and emotions, nor seek spiritual contact with God; all this will come in its own time, as we become more and more calm.

Since the practice of Zen is extremely simple, without any religious or philosophical connotations, it helps us - paradoxically - to connect to God and to answer our doubts in an unconscious

way. The next time you are at home with nothing to do, and think everything around you is annoying and repetitive, try to sit down in a quiet place, remain still, and let the world go on around you.

You will see that, in order to do the important things in life, at times one must allow oneself to do nothing.

Returning to the world after death

I've always thought about what happens when we scatter a little of ourselves across the Earth. I have had my hair cut in Tokyo, have clipped my nails in Norway, watched my blood flow from a wound halfway up a mountain in France. In my first book, "The Archives of Hell" (which has never been reprinted), I speculated about this, as if we felt we had to sow a little of our own body in various parts of the world, so that in a future life, something would be familiar to us. I recently read in the French newspaper Le Figaro, an article by Guy Barret about a true story which took place in 2001, when someone took this idea to its final conclusion.

It was about the American Vera Anderson, who spent her entire life in the town of Medford, Oregon. In old age, she was the victim of a cardiovascular accident made worse by emphysema of the lungs, forcing her to spend years in her room connected to a balloon of oxygen. As if all this wasn't enough of a burden, Vera's case was even more cruel, because she had always dreamed of going round the world, and had saved up in order to do so in retirement.

Vera managed to be transferred to Colorado, so that she might spend her remaining days in the company of her son, Ross. There, before making her final journey - the one none of us return from - she took a decision. Since she would never get to know even her own country, she would travel after she died.

Ross went to the local notary office and registered her mother's will: when she died, she wished to be cremated. So far, nothing unusual.

But the will went on: her ashes were to be placed in 241 little bags, which were to be sent to the chiefs of the mail services in 50 American states, and each of the 191 countries in the world - so that at least part of her body would end up visiting the places she always dreamed about.

As soon as Vera departed, Ross fulfilled her last wish with the dignity one would expect of a son. Each parcel carried an accompanying letter asking for a laying to rest worthy of her mother.

All the people who received Vera Anderson's ashes respectfully obeyed Ross's wish. On the four corners of the Earth, a silent chain of solidarity was formed, along which unknown well-wishers organized diverse ceremonies and rites, always taking into consideration the place the deceased woman would liked to have known.

Thus, Vera's ashes were scattered on Lake Titicaca, in Bolivia, following the ancient tradi-

tions of the Aymara Indians; on the river outside the royal palace in Stockholm; on the banks of Choo Praya, in Thailand; at a Shinto temple in Japan; on the icecaps of Antarctica; in the Sahara desert. The brothers of a charitable orphanage in South America (the article doesn't say which country) prayed for a week before casting the ashes in the garden - and they then decided that Vera Anderson should be considered a type of guardian angel of that place.

Ross Anderson received photos from the five continents, from all races and cultures, showing men and women honoring his mother's last wish. When we see such a divided world as today's, and think no one could care less about each other, this last journey of Vera Anderson fills us with hope, knowing that respect, love and generosity still dwell in the souls of our fellow men and women, however distant they may be.

Four Jewish stories

What makes me suffer

Rabbi Moshe de Sassov gathered his disciples in order to tell them that he had finally learned to love his neighbor. They all thought that he had had a divine revelation, but Moshe denied this.

- In fact - he said - this morning when I went out to do some shopping, I saw my neighbor, Esther, talking to her son. She asked him:

«Do you love me?»

The son said yes. So Esther went on:

«Do you know what makes me suffer?»

«I've no idea,» replied the son.

«How can you love me, if you do not know what makes me suffer? Try to quickly find out all the things which make me unhappy, for only then will your love be impeccable.»

And Rabbi Moshe de Sassov concluded:

- True love is that which manages to avoid unnecessary suffering.

What pleases God

On the Torah's day of joy, Ball-Shem's pupils celebrated, drinking the master's wine. The rabbi's wife complained:

«If they drink all the wine, there won't be any for the ceremony,» she said.

«Put an end to the party,» replied the rab-

bi.

The woman went to the room where the pupils were drinking. But as soon as she opened the door, she changed her mind and went back to her husband.

«Why didn't you do anything?» asked Baal-Shem.

«Because they danced, sang and were so full of joy for life,», replied his wife. «I hadn't the courage.»

«You have understood: this is how God receives the gratitude of his people - seeing they are content. Go there and serve my disciples more wine,» concluded the rabbi.

The sealed lip

The disciple of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov went to him:

«I cannot talk to God.»

«This often happens,» said Nachman. «We feel that our lips are sealed, or that the words do not come. However, the simple fact that effort is needed to overcome the situation, is a beneficial attitude.»

«But it is not enough,» insisted the disciple.

«You are right. At such times, what you must do is look up and say: «My God, I am far from You and cannot believe in my voice.»

«For, in truth, God listens and always

answers. It is only we who cannot speak, fearful that He is not paying attention.»

The prayer of the flock

Jewish tradition tells the story of a shepherd who always said to the Lord: “Master of the Universe, if You have a flock, I shall look after it for free, for I love You.”

One day a wise man heard this strange prayer. Worried that it might offend God, he taught the shepherd the prayers he knew. But as soon as they were parted, the shepherd forgot the prayers; however, fearful of offending God by offering to tend to his flocks, he decided to abandon completely all conversations with Him.

That same night the wise man had a dream: “Who guards the Lord’s flocks?” said an angel. “The shepherd prayed with his heart, and you taught him to pray with his mouth.”

The following day the wise man returned, asked the shepherd to forgive him, and included the Prayer of the Flock in his book of psalms.

An encounter at the Dentsu Gallery

Three very well-dressed gentlemen came to my hotel in Tokyo.

- Yesterday you gave a conference at the Dentsu Gallery - said one of them. - I entered by chance, just as you were saying that no encounter takes place by chance. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves.

I didn't ask how they had found out which hotel I was staying in, I didn't ask anything; if people are capably of overcoming such difficulties, they deserve every respect. One of the three men handed me some books in Japanese. My interpreter was excited: this man was Kazu-

hito Aida, the son of the great Japanese poet, of whom I had never heard.

And it was precisely the mysterious synchronicity of these encounters which enabled me to discover, read and now share with the readers of this column, a little of the magnificent work of Mitsuo Aida (1924-1998), the calligrapher and poet, whose writings remind us of the importance of innocence:

Because it has lived life intensely
the dry grass grabs the passer-by's attention
Flowers merely blossom,
and do so as best they can.
The white lily of the valley, which no one sees
explains itself to no one;
it only lives for beauty.
Men, however, cannot live with “only”.

If tomatoes wish to be melons
they will become a farce.

I am amazed
that so many people are busy
wanting to be what they are not;
why become a farce?

You need not pretend you are strong
should not always prove that all is well,
must not worry about what others think
cry if necessary
it is good to cry until no tears are left
(for only then will you smile again)

Sometimes I watch the openings of tunnels
and bridges on TV. This is what usually happens:
many celebrities and local politicians line up,

with the host minister or governor in the middle. Then, a ribbon is cut, and when the directors of the works return to their offices, they receive many letters of recognition and admiration.

Those who gave their sweat and work, who held the pick and spade, who exhausted themselves working in the summer, or were made to bear the harsh winter in order to finish the job, are never seen; it seems that the best part belongs to those whose faces never sweat at all.

I always want to be someone capable of seeing the faces which are not seen - those who seek neither fame nor glory, who silently play the part destined for them by life.

I want to be capable of this, for the most important things in existence are those which build us, never showing their faces.

Japanese stories of masters and disciples

The master is like bell

A student who had recently arrived at the monastery, went to master Nokami and asked him how he should prepare for the exercise of meditation.

«Do not be afraid to ask» - was the reply.

«And how can I learn to ask?»

«A master is like a bell. If you strike it lightly, all you will heard is a gentle vibration. But if you bang it freely, it will resonate loudly and shake you to the depths of your soul. Ask with cou-

rage, and only stop when you obtain the answer you sought.»

No one changes destiny

Before a decisive battle, the Japanese general decided to take the initiative and attack, knowing that the enemy was greater in number. Although he was sure of his strategy, his men were fearful.

On the way to the confrontation, they decided to stop at a temple. After praying, the general turned to his soldiers:

- I will toss this coin. If it is heads, we return to camp. If it is tails, that means that the gods will protect us, and we shall defeat the enemy. Now, our future will be revealed.

He threw the coin high up, and the eyes of his anxious soldiers saw the result: tails. They

all rejoiced, and as they attacked were filled with confidence and vigor, and were able to celebrate victory later that afternoon.

His chief officer said proudly:

- The gods are always right. No one can change the destiny they reveal.

- You are right, no one can change destiny when we are resolved to follow it. The gods help us, but at times we must help them too. - he replied, handing the officer the coin.

Both sides were tails.

Emptying the cup

A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master in Kyoto, in search of knowledge. While the monk served tea, the professor commented exercises, analyzed writings, interpreted

stories and traditions, and deliberated on the ancient processes of meditation. He did everything to impress his host, in the hopes that he might be accepted as a disciple.

As he spoke, the monk continued to fill his cup, until it overflowed, and tea began to flow across the whole table.

- What are you doing? Can't you see the cup is full, and that nothing more will fit in it?

- Your soul is like this cup - replied the master. - How can I teach you the true art of Zen Buddhism, if it is already filled with theories?

Who is the most powerful master

One of Yu's disciples was talking to a disciple of Rinzai:

- My master is a man capable of doing mi-

racles, that is why he is respected by all his pupils. I have seen him do things far beyond our capabilities. And your master? What great miracles can he do?

- My master's greatest miracle is that he doesn't need to display any great wonder, in order to show his pupils that he is a wise man - was the reply.

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- My master's greatest miracle is that he doesn't need to display any great wonder, in order to show his pupils that he is a wise man - was the reply.

The three cedar trees

My grandmother told the following story: three cedar trees sprouted in the once beautiful forests of Lebanon. As is known, cedar trees take a long time to grow, and these trees spent whole centuries contemplating life, death, nature and mankind.

They witnessed the arrival of an expedition from Israel, sent by Solomon, and later saw the earth covered with blood, during the wars with Syria. They saw Jezebel and the prophet Elijah, who were mortal enemies. They watched the invention of the alphabet, and enjoyed seeing the caravans passing, laden with colorful textiles.

One fine day, they decided to talk about the

future.

- After all I have seen - said the first tree - I wish to be made into the throne of the most powerful king on earth.

- I'd like to be part of something that turns Evil to Good forever - commented the second.

- Myself, I'd like it if every time someone looked at me, they thought of God - replied the third.

More time passed, and some woodcutters came. The cedars were felled, and a ship carried them far away.

Each of those trees had a wish, but reality never asks what to do with dreams; the first was used to build a shelter for animals, and what was left over was used as a prop for bales of hay. The second tree was turned into a very simple tree,

which was soon sold to a furniture tradesman. Since the timber from the third tree had no buyers as yet, it was cut up and stored in the warehouse of a large town.

They lamented woefully: “Our wood was so good, and no one found anything fine to use it for.”

Some time passed and, one starry night, a couple with nowhere to stay, decided to spend the night in the stable which had been built from the first tree. The woman groaned, in the throes of labor, and gave birth, placing her son between the hay and the wood propping it up.

Just then, the first tree understood that his dream had come true: that this was the greatest king on Earth.

Years later, in a modest house, several men sat around the table which had been made from

the second tree. Before they ate, one of them said a few words about the bread and wine before them.

And the second tree understood that, at that moment, it hadn't just been supporting a goblet and a piece of bread, but the union between man and Divinity.

The next day, two pieces of the third tree were taken and assembled to form a cross. It was left to one side, until, hours later, a cruelly beaten man was brought in and nailed to the wood. Horrified, the cedar lamented the barbaric destiny life had left it.

Before three days had passed, however, the third tree understood its destiny: the man nailed there was now the Light which illuminated all around. The cross made from its wood was now no longer a symbol of torture, but became a sign of victory.

As always with dreams, the three cedar trees from Lebanon had fulfilled the destiny they desired - but not in the way they imagined.

Two angels in Brazil

According to an old, well-known legend, whose origins are uncertain, a week before Christmas, Michael the Archangel asked his angels to visit Earth; he wanted to know whether everything was ready for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. He sent them out in pairs, always one older angel and one younger one, so that he might obtain a broader picture of what was going on in Christendom.

One of these pairs was allotted Brazil, where they arrived late at night. Since they had nowhere to sleep, they took shelter in one of the great mansions which are to be found in certain parts of Rio de Janeiro.

The owner of the house, a nobleman on

the verge of bankruptcy (something which happens to many people in that city, by the way), was a devout Catholic, and quickly recognized the celestial envoys, with their golden halos above their heads. But he was very busy making preparations for a great feast to celebrate Christmas, and didn't want to disturb the decorations, which were almost all in place, so he asked them to sleep in the cellar.

Although the cards celebrating Christmas always carry illustrations with falling snow, in Brazil the date falls in the middle of summer; so the place where the angels were sent was scorching hot, and the air - which was very humid - was practically unbreathable. They lay down on the hard ground, but before starting their prayers, the older angel noticed a crack in the wall. He stood up and fixed it using divine powers, and returned to his evening prayers. The heat was so great, it was as if they spent the night in hell itself.

They slept terribly, but had to fulfill the mission which had been entrusted to them by God. The following day, they walked about the great city - with its 12 million inhabitants, its beaches and mountains, its contrasts, its beautiful landscapes and miserable neighborhoods. They wrote their reports, and when night began to fall again, they journeyed into the countryside. Still confused by the time difference, they again found themselves with nowhere to sleep.

They knocked on the door of a humble house, and the door was opened by a couple. Since they had never had access to the medieval engravings portraying God's messengers, they didn't recognize the two pilgrims - but seeing that they needed shelter, the house was put at their entire disposal. The couple made dinner, introduced the angels to their newborn child, and offered them their own bedroom, apologizing that they were poor, that it was so hot but they hadn't the money to buy an air conditioning unit.

When they awoke the following day, they found the couple in floods of tears. Their only possession, a cow which gave the family milk, cheese and sustenance, had been found dead in the field. They bid the pilgrims farewell, ashamed that they were unable to offer them breakfast.

As they wandered along the dirt track, the younger angel was filled with rage:

- I cannot understand such behavior! The first man had everything he needed, and nevertheless you helped him. But this poor couple who received us so well, you did nothing to relieve their suffering!

- Things are not what they seem - said the older angel. - When we were in that awful cellar, I noticed there was much gold hidden in the wall of the mansion, left there by a previous owner. The crack was exposing part of the treasure, and I resolved to hide it again, because the owner of

the house did not know how to help those in need.

“Yesterday, as we slept in the bed the couple had provided for us, I noticed a third guest had arrived: the angel of death. He had been sent to take the child, but since I have known him for many years, I was able to convince him to take the life of the cow instead.”

“Remember the day which is about the be celebrated: since people value appearances so greatly, no one wanted to take Mary in. But the shepherds protected her, and because of this, they were rewarded and were the first to contemplate the smile of the Savior of the World.”

Ueshiba and the adversary

Created by the Japanese master Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), Aikido is the only martial art I have practiced, and in my opinion it is one of the most interesting ones. Here a few texts written down by his disciples during conversations:

A] Whoever has an objective in life, will be faced with an opposing force; in order to eliminate this force, one must learn how to make it work in your favor.

B] A true warrior never sacrifices his friends in order to defeat his adversary; therefore, he must learn to detect and solve the problems before they appear.

C] The best way to confront an adversary is to convince him of the futility of his actions. The warrior shows that his objective is not to destroy anything, but to build his own life. He who walks towards his dream, seeks harmony and understanding above all else, and doesn't mind explaining what it is he desires a thousand times, until he is heard and understood.

D] Do not spend your whole time looking at the problems standing in your way: they will hypnotize you and hinder any action by you. Nor should you concentrate too much on your own qualities, for they were made to be used, and not displayed.

E] The force of a man lies not in his courage to attack, but in his ability to resist attacks. In this way, he prepares himself - through meditation, exercises, and a profound consciousness of his intentions - to stand firm and continue on the path, even if all around him try to drag him away

from his goal.

F] Defeat comes before victory. The key to winning is knowing how to lose - and not to desist.

G] In extreme situations, especially when you are near your objective, the Universe will test your intentions, demanding all of your energy. Be prepared for many great trials, as your dream becomes reality.

H] Do not look at your life with resentment, and be prepared to accept everything the gods place before you; each day brings with it joy and fury, pain and pleasure, darkness and light, growth and decay. All this is part of nature's cycle - therefore do not try to complain or struggle against the cosmic order. Accept it and it will accept you.

I] If your heart is large enough, it will be

capable of welcoming all those who oppose your destiny; and once you have welcomed them with love, you will be able to annul the negative forces your adversaries bring with them.

J] When you notice an adversary approaching, advance and speak with delicate words. If he persists in his aggressiveness, do not take up the fight unless it will bring you something; in this case, use the opponent's force, and do not spend your energy.

L] Know the right moment to use each of the four qualities nature teaches us. Depending on the circumstances, be as hard as a diamond, flexible as a feather, generous as water, or as empty as the air. If the origin of your problem is fire, it is no use counter-attacking with more fire, since this will only increase the blaze: in this case, only water will be capable of combating the evil. The problem will never teach you how to react to it - only you have the power for that.

Alone on the path

Life is like a great bicycle race, whose aim is to fulfill one's Personal Legend - that which, according to the ancient alchemists, is our true mission on Earth.

At the start of the race, we're all together - sharing the camaraderie and enthusiasm. But as the race progresses, the initial joy gives way to the real challenges: tiredness, monotony, doubts about one's own ability. We notice that some friends have already given up, deep down in their hearts - they're still in the race, but only because they can't stop in the middle of the road. This group keeps growing in number, all of them pedaling away near the support car - also known as Routine - where they chat among themselves, fulfill their obligations, but forget the beauty and

challenges along the road.

We eventually distance ourselves from them; and then we are forced to confront loneliness, the surprises of unknown bends in the road, and problems with the bicycle. After a time, when we have fallen off several times, without anyone nearby to help us, we end up asking ourselves whether such an effort is worthwhile.

Yes, of course it is: one must not give up: Father Alan Jones says that, in order for our soul to be able to overcome these obstacles, we need the Four Invisible Forces: love, death, power and time.

We must love, for we are loved by God.

We must be aware of death, in order to understand life.

We must fight to grow - but not be fooled

by the power which comes with growth, for we know it is worthless.

Finally, we must accept that our soul - although it is eternal - is at this moment caught in the web of time, with all its opportunities and limitations; so, on our solitary bike race, we must act as if time existed, doing what we can to value each second, resting when necessary, but always continuing in the direction of the Divine light, without letting ourselves be bothered by the moments of anxiety.

These Four Forces cannot be dealt with as problems to be solved, since they are beyond our control. We must accept them, and let them teach us what it is we must learn.

We live in a Universe which is both vast enough to contain us, and small enough to hold in our hearts. In every man's soul, dwells the soul of the world, the silence of wisdom. As we pedal

on towards our goal, we must ask: “what is lovely about today?” The sun may be shining, but if it is pouring with rain, it is important to remember that this also means that the black clouds will soon disperse. Clouds come and go, but the sun remains the same, and never fails - at times of loneliness, it is important to remember this.

So, when times are tough, we must not forget that the whole world has endured such moments, regardless of race, color, social standing, belief, or culture. A beautiful prayer by the Sufi Dhu ‘l - Nun (Egyptian, died 861 AD) perfectly sums up the positive attitude necessary at such times:

“Oh Lord, when I pay attention to the voices of animals, the sounds of the trees, the bubbling of the waters, the chirping of the birds, the howling wind or the crashing thunder, I perceive in them evidence of Your unity; I sense that You are the supreme power, almighty, the supreme

wisdom, supreme justice.

“Oh Lord, I recognize You in the trials I am enduring. Allow, Lord, Your satisfaction to be my satisfaction. May I be Your joy, that joy which a Father sees in his son. And may I recall You with tranquility and determination, even when it is difficult to say that I love You.”

The circle of joy

Bruno Ferrero tells a story that one day, a countryman knocked hard on a monastery door. When the monk tending the gates opened up, he was given a magnificent bunch of grapes.

- Brother, these are the finest my vineyard has produced. I've come to bear them as a gift.

- Thank you! I will take them to the Abbot immediately, he'll be delighted with this offering.

- No! I brought them for you.

- For me? - the monk blushed, for he didn't think he deserved such a fine gift of nature.

- Yes! - insisted the man. - For whenever

I knock on the door, it is you opens it. When I needed help because the crop was destroyed by drought, you gave me a piece of bread and a cup of wine every day. I hope this bunch of grapes will bring you a little of the sun's love, the rain's beauty and the miracle of God, for it is he made it grow so fine.

The monk held the grapes and spent the entire morning admiring it: it really was beautiful. Because of this, he decided to deliver the gift to the Abbot, who had always encouraged him with words of wisdom.

The Abbot was very pleased with the grapes, but he recalled that there was a sick brother in the monastery, and thought:

“I'll give him the grapes. Who knows, they may bring some joy to his life.”

And that is what he did. But the grapes

didn't stay in the sick monk's room for long, for he reflected:

“The cook has looked after me for so long, feeding me only the best meals. I'm sure he will enjoy these.”

When the cook appeared at lunch, to bring him his meal, he presented him with the grapes.

More about Aikido

The art of peace

Created by the Japanese master Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), the word means “The art (or way) of peace.” I remember spending endless nights with my companions, learning to fight in such a way that the adversary’s negative energy is directed against himself.

Ueshiba, who is known by those who practice Aikido as “The Grand Master”, left behind a series of philosophical practices, during his conferences, in his poetry and conversations with disciples. Here are a few of his main teachings.

Where to begin the art of peace

The art of peace begins inside you; work to manage to keep it at your side. Everyone has a spirit which can be perfected, a body which can be trained, and a path to follow.

You are here to fulfill these three tasks, and to do so two things will be necessary: maintain calm, and practice the Art in everything you do. None of us needs money, power or status in order to practice the Art; at this precise moment you are one step away from Paradise, and should train now.

The universe and man

The whole universe comes from the same source. This source, which we call life, contains our past, the present, and the future. As man moves forward, he can either dissolve or harmo-

nize his vital energy. Evil is born the moment we start to believe that that which belongs to all, belongs only to ourselves; this causes pride, useless desires, and anger. But anyone not possessed by things, eventually becomes lord of all.

Man and the eight forces

In order to practice the Art of Peace, one must at some point delve alternately into the eight opposing forces which make up the Universe:

Movement and inertia

Solidity and adaptation,

Contraction and distention,

Unification and division.

These are present in everything, from the vast space to the smallest plants; each thing car-

ries a gigantic reserve of universal energy, which can be used for the benefit of all.

Constant growth

Life is development. To achieve this, climb high mountains and descend into the deepest valleys of your soul. Breathe in and feel that you are sucking in everything that exists in heaven and earth. Breathe out and feel that the air leaving your body carries the seed of fertility, and will make humanity more true, better, and more beautiful.

Infinite breathing

All that exists above and below, also exists within you. And everything breathes; when you realize this, you will also understand the Art of Peace. Those who practice it know they are warriors protecting Mother Nature, and with each breath are putting inside themselves the sun and

the moon, heaven and earth, the high and low tides, spring and winter, summer and fall.

Man's entire apprenticeship can be summed up in how one breathes consciously. Each time you do so, you share the powerful energy which sustains Creation.

Conscious attention

Make each day a truly new one, by wearing the blessings of Heaven, bathing in wisdom and love, and placing yourself under Mother Nature's protection. Learn from the wise men, holy books, but never forget that each mountain, river, plant or tree, also has something to teach you.

- They're for you - said the sick monk. - Since you are always coming into contact with that which nature produces, you will know what to do with this work of God.

The cook was amazed at the beauty of the grapes, and showed his assistant how perfect they were. So perfect, he thought to himself, that no one would appreciate them more than the sexton; since he was responsible for the Holy Sacrament, and many at the monastery considered him a holy man, he would be best qualified to value this marvel of nature.

The sexton, in turn, gave the grapes as a gift to the youngest novice, that he might understand that the work of God is in the smallest details of Creation. When the novice received them, his heart was filled with the Glory of the Lord, for he had never seen such beautiful grapes. Just then, he remembered the first time he came to the monastery, and of the person who had opened the gates for him; it was that gesture which allowed him to be among this community of people who knew how to value the wonders of life.

And so, just before nightfall, he took the

grapes to the monk at the gates.

- Eat and enjoy them - he said. - For you spend most of your time alone here, and these grapes will make you very happy.

The monk understood that the gift had been truly destined for him, and relished each of the grapes, before falling into a pleasant sleep.

Thus the circle was closed; the circle of happiness and joy, which always shines brightly around generous people.

Seeking Happiness

Amazing as it might seem, many people are afraid of happiness. To such people, being at one with life would mean changing certain habits - and losing their own identity.

We often decide we are unworthy of the good things which happen to us. We do not accept miracles - for to accept them gives us the sensation that we owe God something. Furthermore, we are afraid we might "grow accustomed" to happiness.

We think: "it is better not to taste the chalice of joy, because we shall suffer so much when it is gone."

Afraid to diminish, we cease to grow. Afraid

to cry, we cease to laugh. Here are a few stories about this:

In Moses' footsteps

Rabbi Zuya wanted to discover the mysteries of life. He therefore resolved to imitate the life of Moses.

For years, he tried to behave like the prophet - without ever achieving the results he hoped for. One night, tired of so much study, he fell into a deep sleep.

God appeared in his dream:

- Why are you so upset, my son? - He asked.

- My days on Earth will end, and I am still so far from being like Moses - answered Zuya.

- If I needed another Moses, I'd have already created him - said God. - When you come before me for judgment, I will not ask whether you were a good Moses, but who you were. Try and be a good Zuya.

The donkey dies of exhaustion

Nasrudin decided to go in search of some new meditation techniques. He saddled his donkey, went to India, China and Mongolia, talked to the great masters, but found nothing.

He heard tell of a wise man in Nepal: he journeyed there, but as he was climbing the mountain to meet him, his donkey died of exhaustion. Nasrudin buried him there and then, and wept sadly. Someone passed by and commented:

- You came in search of a saint, this must be his tomb and you are lamenting his death.
- No, this is the place where I buried my

donkey, who died of exhaustion.

- I don't believe it - said the new arrival. - No one weeps over a dead donkey. This must be a place where miracles occur, and you want to keep them for yourself.

Although Nasrudin explained again and again, it was no use. The man went to the next village and spread the story of a great master who cured people at his tomb, and soon the pilgrims began to arrive.

Gradually, news of the discovery of the Wise Man of Silent Mourning spread throughout Nepal - and crowds rushed to the place. A wealthy man came, thought his prayers had been answered, and built an imposing monument where Nasrudin had buried his "master".

In view of everything, Nasrudin decided to leave things as they were. But he learned once

and for all, that when someone wants to believe a lie, no one can convince him otherwise.

That which is funny about man

A disciple asked Hejasi:

- I want to know what is the most funny thing about human beings.

Hejasi said:

- That they always think crooked: they're in a hurry to grow, then lament their lost childhood, and soon loose the money they need to keep their health.

“They are so anxious about the future, that they neglect the present, and thus live in neither the present nor the future.

“They live as if they were never going to

die, and die as if they had never lived.”

Accepting that we deserve our gifts

During a lecture in Australia, a young woman comes up, “I want to tell you something,” she says.

“I always believed I had a gift for curing people, but I never had the courage to use it on anyone. One day, my husband’s left leg was giving him great pain; there was no one about to help, and - mortally ashamed - I decided to place my hands on his leg and ask for the pain to go away.

“I acted not believing that I’d be able to help him. Suddenly, I heard him pray: “Lord, allow my wife to be the messenger of Your light, your Power,” he said. My hand began to heat up, and soon the pain had gone.

“Then I asked why he had prayed like that. He replied that he didn’t remember having said anything. Today I am able to cure, because he believed it was possible.”

Who still wants this bill?

Cassan Said Amer tells a story about a lecturer who began a seminar holding up a 20 dollar bill, and asking:

- Who wants this 20 dollar bill?

Several hands went up, but the lecturer said:

- Before handing it over, there’s something I must do.

He furiously crushed it, and asked again:

- Who still wants this bill?

The hands continued raised.

- And what if I do this?

He threw it against the wall, letting it fall to the floor, kicked it, stamped in it and again held up the bill - all dirty and crumpled. He repeated the question, and the hands continued to be held high.

- You mustn't ever forget this scene - said the lecturer. - No matter what I do with this money, it'll still be a 20 dollar bill. Many times in our lives, we are crushed, stamped on, kicked, maltreated, offended; however, in spite of this, we are still worth the same.

Phrases about happiness

I do not try to understand why I believe in happiness; but I believe I can understand what it is to be happy. (Saint Anselmo)

A child on the farm sees a plane fly overhead and dreams of a faraway place. A traveler on the plane sees the farmhouse and thinks of home. (Carl Burns)

Lawrence LeShan and meditation

Mental gymnastics

Lawrence LeShan was taking part in a scientific congress, when he noticed that a large number of people one would consider “rational”, practiced meditation every day. Intrigued, he tried to find out why they behaved in this way, so contrary to scientific practice. During four days of meetings, he was given all sorts of answers, until someone said: “it’s like returning home.” That was the only moment in which all the members of the group agreed on a definition.

From that moment on, LeShan began to research the benefits and doubts surrounding the

practice of daily concentration, and the result is an interesting book, How to Meditate: a Guide to Self-Discovery. Here are some of the author's conclusions:

Meditation is not the invention of a man, a religion, or a philosophical school, but the search by mankind to find himself. In many places, at different times, investigators of the human condition have concluded that we use very little of our potential to live, express ourselves, and participate.

We meditate to find, recover, or return to a wisdom and happiness which we subconsciously know we possess, but which the conflicts and challenges of our existence have pushed back into a dark corner of our mind. As we start giving ourselves a little time for daily concentration, we discover a higher level of conscience, which places us in harmony with our family and activities - increasing our capability to love, enjoy, and

act in more effective ways.

Comparing meditation to gymnastics, Le-Shan says that a stranger might think it madness that a human being raises and lowers a bar weighed down with lead, over and over again, or pedals a bicycle which goes nowhere, or even walks on a belt which rolls below his feet; however the reason for these exercises is neither the lead, the bicycle nor the treadmill, but the effects these activities have on the organism of the person executing them.

Similarly, sitting motionless in a corner, counting one's breathing, or concentrating on some strange symbols, are not the objective of meditation - they are merely the "physical" process which awakens a new state of consciousness.

Taking the comparison with gymnastics further, LeShan states that the large number of

failures of meditation schools is due to the fact that teachers often try to impose a single standard on their students. If only they followed the example of gym teachers, who know that each person corresponds to a different series of physical exercises, they'd have far more chance of achieving their objectives.

A normal human being tends to repeat the same behavior, that which we call “routine”. With this, he starts to function like a machine, gradually losing his emotions and feelings; although he suffers greatly because life is always the same, this daily repetition of his activities gives him the (false) sensation of being fully in control of his universe. When the “routine” is threatened by an external factor, man panics, since he doesn't know whether he's capable of dealing with the new conditions.

In other words: we constantly want everything to change, and at the same time fight for

everything to continue as it is.

Although meditation techniques have been developed or promoted by individuals who call themselves “mystics”, they aren’t necessarily linked to a search for spirituality, but rather an encounter with inner peace. Next week, we’ll talk about a few concentration techniques, but I’d like to end this column by paraphrasing Krishnamurti on this ancient and - nowadays - highly necessary art:

Meditation is not the control of your body, nor a breathing technique. We should assume the correct posture when we start to meditate - but the relationship with the body ends there.

Do not try to force one’s concentration, that will only cause anxiety; when we meditate properly, true concentration emerges. It doesn’t emerge from choosing certain thoughts, or freeing oneself from our emotions. It emerges be-

cause our soul seeks answers.

When we free ourselves from the necessity to guide things our way, we allow the divine flow to guide us to where we should be.”

Perception of reality

Is this new perception really important?

LeShan agrees that the problem is truly complex. On the one hand, we can “operate” very efficiently in this world such as we know it. On the other, we know that a considerable number of people worthy of our trust, such as Gandhi, Teresa D’Avila, or Buddha, sought to perceive this reality in a distinct manner, and that this led them to take giant steps and change the destiny of humanity.

Just like at the gym, where a good teacher always has a series of different exercises for each type of student, there is no single technique for meditating, and anyone interested in the subject should try to discover his own way. However, there are a few elementary steps which are present in almost all religions and cultures which use

meditation as a way of encountering inner peace, which I shall now describe (based on Lawrence LeShan's highly interesting book, How to Meditate: a Guide to Self-Discovery)

The first thing is to be aware of one's own breathing. Counting the number of times we breathe every two minutes, helps us concentrate our attention on something we do automatically, and thus removes us from that which is normal. At first, this may seem very simple, but we mustn't be fooled by this simplicity: whoever decides to try out this exercise in practice, notices that this requires considerable effort and large doses of patience. However, as we do so (and we can practice conscious breathing anywhere, before going to sleep, or on public transport on the way to work), we come into contact with an unknown part of ourselves, and feel the better for it.

Choosing the place: the next step is to try and dedicate ten or fifteen minutes a day to sit in

a quiet place, and repeat this conscious breathing, trying to remain still (like the Zen monks we have already talked about here). Thoughts will appear, against our will, and at this moment it is useful to recall the words of St. Teresa D'Avila about our mind: "it is a wild horse which goes anywhere, except where we want to take it."

Silencing without violence: finally, as time passes (one should know that this requires two or three months of exercises), the mind has emptied itself naturally, bringing with it great serenity to our everyday lives. However great our problems appear, however stressful our lives, these fifteen minutes every day will make all the difference, and help us to overcome - generally in a subconscious manner - the difficulties we face.

According to a well-known Zen story, Lao Shi asked his master, Wang Tei:

- What must I do to be closer to God?

Wang Tei told him to follow him high up onto a mountain. There, he took a candle from his bag and gave it to his disciple to light. Lao Shi tried several times, in vain.

- It is too windy, I can't light it.

- But it's not windy three kilometers away from here.

- What use is that? I'd need to walk all that way, to light the candle where there is no wind.

- Similarly, in order to educate the mind and light the flame of God within you, you must walk to a calmer place - replied Wang Thei.

Whether in search of God, or just in search of oneself, a man who meditates will find a calm place, and succeed in obtaining a clearer, more object view of the world.

Stories about the prince of darkness

Seeking discord

The devil was walking along a path between two fields, where workers picked grapes.

“I’ll plant a little of that which humans like best: to be right in what they say,” he thought.

He put on a hat, one half of which was green, and the other yellow.

- Follow me to find some treasure! - he shouted to the laborers. Then he hid behind a tree.

The workers ran to the path.

- Let's follow the man in the green hat - said the men from the field on the right.

- You're trying to fool us: we must follow a man in a yellow hat - shouted the men from the field on the left.

The discussion became more and more heated. Half an hour later, the workers had forgotten the treasure, and were killing each other with scythes - to see who was right about the color of the hat.

In search of truth

The devil was talking to his friends when they noticed a man walking along a road. They watched him pass and saw that he bent down to pick something up.

- What did he find? - asked one of the friends.

- A piece of Truth - answered the devil.

The friends were very concerned. After all, a piece of Truth might save that man's soul - one less in Hell. But the devil remained unmoved, gazing at the view.

- Aren't you worried? - said one of his companions. - He found a piece of Truth!

- I'm not worried - answered the devil. - Do you know what he'll do with the piece? As usual, he'll create a new religion. And he'll succeed in distancing even more people from the whole Truth.

The temptation of what is just

A group of devils were trying to enter the soul of a holy man who lived near Cairo; they had already tempted him with Nubian women, Egyptian food, Libyan treasure, but nothing had worked.

One day, Satan passed and saw his servants' efforts.

- You're hopeless - said Satan. - You haven't used the only technique no one can resist; I'll teach you.

He went over to the holy man and whispered in his ear:

- Remember the priest who studied under you? He's just been made Bishop of Alexandria.

Immediately, the holy man was filled with rage, and blasphemed against God's injustice.

- The next time, use this temptation - said Satan to his subjects. - Men can resist almost everything, but they are always jealous of the victory of a fellow man.

In search of the lost path

We go out into the world in search of our dreams and ideals, although we often know we put away in inaccessible places, all that which is within our reach. When we discover our mistake, we start to think we've lost too much time looking far and wide for something which was nearby; and this is why we allow ourselves to be overcome by a sense of guilt, for past mistakes, for the useless search, for the grief caused.

But that's not really true: although the treasure is buried in your home, you'll only find it when you distance yourself. If Peter hadn't experienced the pain of negation, he would never have been chosen as head of the Church. If the prodigal son hadn't abandoned everything, he would never have been joyously received by his

father.

There are certain things in our lives that carry a seal which says: “you will only understand my value when you lose me - and recover me.” It is no use hoping to shorten this path.

The Cistercian priest Marcos Garcia, who lives in Burgos, Spain, commented: “sometimes, God takes away a certain blessing, so the person can understand Him beyond the favors and requests. He knows how far to go in testing a soul - and never goes beyond this point.

“At such moments, we never say God has abandoned us. He never does so; it is we who at times abandon Him. If the Lord puts us to the test, he also always provides enough graces - more than enough, I’d say - to get us through it. When we feel far from His face, we should ask ourselves: are we making the most of that which He has placed along the way?”

In Japan, I was invited to Guncan-Gima, where there is a Zen-Buddhist temple. When I arrived, I was surprised: a fine structure was situated in the middle of a great forest, but had a vast waste land beside it. I asked the reason for this, and the person in charge explained:

- It is the site of the first construction. Every twenty years, we destroy this temple you see before you, and rebuild it next door.

“In this way, the monks, be they carpenters, bricklayers or architects, have the opportunity to exercise their skills, and teach their apprentices in practice. We also show that nothing in life is eternal - and that even temples are in a constant process of refinement.”

If what you are following is the path of your dreams, commit yourself to it. Don’t leave the back door open with excuses: “this still isn’t quite what I wanted.” This sentence - heard so

often - contains the seed of defeat.

Embrace your path. Even if you need to take uncertain steps, constantly destroy and build, even if you know you can do better than at present. If you accept the possibilities of the present, you will certainly improve in the future.

Master Achaan Chah was given a fine piece of land so that he might build a monastery. Chah had to go away for a time and left his disciples in charge of the building work.

When he returned - five months later - nothing had been done. The disciples had already ordered several plans from local architects.

One of them asked Chah:

- Which of the projects should we go ahead with? How should we go about taking the right decision?

Chah answered:

- When one desires that which is good, the results are always good.

Free of the fear to make mistakes, the decision was taken and the result was magnificent.

Face your path with courage, do not be afraid of other people's criticism. And - above all - don't allow yourself to be paralyzed by self-criticism.

God is the God of the brave.

Bringing God into daily life

We often see spiritual life as something distant from our reality. Nothing could be more wrong than this idea; God is in everything around us, and very often we only serve Him when we help our neighbor. Here are some stories about this:

Setting an example

Dov Beer de Mezeritch was asked:

“Which example should one follow? That of pious men, who devote their lives to God? That of scholars, who seek to understand the will of the Almighty?

“The best example is that of the child,” he answered.

“A child knows nothing. It hasn’t yet learned what reality is,” people commented.

“You are all quite wrong, for a child possesses three qualities we should never forget,” said Dov Beer. “They are always joyful without reason. They are always busy. And when they want something, they know how to demand it firmly and with determination.”

Prayers and children

A protestant priest, having started a family, no longer had any peace for his prayers. One night, when he knelt down, he was disturbed by the children in the living room.

“Have the children keep quiet!” he shouted.

His startled wife obeyed. Thereafter, whenever the priest came home, they all maintained silence during prayers. But he realized that God was no longer listening.

One night, during his prayers, he asked the Lord: “what is going on? I have the necessary peace, and I cannot pray!”

An angel replied: “He hears words, but no longer hears the laughter. He notices the devotion, but can no longer see the joy.”

The priest stood and shouted once again to his wife: “Have the children play! They are part of prayer!”

And his words were heard by God once again.

The book by Camus

A journalist hounded the French writer, Albert Camus, asking him to explain his work in detail. The author of The Plague refused: “I write, and others can make of it what they will.”

But the journalist refused to give in. One afternoon, he managed to find him in a café in Paris.

“Critics say you never take on truly profound themes,” said the journalist. “I ask you now: if you had to write a book about society, would you accept the challenge?”

“Of course,” replied Camus. “The book would be one hundred pages long. Ninety-nine would be blank, since there is nothing to be said. At the bottom of the hundredth page, I’d write: “man’s only duty is to love “.

In the Tokyo subway

Terry Dobson was traveling on the Tokyo subway when a drunk got on and began to insult all the passengers.

Dobson, who had studied martial arts for some years, challenged the man.

“What do you want?” asked the drunk.

Dobson got ready to attack him. Just then, an old man sitting on one of the seats shouted: “Hey!”

“I’ll beat the foreigner, then I’ll beat you!” said the drunk.

“I like to drink, too,” said the old man. “I sit every afternoon with my wife, and we drink sake. Are you married?”

The drunk was confused, and replied: “I have no wife, I have no one. I’m just so terribly ashamed.”

The old man asked the drunk to sit beside him. By the time Dobson got off, the man was in tears.

The place we desire

A friend came to wait on our table - at a café in San Diego, California. I had met Cláudia in Brazil four years previously, and tell my friends about her life in the USA: she only sleeps for three hours, since she works in the café till late, and is a babysitter throughout the day.

“I don’t know how she can stand it,” one of them says.

“There’s a Buddhist story about a turtle,” replies an Argentinian woman at our table.

“It was crossing a swamp, covered in mud, when it passed a temple. There it saw the shell of a turtle - all adorned with gold and precious stones.

“I don’t envy you, ancient friend,” thought the turtle. “You’re covered in jewels, but I’m doing what I want.”

Peeling oranges

Ernest Hemingway, the author of the classic *The Old Man and the Sea*, went from moments of harsh physical activity to periods of total inactivity. Before sitting to write pages of a new novel, he’d spend hours peeling oranges and gazing into the fire.

One morning, a reporter noticed this strange habit.

“Don’t you think you’re wasting your time?” asked the journalist. “You’re so famous, shouldn’t you be doing more important things?”

“I’m preparing my soul to write, like a fisherman preparing his tackle before going out to sea,” replied Hemingway. “If I don’t do this, and think only the fish matter, I’ll never achieve anything.”

Two stories about mountains

Here where I am

After having won many archery contests, the town champion went to the Zen master.

- I am the best of all - he said. - I didn't study religion, never sought help from the monks, and succeeded in becoming the finest archer in the whole region. I heard that, for a time, you were the best archer in the region, and ask you: was it necessary to become a monk in order to learn to shoot?

- No - replied the Zen master.

But the champion was not satisfied: he took an arrow, placed it in the bow, fired it and hit a cherry which was very far away. Smiling, as if to say: "you might have saved your time, devoting yourself only to technique." And he said:

- I doubt whether you could do that.

Without looking in the least bit worried, the master went inside, fetched his bow, and began to walk towards a nearby mountain. On the way, there was an abyss which could only be crossed by an old bridge made of rotting rope, and which was almost collapsing: with complete calm, the Zen master went to the middle of the bridge, took his bow and placed an arrow in it, then aimed at a tree on the far side of the precipice, and hit his target.

- Now it is your turn - he kindly told the young man, as he returned to firm ground.

Terrified as he gazed down at the abyss below his feet, the young man went to the spot and fired, but his arrow veered wide of the mark.

- That is why the discipline of meditation was worthwhile - concluded the master, when the young man returned to him. - You may have great skill with the instrument you choose for your livelihood, but it us useless, if you cannot command the mind which uses that instrument.

Contemplating the desert

Three people passing in a small caravan saw a man contemplating the late afternoon in the Sahara desert, from the top of a mountain.

- It must be a shepherd who has lost a sheep
- said the first.

- No, I don't think he's looking for anything, much less at sunset, when the view is hazy.

I think he's waiting for a friend.

- I guarantee that's a holy man, and is looking for enlightenment, - commented the third.

They began to talk about what the man was doing, and became so engrossed in the discussion that they almost fought over it. Finally, in order to resolve the matter, they decided to climb the mountain and go to the man.

- Are you looking for your sheep? - asked the first.

- No, I have no flock.

- Then you are surely waiting for someone - said the second.

- I'm a lonely man who lives in the desert - was the answer.

- Since you live in the desert in solitude, you

must be a saint searching for God's signs, and are meditating! - said the third man, delighted.

- Does everything on Earth have to have an explanation? Then I shall explain: I am merely looking at the sunset. Is that not enough to give sense to our lives?

The Wheel of Time

Carlos Castaneda was certainly the most important writer of the hippie generation, although he was never accepted in intellectual circles - not that this worried him very much. I transcribe here a few excerpts from his books:

A warrior accepts the responsibility for his actions - even the most trivial ones. A common man never admits his mistakes, but claims any victory, even if it is that of another man. He is a winner or a loser, can become a persecutor or victim, but will never achieve the condition of warrior, for he does not deserve it.

Sometimes a warrior must be available, and at others he must remain hidden. It is useless for a warrior to be available all the time, just as it is useless hiding when all know where has hidden. By alternating availability and unavailability, he does not tire easily, and does not tire those around him.

For the common man, the world is strange because when he isn't tired of living, he is suffering because of things he believes he doesn't deserve. To a warrior, the world is strange because it is stupendous, frightening, mysterious, unfathomable. The art of the warrior consists of balancing the terror of being a man, with the wonder of being a man.

Acts have power. Especially when the warrior knows that each fight might be his last battle. There is a strange joy in acting fully in the knowledge that we might die at any moment.

The most difficult thing in this world is to adopt the posture of a warrior. Being sad and complaining is no use, nor is claiming someone does us wrong. No one is doing anything to anyone, and much less to a warrior.

The confidence of a warrior is not the confidence of a common man. A common man seeks approval in the eyes of the spectator, and calls this certainty. The warrior seeks to be im-

peccable in his own eyes, and calls this humility. The common man is tied to his neighbors, the warrior is in contact with infinity.

There are many things that a warrior can do at any given moment, and which he could not do some years ago. It is not that things have changed; what has changed is the idea the warrior has about himself.

Power always places the warrior within reach of a cubic centimeter of luck. The art of the warrior consists of being permanently fluid, in order to use it.

Everyone has at his disposal enough power

to achieve things. The warrior's secret consists of capturing the energy which was before dedicated to his weaknesses, and using it in his favor in this life.

The Nagual Elias and the second chance

Carlos Castaneda tells of how his master's master, Julian Osório, became a Nagual - a type of sorcerer according to certain Mexican traditions.

Julian worked as a actor in a traveling theater in the interior of Mexico. But his artistic life was only a pretext to flee the conventions imposed by his tribe: in fact, what Julian liked most was to drink and seduce the women - any type of woman, those he encountered during his theatrical performances. He overdid things and demanded so much of his health, that in the end he

contracted tuberculosis.

Elias, a very well-known sorcerer among Iaque indians, was taking his evening walk when he found Julian lying in a field: his mouth was bleeding so much that Elias - who could see the spiritual world, could see that the young actor's death was near.

Using some herbs he had in his pocket, he managed to stop the bleeding. Then he turned to Julian:

- I cannot save you - he said. - I have done everything I can. Your death is very close now.

- I don't want to die, I'm too young - replied Julian.

Elias, like all Nagual men, was more interested in behaving like a warrior - concentrating his energy on the battle of life - than helping

someone who had never respected the miracle of our existence. However, without being able to explain why, he resolved to answer the request.

- At five in the morning I shall depart for the mountains - he said. - Wait for me on the edge of the village, without fail. If you do not come, you shall die sooner than you think: your only chance is to accept my invitation. I will never be able to repair the damage you have inflicted on your body, but I can deviate your approach to the cliffs of death. All human beings fall into this abyss, sooner or later; you are a few steps from it, and I cannot bring you back from it.

- So what can you do?

- I can make you walk along the edge of the abyss. I shall mark your paces so that you follow the enormous length of the margin between life and death; you may go to the right or to the left, but as long as you don't fall down, you shall

remain alive.

The Nagual Elias didn't expect much from the actor, a lazy, libertine and cowardly man. He was surprised when, at five o'clock the next morning, he found him waiting at one end of the village. He took him to the mountains, taught him the secrets of the ancient Mexican Naguas, and with time Julian Osório became one of the most respected iaque sorcerers. He was never cured of his tuberculosis, but lived to the age of 107, always walking along the edge of the abyss.

When the right time came, he started taking disciples, and was responsible for the training of Don Juan Matus, who in turn taught Carlos Castaneda the ancient traditions. Castaneda, with his series of books, ended up making these traditions popular the world over.

One afternoon, talking to another of D. Juan's disciples, Florinda, she commented:

- It is important for all of us to examine the path of Nagual Julian along the edge of the abyss. It makes us understand that we all have a second chance, even if we are very close to giving up.

Castaneda agreed: to examine Julian's path meant understanding his extraordinary fight to stay alive. He understood that this battle was fought by the second, tireless one against bad habits and self-pity. It wasn't a sporadic battle, but a constant, disciplined effort to keep his balance; any distraction or momentary debility might cast him into the abyss of death.

There was only one way of overcoming the temptations of his past life: to focus all his attention on the edge of the abyss, concentrate on every step, keep calm, and not become attached to anything but the present moment.

Statutes for the present moment

1] All men are different. And should do everything possible to continue to be so.

2] Each human being has been granted two courses of action: that of deed and that of contemplation. Both lead to the same place.

3] Each human being has been granted two qualities: power and gift. Power drives man to meet his destiny, his gift obliges him to share with others that which is good in him. A man must know when to use his power, and when to use his gift.

4] Each human being has been granted a

virtue: the capacity to choose. For he who does not use this virtue, it becomes a curse - and others will always choose for him.

5] Each human being has the right to two blessings, which are: the blessing to do right, and the blessing to err. In the latter case, there is always a path of learning leading to the right way.

6] Each human being has his own sexual profile, and should exercise it without guilt - provided he does not oblige others to exercise it with him.

7] Each human being has his own Personal Legend to be fulfilled, and this is the reason he is in the world. The Personal Legend is manifest in his enthusiasm for what he does.

Single paragraph - the Personal Legend may be abandoned for a certain time, provided one does not forget it and returns as soon as pos-

sible.

8] Each man has a feminine side, and each woman has a masculine side. It is necessary to use discipline with intuition, and to use intuition objectively.

9] Each human being must know two languages: the language of society and the language of the omens. The first serves for communication with others. The second serves to interpret messages from God.

10] Each human being has the right to seek out joy, joy being understood as something which makes one content - not necessarily that which makes others content.

11] Each human being must keep alight within him the sacred flame of madness. And must behave like a normal person.

12] The only faults considered grave are the following: not respecting the rights of one's neighbor, letting oneself be paralyzed by fear, feeling guilty, thinking one does not deserve the good and bad which occurs in life, and being a coward.

Paragraph 1 - we shall love our adversaries, but not make alliances with them. They are placed in our way to test our sword, and deserve the respect of our fight.

Paragraph 2 - we shall choose our adversaries, not the other way around.

13] All religions lead to the same God, and all deserve the same respect.

Single paragraph - A man who chooses a religion is also choosing a collective manner of adoration and of sharing the mysteries. Nevertheless, he alone is responsible for his actions

along the Way, and he has no right to transfer to religion the responsibility for his steps and his decisions.

14] We hereby declare the end to the wall dividing the sacred from the profane: from now on, all is sacred.

15] Everything which is done in the present, affects the future by consequence, and the past by redemption.

16] Dispensations to the contrary are herewith revoked.

Stories about sacred stories

The other woman

Eve was walking in the Garden of Eden, when a serpent came over.

“Eat this apple,” said the serpent.

Eve, having been instructed by God, refused.

“Eat this apple,” insisted the serpent, “you must look more beautiful for your man.”

“No need,” answered Eve, “there is no other woman besides me.”

The serpent laughed: “Of course there is.”

And, since Eve didn’t believe him, he took her high up on a hill, where there was a well.

“She is in that cave; Adam is hiding her in there.”

Eve leaned forward and saw, reflected in the water down the well, a beautiful woman. Immediately, without hesitation, she ate the apple the serpent was offering her.

After the deluge

At the end of the forty days of deluge, Noah came out of the ark. He was filled with hope, but all he found outside was death and destruction.

Noah protested:

“Almighty God, if You knew the future, why did You create man? Just for the pleasure of punishing him?”

A triple perfume rose up into the sky: incense, the perfume of Noah’s tears, and the aroma of his actions. Then God replied:

“The prayers of a just man are always heard. I will tell you why I did this: so that you will understand your work. You and your descendants will always be rebuilding a world which came from nothing - and in this way we share the work and the consequences. Now we are all responsible.”

Another reflection, another story

Cain and Abel came to the banks of an enormous lake. They had never seen anything like it.

“There’s something inside it,” said Abel,

looking into the water, not know that it was his reflection.

Cain noticed the same thing, and raised his staff. The image did the same thing. Cain stood waiting for the blow; his image did the same.

Abel studied the surface of the water. He smiled, and the image smiled. He laughed out loud, and saw the other imitating him.

As they walked away, Cain thought:

“How aggressive those creatures are who live in there.”

And Abel told himself:

“I’d like to return, for I met someone both handsome and in good humor.”

I too am on the outside

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the brother who always obeys his father is furious at seeing the rebel son received with celebrations and joy. In the same way, many people who are obedient to the Lord's word, end up becoming the merciless hangmen of all those who one day strayed from the Law.

In a small village in the interior, a well-known sinner was barred from entering the church.

He was angry and prayed:

“Jesus, hear me. They will not let me into your house, for they think I am not worthy.”

“Do not worry, my son,” answered Jesus. “I too am on the outside, together with those I

have always stood alongside - sinners like yourself.”

Do not question the search

Sri Ramakrisna tells the story of a man who was about to cross a river, when master Bibhisana came over, wrote a name on a leaf, tied it to the man's back, and said:

- Don't be afraid. Your faith will help you walk on the waters. But the minute you lose faith, you will drown.

The man trusted Bibhishana, and began to walk on the waters, without any difficulty. At a certain point, he had an overwhelming desire to know what his master had written on the leaf tied to his back.

He took it and read what was written:

“Oh god Rama, help this man to cross the river.”

“Is that all?” thought the man. “And who is this god Rama, anyway?”

The moment this doubt became lodged in his mind, he was submerged and drowned in the strong current.

Does the master not suffer with bad disciples?

A disciple asked Firoz:

- The mere presence of a master causes all sorts of curious people to gather round, to discover something beneficial. Can't this be a hindrance and negative? Can't this divert the master from his path, or cause him to suffer because he could not teach that which he wished?

Firoz, the Sufi master, replied:

- The sight of an avocado tree laden with fruit whets the appetite of all those who pass by. If someone wishes to satisfy his hunger beyond his needs, he will eat more avocados than necessary, and will be sick. However, this causes no indigestion to the man who owns the avocado tree.

“It is the same with our Search. The path must be open to all; but it is for God to set the limits of each individual.”

