

Maktub

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Dedicated to Nha Chica

"Maktub" means "It is written." The Arabs feel that "It is written" is not really a good translation, because, although everything is already written, God is compassionate, and wrote it all down just to help us.

The wanderer is in New York. He has overslept an appointment, and when he leaves his hotel, he finds that his car has been towed by the police. He arrives late for his appointment, the luncheon lasts longer than necessary, and he is thinking about the fine he will have to pay. It will cost a fortune. Suddenly, he remembers the dollar bill he found in the street the day before. He sees some kind of weird relationship between the dollar bill and what happened to him that morning. "Who knows, perhaps I found that money before the person who was supposed to find it had the chance? Maybe I removed that dollar bill from the path of someone who really needed it. Who knows but what I interfered with what was written?" He feels the need to rid himself of the dollar bill, and at that moment sees a beggar sitting on the sidewalk. He quickly hands him the bill, and feels that he has restored a kind of equilibrium to things. "Just a minute," says the beggar. "I'm not looking for a handout. I'm a poet, and I want to read you a poem in return." "Well, make it a short one, because I'm in a hurry," says the wanderer. The beggar says, "If you are still living, it's because you have not yet arrived at the place you should be."

Think of the lizard. It spends most of its life on the ground, envying the birds and indignant at its fate and its shape. "I am the most disliked of all the creatures," it thinks. "Ugly, repulsive, and condemned to crawl along the ground." One day, though, Mother Nature asks the lizard to make a cocoon. The lizard is startled - it has never made a cocoon before. He thinks that he is building his tomb, and prepares to die. Although unhappy with the life he has led up until then, he complains to God: "Just when I finally became accustomed to things, Lord, you take away what little I have." In desperation, he locks himself into the cocoon and awaits the end. Some days later, he finds that he has been transformed into a beautiful butterfly. He is able to fly to the sky, and he is greatly admired. He is surprised at the meaning of life and at God's designs.

A stranger sought out the Father Superior at the monastery of Sceta. "I want to make my life better," he said. "But I cannot keep myself from having sinful thoughts." The father noticed that the wind was blowing briskly outside, and said to the stranger: "It's quite hot in here. I wonder if you could seize a bit of that wind outside and bring it here to cool the room." "That's impossible," the stranger said. "It is also impossible to keep yourself from thinking of things that offend God," answered the monk. "But, if you know how to say no to temptation, they will cause you no harm."

The master says: "If a decision needs to be made, it is better to make it and deal with the consequences. You cannot know beforehand what those consequences will be. The arts of divination were developed in order to counsel people, never to predict the future. They provide good advice, but poor prophecy. "In one of the prayers that Jesus taught us, it says, 'God's will be done.' When His will causes a problem, it also presents a solution. If the arts of divination were able to predict the future, every soothsayer would be wealthy, married and content."

The disciple approached his master: "For years I have been seeking illumination," he said. "I feel that I am close to achieving it. I need to know what the next step is." "How do you support yourself?" the master asked. "I haven't yet learned how to support myself; my parents help me out. But that is only a detail." "Your next step is to look directly at the sun for half a minute," said the master. And the disciple obeyed. When the half-minute was over, the master asked him to describe the field that surrounded them. "I can't see it. The sun has affected my vision," the disciple said. "A man who seeks only the light, while shirking his responsibilities, will never find illumination. And one who keeps his eyes fixed upon the sun ends up blind," was the master's comment.

A man was hiking through a valley in the Pyrenees, when he met an old shepherd. He shared his food with him, and they sat together for a long time, talking about life. The man said that, if one believed in God, he would also have to admit that he was not free, since God would govern every step. In response, the shepherd led him to a ravine where one could hear - with absolute clarity - the echo to any sound. "Life is these walls, and fate is the shout that each of us makes," said the shepherd. "What we do will be raised to His heart, and will be returned to us in the same form. "God acts as the echo of our own deeds."

The master said: "When we sense that the time has come for a change, we begin - unconsciously - to run the tape again, to view every defeat we have experienced until then. "And, of course, as we grow older, our number of difficult moments grows larger. But, at the same time, experience provides us with better means of overcoming those defeats, and of finding the path that allows us to go forward. We have to play that second tape on our mental VCR, too. "If we only watch the tape of our defeats, we become paralyzed. If we only watch the tape of our successes, we wind up thinking we are wiser than we really are. "We need both of those tapes."

The disciple said to his master: "I have spent most of the day thinking about things I should not be thinking about, desiring things I should not desire and making plans I should not be making." The master invited the disciple to take a walk with him through the forest behind his house. Along the way, he pointed to a plant, and asked the disciple if he knew its name. "Belladonna," said the disciple. "It can kill anyone who eats its leaves." "But it cannot kill anyone who simply observes it," said the master. "Likewise, negative desires can cause no evil if you do not allow yourself to be seduced by them."

Between France and Spain is a range of mountains. In one of those mountains, there is a village named Argeles, and in the village is a hill leading to the valley. Every afternoon, an old man climbs and descends the hill. When the

wanderer went to Argeles for the first time, he was not aware of this. On his second visit, he noticed that he crossed paths with the same man. And every time he went to the village, he perceived the man in greater detail -his clothing, his beret, his cane, his glasses. Nowadays, whenever he thinks about that village, he thinks of the old man, as well -even though he is not aware that this is true. Only once did the wanderer ever speak to the man. In a joking fashion, he asked the man, "Do you think that God lives in these beautiful mountains surrounding us?" "God lives," said the old man, "in those places where they allow Him to enter."

The master met one night with his disciples, and asked them to build a campfire so they could sit and talk. "The spiritual path is like a fire that burns before us," he said. "A man who wants to light the fire has to bear with the disagreeable smoke that makes it difficult for him to breathe, and brings tears to his eyes. That is how his faith is rediscovered. However, once the fire is rekindled, the smoke disappears, and the flames illuminate everything around him -providing heat and tranquility." "But what if someone else lights the fire for him?" asked one of the disciples. "And if someone helps us to avoid the smoke?" "If someone does that, he is a false master. A master capable of taking the fire to wherever he desires, or of extinguishing it whenever he wants to do so. And, since he has taught no one how to light the fire, he is likely to leave everyone in the darkness."

"When you strike out along your path, you will find a door with a phrase written upon it," says the master. "Come back to me, and tell me what the phrase says." The disciple gives himself to the search, body and soul, and one day comes upon the door, and then returns to his master. "What was written there was 'THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE,' he says." "Was that written on a wall or on a door?" the master asks. "On a door," the disciple answers. "Well, then, put your hand on the doorknob and open it." The disciple obeyed. Since the phrase was painted with the door, it gave way just as the door itself did. With the door completely open, he could no longer see the phrase -and he went on.

The master says: "Close your eyes. Or even with your eyes open, imagine the following scene: a flock of birds on the wing. Now, tell me how many birds you saw: Five? Eleven? Sixteen? Whatever the response -and it is difficult for someone to say how many birds were seen -one thing becomes quite clear in this small experiment. You can imagine a flock of birds, but the number of birds in the flock is beyond your control. Yet the scene was clear, well-defined, exact. There must be an answer to the question. Who was it that determined how many birds should appear in the imagined scene? Not you!"

A man decided to visit a hermit who, he had been told, lived not far from the monastery at Sceta. After wandering aimlessly about the desert, he finally found the monk. "I need to know what is the first step that should be taken along the spiritual path," he said. The hermit took the man to a small well, and told him to look at his reflection in the water. The man tried to do so, but as he made his attempt, the hermit threw pebbles into the water, causing the surface to be disturbed. "I won't be able to see my face in the water if you keep throwing those pebbles," said the man. "Just as it is impossible for a man to see his face in troep6tI DTI have been thinking about how to make this news less difficult to hear -how to paint it in brighter colors, add to it promises of Paradise, visions of the Absolute, provide esoteric explanations -but they do not apply. Take a deep breath, and prepare yourself. I have to be blunt, and I assure you, I am absolutely certain of what I'm telling you. It is an infallible prediction, without any doubt whatsoever. It's the following: you are going to die. It may be tomorrow or fifty years from now, but -sooner or later --you are going to die. Even if you would rather not. Even if you have other plans. Think carefully about what you are going to do today. And tomorrow. And with the rest of your life."

An explorer, a white man, anxious to reach his destination in the heart of Africa, promised an extra payment to his bearers if they would make greater speed. For several days, the bearers moved along at a faster pace. One afternoon, though, they all suddenly put down their burden and sat on the ground. No matter how much money they were offered, they refused to move on. When the explorer finally asked why they were behaving as they were, he was given the following answer: "We have been moving along at such a fast pace that we no longer know what we are doing. Now we have to wait until our soul catches up with us."

Our Lady, with the infant Jesus in her arms, came down to earth to visit a monastery. In their joy, the padres stood in line to pay their respects: one of them recited poetry, another showed Her illuminated images for the Bible, another recited the names of all of the saints. At the end of the line was a humble padre who had never had the chance to learn from the wise men of his time. His parents were simple people who worked in a traveling circus. When his turn came, the monks wanted to end the payment of respects, fearful that he would damage their image. But he, too, wanted to show his love for the Virgin. Embarrassed, and sensing the disapproval of the brothers, he took some oranges from his pocket and began to toss them in the air -juggling as his parents with the circus had taught him. It was only then that the infant Jesus smiled and clapped his hands with joy. And it was only to the humble monk that the Virgin held out her arms, allowing him to hold her Son for a while.

Do not always try to be consistent. Saint Paul, after all, said, "The wisdom of the world is madness in the eyes of God." To be consistent is always to wear a tie that matches one's socks. It is to have the same opinions tomorrow as one has today. And the movement of the planet? Where is it? So long as you do no harm to another, change your opinion once in a while. Contradict yourself without being embarrassed. This is your right. It doesn't matter what others think -because that's what they will think, in any case. So, relax. Let the universe move about. Discover the joy of surprising yourself. "God selected the crazy things on the earth so as to embarrass the wise men," said Saint Paul.

The master says: "Today would be a good day for doing something out of the ordinary. We could, for example, dance through the streets on our way to work. Look directly into the eyes of a stranger, and speak of love at first sight. Give the boss an idea that may seem ridiculous, an idea we've never mentioned before. The Warriors of the Light allow themselves such days. Today, we could cry over some ancient injustices that still stick in our craw. We could phone someone we vowed never to speak to again (but from whom we would love to receive a message on the answering

machine). Today could be considered a day outside the script that we write every morning. Today, any fault will be permitted and forgiven. Today is a day to enjoy life."

The scientist, Roger Penrose, was walking with some friends and talking animatedly. He fell silent only in order to cross the street. "I remember that -as I was crossing the street -an incredible idea came to me," Penrose said. "But, as soon as we reached the other side, we picked up where we left off, and I couldn't remember what I thought of just a few seconds earlier." Late in the afternoon, Penrose began to feel euphoric -without knowing why. "I had the feeling that something had been revealed to me," he said. He decided to go back over every minute of the day, and -when he remembered the moment when he was crossing the street -the idea came back to him. This time, he wrote it down. It was the theory of black holes, a revolutionary theory in modern physics. And it came back to him because Penrose was able to recall the silence that we always fall into as we cross a street. Saint Anton was living in the desert when a young man approached him. "Father, I sold everything I owned, and gave the proceeds to the poor. I kept only a few things that could help me to survive out here. I would like you to show me the path to salvation."

Saint Anton asked that the lad sell the few things that he had kept, and -with the money -buy some meat in the city. When he returned, he was to strap the meat to his body. The young man did as he was instructed. As he was returning, he was attacked by dogs and falcons who wanted the meat. "I'm back," said the young man, showing the father his wounded body and his tattered clothing. "Those who embark in a new direction and want to keep a bit of the old life, wind up lacerated by their own past," said the saint.

The master says: "Make use of every blessing that God gave you today. A blessing cannot be saved. There is no bank where we can deposit blessings received, to use them when we see fit. If you do not use them, they will be irretrievably lost. God knows that we are creative artists when it comes to our lives. On one day, he gives us clay for sculpting, on another, brushes and canvas, or a pen. But we can never use clay on our canvas, nor pens in sculpture. Each day has its own miracle. Accept the blessings, work, and create your minor works of art today. Tomorrow you will receive others."

The monastery on the bank of the Rio Piedra is surrounded by beautiful vegetation -it is a true oasis within the sterile fields of that part of Spain. There, the small river becomes a mighty current, and is split into dozens of waterfalls. The wanderer is walking through the area, hearing the music of the waters. Suddenly, a grotto -behind one of the cataracts -captures his attention. He studies the rocks, worn by time, and regards the lovely forms created patiently by nature. And he finds a verse by R. Tagore inscribed on a plaque: "It was not a hammer that made these rocks so perfect, but water -with its sweetness, its dance and its song." Where force can only destroy, gentleness can sculpt.

The master says: "Many people are fearful of happiness. For such persons, to be content in life means they must change a number of their habits -and lose their sense of identity. Often we become indignant at the good things that befall us. We do not accept them, because to do so causes us to feel that we are in God's debt. We think: 'Better not to drink from the chalice of happiness, because, when it is empty, we will suffer greatly.' Out of a fear of shrinking, we fail to grow. Out of a fear of weeping, we fail to laugh."

One afternoon at the monastery at Sceta, one of the monks offended another. The superior of the monastery, Brother Sisois, asked that the offended monk forgive his aggressor. "I cannot do that," responded the monk. "It was he that did this, and it he who must pay." At that very moment, Brother Sisois raised his arms to heaven and began to pray: "My Jesus, we no longer have need of thee. We are now capable of making the aggressor pay for his offenses. We are now able to take vengeance into our own hands, and to deal with Good and Evil. Therefore, You can leave us on our own, and their will be no problem." Ashamed, the monk immediately pardoned his brother.

A disciple said, "All masters say that spiritual treasure is discovered through solitary search. So, then, why are we all together here?" "You are together because a forest is always stronger than a solitary tree," the master answered. "The forest conserves humidity, resists the hurricane and helps the soil to be fertile. But what makes a tree strong is its roots. And the roots of a plant cannot help another plant to grow. To be joined together in the same purpose is to allow each person to grow in his own fashion, and that is the path of those who wish to commune with God."

When the wanderer was ten years old, his mother insisted that he take a course in physical education. One of the activities required him to jump from a bridge into a river. Early in the course, he was paralyzed by fear. Each day, he stood last in line, and suffered every time one of those in front made his jump -because it would shortly be his turn. One day, the instructor -noticing his fear -made him take the first jump. Although he was still frightened, it was over so quickly that the fright was replaced by courage. The master says: "Often, we can afford to take our time. But there are occasions when we must roll up our sleeves and resolve a situation. In such cases, there is nothing worse than delay."

Buddha was seated among his disciples one morning when a man approached the gathering. "Does God exist," he asked. "Yes, God exists," Buddha answered. After lunch, another man appeared. "Does God exist?" he asked. "No, God does not exist," Buddha answered. Late in the day, a third man asked Buddha the same question, and Buddha's response was: "You must decide for yourself." "Master, this is absurd," said one of the disciples. "How can you give three different answers to the same question?" "Because they were different persons," answered the Enlightened One. "And each person approaches God in his own way: some with certainty, some with denial and some with doubt."

We are all concerned with taking action, doing things, resolving problems, providing for others. We are always trying to plan something, conclude something else, discover a third. There is nothing wrong with that -after all, that is how we build and modify the world. But the act of Adoration is also a part of life. To stop from time to time, to escape one's self, and to stand silent before the Universe. To kneel down, body and soul. Without asking for something, without thinking, without even giving thanks for anything. Just to experience the warmth of the love that surrounds us. At such moments, unexpected tears may appear -tears neither of happiness nor sadness. Do not be surprised at that. It is a gift. The tears are cleansing your soul.

The master says: "If you must cry, cry like a child. You were once a child, and one of the first things you learned in life was to cry, because crying is a part of life. Never forget that you are free, and that to show your emotions is not shameful. Scream, sob loudly, make as much noise as you like. Because that is how children cry, and they know the fastest way to put their hearts at ease. "Have you ever noticed how children stop crying? They stop because something distracts them. Something calls them to the next adventure. Children stop crying very quickly. And that's how it will be for you. But only if you can cry as children do."

The wanderer is having lunch with a woman friend, an attorney in Fort Lauderdale. A highly animated drunk at the next table insists on talking to her throughout the meal. At one point, the friend asks the drunk to quiet down. But he says: "Why? I'm talking about love in a way that a sober person never does. I'm happy, I'm trying to communicate with strangers. What's wrong with that?" "This isn't the appropriate time," she said. "You mean there are only certain times that are appropriate for showing one's happiness?" With that, the drunk is invited to share her table.

The master says: "We must care for our body. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and deserves our respect and affection. We must make the best use of our time. We must fight for our dreams, and concentrate our efforts to that end. But we must not forget that life is made up of small pleasures. They were placed here to encourage us, assist us in our search, and provide moments of surcease from our daily battles. It is not a sin to be happy. There is nothing wrong in -from time to time- breaking certain rules regarding diet, sleep and happiness. Do not criticize yourself if -once in a while- you waste your time on trifles. These are the small pleasures that stimulate us."

The pianist Artur Schnabel was late arriving for lunch at a first class restaurant in New York. His friends began to be concerned, but Schnabel finally appeared, with a spectacular blonde, one-third his age, at his side. Known to be something of a cheapskate, he surprised his friends by ordering the most expensive entree, and the rarest, most sophisticated wine. When lunch was over, he paid the bill with a smile. "I can see that you are all surprised," Schnabel said. "But today, I went to my lawyer's to prepare my will. I left a goodly amount to my daughter and to my relatives, and made generous donations to charities. But I suddenly realized that I wasn't included in the will; everything went to others. So, I decided to treat myself with greater generosity."

While the master was traveling to spread the word of God, the house in which he lived with his disciples burned down. "He entrusted the house to us, and we didn't take proper care," said one of the disciples. They immediately began to rebuild on what remained after the fire, but the master returned earlier than expected, and saw what they were doing. "So, things are looking up: a new house," he said happily. One of the disciples, embarrassed, told him what had actually happened; that where they had all lived together had been consumed by fire. "I don't understand," said the master. "What I am seeing is men who have faith in life, beginning a new chapter. Those who have lost everything they owned are in a better position than many others, because, from that moment on, things can only improve."

The master says: "If you are traveling the road of your dreams, be committed to it. Do not leave an open door to be used as an excuse such as, 'Well, this isn't exactly what I wanted.' Therein are contained the seeds of defeat. "Walk your path. Even if your steps have to be uncertain, even if you know that you could be doing it better. If you accept your possibilities in the present, there is no doubt that you will improve in the future. But if you deny that you have limitations, you will never be rid of them. "Confront your path with courage, and don't be afraid of the criticism of others. And, above all, don't allow yourself to become paralyzed by self-criticism. "God will be with you on your sleepless nights, and will dry your tears with His love. God is for the valiant."

The master and his disciples were traveling, and, on the road, were unable to eat properly. The master asked some of them to go and seek food. The disciples returned at the end of the day. Each brought with him the little he had been able to gain through the charity of others: fruit that was already going bad, stale bread and bitter wine. One of the disciples, however, brought with him a bag of ripe apples. "I would do anything to help my master and my brothers," he said, sharing the apples with the others. "Where did you get these?" asked the master. "I had to steal them," the disciple answered. "People were giving me only spoiled food, even though they knew that we were preaching the word of God." "Get away with your apples, and never come back," said the master. "Anyone who would rob for me, would rob from me."

We go out into the world in search of our dreams and ideals. Often we make inaccessible that which is within our reach. When we realize the error, we feel we have wasted our time, seeking in the distance what was close at hand. We blame ourselves for making such a mistake, for our useless search and for the problems we have caused. The master says: "Although the treasure may be buried in your house, you will find it only if you leave in search of it. If Peter had not experienced the pain of rejection, he would not have been chosen as the head of the Church. If the prodigal son had not abandoned everything, he would not have been given a feast by his father. There are certain things in our lives that carry a seal that says: 'You will appreciate my value only after you have lost me... and recovered me.' It does no good to try to shorten the path."

The master was meeting with his favorite disciple, and asked him how his spiritual progress was going. The disciple answered that he was now able to dedicate every moment of his day to God. "So, then, all that's left is to forgive your enemies," said the master. The disciple looked at his master, startled: "But that's not necessary. I bear no ill will toward my enemies." "Do you think that God bears you any ill will?" asked the master. "Of course not," the disciple answered. "Yet you ask for his forgiveness, don't you? Do the same with your enemies, even though you bear them no ill will. A person who forgives is washing and perfuming his own heart."

The young Napoleon was trembling like a reed in the wind during the ferocious bombardments at Toulon. A soldier, seeing him that way, said to his fellow soldiers, "Look at him, he's scared to death." "Yes, I am," replied Napoleon. "But I go on fighting. If you felt half the fear I feel, you would have fled a long time ago." The master says: "Fear is not a sign of cowardice. It is fear that allows us to be brave and dignified in the face of life's situations. Someone

who experiences fear -and despite the fear goes on, without allowing it to intimidate him -is giving proof of valiance. But someone who tackles difficult situations without taking the danger into account, is proving only his irresponsibility."

The wanderer is at the feast of Saint John , with its tents, archery contests and country food. Suddenly, a clown begins to mimic his gestures. People laugh, and the wanderer laughs, as well, and invites the clown to have coffee with him. "Commit to life!" says the clown. "If you are alive, you have to shake your arms, jump around, make noise, laugh and talk to people. Because life is exactly the opposite of death. To die is to remain forever in the same position. If you are too quiet, you are not living."

A disciple and his master were walking in the fields one morning. The disciple was asking what diet was needed to provide purification. Although his master had always insisted that all foods were holy, the disciple did not believe it. "There must be some meal that brings us closer to God," the disciple said. "Well, perhaps you are right. Those mushrooms there, for example," said the master. The disciple was excited, thinking that the mushrooms would provide him with purification and ecstasy. But as he stooped to pick one he screamed: "These are poisonous! If I were to eat even one of them, I would die instantly!" he said, horrified. "Well, I don't know any other food that would bring you so quickly to God," said the master.

In the winter of 1981, the wanderer is walking with his wife through the streets of Prague , when he sees a boy doing drawings of some neighborhood buildings. He likes what he sees, and decides to buy one. When he holds out the money, he notices that the boy has no gloves -and the temperature is in the 20s. "Why don't you wear gloves?" he asks. "So that I can hold my pencil." They talk a bit about Prague . The boy offers to do a drawing of the wanderer's wife's face, free of charge. As he waits for the drawing to be completed, the wanderer realizes that something strange had happened: he had conversed for almost five minutes with the boy, and neither spoke the other's language. They had used only gestures, smiles and facial expressions -but the will to share something had allowed them to enter into the world of language without words.

A friend took Hassan to the door of a mosque, where a blind man was begging. "This blind man is the wisest person in our country," said the friend. "How long have you been blind," Hassan asked the man. "Since birth," the man answered. "And how did you become so wise?" "Since I didn't accept my blindness, I tried to become an astronomer," the man answered. "But, since I couldn't see the heavens, I was forced to imagine the stars, the sun and the galaxies. And, the closer I came to God's work, the closer I came to His wisdom."

In a bar in a remote village in Spain , close to the city of Olite , there is a sign placed there by the owner. "Just as I succeeded in finding all the answers, all the questions changed." The master says: "We are always concerned with finding answers. We feel that answers are important to understand what life means. "It is more important to live fully, and allow time to reveal to us the secrets of our existence. If we are too concerned with making sense of life, we prevent nature from acting, and we become unable to read God's signs."

There is an Australian legend about a shaman who was walking with his three sisters when they met the most famous warrior of the time. "I want to marry one of these beautiful girls," the warrior said. "If one of them marries, the other two will suffer", said the shaman. "I am looking for a tribe that allow its men to have three wives." For years, they walked the entire Australian continent without finding such a tribe. "At least one of us could have been happy," said one of the sisters when they were old, and sick of walking. "I was wrong," said the shaman. "But now it's too late." And he turned the three sisters into blocks of stone, so that all who passed by would understand that one person's happiness does not mean others must be sad.

The journalist, Walter Carelli, went to interview the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges. When his interview had been completed, they began to talk about the language that exists beyond words, and about the human being's great capacity to understand others. "I will give you an example," said Borges. And he began to speak in a strange language. Then he stopped and asked the journalist what he had been saying. Before Carelli could respond, the photographer who was with him said: "It's the 'Our Father.' " "Exactly," said Borges. "I was reciting it in Finnish."

An animal trainer with the circus is able to dominate elephants by using a very simple trick: when the animal is still a child, he lashes one of his legs to the trunk of a tree. No matter how hard he struggles, the young elephant is unable to free himself. Little by little, he becomes used to the idea that the trunk of the tree is more powerful than he is. When he becomes an adult possessing tremendous strength, one has only to tie a string about the elephant's leg, and tie him to a sapling. He will not attempt to free himself. As with elephants, our feet are often bound by fragile ties. But since, as children, we became accustomed to the strength of the tree trunk, we do not dare to struggle. Without realizing that a simple courageous act is all that is needed to find our freedom.

The master says: "It avails you nothing to seek explanations about God. You can listen to beautiful words, but they are basically empty. Just as you can read an entire encyclopedia about love without knowing how to love. No one will ever prove that God exists. Certain things in life simply have to be experienced -and never explained. Love is such a thing. God -who is love -is also such a thing. Faith is a childhood experience, in that magical sense that Jesus taught us: 'Children are the kingdom of God.' " "God will never enter your head. The door that He uses is your heart."

The abbot always said that Abbot Joseph had prayed so much that he no longer had anything to worry about -his passions had been conquered. Those words reached the ears of one of the wise men at the monastery of Sceta, who called his novitiates together after their evening meal. "You have heard it said that Abbot Joseph has no further temptations to overcome," he said. "The lack of a struggle weakens the soul. Let us ask that the Lord send down a powerful temptation to Abbot Joseph. And, if he is able to resist that temptation, let us ask for another and another. And when he is once again struggling to resist temptation, let us pray that he never says: 'Lord, take this devil away.' Let us pray that instead he asks: 'Lord, give me the strength to win out over evil'"

There is a moment in every day when it is difficult to see clearly: evening time. Light and darkness blend, and nothing is completely clear nor completely dark. In most spiritual traditions, this moment is considered holy. The Catholic tradition teaches us that we should say a Hail Mary at six o'clock in the evening. In the Quechuan tradition, if we run into a friend in the afternoon and we are still with him at evening time, we must start all over, greeting him again with a "Good evening." At dusk, the balance between man and the planet is tested. God mixes shadow and light to see if the Earth has the courage to go on turning. If the Earth is not frightened by the darkness, night passes -- a new sun shines the next day.

The German philosopher, Schopenhauer, was strolling along a street in Dresden, seeking the answers to questions that bothered him. Passing by a garden, he decided to sit and look at the flowers. One of the residents of the neighborhood observed the philosopher's strange behavior and summoned the police. Minutes later, an officer approached Schopenhauer. "Who are you," the officer asked brusquely. Schopenhauer looked the policeman up and down. "If you can help me find the answer to that question," he said, "I will be eternally grateful to you."

A man searching for wisdom decided to go up into the mountains, since he had been told that every two years God appeared there. During his first year there, he ate everything that the land had to offer. Eventually, the supply was exhausted, and he had to return to the city. "God is unfair!" he exclaimed. "Didn't he know that I waited for a year to hear his voice. I was hungry and had to come back to town." At that moment, an angel appeared. "God would like very much to talk with you," the angel said. "For an entire year he fed you. He was hoping that you would produce your own food after that. But what did you plant? If a man is unable to grow fruit where he lives, he is not ready to talk with God."

People say, "Well, it seems that freedom for man consists of choosing his own brand of slavery. I work eight hours a day, and if I get a promotion, I'll have to work twelve. I got married, and now I have no time to myself. I looked for God, and now I have to attend cult meetings, masses and other religious ceremonies. Everything that's important in life -love, work, faith -winds up becoming a burden that's too heavy to bear." The master says: "Only love allows us to escape. Only love turns slavery into freedom. If we cannot love, it is better to stop now. Jesus said: 'Better to be blind in one eye than for the entire body to perish in darkness.' " "Hard words. But true."

A hermit fasted for an entire year, eating only once a week. After this sacrifice, he asked that God reveal to him the true meaning of a certain passage in the Bible. No response was heard. "What a waste of time," the hermit said to himself. "I gave up so much, and God didn't even answer! Better to leave these parts and find a monk who knows the meaning of the verse." At that moment, an angel appeared. "The twelve months of fasting served only to make you believe that you were better than others, and God does not answer a vain person," the angel said. "But when you were humble, and sought help from others, God sent me." And the angel explained what he wanted to know.

The master says: "Notice how certain words were formed so as to show their meaning clearly. 'Let us take the word 'preoccupation.' It can be divided in two: 'pre' and 'occupation.' It means to occupy oneself with something before it happens. 'Who, in the entire universe, could have the gift of occupying himself with a thing that has not yet happened? Never be preoccupied. Be attentive to your destiny and to your path. Learn everything you need to know in order to handle the bright sword entrusted to you. Pay attention to how your friends, your masters and your enemies fight. Train yourself sufficiently, but do not commit the worst of errors: believing that you know what kind of blow your adversary is going to deliver.'"

Friday comes, you go home, and you pick up the newspapers that you weren't able to read during the week. You turn on the television with the sound off. You put on a cassette tape. You use the remote control to jump from one channel to the other, as you try to turn the pages of the paper and listen to the music. The papers contain nothing new, the TV programs are repetitious, and you've already heard the cassette dozens of times. Your wife is attending to the children, sacrificing her youthful years without really understanding why she is doing so. An excuse occurs to you: "Well, that's the way life is." No, that's not the way life is. Life is enthusiasm. Try to remember where it was that you hid away your enthusiasm. Take your wife and children with you and try to find it again, before it's too late. Love never kept anyone from following his dream.

On Christmas Eve, the wanderer and his wife did an evaluation of the year that was about to end. During dinner at the only restaurant in a village in the Pyrenees, the wanderer began to complain about something that hadn't gone the way he thought it should have. His wife stared at the Christmas tree decorating the restaurant. The wanderer thought that she was no longer interested in the conversation, and changed the subject: "Aren't the lights on the tree pretty?" he said. "They are," his wife answered. "But if you look closely, among the dozens of bulbs there is one that has burned out. It seems to me that, instead of seeing the past year in terms of the dozens of blessings that illuminated it, you are fixating on the only bulb that illuminated nothing."

"Look at that humble holy man, walking the road", said one devil to another. "I think I'll go over there and conquer his soul." "He won't listen to you, because he is concerned only with holy things," said his companion. But the devil, in his usual ardent fashion, dressed himself as the Archangel Gabriel, and appeared before the holy man. "I have come to help you," he said. "You must have me confused with someone else," answered the holy man. "I have done nothing in my life to deserve the attention of an angel." And he continued on his way, never knowing what he had avoided.

A friend of the wanderer went to a play on Broadway, and went out for a drink during the intermission. The lobby was crowded, and people were smoking, talking and drinking. A pianist was playing, but no one paid any attention to his music. The wanderer's friend sipped her drink and studied the musician. He seemed bored -just doing his job and waiting for the intermission to end. After another drink, and feeling a bit high, she approached the piano. "You're a pain in the neck! Why don't you play just for yourself?" she exclaimed. The pianist was surprised. And then he began to play the kind of music he liked. In just a few minutes, the entire lobby fell silent. When the song was over, there was

enthusiastic applause.

Saint Francis of Assisi was a very popular young man when he decided to leave it all behind and do his life's work. Saint Clare was a beautiful young woman when she took her vow of chastity. Saint Raimundo Lull knew the great intellectuals of his time when he went off into the desert. The spiritual quest is, above all, a challenge. Whoever uses it to flee from his problems will not go very far. It does no good for someone who cannot make friends to retire from the world. It accomplishes nothing to take a vow of poverty if you are already unable to earn a living. And it makes no sense to become humble if one is already a coward. It is one thing to have something and give it up. It is another not to have something and to condemn those who have. It is easy for a weak man to go around preaching absolute charity, but what good is it? The master says: "Praise the Lord's work. Conquer yourself as you confront the world."

It is easy to be difficult. All we have to do is stay away from people, and in that way, avoid suffering. That way, we don't have to risk love, disappointment, frustrated dreams. It is easy to be difficult. We don't have to be concerned about phone calls we should have made, people who ask us for help, charity that should be extended. It is easy to be difficult. We just have to pretend that we live in an ivory tower, and never shed a tear. We just have to spend the rest of our lives playing a role. It is easy to be difficult. All we have to do is reject everything good that life offers.

The patient said to his physician, "Doctor, I am ruled by fear, and fear has taken away all joy." "Here in my office, there is a mouse that nibbles at my books," the doctor said. "If I become desperate over the mouse, he will hide from me, and I'll do nothing else with my life but hunt for him. Instead, I have put all of my best books in a safe place, and I allow him to eat at some of the others. That way, he continues to be only a mouse, and not a monster. Fear a few things, and concentrate all of your fear on them -so you can be courageous in facing the important things."

The master says: "Often it is easier to love than to be loved. We find it hard to accept the help and support of others. Our attempts to appear independent deprive others of the opportunity to demonstrate their love. Many parents, in their old age, rob their children of the chance to show them the same affection and support they received as children. Many husbands (and wives), when they are overtaken by affliction, feel ashamed at depending upon others. As a result, the waters of love do not spread. You should accept a gesture of love from someone. You have to allow others to help you, to give you the strength to go on. If you accept such love with purity and humility, you will understand that Love is neither giving nor receiving -it is participating."

Eve was walking through the Garden of Eden, when the serpent approached her. "Eat this apple," he said. Eve, well taught by God, refused. "Eat this apple," the serpent insisted. "Because you have to become more beautiful for your husband." "I don't need it," Eve answered. "He has no one else but me." The serpent laughed: "Of course he does." Since Eve did not believe him, he took her to the top of a hill where there was a well. "She's down there. That's where Adam hid her." Eve looked in and saw a beautiful woman reflected in the water. And then she ate the apple the snake offered.

Excerpts from a "Letter to my Heart:" "My heart, I will never condemn you or criticize you. Nor will I ever be ashamed of what you say. I know that you are a beloved child of God, and that He protects you within a glorious and loving radiance. I believe in you, my heart. I am on your side, and I will always ask for blessing in my prayers. I will always ask that you find the help and support you need. I believe in you, my heart. I believe that you will share your love with anyone who needs or deserves it. That my path is your path, and that we will walk together to the Holy Spirit. I ask of you: trust in me. Know that I love you and that I am trying to give you all the freedom you need to continue beating joyfully in my breast. I will do everything I can so that you never feel uncomfortable with my presence surrounding you."

The master says: "When we decide to act, it is natural that unexpected conflict should arise. It is natural that we will be wounded as a result of such conflict. Wounds heal: they stay on as scars, and that is blessing. Such scars stay with us for the rest of our lives, and are of great help to us. If at some point -for whatever reason -our desire to return to the past is strong, we have only to look at our scars. Scars are the marks of handcuffs, and remind us of the horrors of prison -and with that reminder we move forward again."

In his Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul tells us that sweetness is one of the main characteristics of love. Let us never forget: love is tenderness. A rigid soul does not allow the hand of God to mold it in accordance with His desires. The wanderer was traveling a narrow road in the north of Spain, when he saw a man stretched out in a bed of flowers. "Aren't you crushing those flowers?" the wanderer asked. "No," the man answered. "I'm trying to take a bit their sweetness from them."

The master says: "Pray every day. Even if your prayers are wordless and ask for nothing, and can hardly be understood. Make a habit of your prayers. If that is difficult at the beginning, decide for yourself: 'I am going to pray every day this week.' And renew that promise for each of the next seven days. Remember that you are creating not only a more intimate link with the spiritual world; you are also training your will. It is through certain practices that we develop the discipline needed for life's combat. It does no good to forget the resolution one day and pray twice the next. Nor to pray seven times the same day, and go through the rest of the week thinking that you have completed your task. Certain things have to occur with the right pace and rhythm."

An evil man, about to die, meets an angel at the gates to Hell. The angel says to him: "It is enough for you to have done one good thing in your life, and that will help you." "Think hard," the angel said. The man remembers that one time, as he was walking through a forest, he saw a spider in his path and detoured so as not to step on it. The angel smiles and a spider web comes down from the sky, allowing the man to ascend to Paradise. Others among the condemned take advantage of the web, and begin to make the climb. But the man turns on them and begins to push them off, fearing that the web will break. At that moment, it breaks, and the man is once again returned to Hell. "What a pity," the man hears the angel say. "Your concern with yourself turned the only good thing you ever did into evil."

The master says: "A crossroad is a holy place. There, the pilgrim has to make a decision. That is why the gods usually sleep and eat at crossroads. Where roads cross, two great forces are concentrated -the path that will be chosen, and the path to be ignored. Both are transformed into a single path, but only for a short period of time. The pilgrim may rest, sleep a bit, and even consult with the gods that inhabit the crossroad. But no one can remain there forever: once his choice is made, he has to move on, without thinking about the path he has rejected. Otherwise, the crossroad becomes a curse."

Humanity has committed some of its worst crimes in the name of the truth. Men and women have been burned at the stake. The entire culture of some civilizations has been destroyed. Those who committed the sin of eating meat were kept at a distance. Those who sought a different path were ostracized. One person, in the name of truth, was crucified. But -before He died -He left us a great definition of the Truth. It is not what provides us with certitudes. It is not what makes us better than others. It is not what we keep within the prison of our preconceived ideas. The Truth is what makes us free. "Know the Truth, and the truth will make thee free," He said.

One of the monks at the monastery at Sceta committed a grave error, and the wisest of hermits was summoned by the brothers to judge him. The wise hermit did not want to come, but the group was so insistent that he agreed. Before he left his place, though, he took a bucket and made some holes in its bottom. Then, he filled it with sand, and began his walk to the monastery. The father superior, noticing the bucket, asked what it was for. "I have come to judge another," the hermit said. "My sins are running out behind me, as does the sand in this bucket. But, since I do not look behind me, and cannot see my own sins, I am able to judge another." The monks immediately decided not to proceed with the judgment.

Written on the wall of a small church in the Pyrenees : "Lord, may this candle I have just lit Make light, And illuminate me when I have problems and make decisions. May it make fire, So that You can burn away my egotism, pride and impurity. May it make a flame, So that You can warm my heart and teach me to love. I cannot remain for long in Your church. But in leaving this candle, a bit of myself remains here. Help me to extend my prayer to the activities of this day. Amen."

A friend of the wanderer decided to spend a few weeks at a monastery in Nepal . One afternoon, he entered one of the many temples of the monastery, and saw a smiling monk seated on the altar. "Why are you smiling," he asked. "Because I understand the meaning of bananas," said the monk, opening his bag and taking out a rotten banana. "This is a life that ran its course, and was not made use of -and now it is too late." Then he removed from his bag a banana that was still green. He showed it to the man, and put it back in his bag. "This is a life that has not yet run its course, and awaits the right moment," he said. Finally, he took from his bag a ripe banana, peeled it, and shared it with the man, saying: "This is the present moment. Know how to live it without fear."

A woman friend had gone out with the exact amount of money she needed to take her son to the movies. The boy was excited, and every minute asked his mother how long it would take to get there. When she was stopped at a traffic light, she saw a beggar seated on the sidewalk. "Give all the money you have with you to him," she heard a voice say. The woman argued with the voice. She had promised to take her son to the movies. "Give it all," the voice insisted. "I can give him half, and my son can go in alone while I wait outside," she said. But the voice didn't want to discuss it. "Give it all!" She had no time to explain it all to the boy. She stopped the car and held out all the money she had to the beggar. "God exists, and you have proved it to me," the beggar said. "Today is my birthday. I was sad, and ashamed to be begging. So, I decided not to beg: if God exists, he will give me a present."

A man is walking through a small village in the middle of a downpour, and sees a house burning. As he approaches it, he sees a man surrounded by flames seated in the living room. "Hey, your house is on fire!", the traveler shouts. "I know that," the man answers. "Well then, why don't you get out?" "Because it's raining," says the man. "My mother always told me you can catch pneumonia going out in the rain." Zao Chi's comment about the fable: "Wise is the man who can leave a situation when he sees that he is forced to do so."

In certain magic traditions, disciples devote one day a year -or a weekend if it is needed -to enter into contact with the objects in their home. They touch each object and ask aloud: "Do I really need this?" They take the books from their shelves: "Will I ever reread this?" They examine each souvenir they have kept: "Do I still consider the moment that this object reminds me of to be important?" They open all of their closets: "How long is it since I wore this? Do I really need it?" The master says: "Objects have their own energy. When they are not used, they turn into standing water in the house -- a good place for rot and for mosquitos. You must be attentive, and allow that energy to flow freely. If you keep what is old, the new has no place in which to manifest itself."

There is an old Peruvian legend that tells of a city where everyone was happy. Its inhabitants did as they pleased, and got along well with each other. Except for the mayor, who was sad because he had nothing to govern. The jail was empty, the court was never used, and the notary office produced nothing, because a man's word was worth more than the paper it was written on. One day, the mayor called in some workmen from a distant place to build an enclosure at the center of the village's main square. For a week, the sound of hammers and saws could be heard. At the end of the week, the mayor invited everyone in the village to the inauguration. With great solemnity, the fence boards were removed and there could be seen... a gallows. The people asked each other what the gallows was doing there. In fear, they began to use the court to resolve anything that before had been settled by mutual agreement. They went to the notary office to register documents that recorded what before had simply been a man's word. And they began to pay attention to what the mayor said, fearing the law. The legend says that the gallows never was used. But its presence changed everything.

The master says: "From now on -and for the next few hundred years -the universe is going to boycott all those have preconceived ideas. The energy of the Earth has to be renewed. New ideas need space. The body and the soul

need new challenges. The future is knocking on our door, and all ideas -except those that are based upon preconceptions -will have a chance to appear. What is important will remain; what is useless will disappear. But let each person judge only his own concepts. We are not the judges of the dreams of others. In order to have faith in our own path, it is not necessary to prove that another's path is wrong. One who does that does not believe in his own steps."

Life is like a great bike race, the goal of which is to live one's own Personal Destiny. At the starting line, we are all together, sharing camaraderie and enthusiasm. But, as the race develops, the initial joy gives way to challenges: exhaustion, monotony, doubts as to one's ability. We notice that some friends refuse to accept the challenges -they are still in the race, but only because they cannot stop in the middle of a road. There are many of them. They ride along with the support car, talk among themselves and complete the task. We find ourselves outdistancing them; and then we have to confront solitude, the surprises around unfamiliar curves, problems with the bicycle. We wind up asking ourselves if the effort is worth it. Yes, it is worth it. Don't give up.

A master and his disciple are riding across the Saudi Arabian desert. The master makes use of every moment of their ride to teach the disciple about faith. "Trust in God," he says. "God never abandons his children." At night, in their camp, the master asks the disciple to tie the horses to a nearby rock. The disciple goes to the rock, but remembers what the master has taught him: "He must be testing me," he thinks. "I should leave the horses to God." And he leaves the horses unfettered. In the morning, the disciple sees that the horses have disappeared. Revolted, he comes back to his master. "You know nothing about God," he exclaims. "I left the horses in His care, and now the animals are gone." "God wanted to care for the horses," the master answered. "But to do that, he needed your hands to tie them."

"Perhaps Jesus sent some of his apostles to Hell to save souls," John says. "Even in Hell, all is not lost." The idea surprises the wanderer. John is a fireman in Los Angeles, and today is his day off. "Why do you say that?" the wanderer asks. "Because I've gone through Hell here on earth. I go into buildings that are in flames and see people desperate to escape, and many times I risk my life to save them. I'm only a particle in this immense universe, forced to act like a hero in the many fires I've fought. If I -- a nothing -can do such things, imagine what Jesus could do! I have no doubt that some of His apostles have infiltrated Hell, and are there saving souls."

The master says: "A great many of the primitive civilizations practiced the custom of burying their dead in a fetal position. 'He is being born again, in another life, and we must place him in the same position he was in when he came into this world,' they said. For those civilizations, death was only another step along the way of the universe. Little by little, the world has lost its calm acceptance of death. But it's not important what we think, or what we do or what we believe in: each of us will die one day. Better to do as the old Yaqui Indians did: regard death as an advisor. Always ask: 'Since I'm going to die, what should I be doing now?'"

Life is not about giving or receiving advice. If we need assistance, it is better to see how others solve — or fail to solve -their problems. Our angel is always present, and often uses someone else's lips to tell us something. But it usually reaches us in a casual way, generally at a moment in which -although we are attentive -our preoccupations prevent us from seeing the miracle of life. We must allow our angel to speak to us in the way he knows best -when he thinks it is needed. The master says: "Advice is a theory about life -and the practice of life is generally quite different."

A padre in the Charismatic Renewal movement in Rio de Janeiro was riding on a bus when he suddenly heard a voice saying that he should stand up and preach the word of Christ right there. The padre began to converse with the voice: "They'll think I'm ridiculous! This is no place for a sermon." But the voice insisted that he had to speak out. "I'm a timid man, please don't ask this of me," he implored. The internal impulse persisted. Then he remembered his promise -to accept all of Christ's designs. He stood up -consumed with embarrassment -and began to speak of the Evangelist. The riders listened to him in silence. He looked at each of the passengers, and all were staring directly at him. He said everything that he was feeling, completed his sermon and sat down. Even today, he has no idea what task he was performing there on the bus. But that he was performing a mission, he has no doubt whatsoever. An

African witch doctor is leading his novice through the jungle. Although he is quite elderly, he makes his way with agility, while his young novice slips a falls many times. The novice picks himself up, swears, spits on the traitorous ground and continues to follow his master. After a long hike, they reach a sacred place. Without pausing, the witch doctor turns around and begins to walk back to where they had started. "You have taught me nothing today," says the novice, after falling again. "I have been teaching you something, but you have failed to learn it," says the witch doctor. "I'm trying to teach you how to deal with life's mistakes." "And how should I deal with them?" "The same way as you should deal with the falls you have taken," answers the witch doctor. "Instead of cursing the place where you fall, you should try to find out what made you slip in the first place."

The father superior of the monastery at Sceta was visited one afternoon by a hermit. "My spiritual advisor does not know how to direct me," the hermit said. "Should I leave him?" The father superior said not a word, and the hermit returned to the desert. A week later, he returned to visit the father superior. "My spiritual advisor does not know how to direct me," he said. "I have decided to leave him." "That is wise," said the father superior. "When a man perceives that his soul is discontented, he cannot ask for advice. Make the decisions needed to preserve your passage through this life."

A young woman comes to see the wanderer. "I want to tell you something," she says. "I have always believed that I had the gift of curing. But I never had the courage to try it with anyone. Until one day, my husband was having great pain in his left leg, and there was no one available to help him. I decided -with some embarrassment -to place my hands on his leg and ask that the pain disappear. 'I did this without really believing I would be able to help him, and as I did so, I heard him praying. 'Please, Lord, make my wife capable of being the Messenger of Your light and your strength,' he said. My hand began to become hot, and the pain disappeared. 'Afterwards, I ask him why he had prayed that way.

He answered that it was in order to give me confidence. Today, I am able to cure, thanks to those words."

The philosopher, Aristipus, was enjoying his power at the court of Dionysus, the tyrant of Syracuse. One afternoon, he came upon Diogenes preparing a meal of lentils for himself. "If you were willing to be courteous to Dionysus, you would not have to eat lentils," Aristipus said. "If you knew how to enjoy lentils, you would not have to be courteous to Dionysus," Diogenes answered. The master says: "It is true that everything has its price, but the price is always relative. When we follow our dreams, we may give the impression to others that we are miserable and unhappy. But what others think is not important. What is important is the joy in our heart."

A man who lived in Turkey was told of a great master who lived in Persia. Without hesitation, he sold all of his belongings, said good-bye to his family and went off in search of wisdom. After several years of wandering, he found the hut where the great master lived. With fear and respect, he knocked on his door. The great master appeared. "I am from Turkey," the man said. "I have come all this way to ask you just one question." The old man was surprised, but said, "Fine. You may ask me one question." "I want to be clear about what it is that I am asking. May I say it in Turkish?" "Yes," said the wise man. "And I have already answered your only question. If there is anything else you want to know, ask your heart. It will provide you with the answer." And he closed the door.

The master says: "The word is power. Words transform the world, and man as well. 'We have all heard it said: 'We should not talk about the good things that have happened to us, because the envy of others will ruin our happiness.' Nothing of the sort. Those who are winners speak with pride of the miracles in their lives. If you release positive energy into the air, it attracts more positive energy, and makes those who really wish you well happy. As for the envious and defeated, they can only do damage to you if you give them this power. Have no fear. Speak out about the good things in your life to whoever will listen. The Soul of the World has a great need for your happiness."

There was a Spanish king who was very proud of his lineage. He was also known to be cruel to those who were weak. He was walking one day with his senior people through a field in Aragon, where, years before, his father had fallen in battle. They came upon a holy man there, picking through an enormous pile of bones. "What are you doing there?" asked the king. "All honor to Your Majesty," said the holy man. "When I learned that the king of Spain was coming here, I decided to recover the bones of your father to give them to you. But no matter how hard I look, I cannot find them. They are the same as the bones of the farmers, the poor, the beggars and the slaves."

"Who is the best swordsman?" asked a warrior of his master. "Go to the field near the monastery," his master answered. "There is a rock there. I want you to insult the rock." "But why would I do that?" the disciple asked. "The rock will not respond." "Well, then attack it with your sword," the master said. "I won't do that, either," the disciple answered. "My sword would break. And if I attack the rock with my hands, I'll injure my fingers and have no impact on it. That wasn't what I asked. Who is the best swordsman?" "The best is the one who is like the rock," said his master. "Without unsheathing a sword, it demonstrates that no one can conquer it."

The wanderer arrives at the village of San Martin de Unx, in Navarra, and is able to find the woman who keeps the key to the Roman church in the ruined place. With great kindness, she climbs the narrow stairs and opens the door. The darkness and the silence of the medieval temple have an emotional impact on the wanderer. He falls into conversation with the woman, and as they talk, mentions that, although it is mid-day, little can be seen of the beautiful works of art there in the church. "The detail can be seen only at dawn," the woman says. "The legend says that it was this that the builders of the church wanted to teach us: that God has a particular time for showing us His glory."

The master says: "There are two gods. The god that our professors taught us about, and the God who teaches us. The god of whom people always speak, and the God that speaks to us. The god we have learned to fear, and the God who speaks to us of compassion. There are two gods. The god who is on high, and the God who takes part in our daily lives. The god who makes demands upon us, and the God who pardons our debts. The god who threatens us with the fires of Hell, and the God who shows us the best path. There are two gods. A god who crushes us under our sins, and a God who liberates us with His love."

The sculptor, Michelangelo, was once asked how it was that he could create such beautiful works. "It's very simple," he answered. "When I look at a block of marble, I see the sculpture inside it. All I have to do is remove what doesn't belong." The master says: "There is a work of art each of us was destined to create. That is the central point of our life, and -no matter how we try to deceive ourselves -we know how important it is to our happiness. Usually, that work of art is covered by years of fears, guilt and indecision. But, if we decide to remove those things that do not belong, if we have no doubt as to our capability, we are capable of going forward with the mission that is our destiny. That is the only way to live with honor."

An old man who is about to die calls a young man to his side and tells him a story of heroism: in wartime, he had helped a man to survive. He provided the man with shelter, food and protection. When the man who had been saved was once again in a safe place, he decided to betray his saviour and turn him over to the enemy. "How did you escape?" the young man asked. "I didn't escape. I was the betrayer," said the old man. "But in telling the story as if I were the hero, I can understand everything he did for me."

The master says: "We all need love. Love is a part of human nature, as much as eating, drinking and sleeping. Sometimes we find ourselves, completely alone, looking at a beautiful sunset, and we think: 'This beauty isn't important, because I have no one to share it with.' At such times, we should ask: how often have we been asked to give love, and turned away? How many times have we been fearful of approaching someone and saying, unmistakably, that we love them? Beware of solitude. It is as much of an addiction as the most dangerous narcotic. If the sunset no longer makes sense to you, be humble, and go in search of love. Know that -as with other spiritual blessings -the more you are willing to give, the more you will receive in return."

A Spanish missionary was visiting an island when he came upon three Aztec holy men. "How do you pray?" the

padre asked. "We have only one prayer," one of the Aztecs answered. "We say, 'God, you are three and we are three. Have pity on us.' " "I'm going to teach you a prayer that God will hear," said the missionary. And he taught them a Catholic prayer, and went on his way. Shortly before returning to Spain, he stopped again at the same island. When his ship approached the shore, the padre saw the three holy men walking across the water toward him. "Father, father," one of them said. "Please teach us again that prayer that God listens to. We have forgotten the words." "It's not important," the padre answered, having witnessed the miracle. And he asked God's pardon for not having understood that He speaks all languages.

Saint John of the Cross teaches us that, along our spiritual path, we should not look for visions, or believe the statements we hear from others on the same path. Our only support should be our faith, because that faith is clear, transparent and born within us. It cannot be confused. A writer was conversing with a priest, and asked what it was to experience God. "I don't know," the priest answered. "The only experience I have had so far is the experience of my faith in God." And that is the most important.

The master says: "Forgiveness is a two-way street. Each time we forgive someone, we are also pardoning ourselves. If we are tolerant of others, it is easier to accept our own mistakes. That way, without guilt or bitterness, we are able to improve our approach to life. When, out of weakness, we allow hatred, envy and intolerance to vibrate around us, we wind up being consumed by the vibrations. Peter asked Christ: 'Master, should I forgive the other person seven times?' And Christ answered: 'Not just seven, but seventy times.' The act of forgiving cleanses the astral plane, and shows us the true light of the Divinity."

The master says: "The ancient masters were accustomed to creating "personages" to help their disciples to deal with the darker side of their personality. Many of the stories about the creation of such personages have become well-known fairy tales. The process is simple: you have only to place your anxieties, fears and disappointments within an invisible being who stands at your left side. He functions as a "villain" in your life, suggesting attitudes that you would not like to adopt -but wind up doing so. Once that personage is created, it is easier to reject his advice. It's extremely simple. And that's why it works so well."

"How can I know what is the best way to act in my life?" a disciple asked his master. The master asked that the disciple build a table. When the table was almost finished -needing only the nails driven into the top -the master approached the disciple. The disciple was driving the nails with three precise strokes. One nail, though, was more difficult, and the disciple had to hit it one more time. The fourth blow drove it too deep, and the wood was scarred. "Your hand was used to three blows of the hammer," the master said. "When any action becomes habitual, it loses its meaning; and it may wind up causing damage. Every action is your action, and there is only one secret: never let the habit take command of your movements."

Near the city of Soria, in Spain, there is an ancient hermitage carved into the rocks. Some years ago a man who abandoned everything to dedicate himself to contemplation lived there. The wanderer is trying to find the place one autumn afternoon, and, when he does, he is received with total cordiality. After sharing a piece of bread, the hermit asked that the wanderer go with him to a small stream nearby to collect some edible mushrooms. As they walk, a boy approaches them. "Holy man," he says, "I have been told that, in order to achieve, we should avoid eating meat. Is that true?" "Accept with joy everything that life offers you," the man answered. "Do not commit sins against the spirit, but do not blaspheme the earth's generosity."

The master says: "If your journey is difficult, listen to your heart. Try to be as honest as possible with yourself, and see whether you are really following your path and paying the price for your dreams. If you do this, and nevertheless your life is hard, the moment comes when it is right to complain. But do it with respect, as a child complains to a parent. But do not fail to ask for more attention and help. God is Father and Mother, and parents always want the best for their children. It may be that the learning process is being pushed too hard, and it costs nothing to request a pause, some affection. But never exaggerate. Job complained at the proper time, and his belongings were returned to him. Al Afid complained too much, and God stopped listening".

A pious man found himself suddenly deprived of all of his wealth. Knowing that God would help him no matter what, he began to pray: "Lord, please let me win the lottery," he asked. He prayed for years and years, but was still poor. One day he died, and -since he was a very pious man, he went straight to heaven. When he arrived there, he refused to enter. He said that he had lived his entire life according to his religious teachings, and that God had never allowed him to win the lottery. "Everything You promised me was a lie," the man said, disgusted. "I was always ready to help you win," the Lord responded. "But, no matter how much I wanted to do so, you never bought a lottery ticket."

An aged Chinese wise man was walking through a field of snow, when he came upon a woman weeping. "Why are you crying?" he asked. "Because I'm thinking about my life, my youth, the beauty that I saw in the mirror and the men I loved. God is cruel to have given the ability to remember. He knew that I would remember the spring of my life, and cry." The wise man stood there in the field of snow, staring at a fixed point and contemplating. At a certain point, the woman stopped crying: "What do you see there?" she asked. "A field of roses," answered the wise man. "God was generous with me when he gave me the ability to remember. He knew that in winter, I could always remember spring -and smile."

The master says: "One's personal destiny is not as simple as it appears. Not at all. It may even call for some sort of dangerous action. When we want something, we put into motion some powerful energies, and we are no longer able to conceal from ourselves the true meaning of our life. When we want something, we make a choice and we pay a price. To follow one's dream carries a price. It may demand that we give up old habits, it may create problems for us, and it may bring disappointment. But, no matter how high the price, it is never so high as at we pay for not having lived out our personal destiny. Because one day we will look back and see everything we have done, and hear our own heart

say: 'I wasted my life.' Believe me, that is the worst phrase you can ever hear."

A master had hundreds of disciples. All of them prayed at the appropriate time -except one, who was a drunkard. On the day that he was dying, the master called the drunken disciple to his side, and passed on to him all of his occult secrets. The other disciples were revolted: "What a shame! We sacrificed everything for a master who was unable to perceive our qualities," they said. The master said: "I had to pass on these secrets to a man I knew well. Those who appear to be virtuous generally conceal their vanity, their pride and their intolerance. So, I chose the only disciple whose defects I could see: the drinker."

The Cistercian father Marcos Garcia said: "Sometimes God takes back a certain blessing in order to help the person understand it better. God knows up to what point he can test a soul -and he never goes beyond that point. At such times, we never say: 'God has abandoned me.' If the Lord imposes a demanding test upon us, he always provides us with a sufficient number of graces -probably more than sufficient -to meet the test. When we feel far from His presence, we should ask ourselves: 'Do we understand how to make use of what he has placed in our path?'"

Sometimes days or weeks pass without our having received a gesture of affection from anyone. Such periods are difficult; when human kindness seems to have disappeared, and life seems to be simply a matter of survival. The master says: "We must examine our own fireplace. We must place more kindling, and try to illuminate the dark room that our life has become. When we hear our fire crackling and the burning wood snapping, and when we read the stories the flames are telling, hope returns to us. If we are capable of loving, we will also be capable of being loved. It is only a matter of time."

At a luncheon, a person broke his glass. Another person said, "That's a sign of good luck." Everyone at the table knew of the belief. But a rabbi who was there asked: "Why is that a sign of good luck?" "I don't know," said the wanderer's wife. "Perhaps it's an ancient way of preventing the guest from feeling bad." "No, that's not the explanation," the rabbi said. "Certain Jewish traditions have it that every man has a certain quota of luck, which he uses up over the course of his life. One can make that quota pay interest if he uses his luck only for things he really needs -or he can use his luck in a wasteful fashion. We Jews also say 'Good luck' when someone breaks a glass. But it means, 'It's good that you didn't use up any of your luck trying to keep the glass from breaking. Now, you can use it for more important things.'"

Padre Abraham knew that close to the monastery at Sceta lived a hermit reputed to be a wise man. He sought the man out and asked him: "If you were to find a beautiful woman in your bed today, would you be able to convince yourself that it was not a woman?" "No," answered the wise man. "But I would be able to control myself." The padre went on: "And if you found some gold coins in the desert, would you be able to regard the money as stones?" "No," said the wise man. "But I would be able to control myself and leave them there." The padre insisted: "And if you were consulted by two brothers, one of whom hates you and the other of whom loves you, would you be able to regard them as equals?" The hermit answered: "Even though I might suffer inside, I would treat the one who loved me in the same way as the one who hated me." "I will explain to you what a wise man is," the padre later told his disciples. "It is he who, rather than killing his passions, is able to control them."

W. Frasier, throughout his life, wrote about the American west, and was proud of having written the screenplay for a film that starred Gary Cooper. He said that there were very few times in his life when he became angry. "I learned many things from the pioneers," he said. "They fought the indians, crossed deserts, searched for food and water in remote places. And all that was written during that period shows that they demonstrated a curious trait: the pioneers wrote only about and talked about only good things. Instead of complaining, they composed songs and jokes about their difficulties. That way, they avoided discouragement and depression. And today, at age 88, I try to do the same thing."

The text is adapted from a poem by John Muir: "I want to free my soul so that it can enjoy all of the gifts that the spirits own. When this is possible, I will not try to know the craters of the moon, nor track the rays of the sun to their source. I will not try to understand the beauty of a star, nor the artificial desolation of a human being. "When I learn how to free my soul, I will follow the dawn, and to return with it through time. When I learn how to free my soul, I will plunge into the magnetic currents that drain into an ocean where all waters meet to form the Soul of the World. "When I learn how to free my soul, I will try to read the splendid page of Creation from the beginning."

One of the sacred symbols of Christianity is the figure of the pelican. The reason is simple: in the total absence of food to eat, the pelican plunges its beak into its own flesh to feed its young. The master says: "We are often incapable of understanding the blessings we have received. Many times we do not perceive what He does to keep us spiritually nourished. There is a story about a pelican who -during a hard winter -sacrificed herself by providing her own flesh to her children. When she finally died of weakness, one of the nestlings said to another: 'Finally! I was getting tired of eating the same old thing every day.'"

If you are dissatisfied with something -even a good thing that you would like to do, but have not been able to -stop now. If things are not going well, there are only two explanations: either your perseverance is being tested, or you need to change direction. In order to discover which of those options is correct -since they are opposites -make use of silence and prayer. Little by little, things will become strangely clear, until you have sufficient strength to choose. Once you have made your decision, forget completely the other possibility. And go forward, because God is the God of the Valiant. Domingos Sabino said: "Everything always turns out for the best. If things are not going well, it is because you have not yet reached the end."

The Brazilian composer, Nelson Motta, was in Bahia, when he decided to pay a visit to Mother Menininha de Cantois. He caught a taxi, and on their way, the driver lost his brakes. The car spun around in the middle of the road, but other than being frightened, nothing serious occurred. When he met with Mother Menininha, the first thing

Nelson told her about was the near accident in the middle of the road. "There are certain things that are already written, but God finds us a way to get past them without any serious problem. That is, it was a part of your destiny to be in an automobile accident at this point in your life," she said. "But, as you see, everything happened -and nothing."

"There was something missing from your talk about the Road to Santiago," said a pilgrim to the wanderer as they were leaving the conference together. "I have noticed that the majority of pilgrims," she said, "whether on the Road to Santiago or on their paths through life, always seek to follow the same pace as the others. At the beginning of my pilgrimage, I tried to walk at the same pace as my group. I got tired, I demanded more of my body than it could deliver, I was tense, and I wound up with problems in the tendons of my left foot. It was impossible for me to walk for two days, and I learned that I would be able to get to Santiago only if I went at my own pace. It took me longer than the others, and I walked alone for many stretches along the road. But it was only because I respected my own pace that I was able to walk the entire road. Since then, I have applied that lesson to everything I do in my life."

Croesus, the king of Lydia, had made the decision to attack the Persians, but nevertheless wanted to consult with a Greek oracle. "You are fated to destroy a great empire," the oracle said. Happily, Croesus declared war. After two days of battle, Lydia was invaded by the Persians, its capital was sacked, and Croesus was taken prisoner. Revolted, he asked his ambassador to Greece to go back to the oracle and tell him how wrong he had been. "No, it was you who were wrong," said the oracle to the ambassador. "You destroyed a great empire: Lydia." The master says: "The language of signs is there before us, to teach us the best way to act. But many times we try to distort those signs so that they "agree" with what we wanted to do in the first place.

Buscaglia tells the story about the fourth of the Magi, who also saw the star shining over Bethlehem. But he was always late in arriving at the place where Jesus might be, because along the way, the poor and needy stopped him to ask him for help. After thirty years of following in Jesus's footsteps, through Egypt, Galilee and Bethany, the magus reached Jerusalem, but was again too late. The child Jesus was now a man, and the magus had arrived on the day of the crucifixion. The king had brought pearls to give to Jesus, but had sold everything in order to help those whom he had met along the way. Only one pearl remained, but the Saviour was already dead. "I have failed in the mission of my life," the king thought. And then he heard a voice: "Contrary to what you are thinking, you have been with me all your life. I was nude, and you dressed me. I was hungry, and you fed me. I was imprisoned, and you visited me. I was in every poor soul along the way. Thank you for so many presents of love."

A science fiction story tells of a society where almost everyone is born ready to perform a function: technicians, engineers or mechanics. Only a few are born without any skills: these are sent to an insane asylum, since only crazy people are unable to make a contribution to society. One of the insane rebels. The asylum has a library, where he attempts to learn everything there is to know about the arts and sciences. When he feels that he knows enough, he decides to escape, but he is captured and taken to a research center outside the city. "Welcome," says one of the people in charge of the center. "It is those who have been forced to make their own way that we admire most. From now on, you may do as you please, since it is thanks to people like you that the world is able to progress."

Before leaving on a long trip, a businessman was saying good-bye to his wife. "You have never brought me a present that was worthy of me," she said. "You ungrateful woman, everything I have given you cost me years of work," the man answered. "What else can I give you?" "Something that is as beautiful as I am." For two years, the woman awaited her present. Finally, her husband returned. "I was able to find something that is as beautiful as you," he said. "I wept at your ingratitude, but I resolved that I would do as you asked. I thought all this time that there couldn't be a present as beautiful as you, but I found one." And he handed her a mirror.

The German philosopher, F. Nietzsche, once said: "It's not worthwhile to spend time discussing everything; it is a part of the human condition to err from time to time." The master says: "There are people who insist that they be right about even minor details. They often do not permit themselves to make a mistake. What they accomplish with that attitude is a fear of moving ahead. Fear of making a mistake is the door that locks us into the castle of mediocrity. If we are able to overcome that fear, we have taken an important step in the direction of our freedom."

A novice asked the Father Superior Nisteros at the monastery at Sceta: "What are the things I should do in order to please God?" Father Nisteros answered: "Abraham accepted strangers, and God was happy. Elijah did not like strangers, and God was happy. David was proud of what he did, and God was happy. The Roman publican, before the altar, was ashamed of what he did, and God was happy. John the Baptist went into the desert, and God was happy. Jonah went to the great city of Ninevah, and God was happy. Ask your soul what it wants to do. When your soul is in agreement with your dreams, it makes God happy."

A Buddhist master was traveling on foot with his disciples, when he noted that they were discussing among themselves who was the best. "I have practiced meditation for fifteen years," said one. "I have been charitable ever since I left my parents' home," said another. "I have always followed the precepts of Buddha," said a third. At noon, they stopped under an apple tree to rest. The branches of the tree were loaded down with fruit, to the point that its branches reached to the ground. "When a tree is laden with fruit, its branches bend to touch the ground. The truly wise is he who is humble. When a tree bears no fruit, its branches are arrogant and haughty. The foolish man always believes that he is better than others."

Antonio Machado says: "Blow by blow, step by step, Pathfinder, there is no path, The path is made to be walked. By walking, the path is made, And if you look back, All you will see are the marks Of footsteps that one day Your feet will once again take. Pathfinder, there is no path, The path is made to be walked."

At the Last Supper, Jesus accused -with the same gravity and using the same phrase -two of his apostles. Both had committed the crimes foreseen by Jesus. Judas Iscariot recovered his senses and condemned himself. Peter also recovered his senses, after denying three times everything he had believed in. But at the decisive moment, Peter

understood the true meaning of Jesus' message. He asked forgiveness and went on, humiliated. He could have chosen suicide, but instead he faced the other apostles and must have said: "Okay, speak of my error for as long as the human race exists. But let me correct it." Peter understood that Love forgives. Judas understood nothing.

A famous writer was walking with a friend when a boy started to cross the street in front of an oncoming truck. The writer, in a fraction of a second, threw himself in front of the truck and was able to save the boy. But, before anyone could praise him for his act of heroism, he slapped the boy across the face. "Don't be fooled by appearances, my boy," he said. "I saved you only so that you couldn't evade the problems you will have as an adult." The master says: "Sometimes we are afraid of doing good. Our sense of guilt always tries to tell us that -when we act with generosity -we are merely trying to impress others. It is difficult for us to accept that we are good by nature. We mask our good acts with irony and indifference, as if love were synonymous with weakness."

Jesus looked at the table before him, wondering what would be the best symbol of his passage on Earth. On the table were pomegranates from Galilee, spices from the deserts of the south, dried fruits from Syria and Egyptian dates. He must have extended His hand to consecrate one of them, when suddenly he recalled the message that he brought was for all men everywhere. And perhaps pomegranates and dates did not exist in some parts of the world. He looked about him, and another thought occurred to him: in the pomegranates and the dates and the fruits, the miracle of Creation manifested itself without any interference by human beings. So he picked up the bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: "Take and eat, all of you, for this is my Body." Because bread was everywhere. And bread, in contrast with the dates, the pomegranates and the fruits of Syria, was the best symbol of the path toward God. Bread was the fruit of the earth and of man's labors.

The juggler stops in the middle of the plaza, pulls out three oranges and begins to toss them. People gather round and marvel at the grace and elegance of his movements. "That's what life's like, more or less," someone standing there with the wanderer says. "We always have an orange in each hand, and one in the air. But that one in the air makes all the difference. It was thrown with ability and experience, but it follows its own course. Like the juggler, we throw a dream out into the world, but we don't always have control over it. At times like that, you have to know how to put yourself in God's hands -and ask that, in due time, the dream follows its course correctly and falls, completed, back into your hand."

One of the most powerful exercises in interior growth consists in paying attention to things we do automatically -like breathing, blinking our eyes, or attending to things around us. When we do this, we allow our brain to work with greater freedom -without the interference of our desires. Certain problems that appeared to be insoluble wind up being resolved, and certain pains that we thought could never be overcome wind up dissipating effortlessly. The master says: "When you have to confront a difficult situation, try to use that technique. It requires a bit of discipline... but the results can be surprising".

A man is at a fair, selling vases. A woman approaches and examines his merchandise. Some pieces are undecorated, while others have carefully wrought designs. The woman asks the price of the vases. To her surprise, she learns that they all cost the same. "How can the decorated vase cost the same as the simple ones?" she asks. "Why charge the same for a vase that it took more time and effort to make?" "I am an artist," the seller says. "I can charge for the vase I made, but not for its beauty. The beauty is free."

The wanderer was seated alone at a mass. Suddenly, he was approached by a friend. "I have to talk to you," the friend said. The wanderer saw in the meeting a sign, and began to talk about what he considered to be important. He spoke of God's blessings, of love, and of the fact that he saw his friend's arrival as a signal from his angel, because moments before the wanderer had felt alone, whereas now he had company. The friend listened without saying a word, thanked the wanderer, and left. Rather than happiness, the wanderer felt more alone than ever. Later, he realized that, in his enthusiasm, he had paid no attention to his friend's request: that he speak. The wanderer looked down and saw his words thrown to the floor. Because the Universe wanted something different to have happened at that moment.

Three fairies were invited to the baptism of a prince. The first granted the prince the gift of finding his love. The second granted him enough money to do as he pleased. The third granted him beauty. But, as in all fairy tales, a witch appeared. She was furious at not having been invited, and pronounced a curse: "Because you already have everything, I'm going to give you even more. You will be talented at whatever you try to do." The prince grew up handsome, rich and in love. But he was never able to complete his mission on Earth. He was an excellent painter, sculptor, musician, mathematician -but he was never able to complete a task because he quickly became distracted and wanted to move on to something else. The master says: "All roads lead to the same place. But choose your own, and follow it to the end. Do not try to walk every road."

An anonymous text from the XVIII century speaks of a Russian monk who was looking for a spiritual adviser. One day, he was told that in a certain village lived a hermit who dedicated himself night and day to the salvation of his soul. Hearing this, the monk went in search of the holy man. "I want you to guide me along the paths of the soul," the monk said when he found the hermit. "The soul has its own path, and your angel will guide you," answered the hermit. "Pray without stopping." "I don't know how to pray like that. Will you teach me?" "If you do not know how to pray incessantly, then pray to God to teach you how to do so." "You are teaching me nothing," said the monk. "There is nothing to be taught, because you cannot transmit faith in the same way that you transmit knowledge about mathematics. Accept the mystery of faith, and the Universe will reveal itself."

The master says: "Write! Whether it's a letter, a diary or just some notes as you speak on the telephone -but write! In writing, we come closer to God and to others. If you want to understand your role in the world better, write. Try to put your soul in writing, even if no one reads your words -or worse, even if someone winds up reading what you did not want to be read. The simple fact of writing helps us to organize our thoughts and see more clearly what is in our

surroundings. A paper and pen perform miracles -they alleviate pain, make dreams come true and summon lost hope. The word has power."

The monks of the desert affirmed that it was necessary to allow the hand of the angels to act. In order to bring this about, they sometimes did absurd things -such as speaking to the flowers or laughing without cause. The alchemists follow the "signs from God," clues that sometimes make very little sense but wind up leading somewhere. The master says: "Do not fear being regarded as crazy -do something today that fits not at all with the logic you have learned. Behave in a way that is opposite to the usual serious comportment you were taught. This little thing, no matter how little it is, can open the door to a great adventure -human and spiritual."

A fellow is driving a luxurious Mercedes Benz when he blows a tire. As he tries to change it, he realizes that he has no jack. "Well, I'll go to the nearest house and ask if I can borrow one," he thinks, as he goes in search of help. "Maybe the person I ask, seeing my car, will charge me for finding me his jack," he says to himself. "With a car like this, and with me asking for help, he'll probably charge me ten dollars. No, maybe even fifty, because he knows I really need the jack. He might take advantage of me and charge me as much as a hundred dollars." And the further he walks, the higher goes the price. "When he reaches the nearest house, and the owner opens the door, the man shouts: 'You're a thief! A jack isn't worth that much! Keep it!'" Who of us can say that he has never acted that way?

Milton Ericsson is the author of a new therapy that has won over thousands of practitioners in the United States. When he was twelve, he contracted polio. Ten months later, he heard a physician tell his parents: "Your son will not make it through the night." Ericsson heard his mother crying. "Who knows, if I make it through the night, perhaps she won't suffer so," he thought. And he decided not to sleep until the next day dawned. As the sun rose, he shouted to his mother: "Hey, I'm still alive!" The joy in the house was so great that he decided that he would always try to make it through one more night to put off his family's suffering. He died at 75 in 1990, leaving a number of important books about the enormous capacity man has to overcome his own limitations.

"Holy man," said a novice to the Father Superior, "my heart is filled with love for the world, and my heart is cleansed of the temptations of the devil. What is the next step?" The padre asked the disciple to go with him to visit an ill person who was in need of extreme unction. After comforting the family, the father noticed a trunk in one of the corners. "What is in that trunk?" he asked. "The clothing that my uncle never wore," said his niece. "He always thought that there would be some occasion for wearing them, but they wound up rotting in the trunk." "Don't forget that trunk," the father said to the disciple as they left. "If you have spiritual treasures in your heart, put them into practice now. Or they will still."

Mystics say that when we begin our spiritual path, we want to speak often with God -and we wind up not listening to what He has to say to us. The master says: "Relax a bit. It is not easy. We have a natural need always to do the right thing, and we think we can do that if we work unceasingly. It is important to try, to fail, to get up and try again. But let us allow God to help. In the middle of a great effort, let us look at ourselves, allow Him to reveal himself and guide us. Let us sometimes allow Him to take us onto his lap."

A padre at the monastery at Sceta was sought out by a young man who wanted to follow the spiritual path. "For a period of a year, pay money to whoever attacks you," said the padre. For twelve months, the young man made payment whenever he was attacked. At the end of the year, he went back to the padre to learn what the next step was. "Go into the city and buy food for me," the padre said. As soon as the man left, the padre disguised himself as a beggar, and using a short cut that he knew, went to the gates of the city. When the man approached, the padre began to insult him. "This is great!" said the man to the false beggar. "For an entire year, I had to pay anyone who insulted me, and now I can be attacked for free, without spending a cent." Hearing that, the padre took off his disguise. "You are ready for the next step, because you have learned to laugh in the face of your problems," he said.

The wanderer was walking with two of his friends through the streets of New York. Suddenly, in the midst of a casual conversation, the other two began to argue, almost attacking each other. Later -when things had calmed down -they were sitting in a bar. One of them apologized to the other. "I've noticed that it's very easy to be hurtful to those you know," he said. "If you were a stranger, I would have controlled myself much more. But because we are friends -and you know me better than anyone does -- I wound up being much more aggressive. That's human nature." Maybe it is human nature. But we should fight against it.

There are moments when we would very much like to help someone, but there is nothing we can do. Either the circumstances do not allow us to offer help, or the person is not receptive to any expression of relatedness and support. The master says: "There is always love. Even at those times when we feel most useless, we can still love -without expectation of reward, change or thanks. If we are able to act in that way, the energy of love begins to transform the Universe around us. When this energy appears, it is always able to do its work".

Fifteen years ago, during a period of profound rejection of faith, the wanderer was with his wife and a friend in Rio de Janeiro. As they were having a drink together, an old buddy with whom the wanderer had shared the craziness of the 60s and 70s came into the bar. "What are you doing now?" the wanderer asked. "I'm a priest", his friend said. As they left the place, the wanderer pointed at a child sleeping on the sidewalk. "See how concerned Jesus is with the world?" he said. "Of course I see," said the priest. "He placed that child right in front of you to make sure that you saw him, so that you could do something."

A group of Jewish wise men met in order to try to create the shortest Constitution in the world. The rule for the meeting was that if -within the time span that he could balance himself on one foot -one of them could define the laws that should govern man, he would be regarded as the wisest of them. "May God punish the criminals," said one. The others argued that this wasn't a law, but a threat. The phrase wasn't accepted. At this point, the rabbi Hillel joined the meeting. Placing himself on one foot, he said: "Do not do unto others anything you would not want him to do unto

you. This is the Law. All the rest is judicial commentary.” So the rabbi Hillel was considered the wisest of them.

The writer, George Bernard Shaw noticed a huge block of one in the living room of a friend, the sculptor, J. Epstein. “What are you going to do with that stone?” Shaw asked. “I don't know yet. I'm thinking about it,” Epstein answered. Shaw was surprised: “You mean you plan your own inspiration? Don't you think an artist has to be free to change his mind when he wants to?” “That only works when -after changing your mind -all you have to do ball up a piece of paper that weights five grams. But, when you are dealing with four tons, you have to think differently,” Epstein said. The master says: “Each of us knows the best way to do his work. Only the person confronted with the task knows what problems are involved.”

Brother John was thinking: “I need to be like the angels. They do nothing but contemplate the glory of God.” And that night, he left the monastery at Sceta and went into the desert. A week later he returned to the monastery. The brother at the gate heard him knock, and asked who it was. “It's Brother John. I'm hungry.” “That cannot be,” said the brother. “Brother John is in the desert, transforming himself into an angel. He no longer feels hunger, and no longer has to work to support himself.” “Forgive my pride,” said Brother John. “Angels are helpful to man. That is their work, and that is why they contemplate the glory of God. I can contemplate the same glory in doing my daily work.” With those words of humility, the brother opened the gate.

Of all the powerful arms of destruction that man has been able to invent, the most terrible -and most cowardly -is the word. Fists and firearms at least leave some blood remaining. Bombs destroy houses and streets. Poisons can be detected. The master says: “The word can destroy without leaving a clue. Children are conditioned for years by their parents, men are impiously criticized, women are systematically massacred by the words of their husbands. The faithful are kept far away from religion by those who regard themselves as the interpreters of the voice of God. Verify whether you are making use of this weapon. See whether others are using this weapon on you. And prevent either of those from continuing.”

A legend of the desert tells the story of a man who wanted to move to another oasis, and began to load up his camel. He piled on his rugs, his cooking utensils, his trunks of clothes -and the animal accepted it all. As they were leaving, the man remembered a beautiful blue feather his father had given him. He retrieved it and placed it on the camel's back. With that, the animal collapsed of the weight and died. “My camel couldn't even bear the weight of a feather,” the man must have thought. Sometimes we think the same of others -without understanding that our little joke may have been the drop that caused the goblet of suffering to overflow.

“Sometimes people get used to what they see in films and forget the real story,” someone says to the wanderer. “Do you remember the film, 'The Ten Commandments?'” “Of course. Moses -Charlton Heston -raises his staff, the waters open, and the people of Israel are able to cross the Red Sea.” “In the Bible, that's not how it was,” says the person. “There, God gives an order to Moses: 'Tell the children of Israel to march.' And it is only after they begin to move forward that Moses raises his staff and the waters part. Because only courage in walking the path makes the path reveal itself.”

This was written by the cellist, Pablo Casals: “I am always being reborn. Every morning is a time to begin life again. Eighty years ago I began my day in the same way -but this doesn't mean it is a mechanical routine. It is essential to my happiness. I awaken, and I go to the piano and play two preludes and a fugue from Bach. These pieces function as a blessing upon my house. But this practice is also a way of reestablishing contact with the mystery of life and with the miracle of being a human being. Even though I've done this for eighty years, the music is never the same -it always teaches me something new fantastic, unbelievable.”

The master says: “On the one hand, we know that it is important to seek God. On the other, life creates a distance between us and Him. We feel ignored by the Divinity, or we are preoccupied with our daily tasks. This creates a feeling of guilt: either we are renouncing life to too much of an extent because of God, or we feel we are renouncing God too much because of life. This apparent conflict is a fantasy: God is in life and life is in God. One has only to be aware of this in order to understand fate better. If we are able to penetrate into the holy harmony of our daily round, we will always be on the right path, and we will complete our task.”

The phrase is from Pablo Picasso: “God is an artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant and the ant. Actually, he never sought for a style -he was simply doing everything that he wanted to do.” The master says: “When we begin along our path, a great fear arises. We feel obligated to do everything right. In the end, since we have only one life to live, who was it that invented the standard of ‘Everything right?’ God made the giraffe, the elephant and the ant -why do we have to follow a standard? A standard serves only to show us how others define their own reality. Often we admire the models of others, and many times we can avoid the errors committed by others. But as for living well -only we know how to do that for ourselves.”

Several devout Jews were praying at the synagogue when, during the prayer, they heard a child's voice saying: “A, B, C, D.” They tried to concentrate on the scripture, but the voice repeated, “A, B, C, D.” They interrupted the service, and, when they looked around, saw a boy who continued with the same chant. The rabbi spoke to the boy: “Why are you doing that?” “Because I don't know the holy verses,” the boy said. “So I was hoping that if I recited the alphabet, God would use the letters to form the right words.” “Thank you for this lesson,” said the rabbi. “And may I give to God my days on this Earth in the same way that you have given him your letters.”

The master says: “The spirit of God that is present in us can be described as being the screen in a movie theater. On the screen, various situations occur -people love, people separate, treasures are found, distant countries are discovered. It is not important which film is being shown. The screen is always the same. It is not important if tears fall or blood runs -because nothing can stain the whiteness of the screen. Just as with the movie screen, God is there -behind every one of life's agonies and ecstasies. We will see them all when our film ends.”

An archer was walking in the woods near a Hindu monastery known for the severity of its teachings, when he saw the monks in the garden, drinking and enjoying themselves. "How cynical are those who seek the path to God," said the archer aloud. "They say that discipline is important, but there they are getting drunk!" "If you shoot one hundred arrows in a row, what will happen to your bow?" asked the eldest of the monks. "My bow would break," answered the archer. "If someone exceeds his limits, their will is also broken," said the monk. "He who is unable to balance work with relaxation loses his enthusiasm, and cannot go far."

A king sent a messenger to a distant country with a peace agreement that was to be signed. Wanting to take advantage of the journey, the messenger informed some of his friends that had important business dealings in that country. They asked that he postpone his trip, and -since a peace agreement was to be signed -they wrote new orders, and changed their business strategies. When the messenger finally made the trip, it was already too late for the agreement he was to deliver; war broke out, destroying the king's plans and the business arrangements of the men who had delayed the messenger. The master says: "There is only one important thing in our lives: to live our personal destiny -the mission that was fated for us. But we always wind up loading ourselves down with useless concerns that then destroy our dream."

The wanderer is in the port of Sydney, looking out at the bridge that connects the two parts of the city, when an Australian approaches him and asks that he read an ad in the newspaper. "The letters are quite small," he says. "I left my glasses at home, and I can't make them out." The wanderer is also without his reading glasses, and apologizes to the man. "Well, I guess I'll just forget about the ad," says the man. And, wanting to continue the conversation, he says, "It's not just the two of us. God's vision is also clouded. Not because he is old, but because he wants it that way. Then, when someone close to Him commits an error, He is unable to see it clearly. Not wanting to be unfair, he forgives the person." "And what about the 'good things,'" I ask. "Well, God never leaves his glasses at home," laughs the Australian as he moves on.

"Is there anything more important than prayer?" asked the disciple of his master. The master asked the disciple to go to a nearby bush and cut off a branch. The disciple obeyed. "Is the bush still alive?" asked the master. "Just as alive as before," answered the disciple. "Now go and cut the roots," said the master. "If I do that, the bush will die," said the disciple. "Prayers are the branches of a tree, whose roots are called faith," said the master. "There can be faith without prayer. But there can be no prayer without faith."

Saint Teresa d'Avila says: "Remember: the Lord invited all of us, and -since He is the pure truth -we cannot doubt his invitation. He said: 'Come to me all who are thirsty, and I will give you to drink.' "If the invitation were not for each and every one of us, the Lord would have said: 'Come to me all who wish to, because you have nothing to lose. But I will provide drink only for those who are prepared.' He imposes no conditions. It is enough to walk and desire, and all will receive the Water of Life of his love.

The Zen monks, when they wish to meditate, sit before a rock: "Now I will wait for this rock to grow a bit," they say. The master says: "Everything around us is constantly changing. Every day, the sun shines upon a new world. What we call routine is full of new proposals and opportunities. But we do not perceive that each day is different from all the others. Today, in some place, a treasure awaits you. It may be a fleeting smile, it may be a great victory -it doesn't matter. Life is made up of large and small miracles. Nothing is boring, because everything constantly changes. Tedium is not of the world. The poet, T. S. Eliot, wrote: 'Walk many highways/ return to your home/ and view everything as if for the first time'".