

**Instruction manual for a shared happiness**

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**Community and  
self-limitation**

*starting a move towards change*

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## **An essay in seven volumes**

Each volume can be read separately. The same short introduction explains in each volume the orientation.

- 0) Community and self-limitation:  
starting a move towards change.**
- 1) Effort and comfort:  
towards a reconciliation between nature and humanity.**
- 2) Vocation and subsistence:  
towards a reconciliation between simplicity and wealth.**
- 3) Recessive and dominant:  
towards a reconciliation between feminine and masculine.**
- 4) Circular and linear:  
towards a reconciliation between South and North.**
- 5) Knowledge and learning:  
towards a reconciliation between subtle faculties and intellect.**
- 6) Spirit and matter:  
towards a reconciliation between Reality and appearances.**

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## Community and self-limitation

### CHANGE AS A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

This is the story of our own destruction and of how we can come back to life.

While the Universe since billions of years evolves towards more complexity and deeper awareness, our western society seeks for homogenisation and oblivion; while the Universe tends towards more subjectivity and stronger communion, we escape into illusion, dry materialism, individualism and competition. We need urgently to recognise that our society is truly regressive: we walk against the laws of nature and, instead of opening ourselves to the deep mystery of life, we escape into many ways of artificial self-destruction.

This essay tries simultaneously to describe in a simple way the complex desegregation of our modern western society and to propose simple practical ways of transformation of our patterns of development, through our attitudes and behaviours in our everyday life. On one hand, it will describe the many deep imbalances which are causing the deterioration of our living conditions and generating more and more injustice and suffering. On the other hand, it tries to propose another vision for a possible future, through very practical ways of changing our behaviours as citizens and consumers.

#### *A necessity for change*

Everyone sees the world in their own way. What is common between the Indian coolie, the Kalahari hunter, the New York lawyer and the old Inuit woman? They have such a different experience of life that they adopt very different perceptions and representations of what are the essential priorities in their own life, beyond a common necessity for surviving. Each one acts according to their own interests.

Privileges completely change our understanding of our situation and urge us to act in a certain way which in general tends to reinforce these same privileges.

Our world suffers terribly: exploitation, destruction of nature, hunger and precariousness for the poor, depression and boredom for the rich, dominance of market upon human values, repression of femininity, rejection of older people, loneliness for individuals, dissolution of community links, heavy materialism in rich societies, extreme rationalism, domination by technology, devaluation of intuition, reification of the body, lack of spiritual guidance. The list never finishes.

There is an urgent need for change. There is no more time for talk; it is time for action. Our survival itself is at stake. Our main problem is not how to know what to change and how to change it. We know already the solutions. They have only to be tested, implemented and improved. The main problem is in fact how to break resignation, how to start a move towards change. We seem to be trapped on the track of our own destruction. We seem to be incapable of reaction, as if we were paralysed. This is why this essay will attempt to provoke a change of mind in showing this terrible trend for self-destruction which inhabits us. This is certainly an ambitious aim, and it is clear that the reader can only absorb what he or she is ready to accept. It is hard to be convincing. Nevertheless the blunt description of our attitudes and values will show how our civilisation has become poorer and poorer and will describe another way of coming back to life. This essay will not talk so much to the head but to the heart, not only to frighten us but mainly to give us hope in so many possibilities for our future, if we accept the need for change.

This essay is a psychotherapy of our western society. I will try to describe our values, our attitudes and our behaviours by linking them with their original roots. It is certainly a work of interpretation which everybody will not necessarily agree with but it is yet a way to challenge our reflection and to urge us to see the causes of our behaviours. It is unavoidable that any therapy is always painful. These descriptions are not very flattering, but they should help everybody to see the truth about our common behaviours. It is certainly not an explanation which will suit everybody; it will be only an incentive to see the truth which will differ for each of us.

Truth is often hard to say and hard to hear. It certainly hurts, but it is also liberating. We must learn to be tender with people and ourselves, but hard with facts and attitudes. There cannot be any change without this effort to see things as they are, even if it is painful to recognise what is and how sick we are. Change can only happen when we change ourselves, when we look clearly at ourselves and at the consequences of our values, attitudes and acts. This is a spiritual path in the way it touches our deep nature, our vocation, our aspiration for happiness and for a better life, for ourselves and for others. Change cannot be lead by material considerations. It has to be guided by spiritual values like justice, peace, compassion. It is more rooted in our being than in our acting. It concerns more the nature of our personal or collective attitude than the question of the technical means we can implement. It is a philosophical choice.

I will show how self-limitation is the necessary path for change; on one hand because self-limitation helps to limit the negative impact we have on our natural and social milieu, but essentially on the other hand because it opens us and makes room for human values and for a personal and collective deepening. Most of the philosophical or spiritual traditions teach that self-limitation is the way to happiness.

### *Six imbalances*

As a way to structure this essay, I have identified six main imbalances which threaten our world. I intend to describe each of these imbalances, one after the other, but I want to do this in a positive way, in order to demonstrate that these imbalances are not only a threatening problem for our survival but that they are also the key for the solution; each one of these six imbalances can be described as a special polarity between two terms, where one term (usually mentioned as the first) dominates the other term and prevents its expression: 1) humanity and nature, 2) wealth and simplicity, 3) masculine and feminine, 4) North and South, 5) intellect and subtle faculties, 6) appearances and Reality; it means that the domination of the first term over the second prevents the second to be fully expressed; thus the polarity also represents the key to the neglected potential of unexpressed faculties which challenge us to become more creative in order to express what has been lost; it is why these same polarities offer also the means for a deep transformation of our society; they will be described in the reverse order, where the second term (the weakest) will be mentioned first, as the guiding and changing force, and the other term will be mentioned in second, as the energy which has to adapt, in a form of reconciliation between the two concerned poles. According to this new order, these imbalances or polarities are the following:

- 1) Effort and comfort: towards a reconciliation between nature and humanity
- 2) Vocation and subsistence: towards a reconciliation between simplicity and wealth
- 3) Recessive and dominant: towards a reconciliation between feminine and masculine

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- 4) Circular and linear: towards a reconciliation between South and North
- 5) Knowledge and learning: towards a reconciliation between subtle faculties and intellect
- 6) Spirit and matter: towards a reconciliation between Reality and appearances.

Each of these parts will be presented as a separate book which can be read independently of the five others, in any order which suits the reader, according to his or her centres of interest.

A first volume as general introduction precedes these six parts and exposes the generalities concerning the orientation for change, especially in what concerns the dynamic of community and the necessity for self-limitation. This general part is called: *0) Community and self-limitation, starting a move towards change.*

The first pages of this first general volume are repeated in each volume in order to summarise the approach and to make it understandable irrespective of which volumes the reader will have read. The seven volumes form nevertheless a whole where references are made to what has already been written in more detail in the precedent parts, but in a way which does not necessitate having read it.

### ***The risk of generalisations***

In order to make things more evident, I will use generalisations. Any generalisation is never true, because there are always exceptions or even regular situations which can contradict it; it is only a finger pointing on a main characteristic which is hard to grasp because it is a dominant factor which is not always true. Generalisation is a good way to emphasise a dominating trend which can only be recognised

beyond complexity and diversity. It is why the reader should make the effort to accept this sometimes surprising form of simplification, in order to understand what is meant by the statement. The first reflex is generally to adopt a defensive attitude and to refute what is being described; this tendency is especially clear in psychotherapy as each insight about our own values and attitudes is a kind of menace for our personal stability and for our trend to reinforce wrong, but strongly integrated, behaviours or privileges.

I will try to describe our modern western society, which in fact does not exist as such anywhere, but I will nevertheless describe characteristics which we can identify in most of our western countries. As western society, I understand the rich nations which consume most of the world's wealth and dominate the world economically since the time when they have taken advantage of the industrial revolution and colonised the other continents. These nations are mainly the ones of North America and Europe, including Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Yet there is no clear boundary as there are many traditional - non-western - societies within these nations and also many western aspects in poor countries, especially among the dominating elite.

In the same way of generalisation, I will talk about traditional societies. These are the societies which developed in the southern countries as well as the ones which were established in western countries before the development of market economy and before the industrial revolution. These societies are still at least partly alive nowadays in many more protected parts of western countries. We could define traditional societies as the ones which consume mainly what they are producing and which are guided by other values than by trends of mere materialistic accumulation. These societies, because they are fragile and acting mainly locally, are probably more

transparent. They should not be idealised, but they nevertheless represent a more human scale of development which can inspire us.

### *A testimony*

This essay does not pretend to put forward an universal truth nor to describe the full range of most important aspects of our society. It is not an encyclopaedia of alternative living; who could have the knowledge to write such an essay? It is far more a testimony and a challenge. The tone may seem highly and heavily moralistic, but it is only a way to explain a personal truth. While taking a clear stand about the interpretation of what I observe in front of me and proposing precise ways to react to the terrible destruction of our environment and of our local communities, I will try to break the resignation and to provoke a move towards change.

In this way, each statement is more a point of view, a testimony and a challenge than the expression of an objective and absolute truth. Who could say what truth is? There are many expressions of truth (small t). Each one of us has his or her own truth (small t). These different truths can be even contradictory; they remain nevertheless valid. They compose, all together, a kind of gigantic mosaic which may try to represent the perennial Truth (capital T). In fact, although there are many personal truths (small t), there is only one perennial Truth (capital T), but there are many expressions of it which, despite their diversity and imperfections, have yet to conform to the perennial Truth (capital T). It means that our diversity is the key for everybody to bring their own special contribution to the expression of a complex picture which can only take shape because our personal or collective inputs of understanding and creativity are complementary, sometimes even antagonistic, but yet necessary to the whole picture.

Truth cannot be described with words, unless it is reduced to a mere simplified representation which our rational mind reconstructs artificially in its own limited way in order to describe the world with words, while letting unexpressed all the aspects it has not perceived. This representation is usually made possible by the simple addition of partial elements of understanding; it is thus necessarily ignoring what has not been perceived and it also lacks of a broader global understanding; as this representation becomes our map for acting in our daily life, it is evident that a map with so many holes and distortions can only lead us astray. This impossibility to describe the Truth is the reason why the oriental tradition has adopted the apophatic way as another way of expressing our perception of the world in avoiding to try to describe what reality consists of. It has done so in two different ways: first by saying what reality is not and second by indicating more the direction in which to search, using metaphors or poetical images, than trying to describe reality itself. I will adopt this double process in my essay.

First as the negative way - saying what reality is not - I will describe our daily practices and I will show how much they are flawed. This will be essentially a description of the negative impact of these practices (our use of energy, technology, money, power, knowledge, etc) and how much they are based on false premises. It is important to emphasise that these means are not bad as such and that the flaw consists mainly not in the tool itself but in the use we make of it; the criticism of our practices addresses more our purposes and needs than the means themselves. This first part of the way will seem very pessimistic as it will essentially insist on the negative aspects of our development. The apophatic (negative) way of saying what life is not is not an easy exercise because we are attached to our practices and to the privileges they allow us to consolidate. Our first reflex, when one dares to criticise our use of technology, of money or of power,

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consists in resistance; we refuse to see how much the flaw is real, how much our representations, our ways of thinking and living are destructive for one another and for ourselves, for our environment and for our social life. Yet the ecological cataclysm and the economic collapse we can observe around us tell us more than it is necessary about the urgency of changing these ways which are in heavy conflict with the laws of life and nature. This exercise of questioning our ways of life is made more difficult by the fact that our representation of the world and the justification of our ways of life are firmly consolidated in a rational construct which accepts no crack. It is like a fortress which prevents the unknown to enter, although, as I just described it, the major part of this representation keeps ignoring most aspects of life, as it is an artificial rational construction made by the addition of a limited number of simple parts. It is a left brain representation (i.e. a cerebral construction), while the right brain true presentation (i.e. direct perception) remains more in touch with the mysterious dimension of life we cannot grab but only experience<sup>1</sup>. This struggle consists in the resistance of our left brain, which constructs a false image of the world and defends its rational simplified representation, against the freshness, openness and sensitivity of our right brain, whose lively experience of life comes to challenge the dead re-presentation created by our mind. This is an attempt by our fragile faculties of intuition and perception to force open our rational mind to more than just reason. We need this opening for our survival, especially for the survival of our intuitive and creative faculties, because we need urgently to recognise the collapse of our attempts to dominate the world, and we can only do so if we escape from our imprisonment in the fortress of our false representations and privileges by our rational mind. My purpose in describing our ways of life in a negative way, which will sometimes

be perceived as extreme and exaggerated, is to shaken the walls of the fortress and to create cracks and holes which can allow light to enter and widen our poor representations of life. We have first to question our rational picture and to get it shaken so much that it becomes then free to accept to review its radical and narrow stand; only under this condition it can become more open to new insights. Hindu and Buddhist traditions have never stopped teaching how we have to stop our mind in order to see the light.

Then, as second step on the apophatic way, once our mind is more open to new perceptions, I will try to describe in which direction we have to search for a new way of being. This will be made in a indirect way. When the finger shows the moon, we have to look at the moon, which remains mysterious, and not at the finger, which does not say much; each description of this path will seem therefore lacking consistence or being too idealist; the finger is not able to say what the moon is. We have to let resonate what our intuition and experience of the world tell us with what we have deep in us that we still ignore. Here again it is more a function of our right brain with its intuition, inspiration, creativity, love of globality that will allow us to see more widely. It is all about evoking what the true nature of life is (who knows what it is?) and showing how a better perception of its deep nature would change us completely as well as our ways of life.

I hope the reader will follow me on this steep double path, in accepting first to radically question very well established values and principles that ground our western ways of life and in accepting secondly to imagine another world that we intuitively know in ourselves but whose picture we are not very aware of. This can only be done if the reader accepts to let go of his or her own attachments to present comfort and to let surface in him or her these deep intuitions we all have about the true meaning of life. Life is not

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<sup>1</sup> See the remarkable book by Iain McGilchrist: *The Master and his Emissary; The divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World*. Yale University Press, 2009.



something we produce, we create or we control; it exists beyond us and independently from us as a flow which nourishes us all; it is our true source of being. We can resist it and remain imprisoned in the fortress of our poor representations or we can open ourselves to it and let it irrigate our inner life. Opening to it does not require anything special from us; we have only to remove the obstacles to its flow, i.e. the walls of the fortress. As life is much beyond us, we can only choose either to resist it (a negation of life) or not to resist it (a negation of the negation of life). To access life we need “only” to remove the obstacles, i.e. the negation. It is why the cracks in the fortress of our rational representations are so essential: they break our resistance to life and let enter light into our lives. Freedom can only be experienced if we accept to open the fortress of our rational mind to the liveliness of our experience.

Because life cannot be explained, my contribution can only be limited to a personal expression of my perception, rooted in my own experience, with its many blind spots and its few insights. It is why, in this essay, I prefer to express my own point of view in a form of testimony and commitment. I hope the reader will accept to follow me and feel shaken. It is his or her own responsibility to adopt the stand he or she wants to: to resist or not to resist. Although it will make clear practical proposals, this essay will not propose recipes. The pragmatic aspect of these proposals is more a challenge in order to show that change is possible and within reach for anybody who wants to act. There are no universal solutions. Each person, each community, each culture has to reinterpret these challenges by integrating, transforming and adapting them, as well as implementing them in their own way. These proposals are therefore incentives in order to help people to find their own way.

Since my wife and I are living in Numbugga, near nature, on the far South Coast of New South Wales in Australia, we are trying to practise what is said in this essay. We do what is within our ability to implement the many options which constitute the core of this essay. The reflection which is proposed here is therefore not mere theory but real practice. Of course we are far from having solved all the problems we meet in everyday life and far also from practising an ideal way of life. One of the main unsolved problems remains, for instance, the question of a form of transport which would integrate into the natural cycles; although we begin to see roughly how it could be solved, it is still not a practical reality. And many other questions remain unsolved.

### *Statements, patterns and options*

Instead of exposing each point as an argumentation that would start with a generality and would then develop the content until it reaches a conclusion that would content the main idea, I have preferred to formulate this main idea immediately at the start and then explain it. This kind of reversed structure seems more challenging as it starts at each new step with the main point - or a kind of conclusion - expressed in two short lines. Through this other way of proceeding this book proposes a whole range of successive main statements that work as so many patterns<sup>2</sup> of behaviours. Many of these patterns or statements are the expression of another understanding of our society; as such they provide a powerful incentive for change. They can be understood as so many options that emphasise the fact that the implementation of these proposals, after it has been adapted to the local culture and conditions, consists of a personal or collective choice which depends on us only and on the way we want to interact

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<sup>2</sup> This approach has been inspired by the American architect Christopher Alexander: *A Pattern Language* (1977) and *The Timeless Way of Building* (1979), both at Oxford University Press, New York.

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with the world. As citizens and consumers, we are in fact the real actors of our world.

The description of these patterns starts with a title and a statement on two lines that summarise the concept or the option. Then each statement (or pattern) is explained in one or two paragraphs that explain the main concept. The further part of the text develops the idea in more detail. At the end of the book the reader can find a list of these statements with their titles and their two-line summary.

The proposed patterns or statements will be often described as lists of characteristics or of sub-options. Where I see 5 characteristics, someone else might see 4 or 6. It is not important. What is more central is the attempt to make reality more understandable and our respective influence more evident. These lists are inspired by the numerous lists in Buddhist teaching which describes for instance the 3 Jewels, the 4 Noble Truths, the 5 Aggregates. It can seem very presumptuous, but it is in fact more a humorous wink; reality is much more complex than the description we make of it. The simplification of our road map makes our action easier, but it does not make reality simpler so far. We are encouraged to act, but this should not be an illusion of mastery; it is only a way to break our resignation.

At the end of the volume the reader will find a summary of the main options under the form of a list of possible commitments that any individual or local community can follow in order to practice a way of life which conforms to the spirit of this essay. This sort of rule can help in a very practical way a community to start to implement change. It is not the solution but it can help as a first base for discussion. The necessity for change is understood as the precious opportunity to reorganise our life for more happiness and deeper meaning.

Before I describe further on, in more detail, the different options which this essay will propose, we can summarise the main orientation of the proposed change in mentioning the principal options which constitute the spine of this way of life based on self-limitation:

- Spiritual orientation: change cannot happen for material reasons only, but it has to be guided by spiritual values such as justice, peace, harmony, compassion.
- Self-limitation: we have to learn how to reduce the impact of our way of life by choosing simplicity, by giving priority to human values over material ones. This form of intentional self-restriction is a form of liberation which brings real happiness: *small is beautiful*.
- Local community: we are all parts of a wider common social and natural body and we are all interdependent. Cooperation is the base for a harmonious development. Although competition can be considered as healthy when it remains limited, it is only an illusion, a bet in which each one hopes to be quicker and smarter than the other, but in which there are many more losers than winners. The local community is the place where change can take shape, according to a common project which grows in consensus with time and with the maturity of its members. This project slowly takes shape, even in a kind of marginal way, through the personal action of a few members.
- Cumulative effect: the world is what it is because of the cumulative effect of our respective personal impacts (for each of us negligible) or of our personal renunciations (for each of us a high cost). There are no other actors than people, although certainly some people have more impact than others.
- Whitewashing and corruption: the goods we consume are generally produced in conditions based on the exploitation of the

poorest or of poorer countries and on the destruction of the environment. When these goods are repacked and presented on the shelves of our local supermarket, they have lost all traces of this form of corruption which has generated them. They have been whitewashed as so many disruptive aspects of our modern society have become hidden: this form of virtuality makes truth difficult to grasp.

- A choice is a vote: each choice we make is a vote which encourages the production or the behaviour or the belief which is validated by this choice. We are therefore responsible for each choice because it shapes the world as it is.
- A new anthropology: all these main patterns or options constitute the practice of a new anthropology, i.e. a new understanding of the meaning of life, based on the preeminence of human values over material goods. This new anthropology is necessary not because its values are morally superior but because it is a necessary condition for opening us to the experience of the real essence of life instead of keeping us imprisoned in an illusion of material comfort and security which cuts us off from others and from our natural environment.

### *The power of truth*

Gandhi practised his own truth with a very high rigor and freedom. He showed us the way of integrity (the way to remain whole) and how much our own testimony is important to foster the change we want to see in the world. In being faithful to our understanding of life and to our own spiritual path, which is more a search than a ready-made answer, we become really creative and capable of following our own vocation. We have the opportunity of being recognised and appreciated by our own community for what we are. Is that not a more positive way to happiness than conformity with the kind of success which our materialistic society proposes and which is in fact

only a frustrating and disturbing illusion? The practice of the power of truth is certainly the most powerful non-violent way to convince and to change our world for a more human one, as well as to change ourselves in order to discover the depth of life and to find real happiness.

## **1) THE DIMENSION OF OUR TESTIMONY**

### **The spiritual dimension as depth of life**

It is essential in our personal and social evolution to identify the role of our ethical values as the guide for our human development. There cannot be any form of humanism without the choice for certain essential values which have to lead us through the many choices of our life.

It seems to be an evidence, but in fact we live in a very secular and materialistic society which has lost this fundamental reference to the values which guide it. Certainly the material conditions of our surviving are very important because they ensure the basic conditions for life; nevertheless they cannot provide the major dimensions which give a meaning and an orientation to our life, whether it concerns our personal life or whether it concerns our social organisation and the project of our human community.

Only spiritual values can give a meaning to our life. By the expression “spiritual values”, I mean the values which are not attached to material goods and which guide us, as our sense for justice, for peace, for good, for beauty, for love. These spiritual dimensions of our life are so crucial because they provide the true nourishment for our hunger for liveliness, but we have yet a huge difficulty to recognise them and especially to formulate a clear reference to them, as if idealism should be considered as a form of childish naïvety. In fact idealism is a more accomplished and more aware form of our understanding of the meaning of life because it is able to integrate the material and the non material dimensions of our

existence and it is able to combine them according to a balanced hierarchy.

This reference to ideals is therefore crucial and it is why the first chapter of this essay will be of a very different nature from the following ones, in the way it will try to make more understandable how this spiritual dimension is everywhere present; it will try also to explain how far spirituality is wider than what institutional religion has made of it and how it is in fact already a practice of everyday life for most of us, because we are all sensitive to what is right, to what is just, to what is harmonious. It seems that all people strive for love and recognition, more than for anything else, even if so much violence and cruelty seem to show that people do not know how to access this beauty.

#### **A collective path**

***Our desire for happiness should lead us on a collective way because we are co-dependent and we therefore need each other's help.***

We all strive for happiness. It is our main motivation in life. But we are ignorant and awkward and we constantly make the wrong choice because we get seduced by illusions (publicity, fashion, conformity, materialism) and because we believe that happiness is a competition; in fact we have to understand that happiness is a cooperative process, because it relies on sharing, on justice, on equity and on harmonious relationships with our natural and our social context.

This statement is our starting point. It says that life is not a competition but it is a common path we share with others. Other human beings are our helpers and we are all co-dependent. If we build our local community together, it will provide the best possible

frame for our personal thriving and it will help each of us to develop in a more harmonious way. Any gentle form of competition can stimulate a form of excellence and this form of competition is fully present in the cooperative process, but, when competition becomes too strong, it quickly becomes a struggle which hinders cooperation, which is the only way to establish a thriving community; we need each other in our diversity and complementarity to be able to create a rich social and personal life. Cooperation is certainly not the easiest way, but it is the richer. Our western society has preferred the materialistic way, which represents the extreme possible reduction of life to its minimum: life has become a flat landscape, without any hierarchy for values and without necessity for choices, because diversity and complementarity have been eliminated.

### **The urgent need for change**

***Our modern society needs to undergo a profound change in its way of understanding life and of fostering relationships.***

There is no need to demonstrate how much our world suffers from exploitation, oppression, destruction and violence. We destroy our own environment, many people do not have access to a minimum subsistence, the gap between rich and poor increases, materialism has crushed our sensitivity. Change is urgently needed!

From climate change to globalisation, there is a wide range of imbalances which this essay wants to look at. The simple fact of a better understanding of what is at stake already helps us to see the way to change things. The most difficult aspect of this change is not its necessity but our will for change. The question is not how to change but how to start a move towards change.

As soon as we understand our search for happiness as a collective path, we see our society with a very different eye and we become able to see our personal role in this necessity of starting the move towards change.

### **A new anthropology**

***We need a new anthropology (understanding of life) which will guide us in our choices on the path towards truth and happiness.***

The many contemporary problems we are confronted to, like violence, injustice, poverty, climate change, financial crisis, depression, are not the main issues; they are only the expression of the deep ethical, humanist and spiritual crisis we are going through and of our inadequate understanding of what life is about. We need to (re)discover the deep meaning of our existence and of our living together. We need to develop a new anthropology, a new humanism which is not based on material contingencies but which explains life and formulates the major priorities in our choices. An anthropology which focuses on human values, on the deepest dimensions of life itself and not on its maintenance conditions only. This anthropology can only be anchored in a wider understanding of the meaning of life, much beyond a purely ethical frame. It has to be a large fresco of the invisible sources of our life energy and of its purposes, more a questioning than an answering. Naturally each culture will develop their own understanding and representations, yet it is to believe that a basic perennial universal philosophy constitutes the base of this new (or old) understanding of life as being sacred and mysterious. All our faculties (physical, technical, scientific, intellectual, artistic, philosophical, psychological, emotive, spiritual) will contribute to make this existing back ground more perceptible and conscious for all.

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Problems today are solved as isolated problems, mainly on the purely technical level: we know that climate change is due to an excess of CO<sub>2</sub>, it is why we look for the technologies that will allow us to reduce the production of CO<sub>2</sub>; we know that the financial crisis is due to excess in speculation, it is why we look for regulations that will allow us to better control excesses; and so on. But never we question what in our culture and values, and especially in their origins, has generated the faulty behaviours that produce the harm. The discovery of our true anthropology is a form of psychotherapeutic path.

Life is more than mere technical problem of quantities. Only a new anthropology can offer the necessary frame for a true debate and re-equilibration. New: it does not mean we have to reinvent everything; it only means we have to re-appropriate ourselves the roots of our being and of our culture. We have to go back to the source of our beliefs, it means to our cultural, social and spiritual heritage, which we will re-examine under the light of our new knowledge and experience, in an authentic spirit of search for truth which has to reveal to ourselves our true place in the cosmos.

Although this new anthropology cannot be described with words, the following options of this essay will better describe or illustrate the necessary spirit of this search which is never ending. This is a search and not an answer we are looking for.

### *A spiritual dimension*

*Life is not only material - it is mainly spiritual. Reality beyond appearances is what gives orientation and meaning to life.*

Life is more than the physical, chemical and mechanical aspects of the biological process which we can observe. There is an energy and a creative orientation which govern life and which we cannot grasp and cannot describe. Nevertheless, this energy and meaning constitute the real core of life. It is the Reality which is beyond appearances. We can only observe it in its effects because we cannot get hold of it as such.

Science tries to describe and to explain life. It is a very rich contribution to our understanding of the universe. But this attempt to describe our material reality has its limits; it cannot describe what is essential to us.

The determinist approach to life says that everything is only a consequence of physical or chemical or mechanical events or, if not, then of probability (chance or necessity). Because they reduce life to a pure material phenomenon, in doing so, the scientists who adopt this materialistic understanding describe themselves in fact as being not much more than a heap of stones, except by their complexity. In this understanding, will, freedom, interpretation and choice lose their entire meaning. We are reduced to the position of being inanimate.

Beyond the material aspects of life, I believe there is a force which is the real core of life. This force has a spiritual nature and is the source of everything. The universe has an orientation towards an aim or a core of attraction and a meaning. It is governed by an energy which has its own will; you can call it compassion or God or Reality. Let us for a while call it Reality, because the word God is too loaded with false interpretations and representations.

We experience this Reality in our life, in a hidden way, because it is not tangible, but we can recognise it when it acts, as we can see the

effects of the wind when it moves the branches and the leaves. The wind remains invisible but we can observe its effects. It is the same with the Spirit: we can observe his/her action, although we can neither grasp nor catch Him/Her. What is invisible can nevertheless be experienced. Our own experience and observation become the tools for our understanding and our knowledge of this spiritual dimension.

### *The key to depth*

*Beyond the minimal necessary conditions for our subsistence, spiritual values are the key to the depth of life.*

As soon we can access the minimal material conditions for our physical survival (air, water, food, clothing, shelter), we need love, justice, beauty and peace which are the keys for discovering the core of life. Spiritual values are nothing else but the hidden dimensions of life which allow us to discover depth; we discover this depth only by experiencing by ourselves these hidden spiritual dimensions.

Spiritual dimensions are the core of life but we can only be open to them if the necessary minimum for our survival is available to us. This means that we need first to answer our physical basic needs and it does not require much to do so. With the means we have nowadays we could ensure the subsistence of all human beings on our planet Earth. This does not happen because we remain indifferent to the destiny of others; it is abstract because we cannot experience their suffering on our own skin and we find we have enough to do with caring for ourselves and the ones we love.

But this minimal subsistence is not enough to make us happy. More material goods can distract us and give us the illusion of a kind of

well-being; we call it comfort. But what we need the most is recognition and love, peace and equity. Immaterial goods are in fact the way to a substantial and rich life; these goods are invisible; they are the hidden dimensions and real depth of life.

### *Matter and Reality*

*Matter reveals and, at the same time, hides the Reality beyond appearances.*

This is a paradox: matter is necessary to make the other Reality accessible to us because only through our senses and mind we can become aware of the other Reality which expresses itself through matter as well as through immaterial dimensions. But what we grasp is not the Reality, it is only an aspect of it and Reality remains invisible, impossible to touch, to listen to, to smell or to describe. Therefore we can see that matter not only reveals but also hides Reality, because it prevents us from having direct access to it. It is why Reality is beyond appearances.

Spirit and matter are two aspects of the same reality, although they are not of the same essence. Spirit expresses and makes Him/Herself visible through matter. Without matter, without our body, we would not be able to become aware of this other Reality. And we would not be able to express what we understand of this other Reality.

Nevertheless, although matter is an expression of the Reality, it is also a screen, because it presents to us the false appearance of a reality which never lasts, which always changes and dies. We have therefore the tendency to believe that what we see is what we get. But the true dimension of life remains invisible and hidden.

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### *A subtle interpretation of life*

*The Spirit (Reality) is the core of everything and leads us to other more subtle interpretations of life.*

We can interpret each event, each fact in two ways:

- 1) either as a material phenomenon, which includes only the visible or measurable physical, chemical and mechanical aspects of what happens;
- 2) or as a spiritual phenomenon; this means as a material fact like under (1), but which reveals a deeper dimension, a deeper significance, beyond the simple material dimension.

This second interpretation excludes pure chance as a creative factor. It accepts that nothing is neutral. It includes the first interpretation but integrates it in a wider meaning.

Our own interpretation of the world leads us to act in a specific way; a spiritual interpretation will therefore lead us to act according to spiritual choices and priorities more than according to material appearances and tangible phenomena, even if these material aspects are also considered.

As short-sighted as the first interpretation can be, it is sure that the second interpretation seems a bit fanatical. Nevertheless this exercise of reading the deep significance of facts remains one of the most fascinating attitudes we can have about life. It shows another way of looking at our life where causes bring consequences about in a similarly strict string, as it does in the visible realm of things, but which can include many more factors than what we are used to.

Of course this spiritual interpretation of what happens is only a personal one; it cannot be proved right or wrong. It is a subjective interpretation which is linked with our personal experience from the past. Everybody will have a different interpretation. It seems to be a crazy thing that we behave according to something which is so partial and so peculiar, but experience shows that this very personal understanding helps us to go more deeply along our own path. Although it is peculiar, it is our only path towards truth.

It is important to underline here that spirituality is not about impressive apparitions of a supernatural being; it is about the normal life perceived in its depth. It has nothing special which life does not contain, but spirituality recognises these aspects we usually do not notice because they are very discrete and subtle. Our sense of observation, our capacity to listen, our openness to use our intuition, and to use other parts of our being than our rational mind, provide an additional help, although our mind remains an important tool.

An attitude which refuses even to hear or to talk about this hidden reality seems to be a kind of blockage and even the expression of a lack of freedom. It is essential to remember that spirituality is a completely free field and that everybody can therefore find their own path according to their own sensitivity and understanding. There is no constraint of any kind, except our awareness of the impact of our own perception and experience on our life and on that of others. This is why it is difficult to understand how so many people refuse nowadays even to look at this dimension of reality. It is a little bit like saying: I do not want to use my sight, I will only use my hearing. Why limit ourselves in our ability to discover Truth? A larger view can only help us to grasp other dimensions of our reality we would not be aware of, if we were closed to any other form of perception. In this way humanism would gain a lot because it would engage on the



spiritual level, and especially it would be ready to design its own approach and to propose in this way a new path which could integrate this other dimension into our human struggles; this new approach would be a liberation for so many people who have been hurt by the official positions of a too constraining form of institutional religion.

By learning to recognise the central role that the Spirit plays in our world, we open to another understanding of the universe which profoundly changes our attitudes, our behaviours and our beliefs. It gives a depth as if it would add another dimension: the three dimensions of space instead of the flat land of our road-map.

### *The existence of the Spirit*

*Four so-called “proofs” of the existence of the Reality beyond appearances (which are no-proofs). Observation is the tool.*

Humorously we can try to describe these four proofs, which remain no-proofs because they express only a personal experience and interpretation. For instance:

- 1) When after 20 days I discover that the eggs of my hen have become chicks, it is simply a wonder: how can life emerge? how can life reproduce life? and even how can life (human life for instance) integrate a spiritual dimension?
- 2) Everybody has a sense of the sacredness of life: if not, would we not remove (kill?) our neighbour as we remove a stone which is in our way?
- 3) Love, peace, beauty are qualities which cannot be defined because they are wider than anything we can represent ourselves: is this form of infinity or eternity not a sign of this infinite unfathomable depth of life?

- 4) The fruits we bear are signs of our personal evolution and especially of our spiritual growth: are not Gandhi, or the Dalai Lama universally recognised as wise and inspiring people, because they are rooted in another dimension, while remaining fully incarnated?

Observation is the ideal tool we have in order to recognise the expression of Reality and to investigate its nature.

If it were not a life serious subject, we could say that these examples are just jokes. It is almost all that we have in order to find this other reality, but, although it seems to be very little, it is in fact telling us very much if we are ready to listen. As Buddhists say: observe the nature of things. Observation is the only tool we have; it seems very fragile and not very effective, but it is in fact a powerful tool. The main obstacle is not the limitation of our tools to discover the Reality, it is our stubbornness in being tricked by first appearances and to believe that reality is simply what we see of it. Our faculties are much wider than that. We have to learn how to trust our capacity to investigate these other dimensions, if we are trusting enough to let us be lead on this path: observe, listen, be silent.

### *An unfathomable Reality*

*Reality, although we experience it, remains unfathomable and is very different from the representations we have of it.*

Religions are an attempt to express what is Reality although Reality remains impossible to describe. The message of religions is therefore only a (more or less awkward) pointing finger which limits itself in showing the direction in which we have to search, instead of expressing the Truth in its complete meaning. The Eastern theology -

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whether Orthodox or Buddhist - has even adopted the apophatic way (literally the way “which does not say”), which does not even try to describe this Truth but only gives indications on the path which leads to the experience of Reality. The Russian theologian Mikolai Berdaiev says: God is in no way similar to what we think he is.

A Chinese saying tells us: when the finger shows the moon, the fool looks at the finger. It is very much what we do. And then we say: but God is not a finger, and we remain disappointed by the teaching we receive.

There are many misunderstandings about religion and spirituality, because this sacred dimension of our private life has been used by power and institutions in the most horrendous ways. I understand so well people who have had their wings burned by this difficult contact with the official religious institutions or the false use of spiritual references. I also experienced it myself. Official religion has too often described a nasty and perverse god who luckily does not exist! It is a chance that many people do not believe in this god. Nevertheless this deep deception has often brought them far away from the spiritual Truth, and it is sad to see that, because of their wounds, they have lost their ability to rediscover this deep meaning of life in their own way.

Let us examine a few of these misunderstandings. To make it easier, we will call the Reality God, as it is the way most people do in our Christian based culture, and we will say “he” instead of s/he, although s/he is feminine and masculine, and not this bearded figure we use to represent God. God remains invisible, beyond any representation; s/he cannot be seen; s/he is pure Spirit and therefore everywhere but never tangible. By using the word God, we will try to rehabilitate this name, because it is in using the usual word that one

can rehabilitate the concept which hides behind this word. Let us try in this way to express how much God is not a being of anger and menace, but one of love and freedom, incredibly discrete and respectful of our choices.

## The misunderstandings about spirituality

### 1) Awareness and search

*Even a small awareness of the existence of another Reality beyond appearances can only urge us to try to discover more about it.*

Whatever the official theology has been able to say about God, it won't “change” God and God remains who he is. God remains free to reveal himself as he wants and how he wants. He is as he reveals himself to us, and our personal experience is our way of knowing him. The glimpses we can have of this other Reality can only prompt us to try to know whether it really exists and to discover more about it.

This is certainly the first point of misunderstanding. This point is very important, because it is not the theology which defines the nature of God but theology is only an awkward means to describe the nature of the one we cannot know or describe.

Similarly, my teacher in biology at school could be a very bad teacher, but this did not take anything away from the fascinating creativity of the biological world. Of course bad teaching creates a huge obstacle on our way, but the mystery remains complete and still present, and leaves us all our opportunities to discover it, in our own way. As God remains unchanged by theology (whether good or bad) he continues to act in our lives and to reveal himself to us in little

things. Therefore we never lose an opportunity to discover unknown aspects of him, as long we remain open to recognise his presence or expression.

If I am sensitive, or just open, to the so-called “proofs” of God’s existence, then I have only one way to go: the one of an insatiable search for Truth in order to know whether God exists, and, if he exists, in order to discover who he is. And what the teaching tells me is only a help. I remain fully responsible for my own path; it means I have to use my critical sense and all my faculties, despite all the obstacles others could have put on my way, but also with gratitude to all who have helped me on my path.

### **2) The body of believers and the institution**

***The official religious institution (Church, Temple, Mosque) is not the same as the living body of believers; the latter only matters.***

It is essential to make a clear distinction between the religious institution and the community of believers:

- 1) The institution is only the human structure which is in charge of organising the practical aspects in the life of the community. It is the expression of the form of power which has been adopted by this institution and which is not an expression of the quality of the religious message. This structure has usually the role and the power of formulating the doctrine in the form of the teaching; but the doctrine is not the Truth; it is only the formulation of the teaching and it is not therefore the spiritual Reality itself.
- 2) The community of the believers is the living spiritual body which encompasses all the people who have part in a shared Reality. The living body of believers is the only real living dimension and

the only spiritual expression: it is where spiritual life happens as such and in its confrontation with our milieu. The intensity of what is expressed or lived in this body of believers is much less apparent than what the authority expresses, although it is much more fundamental and essential for the expression of our spiritual belonging.

This is the second point of misunderstanding. We too often make a confusion between the official position of the authority and the real practice of the many believers. The media usually concentrate mainly on the shocking positions of the Church about contraception, divorce or homosexuality and they do not describe the inspiring life of so many people who are involved in their own spiritual practice, in peace, justice or health issues, often paying a very high personal price for their commitment. The community of the believers is like the hidden part of the iceberg: one sees well only what is not important, i.e. the official aspect of the institution. Of course the harm caused by these excessive and awkward positions of the authority is appalling and prevents many people from having access to a deeper reality, but, although more visible, it nevertheless remains a secondary aspect and it should not hide the real depth of a living community which is far from being perfect but remains very inspiring. Who is not sensitive to the inspiring example of the life of Mother Teresa, of any Hindu sannyasi, of Francis of Assisi, or of people who give up their own security in order to help their neighbours?

### **3) Spirituality and religion**

***Spirituality is personal experience, while religion is teaching (formal expression of a cumulated experience).***

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Spirituality and religion are two different approaches of the divine Reality:

- 1) Spirituality is the field of our personal relationship with the divine; it is mainly our own experience and our own search or the one of our community. It happens in the present.
- 2) Religion is an attempt to describe this search and the nature of the divine Reality. It is a means of finding the best form of expression for describing the experience of humanity in its relationship to the divine, in order to transmit this knowledge and make it understandable for new generations. Hence it is not the Reality but a description of the Reality, or even a description of the path to the Reality. Although, as a teaching, religion is an expression of this sacred commune experience, it has been also strongly influenced in its human form because it has been impregnated by the perceptions and interpretations of the ones who wanted to transmit this message and who tried to find the best possible means in this purpose. Some other have even used it for their own purpose.

This is the third point of misunderstanding. Many people have been deeply hurt by the teaching of the Temple, of the Synagogue, of the Church or of the Mosque, because institutional religion has often misinterpreted the message or has used it for its own purposes. Many dogmas and expressions of the official theology present reductionist views and are even in contradiction with the original message: for instance how can Christianity be divided or exclude people from its own community? It is evident that this negative human aspect does not fit with the original message. The religious institution is exposed, as any other, to human tendencies of greed, thirst for power, need for control, or just to ignorance and awkwardness. Often also there is a big gap between the teaching and the behaviour of the ones who

teach. It certainly does not help to believe in the teaching, but, once again, the weakness of the teacher does not change the Reality; it only makes it less accessible, although more human. It means that the weaknesses of the religious teaching should in fact challenge us to go deeper into the message in order to go beyond the twists of the teaching and to generate our own understanding and experience.

### 4) Contemplation and morality

*Contemplation relies on our own experience of the divine, while morality is only its expression in terms of behaviour.*

Contemplation and morality are two different fields:

- 1) First comes contemplation which is the living experience of life and of our relationship with the divine. It is unforeseeable and absolutely free of any constraints; it is a process which changes us.
- 2) Secondly, morality is not the heavy burden it has been made of; it is only the translation of the living contemplative experience in terms of human behaviour, because the experience of the divine dimension of life completely changes the way life is understood and it also changes therefore the behaviour in everyday life.

This is the fourth point of misunderstanding. The religious teaching is very often perceived as a primarily moralistic teaching: you should! you should not! Hell is the punishment for sin! Although it is often what is actually taught, we have sadly to recognise that it is in complete contradiction with the original message: the real message is one of forgiveness and freedom, which is far from the heavy condemnation for sins.

The religious institution often has a deep fear from contemplation because it is a personal inner process and it is something it cannot control. Contemplation is in fact the core of the spiritual search because it is the field of our own personal relationship with God where we experience who he is and how far it is given to us to access this dimension. The experience of contemplation has, once again, nothing supernatural; in general, it is not a spectacular and impressive apparition but it is much more a form of awareness, of very discrete and subtle feeling of peace and of joy. Every experience is different and everybody experiences it differently. No rule can be written. It is the free field of personal experience and of God's expression in our life.

When we become aware of the deep meaning of life, it is normal that our perceptions and interpretations are shaken and that we discover another form of understanding. While the meaning changes, the behaviour in everyday life can only follow this important shift of mind and has to adapt to the new meaning. Morality is in fact nothing else than the change which happens in our behaviour. When life appears as sacred, it is normal that we do not want to kill anymore. If we experience the fact that we all together form one unique and same body, it is normal that generosity impregnates naturally any exchange with others. Morality is in this sense not an imposed burden, but it is a natural expression of what has been experienced.

Nevertheless it remains true that morality can be taught as such, as a means to discover another quality of human relationship. In this case, it is working the other way. The "right" attitude is taught in order to provoke the experience and to open the person to the sacred dimension of life.

Both ways are true. The first move, from contemplation to morality, is more natural, while the second, from morality to contemplation, is more man induced. The first is richer but more difficult to gain access to, in an authentic way. The second is easier to teach and to control. And, importantly, we are complex beings who are used to work in different ways and to combine usually different approaches.

### 5) Culpability and "sin"

*Religious culpability comes from a misinterpretation of what the so-called "sin" really is.*

The core of the spiritual message means that we are freed from sin, and not condemned to be punished. The teaching has often reversed this message and put the emphasis on condemnation. It is a terrible misinterpretation which has closed - and still does close - the gates of spirituality to many people.

This is the fifth point of misunderstanding. The main message of religion has to make people free from their guilt feeling and to open for them the way for self-expression when they can see how they are linked with the whole universe and the whole humanity, and how the roots of their being are in God. Every day we can have a new start; we are not trapped in our illusions. Every day we can free ourselves from the illusions which have misled us yesterday. It is important that we can see how much we are all interdependent. We are forming a huge body and we need each other to develop and express our full potential.

Of course, we can also choose to go our own way; we can try to dominate others, try to use them, try to exploit them - this is too often our easiest tendency - but very quickly we notice how it brings

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violence and suffering and how it finally reduces our possibilities to experience this authentic depth of life which is the core of our happiness.

Domination has brought too much suffering; it destroyed nature, it destroyed people and cultures. It is important for us to identify the illusory paths which open in front of us. In this way confession, as it is practised essentially in Christianity, has nothing to do with culpability; it is only a time of examination of our own life, a time for assessment where we try to see clearly where we stand. It aims in fact to nothing else than recognising our true place and our true path, according to our roots in God, it means according to our belonging to this whole body of humanity. It is a time where we try to understand what leads us always astray, why we cannot be faithful to our vocation and why we let us be distracted from our fundamental choices. It has nothing to do with guilt; it is on the contrary very liberating to be able to look clearly in our own life. Confession is like psychotherapy; it is a means to see clearly where to go, how to behave in the light of the past experiences, and still more with the main belief that we can restart everyday a new life, free from the burden of the past. This is the true message of spirituality and of religion when they do not transform the message for own purposes or by simple awkwardness or ignorance.

We experience as a liberation our ability to recognise our own limitations. We do not need to be perfect. The awareness of our own weaknesses allows us to be ourselves without any feeling of guilt. Our society puts pressure upon us to conform and to excel, but we do not need that to be happy. Guilt is very often this creeping feeling of failing because we do not want or are unable to conform with this model of excellence. Sin is often this penetrating violence which destroys us from inside when we feel intuitively that the social

pattern is wrong but we do not dare to oppose it and therefore we feel guilty by not answering the expectations which our social milieu imposes upon us: we should be clever, beautiful, quick, rich, successful, it says; yet what are these values but illusions? Therefore our intuition that we should resist this trend is right and makes us free: thus we become free to choose not to perform and not to be excellent. We have a right to be just ourselves; it does not mean mediocrity; it means in fact authenticity. This is the true way to creativity.

According to Greek and Hebrew etymology, the word *sin* means: *to miss the aim*. This is the arrow which gets lost because it has been diverted. It also means: *to be not participating*, which means a lack of connection with the universe and therefore a distorted relationship with God. We see how far this other understanding is from the idea of contravening a rule or an interdiction, as it is too often the interpretation of sin according to traditional teaching. Sin is in fact nothing else than our tendency, by ignorance or laziness, to resist following the way which allows us to be fully human in taking part in our divine dimension. This access to divinity is not an achievement of ours, it is a gift of life, it is pure grace. It is why life is sacred, because it leads us to this sacred dimension of our vocation.

### **6) Experience and teaching**

***Experience is the tool we use to test the teaching, while teaching opens our eyes on the deep meaning of our experience.***

Experience and teaching often seem to be in conflict, because they challenge each other. In fact they are complementary. It is a subtle balance between a critical attitude towards teaching, based on our

own experience which initiates us to the Reality, and nevertheless an openness to the many aspects of teaching we still do not understand.

This is the sixth point of misunderstanding. Teaching too often seems in contradiction with our experience and especially with the attitude or behaviour of the ones who want to teach us. Teaching is a mixture of revelation, in the sense it is the expression of human experience in its relationship with God, and of additions and interpretations by the successive teachers and authorities of the religious institution. In this way it cannot be just swallowed as it is given; it needs to be purified of all the falsifications or awkward adaptations it has received through the ages. It also has to be assimilated by each of us; made personal and tuned with our own sensitivity and personal experience. Each of us has to find his/her own way in the diversity of the many teachings and forms of expression. Diversity of religions and traditions answer this need for diversity which is engraved in human nature: many cultures, many languages, many religions, many traditions; this rich diversity offers many ways for everybody to find one's own personal path. This is the role of traditions and of teaching, to tell us the variety of human experience and to prevent the difficulty of starting from scratch. Traditions deliver to us the content of human experience. We have to understand it as well as we can, and then we have to assimilate it and make it personal, according to our own context, culture, sensitivity.

Our own experience plays a fundamental role inasmuch as it opens our heart and mind to different aspects of our life. The teaching is only capable of explaining some aspects of the invisible reality or simply of indicating that another dimension exists, but it cannot make it real until our experience has allowed us to come in touch with this other dimension or reality. This is why our own experience cannot be replaced by anything else; it is our principal tool to investigate the

true nature of life. Of course, our faculty of observation becomes in this sense primordial because it allows us to extract from our experience any new knowledge this experience gives us access to, and it makes it possible for us to be enriched.

We have to find and identify our personal form of faith and life, whatever it is: our way of dressing, our way of speaking, our beliefs, our behaviour, our way of relating to the invisible Reality. But this necessity of finding our own way does not mean that we should create our own truth as it suits us. We must find our own relationship with the Truth and we must create our personal path, but Truth remains unique even if there are many ways to express it. Assimilation and individualisation of our own perception does not mean we should practise eclecticism. Truth remains what it is, whatever we say about it; only our path can adapt to our own personality, but it must remain faithful to Truth. This is a subtle balance between our own interpretation and what Reality is.

### **7) Faith and practice**

***Faith recognises what is not fully realised, while practice is the translation of faith in our everyday life.***

Whatever we do, we need to have faith in our commitment, whether it is in social action or on our spiritual path. It is essential to be able to read the potentials which are contained in any situation, because they show us what can be actualised. Faith in this way can read what can become reality; it can recognise what is still in the egg. But faith without practice has no meaning. Everyday practice must adapt to the promising view which can read potential; it has to test faith in confronting it with our daily reality. Practice is the test of faith, while faith throws another light on practice.

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This is the seventh point of misunderstanding. Faith is in interaction with practice. Faith is trust in the given tradition which describes to us the potential we do not see immediately by ourselves. Without this trust in our teacher, we cannot learn. I can learn to swim only if I trust the teacher who tells me that I am able to float on water and even to move forward. Trust in the teacher is a fundamental aspect of our spiritual path. It is what allows us to discover and experience the unknown. But this trust cannot be blind. Trust does not mean a blind faith. Faith is what pulls us forward; it is never a refusal to see reality as it is. On the contrary, faith makes us independent and critical. It helps us accept and recognise reality as it is. Because we are anchored through faith in another dimension, we are more capable of looking at ourselves and at our situation with clear-sightedness. Therefore practice is the free field for the confrontation of faith with our daily reality. Out of this confrontation a new way to look at life is fostered.

### Consciousness as synthesis

*Consciousness is interpretation and synthesis; it proposes a balance between teaching, experience, faith and practice.*

Observation allows us to extract the meaning of things, situations and facts. But the real faculty which establishes the right balance between all the aspects we notice is our consciousness; consciousness is our faculty to draw the synthesis and to adopt the best interpretation we can. It is where spiritual knowledge allows us to go beyond intellectual learning; the power of consciousness relies on an ability to perceive the whole, beyond the only rational approach through our mind. It also integrates the more hidden dimensions which we cannot grasp or describe by intellectual means.

Observation, perception and consciousness form a kind of chain which we will examine in more detail further on. Consciousness is not a mere picture of reality, it is an interpretation which gives a meaning and an orientation to what it observes. Therefore it is not neutral; it is a stand, a testimony. Our spiritual path leads us to interpret life and to choose our attitude. It goes much beyond a simple objective statement. Consciousness is therefore a kind of restructuring of the reality we experience.

Consciousness calls for new choices.



## **2) THE DIMENSION OF OUR CHOICES**

After having described in very general terms what consists of the spiritual dimension of our life, we have to look at the role which our choices play in our life, because the reference to spiritual values enhances our possibility to make choices which can completely change our way of life; choices therefore reveal themselves as necessary for our own accomplishment.

### **The necessity for our choices**

Choices should enhance our personal freedom; they should increase diversity, instead of leading to conformity as they do in our society. Choices are the fundamental key for a transformation of our personal and collective frame of life.

#### **Individualism as a path to conformity**

***Individualism does not lead us to freedom, but only to social conformity; real freedom urges us to practise life choices.***

Individualism and a false understanding of freedom mean that we should just do what pleases us. This understanding is pure derelict indulgence and childish regression into hedonism and selfishness. In fact it leads us into exactly the contrary of freedom; it leads us to the most banal conformity which adapts to the flat land of publicity and fashion: do as you enjoy it, do as others do, or as dominant powers want you to do.

Freedom is not the possibility to do whatever pleases us; freedom is grounded in our consciousness which is our faculty for synthesis and

interpretation and which provides us therefore with the capacity to choose the most difficult path because it is the path for our personal and spiritual growth. Freedom is the liberty to accept reality as it is; it implies the necessary detachment from our own comfort in order to be capable to practise truly, i.e. to live in a perfect faithfulness to what we believe is Truth. No talk is necessary, only the practice can express this personal truth.

Therefore, it is urgent that we understand that life can only be in touch with depth if it results in choices which concern the spiritual values we are ready to practise, whatever constraints it implies for us. Growth is only possible if we are ready to make the necessary choices and to accept paying the price for our commitment.

Hedonism becomes more and more the rule of our modern society: do it as long it pleases you; if it is too constraining, then stop it and drop out. This is the dominant picture of our modern society which is ruled by publicity. Pleasure has of course nothing negative, as long as we do not become prisoners of it. It is why detachment is a main key to freedom, because it allows us to remain independent of our comfort. Need for comfort, whether physical or psychological, is certainly one of the main hindrances to our personal and social growth. Search for comfort leads us to social conformity; we just do as others do. It is the negation of freedom. Freedom should yet call for diversity.

A Buddhist saying puts it this way: “among two paths, choose always the most difficult one”. The key for our happiness and personal or social growth resides in our choices. We must learn again how to make choices. These choices concern less the material conditions of our life than the spiritual quality of what is important in our life and what has to guide us.

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### *Our subjective understanding*

*Our understanding of the world is fostered by our own personal past experiences and by our memories.*

Each of us has a different way of looking at life and his/her milieu, because he/she understands it through the filter of his/her own experiences from the past and through the filter of culture which is nothing else than a proposed frame for the interpretation of what happens around us which has been constructed through the many generations of human experience. This proposed frame for interpretation suggests to us answers for our own interrogations. An Inuit hunter and a lawyer from New York have very different understandings of what is life, because their respective experiences have almost nothing in common. Even two lawyers in New York do. Therefore choices, which are the result of our interpretations, are very different according to the different persons we are, depending on the past we have had and especially on the degree of harmony or of conflict we have shown in our personal relationship with the world.

It is a very important key to our understanding of life: there is no objective reality, because our subjective ways of interacting with the surrounding reality are the main factors which define our relationship with the world. Our attitude to our environment fosters our behaviour which defines the kind of relationship we establish with our context. A conflicting attitude will generate conflict while a conciliating attitude will generate more harmony. Past experiences of suffering transform our vision of the world and of others and tend to overwhelm us while happy events foster a positive attitude to life. This way of understanding our perception of reality is certainly more realistic than the belief that reality objectively exists as such and that

there is only one best way to interact with it. In fact we create the world with and within our minds. Of course reality exists also independently of us, but it is mainly our own attitude which makes it real to us. Without our interaction, reality would remain something completely abstract and strange to us.

Therefore our past experiences and what we have recorded of them become the dominant factors which foster a special kind of attitude more than another. If I burned myself as a child with hot water or if I almost drowned in a pool, I have recorded a negative attitude towards water, until another experience changes this negative memory to something more positive, by adding more aspects to it. It is astonishing how much our first impressions create almost like grooves into which we fall again and again until we succeed in widening our perceptions by adding different experiences to it. This aspect of our own personal growth is essential and it will fundamentally influence the way we interact with the world, the way we interpret what we see around us and the way we make choices in our own life.

### *The chain of transformation*

*The chain of perception (or of transformation) changes facts into perceptions, then into interpretations and choices.*

We do not perceive facts as they are, but our senses, our mind, our heart and the many components of our being treat what happens to us and around us, and what we perceive of it, into a long chain of transformations which processes the basic information in order to make it usable and to help us to cope with our environment:

- 1) The facts: they are made out of what happens in us and around us - if they exist independently of us, and that is not even sure that they do.
- 2) The perceptions: they are the sensations which these facts provoke in us, mainly through our senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Our mind is in fact our sixth sense in the way it is assembling these very disparate perceptions by our senses, which are very specialised. It is our mind which constructs the resulting image in adding the missing data which it gets out of its own storage (memory, acquired concepts).
- 3) The interpretations: they are the understanding we have of the resulting image provided by our mind, it means that we try to give a meaning to what we have perceived. This interpretation relates of course mainly to our past experiences, to our emotions, to our knowledge, to our passions, to our wounds, to our memories. This interpretation is a deep transformation of the received messages according to our own personality.
- 4) The choices: they are the reactions which these interpretations provoke in us and they generate attitudes, behaviours and acts which are very much connected with the meaning of the interpretation. More than the real facts we try to perceive, it is the meaning we give to our perceptions which fosters the kind of reactions we express.

The consecutive reactions will generate new facts which will influence our environment and therefore provoke new perceptions: the chain of transformations is an infinite cycle which never finishes.

This understanding of the way we transform what we call reality, in order to make it our own reality, is very important, because it shows how much we change the initial signal, which is the fact, so that we come to a reaction.

It is striking to become aware how much the image we have of our world is a reconstituted picture which our mind constructs from very partial information. Each of our senses fulfils only one function: the eye can only see and the ear can only hear. It seems evident but we rarely become aware how much our mind has to work hard in order to recombine these divided perceptions of a unique reality. It has also to fill the gaps because this information remains very partial and many of the links between them are missing. For instance, if I hear a rooster crow, my mind will provide the picture of an average rooster; a picture of what I have experienced a rooster looks like. But the rooster I hear is maybe very different from the ones I have known. It is still more striking if I am hearing a bird I cannot identify. My brain will panic and quickly try to assemble a plausible variation of what this bird could look like. It is evident that my brain will try in this way to trick me instead of recognising its limitation and of proposing a blank picture with a footnote: no image is available.

This example is good enough to express how much we build for ourselves the image we have of the world. It shows how important the transformation can be through the chain of our perceptions-interpretations-choices and how much it distorts what we call reality. It is why reality is in fact more what we do out of our perceptions than what happens really around us and which we will never be aware of. Reality becomes in fact what we have made of it, because we will act according to our own picture and understanding, and not according to the facts themselves. This is the rich aspect of life. Life, according to this understanding (interpretation), becomes mainly interpretation and choice.

Of course, we never stop confronting our interpretations with what we understand from reality, because our acts show us how much our

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interpretation confirms our perceptions. The chain is also working backwards. We have constantly to adapt our interpretations and choices and even correct our perceptions in the way our mind constructs this image which is meant to be a representation of reality.

Ken Wilber<sup>3</sup> describes the interpretation of what is surrounding us in the way he establishes a clear distinction between the IT, the WE and the I. The facts and objects (the IT) are something and the reactions they provoke in us are something different. The facts are what happens in our environment and what science tries to study, but science is already a form of interpretation, although it tries to be very objective. It is the study of the IT, where IT remains impossible to know as it is, without the filter of our perceptions through interpretation. Psychology and sociology have shown how much we are influenced by our past, by our social belonging, by our privileges, in the way we understand (i.e. interpret) what happens to us or around us. Culture is even the cumulated explanation of our world; it is the collective approach to reality. It is the WE approach. Through knowledge, through values, through social forms, our society (the WE) proposes a collective common interpretation of reality. This interpretation varies considerably from one society to the next; it is not the same in Papua New Guinea, in Siberia, in Paris or in Abidjan. Religion itself is also a proposed interpretation of reality. Different religions propose different interpretations; and especially different personal experiences lead to different degrees of personal maturity inside the same religious belief and these different degrees of personal maturity propose different ways of grasping this wider reality. As the many independent persons we are, we have a relative degree of freedom to adopt or refute the interpretation that our culture or religion proposes. Once again, it is evident that our own perception is strongly influenced by our own past. This is the realm of the I, who

remains on one hand more or less free to find one's own interpretation and who remains on the other hand exposed to the conditions of one's own life and history. Therefore my own interpretation (the I) will be different from the one of my neighbour, although we grew both of us in the same cultural frame (the same WE).

It is a main aspect of our responsibility to be able to see clearly the distinction between the fact and the projection for meaning we propose. At each time in our life we have to be aware of this distinction between the facts and our own interpretations. It is the most basic step into our psychological, intellectual and spiritual growth, when we come out of childhood into adulthood. This basic step is fundamental for our respect of the other and for our ability to fit into a world which is made out of diversity and complementarity. In the same way we must become aware of the huge differences of interpretation which the different cultures propose. It shows how diverse reality can be.

### *Our privileges as justification*

*Our privileges and need for security, more than our clear awareness, are a justification for our attitudes and behaviour.*

Our way of looking at life and our interpretation of what happens to us or around us is mainly influenced by the way we are involved in these situations. If we are in a privileged position, our discourse will tend to justify our attitudes and behaviours, independently of their righteousness. This means that we tend to lose our ability to judge in an relatively "impartial" way when we are involved and when our personal interests are concerned. Detachment is therefore an important aspect of our rich and deep understanding of life, because it

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Wilber: *A Brief History of Everything*. Shambala, Boston, 1996.

provides us with a distance which allows us to consider our context with much more freedom than if we are too dependent on the advantages which our position ensures for us.

This is the basic approach by sociology and psychology. Privileges are the most difficult thing to overcome because they define our implication and they mean what we can well lose in case of change.

The discourse for our justification is an important key in order to make explicit the way how we view reality and how we are linked to our context. Of course this does not express clearly these links as they are; on the contrary, the justifying discourse often plays the role of hiding the real causes and motivations in order to protect them and to make them less visible or less understandable. It is striking in our rich societies how we believe that our material wealth gives us a right to consume more and to justify more sophisticated needs than it is the case for poor people. And this belief remains strong despite the fact we live objectively in the same world.

In most of the cases, we are even not aware of our way of justifying our position; we really believe in our own justification. We make ourselves prisoners of our own position and we lose therefore any freedom to take more distance and to see more clearly our situation in an apparent relationship with what makes it enjoyable.

True detachment - which is not isolation nor hiding nor numbing - provides us with a distance which allows us to better understand all aspects of our position. We should in fact be capable, through detachment and distance, to look at ourselves with the same critical eye as if we were someone else. Detachment provides us with a critical attitude which helps us to see things with clear-sightedness; this is the way to freedom.

### Consciousness and awareness

*Search for truth, in consciousness and awareness, opens a true way to growth and to personal and social depth.*

The deep inner drive to observe reality as it is and to recognise Truth is certainly a changing life attitude. Instead of remaining stuck in our representations and customs, we keep on moving in an ever discovering search which changes us deeply in a way which allows us to identify better our true nature and our vocation and it helps us to find the means to express them.

Awareness is a form of vigilance which identifies fully what happens and what is around us; consciousness concerns the picture of our insertion in the cosmos in an ever changing way because each step provides us with a new view of our environment. Both are a form of knowledge and also a form of interrogation.

Our society tries to keep imposing a false picture of happiness and of life as something we can grab and control, when acts are understood to make the substance of life in the way they allow us to dominate our environment and to achieve what we have planned.

On the opposite, the way which searches for truth consists in investigating the way we are; it is fostered by the nature of the spirit which animates our being: are we aware of what is? are we aware of where others are? are we in a peaceful and loving attitude, or are we angry and frustrated?

Awareness proceeds out of our observations and out of our ability to discover new aspects in life. It is an openness to any unknown reality.

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Out of this true connection to the world arises our consciousness which guides us in order to find the right balance and equanimity. Because it tries to be more detached from a material security that our social values try to encourage, it finds a better security in a form of inner peace which does not depend so much on exterior conditions but relies more on our inner grounding and rooting in the invisible Reality.

Paradoxically, the fact of opening a way of questioning, which shakes our common representations, allows us to find more freedom, in a form of life which depends less on external conditions and which provides therefore a deeper sense of security and peace. Asking true questions becomes a more secure way than answering our questioning with false ready made answers. Questioning is inevitably a call for choices. Paradoxically it means that our courage to challenge our own comfort provides a better spiritual security (this term is also a paradox!) than any escape in refuge values.

### **Diversity and complementarity**

***The diversity of languages, cultures, religions, ways of life is a sign of the living complementarity which helps us in our search.***

What is common between a hunter of the Kalahari and a Chinese doctor, between an Indian coolie and a European farmer, between an Inuit woman and a Californian student, but their humanity? We have basically the same genes and the same ability to be kind or clever. Mainly life circumstances and influencing social or religious patterns create the differences in the long term. The human diversity is like biodiversity; it is endless and it is the most precious gift in our sharing of the human condition; it is the true source of complementarity where each of us (person, community, culture,

religion) can find our place in a wider body where it plays the special and unique role it has to play, according to its own gifts. Each culture is a useful contribution to the global understanding of life. No culture is superior to another. But modern globalisation tends to flatten these differences by destroying weak local cultures and by imposing a single way of thinking and living. Our western civilisation did not impose itself because of its wisdom or because of its ability to make people happy, but it did through its total lack of moral restraint, through the power of its weapons and of its technology, as well as by imposing the logic of market (conversion of any value into money) upon all aspects of life. This tendency to standardisation is killing the richness of our diversity and will impoverish us for ever.

The diversity of forms of life is certainly one of the most precious treasure in nature: from the whale to the small bacteria, from a kangaroo (with a pouch) to the swallow, from the camel (with one or two humps?) to the worm, from the penguin to the platypus (a mammal which lays eggs). Mankind, being part of nature, enjoys the same quality of diversity; diversity is for us the way to truth because it proposes diverse ways which are complementary. Destroying this diversity equals destroying ourselves or our sustainability, as destroying biodiversity and nature is the way to destroy the environment which feeds us and allows us to survive.

Each culture proposes another way of integration in our universe. Each religion proposes another way to find Truth. None of them is perfect, but they propose to us the best of what remains from human experience. This diversity answers the diversity of our needs as human beings and persons. It provides us with the possibility of choosing the right way. We have to learn to discern which insights are an inspiration for truth among all the different answers that are proposed to us. Observation, interpretation, awareness and

consciousness will help us to identify our way, and to choose the true way of expressing ourselves.

### Citizens and consumers

*Through democracy and marketing, each of us becomes a citizen and a consumer and therefore a contributor to what our world is.*

Participation is the basic law of our economic and political system. Democracy relies on our participation. Either people are participating in a direct way when decisions are taken directly by the local community when it gathers, with all its members, in order to take the necessary decisions which concern the future of the community (direct democracy), or people are participating in an indirect way when they are delegating their own power to elected members of the community (indirect democracy). Marketing makes also us participants in the economic life: as working forces (producers) and especially as consumers, we are the necessary actors who allow the system to develop into what it is. Hence, our commercial and political system does not exist as such. This system is what it is because it is what we make it in taking part in it, even when we abstain from doing anything or when we are not aware of the fact we are participating in it.

Without producers and consumers there is no market; without citizens there is no political system; even a repressive system can only exist because it has people to oppress. This means that our daily behaviour is what makes the system what it is, by the way we support it, by the way we abstain or by the way we oppose it. Of course our influence is very small but our contribution is nevertheless the very small brick among the many which the system is made of. Of course our influence is more comfortable if we adapt to what is requested of

us. Of course any opposition to what is requested of us can be paid at a very high price (imprisonment, torture, killing), depending on the interests we are confronting, but even this high price confirms that our attitude plays an essential role in the maintenance or in the transformation of our economic or political system.

In other terms, we cannot avoid being dependent on the social context in which we live, because it provides us with most of the things we need, and the quality and the quantity of what we get from this context illustrate precisely the price we have to pay if we refuse to support its ways. Our choice to support or not to support any aspect of our society is a difficult choice which shows our power but a power which is very difficult to get hold of, because it requires a lot from us.

This statement can seem very theoretical, but it is in fact the practical statement of everyday life. In our society of abundance, our natural and social context provides us normally with everything we need or we think we need for our subsistence and for our personal development. But it does only if we accept the rules and the ways it provides these necessary goods or conditions. Practically it means, as we will see later, that each of our choices has the value of a vote.

In a totalitarian system, people have to submit to imposed conditions if they want to have access to the best goods and privileges. If they oppose the system, they have to pay a high price. In our democratic system, we have also to respect rules; they are not based on the same kind of direct and explicit repressive power, but they imply also that we behave in the way that is expected. As caricature we can say that repression in totalitarian systems plays the consolidating role that material comfort plays in market societies. Both ways provide the

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cement which maintain the system as it is, the former by fear of persecution, the latter by seduction for material goods.

Commercial goods can be sold only if producers produce them and if consumers buy them. Democratic power can be elected only if people vote. Political power can only maintain in power if we support it actively or if we tolerate it passively. Yet our freedom consists in acting independently of the advantages the system provides us with: I behave this way because it is the way I think it is right (true) to behave, and I am ready to do so independently of the price I have to pay for it, or I accept having to adapt my behaviour in order to avoid paying the price I would pay if I would do what I think is right. Our freedom consists in this lesser or stronger adaptation. In our modern society we are used to conform a lot; this means we have adopted a very restricted practice of freedom because we know that we depend on our social, political and economic context for a lot of advantages we are attached to, and this is the case especially in rich societies. These advantages are even considered as the sign of our advanced civilisation; in fact they are in most cases the signs of our servile dependency.

### *The fear of truth*

*It is difficult and frightening to see truth as it is; we do not like it when truth is told to us. Yet truth challenges us to become free.*

It is very difficult to be able to express truth and to be understood by others without defence mechanisms trying to make the truth teller an enemy or to deform the content of what is said. When one tries to express a deep thought or concern, it is difficult to know whether it is just a consequence of a more personal experience or how much it is also a truth for the other. If it is useful to be told, it is not easy to

know how it should be expressed. The form of expression is very important because it is the wrapping which allows people to have access to the content. Social conventions do not like truth to be told and it is hurtful to dare to express it without hiding it in different ways. People (we) do not like to be confronted. Nevertheless the ability to recognise truth creates freedom. This is why it is essential to be able to overcome our fear of truth.

As a French song puts it: “the prophet has said the truth; he must be executed” (Guy Béard). Although truth is commonly recognised as something positive and very valuable, the practice of truth is experienced as very confronting and disturbing. The only fact of behaving according to one’s truth - and thus confronting usual behaviour - is understood as a threat and aggression, even if nothing is said expressively. In a social context, it is not well accepted when someone criticises common behaviours or established values, even if this criticism is based on a true observation.

This is an important step in the maturing process of a community when the members accept to question their own values and behaviours. This new ability makes them free to search for truth, to become free of false beliefs and to proceed to a better way of life. When it is recognised as a creative power, truth makes us free.

### *The Eichmann’s syndrome*

*We are imprisoned in the logic of our own social context, to such an extent that we accept its destructive behaviour as unavoidable.*

Our social context is built on a logic which evolves with time. In the case of totalitarian regimes, this logic becomes an evident form of madness, but people yet try very hard to conform to it and adopt it as



the new rule, especially when violent repression is the price to pay for not conforming. When one looks back at the cruel times of history, one is struck by the lack of resistance of people to evil behaviours, like under the third Reich or in case of slavery, although it is clear that the violence of repression can explain a larger part of these behaviours, but yet not completely. In democratic systems, the same tendency to conformity exists, which can reveal being very destructive too, although there is no open form of repression. The logic of our society becomes yet the habit and the rule, despite the destruction it fosters.

Adolf Eichmann was the man who, under the nazi regime, was in charge of the transport of the Jews who were sent to be executed in concentration and death camps. Although he was not a very powerful man, he organised with a few collaborators the transport of millions of people to the death camps, with an incredible zeal. In his court case in Jerusalem in 1961, he did not show any regret but expressed only a sense of zeal to conform to what was expected of him in the criminal logic of that time. Hannah Arendt, in her report of the trial, described this attitude as the banality of evil. She described also how even Jewish groups had participated in the selection of those to be executed, mainly by fear of being themselves taken to the death camps, but also by zeal of trying to integrate into what seemed to be the new coherence of their society; they tried to adapt to what was required from them, without seeing what was really at stake.

This is of course a deep and terribly difficult subject which cannot be treated in a few lines. For deeper reflecting and better understanding, one should read the report of Hannah Arendt<sup>4</sup> because it is certainly one of the deepest reflections ever written about the power of evil.

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem; a report on the banality of evil*. Faber and Faber. London, 1964

Eichmann represents of course an extreme case of collaboration in extreme totalitarian conditions (nazism). Yet the teaching of Arendt's book concerns also our modern society because it describes a destructive tendency for collaboration with evil acts, which we could call the Eichmann's syndrome, and which we could define as the tendency to conform freely with the logic of our society, even when it perpetrates the most destructive acts; the Eichmann's syndrome seems to describe our general tendency for integrating the destructive logic of our social group as part of something we cannot fight against. This other logic seems not only unavoidable, but it becomes a necessity.

This ability to conform with the destructive and evil logic of our social milieu is made possible by our incapacity to adopt a free moral personal stand and by our inability to understand deeply the stand of others, of the ones who think and live differently, because they belong to other social classes, to other cultures or practise another religion or other moral values and therefore have adopted another logic. These other ways of understanding life are excluded as being the peculiar ones of marginal and strange people who do not belong to the dominant social group, to the dominant logic. Conformity means in this case rejection of the ones who are different as well as adaptation to the law of the strongest. The Eichmann's syndrome is more a characteristic of a monolithic society. Diversity is its antinomy or antidote.

The logic of our modern society is in many ways based on exploitation and destruction of natural and human resources. Our consumption reinforces these patterns, although we know very clearly that this logic is a destructive one. We know about the exploitation of poverty, we know about climate change. We know,

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but we continue to consume goods out of poor countries, despite the exploitation it reinforces; we continue to drive our car, despite the harmful influence it has on climate. We know but nevertheless it seems clear that we have to conform to the logic of our privileged group and that our needs are such that we must continue to conform to these destructive behaviours in order to satisfy these needs. This is the logic of our society and we remain full of zeal in order to conform to these destructive behaviours. We are convinced that it is our duty to continue to behave in a destructive way because it is what other people do. Yet nothing obliges us. We are free to conform or not to conform. In our case, there is also a form of banality of evil which leads us to the wrong behaviour, despite there being no repression.

As shocking as it can appear, our behaviour becomes an expression of what I have called the Eichmann's syndrome, each time we are conforming to a destructive logic, representation or behaviour of our social group, even if we are not aware of the impact of our attitude. Even if our behaviour is much less harmful than the one of a nazi executor.

### *The power of our freedom*

*The power of our choices (our votes) is the power of our freedom, related to the price we are ready to pay for our expression.*

Political or economic powers have only the power we attribute them. Power can be based on our simple resignation to submit to it, or it can be linked with the advantages we believe to have in submitting to it or it can be based on the fear it inspires in us. This fear can be real because of a true menace for persecution or it can be only in our imagination (representation, projection). In any case, whether our submission is the consequence of our imagination or projection, or if

it is the consequence of a real threat which we can have experienced on our own skin, the degree of our submission depends on what we are ready to pay for our peace and on what our peace consists of. Does this peace consist only in material comfort and privileges, or does it consist in true self-expression? In most cases, renouncing on self-expression is the price we have to pay for our own comfort. Self-expression and comfort seem to be incompatible, because the former means a risky way of life, often in a psychological sense more than in a physical sense, each time we let go of conformism and of ready-made answers and attitudes. It is why our submission to power - whether political, economic, social, religious, military - depends essentially on our priorities or choices.

Our capacity in making choices depends on our priorities; strongly requiring priorities (truth, justice, peace, love) require strong and clear choices, which make us free from illusory powers, even if the price to pay is high; the price is then only the condition for reaching our aim. If it is clear that the aim or the orientation are the important things in our life, we have no other choice than to conform to our choices, if we do not want to betray ourselves. Faithfulness to our truth becomes more important than the price we may have to pay for it.

This aspect of the importance we attribute to the existing powers in our life is very important in relationship with our capacity of choosing what seems to be the right values and of conforming our life to our own priorities.

We can see how a totalitarian power tends to undermine its own power, by depriving from their own privileges or advantages the people whom it wants to oppress. In doing so, it destroys the means through which it can get hold of people, because, once it has deprived

the person of all its privileges, nothing is left which can get hold of the person. The most independent opponents of power are always the ones who do not care about their own well-being or at least are detached from it, because the meaning of their life relies on the practice of truth.

### *The law of bottom up change*

*Change can only happen from bottom up if we, as consumers-citizens, practise it; then democratic governments will follow.*

We make the mistake of waiting for governments or political and economic powers to implement the necessary change (change from above), because we are not aware of the power of our choices, and, by ignorance and by inertia, we do not see that it is our responsibility to start the movement of changing our way of life (bottom up change). Democracy makes governments the hostages of conservatism; because their power, in a democratic system, depends on votes, governments have to stick to what is conventional and to what people seem to like. Paradoxically, democracy, as a practice of delegation of power through vote, is often the condition which can prevent change and courageous stand of political authority. But a more direct democracy, through the more direct empowerment of people on the local level, allows them to become more conscious of the impact of their common choices and to act according to the common values which can be positive and dynamic (ideals) more than just a refuge (conformism or fear).

It is much harder to create consensus about idealistic projects than about material and visible implementations which have only to satisfy more selfish and basic instincts. It is why, in our democratic political system which is based on delegation of power more than on

direct empowerment, fear, as a negative force, is much easier to exploit than trustful and loving openness.

On the other hand, the direct practice of our empowerment encourages us to go deeper into a truthful way of sharing power because it allows us to see more clearly the real issues and provides us with the necessary tools for improving our conditions of life and for implementing change.

### *A new paradigm for change*

After having looked at the necessity of making choices in order to have more access to depth and to change our conditions of life, it is important to see what should guide us in this move towards change and how much the collective dimension and the collective goods, which we call the *commons*, are an essential means to actualise this change of paradigm.

### *A new paradigm*

*We need a new anthropology (or paradigm): through the power of our own choices, we can rediscover life and practise it to the full.*

The unrestricted expansion of western ways of life, reduced to their poorest materialistic dimension, is encouraging the worst human sides (fear, ignorance, greed) and is creating so much suffering in the world: nature is destroyed and exhausted; femininity is prevented from expressing fully its many gifts; poor people are ever more numerous and become poorer, while rich people become ever fewer and richer; Southern populations find it harder to survive and to be respected in their authenticity; market values are controlling and flattening our ways of life and our relationships within the

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community; knowledge becomes more and more materialistic and technical, only reduced to the use of the rational mind, excluding other forms of perception; our modern society has lost any reference to the sacred dimension of life. We need to invent and to practise another way of life, based on other priorities and deeper values, on a new anthropology. Life is more than surviving, life is more than accumulating. With our modern means, we have everything we need to provide each of us with the basic goods which allow life to be more than survival. This is why it is urgent to start practising according to another paradigm, to another anthropology, i.e. to another understanding of the nature of being human. It depends only on our will to do so; it depends on our choices.

The sad state of the world is not a fatality; it is the result of our attitudes, behaviours and choices. In changing our ways of life, we can have access more happiness and share it with others. Happiness is not a cake whose parts become smaller when it is shared among more people!

We have to learn to recognise the links between our attitudes or behaviours on one hand and the exploitation of the weakest people on the other hand. Our own happiness would also increase if we were ready to change our ways of life. As it has been said before, change can only happen because of spiritual values, i.e. of a deeper understanding of what it is to be human.

### *The inversion of the inversion*

*The new paradigm has to re-invert the inversion by the market: priority must be given to collective well-being over individual profit.*

The laws of market are based on a fundamental inversion of the laws of life: they say wrongly that everyone should try in each exchange to keep for oneself the maximum profit and that this mischievous behaviour will bring happiness. In other words, it means that each one should keep and accumulate for oneself the maximum of value which it is possible to detach from circulating goods and services, by retaining it for oneself and depriving therefore others (community) of this same value. We wrongly believe that profit is natural and good, but it is in fact pure theft because it wants to appropriate for oneself the product of common creativity. Profit is not honest income earned by a useful work, but it is dishonest speculation. The product of common creativity must remain in circulation among members of the community, and be therefore accessible to as many people as possible. By practising this other truth in keeping the common creativity and goods accessible for all, it reverses what the market laws have inverted by letting us believe that profit is the law of exchanges. The practice of reversion of market laws allows the community to concentrate on community well-being, in circulating goods as much as possible, instead of accumulating them. Sharing is the law of life.

This statement is fundamental. It is the key for the new paradigm inasmuch as it touches the core of the market twist which destroys our human community. When we see clearly that profit is theft and retention of the common good, we see how much creativity and wealth gets lost when it is removed from community and how much people are deprived of this wealth which remains in private hands. What circulates instead of being retained (accumulated) becomes accessible to everybody and people can enjoy it each time it is exchanged. The effect of a shared good is multiplied by the number of exchanges, while a good which remains in private hands will be

enjoyed by only one person; and it will be only enjoyed under the condition that it is not stored in a place where it is not used.

When a community has understood this basic law of life, it becomes free to concentrate on community well-being. Search for profit is no more a priority, it becomes a negative attitude. It becomes then clear that any group of people or any company should always reinvest its own benefices in its own activity or in a common field in order to make better goods and services more accessible for all. Each group or company becomes therefore a social actor. Speculation has no more meaning. The stock exchange disappears. Wealth remains in public domain. This is the new paradigm, as well for material as for immaterial goods.

### **The bet on human nature**

***A community-oriented attitude bets on the fact human nature reveals goodness when it is encouraged to practise generously.***

The search for profit isolates people from each other and makes them competitors and enemies. But when community encourages generous and creative behaviours by giving priority to common well-being over individual profit, it gives people (it means all of us!) the opportunity to bring their own faculties to fruition and to be recognised by others (community) for what they are. In a positive environment which stimulates compassionate and generous attitudes, people look more for recognition and compassion than for accumulation of material goods. When people see suffering they are naturally moved and want to help. This is the positive bet on human nature which creates positive conditions for this positive nature to emerge.

One could say that injustice in our world is more the consequence than the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is ignorance. Being ignorant, we behave in a awkward way which makes us suffer and therefore we begin to act in an unjust way, bringing new suffering on ourselves and on others. If community and our elders, because they are mature and have accumulated human wisdom through centuries, can lead us and show us the best way to happiness by encouraging the positive aspects of our true and deep nature, it will help us to be generous and compassionate. We will therefore act in a positive and generous way and we will get recognition by our own community for our personal gifts. Social recognition and esteem for generosity are probably the most precious goods any person would strive for; search for power, wealth and prestige are certainly false ways to acquire this supreme coveted good.

It is important to see how far this positive understanding of human nature constitutes by itself the necessary positive condition to prove it is right.

### **The inversion by the new anthropology**

***We believe wrongly we have to adapt to competition; yet when we choose to act in a spirit of partnership we create the world we want.***

The spirit of competition in our modern society (get what you can quicker than the other) seems so strongly embedded in a necessity for succeeding or even only for surviving that we feel we have to conform to it whether we like it or not; any other attitude seems idealistic and unrealistic, and therefore condemned to bring only failure and suffering. But this is a complete twist of reality, a monstrous inversion our economic system based on competition has imposed onto us. On the opposite of this violent perception of life,

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the new paradigm says: your reality in the world becomes what you see in it. This is your choice to perceive life as a fearful struggle or as a loving creativity. In both cases, life remains a rich experience, yet in the latter case (the positive perception) it acquires a far more rewarding content. We create the world in which we live; if we behave as competitors, the world becomes around us a place for domination and exploitation; if we behave like partners, the world becomes around us a place for cooperation and sharing. The question is who will be the first to start to act according to their conscience and especially according to true values which bring life instead of destruction. Personal freedom gives this force to be faithful to one's own beliefs and values, to one's own anthropology.

It is evident that it is easier to conform to main stream if one needs to be successful in our society according to its hierarchy of values. But if this hierarchy seems empty of content and destructive, we have almost no other choice than remaining faithful to our own values and anthropology. The personal freedom to act according to what one perceives as truthful is the core of our vocation. If not we betray ourselves. Our clear and free stand breaks the inversion by free market economy which says that competition is the law of our society.

A new paradigm, a new anthropology, has to show a new way, a creative and constructive way which does not rely on resignation and destruction but on freedom and humanity. Beliefs can only take shape if they are implemented in everyday practice. Only if we have the courage to be true, the world can become the place it is meant to be: a place for life in a dense network of sharing and cooperation instead of a place for struggle under the permanent threat of having to kill or to be killed. A world governed by an anthropology of compassion.

The new paradigm says: the world becomes what you see in it, whether it is a fearful field for struggle and survival or on the contrary a fascinating place for implementing love and creativity. In both cases life remains a risky challenge, yet in the latter it promises a most rewarding content.

### *The 3 choices of the new paradigm*

*The new paradigm relies on three choices: self-limitation, cooperation and control of market by the local community.*

We can define these three aspects for now in a shortened version:

- 1) Self-limitation: our ability to choose simplicity as a better way of life is a powerful means to regain independence; small is beautiful! This choice is based on the conviction that our constant attempt in modern society to achieve everything which is possible is in fact destructive and that, as soon as our basic needs are satisfied, we should try to keep our material standard of life as simple as possible in order to be in harmony with nature and with other human communities. Self-limitation is a positive choice which offers more with less.
- 2) Cooperation: competition is never the way for valuing diversity and complementarity which allow faculties of the many members of the local community to thrive and to contribute to common material and non-material wealth, because competition allows domination of the strongest and squashes the weakest; only cooperation offers the possibility of encouraging the expression of more hidden gifts, which can then enrich common life. Our happiness depends more on the good conditions which our local context offers globally to all members of the local community

than on the individual possibility we could have to take advantage of personal privileges against the interests of others.

- 3) Control of market by the local community: if the local community chooses to, it has the power to control or at least to improve considerably its control on the impact of economy and of the laws of market on the local exchanges, on local subsistence and therefore on the quality of local life. Human values should be in control of economic mechanisms and not the contrary. Spiritual values should orient our practical behaviour, instead of our daily life dictating the kind of justification which makes our mediocre behaviours more acceptable.

The combination of these three choices (self-limitation, cooperation, social control) offers the best conditions for a good balance in our relationships with nature and for justice and equality in sharing goods and qualities among people. Self-limitation means measure, and cooperation means equity, while the control of economics by our human values means the possibility of choosing the path for truth instead of becoming the slaves of uncontrolled instincts, behaviours or mechanisms.

Although we will look later at each of these choices in more detail, we can describe them rapidly.

### 1) Self-limitation

*Self-limitation is a positive choice - small is beautiful and less offers more - simplicity is a richer path.*

Self-limitation should not be seen as a morbid attitude which renounces being open to the diversity of experiences and pleasures and takes refuge in a frightened attitude to life. It is, on the contrary,

a more mature attitude which recognises how much our materialistic way of life is heavy and restrains us from having access to the real depth of our experiences.

The choice for self-limitation restrains consciously the superficial expansion (I touch a little bit of everything) in favour of a better concentration and depth (I understand better the deep meaning of what happens to me), because a self-limited attitude recognises that we are not capable to know well what we cannot concentrate on.

It is essential to understand this positive aspect of self-limitation, without which self-limitation seems to be a very sad attitude of morbid withdrawal. Small is beautiful, because it allows us to keep conscious of what happens; it helps us to concentrate on what is important.

On one hand self-limitation reduces the negative impact of what we do not master anymore; we have certainly developed brilliant and powerful means (science, technology, economy, health) which allow us to change our milieu, but we have lost the capacity to control the use of these means and this lack of control is causing a lot of damages: destruction of our environment, terrible consequences of major technical accidents, oppression of people. In being capable of self-limiting the use of these too powerful means, we will reduce their negative impact on nature, on climate, on the way of life of the poorest among us, on even the right to live or to survive for so many people.

On the other hand, self-limitation opens new doors for our evolution. In consuming less materialistic goods and in using less powerful means, we will not only reduce our negative impact on nature, but we will also allow more room for the practice of human values. If the

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priority and social pressure is no more on accumulating material goods but on practising justice and equity, on expressing our respective gifts and on improving our personal involvement in building our common social milieu, the gain for all is absolutely evident.

I will show later how this second choice is not so idealistic as one thinks. It is in fact the most realistic possible choice we can make, if we do not want to suffer and to be annihilated.

### 2) Cooperation

*Cooperation is the only path for building a harmonious collective life, while competition is mainly an illusion for losers.*

Competition is based on the illusion of a bet: I can be quicker and smarter than others and I will therefore get many personal advantages for myself. In fact, if exceptionally some people can win by betting in this way, it is evident that most people are losers at this bet: there are more poor people in the world than rich people. Each of us has more chances to lose than to win.

Winner can only win because they are taking advantages of others through power. These advantages are never freely given but only extorted through force. They are a theft. Indeed cooperation is the only way to build a balanced community where everybody has a share in the common wealth. Cooperation is the only way to allow this common wealth to be optimal because it helps everybody to contribute to it.

We are used to believe that we are independent people and that we do not have to rely on anybody else. But, in fact, we depend on our environment for everything: for breathing, for eating, for learning, for

any of our needs, for any activity. In the bread we eat, so many actors are involved: earth, sun, water, farmer, transport, energy, baker.

Our choice remains: either we try to exploit these relationships to our own advantage, in trying to get the maximum for ourselves, or we recognise the richness of these exchanges, in taking the best care of them, because we see how much their quality (and not the quantity) is in fact the condition for our personal as well as collective well-being.

We can try to force others to see our own value by using prestigious means; this first possible choice leads us to the first attitude (exploitation and accumulation); or our own value can be freely asserted by others through the social recognition of our personal qualities in our personal skills and in our service for the community; this leads us to the second attitude (cooperation and sharing). If we carefully observe the nature of human relationships, we come to the conclusion that people are more needy for social recognition and for love than for domination and accumulation. The essential question consists more how to get this personal recognition by others. Ignorance is mainly the illusion which leads us on false paths where fear and greed act as destructive forces which prevent us from seeing the real true way leading to what we are looking for.

### 3) Control on the market

*The relative control on economic exchanges by the local community through human values is a sign of social maturity.*

When the members of the local community see the clear advantages of cooperation over competition, they become able to establish a few rules which have to be respected in order to allow the cooperative process to be implemented (buy local, priority to small businesses,



support young people, share skills, help people in need, give time for social services, create alternative circuits). These rules form the frame for an increasing possible control of the local community upon economic laws because it decides which are the dominant conditions for the practice of economic and social exchanges inside the local community. The ability to define a general frame for the common life is a sign of maturity and it can only improve and extend with time, as long this kind of awareness is predominant. In fact, it is exactly what we practise in everyday life at our own level but in a form of isolation (family, group of friends, neighbourhood): we try not to let external constraints destroy our quality of life and we often give priority to human values over practical aspects of life.

It is easy to observe how more personal relationships between people, as in an isolated context, in a village or a friendly neighbourhood, allow exchange of services and goods in a more informal way (free of any expectation, in reciprocity, in solidarity), while more impersonal exchanges (urban anonymity, big compounds, trade over internet, international exchanges) use more impersonal forms of exchanges through money, through the economic laws of market and through conventional economic channels. Proximity and personal relationships allow a more diverse and a wider range of exchanges which create more links between people and make the quality of these links more visible. If the size remains small, the effect of our acts is more understandable and more under our control. Self-limitation remains therefore a condition for good control by the local community.

This form of control grows organically with time. It develops according to the growing understanding of the participants who mature under this process.

The control of the main economic components of local life allows the local community to consolidate its own empowerment: local food production, local employment, local investment of social wealth and knowledge, increase in the offer of learning and working possibilities for young people, possibilities to create a wider variety of small businesses and activities, attempts to allow more different forms of expressions which could be more suitable for the diversity of people. This form of priority which is given to local development and to the harmony of its process is certainly a very important condition for allowing a better control on the economic forces and for limiting the negative influence of the market laws on the quality of social life. The implementation of such decisions is certainly not easy but it is made difficult more by the lack of beliefs in this form of development than by the real obstacles it has to overcome practically.

As we can see the three aspects of the new paradigm are narrowly connected one with each other: self-limitation, cooperation and social control of economy.

### **The laws of balance and equity**

***The two main laws which have to guide us on the way for change are the law of balance with natural cycles and the law of equity.***

- The law of balance with natural cycles requires that we adapt our needs on the one hand to the availability of resources and to the ability of our environment to renew them, and on the other hand to the capacity of our environment to absorb wastes and to recycle them. It means therefore that we have to review our needs, not only according to our own priorities but especially in respect of the laws of nature.

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- The law of equity cares for an equal and just sharing of resources and goods among people as well as an equal right to produce wastes without creating imbalances in nature.

### A) Two parameters for our activities:

The law of balance with natural cycles concerns, on the one hand, the use we make of natural resources - i.e. our attitude towards resources which are situated upstream from our activities - and, on the other hand, the way we manage what we call wastes - i.e. our attitude towards the refuses which are situated downstream from our activities. These two attitudes constitute two essential parameters for measuring our activities and their impacts which are in fact predefined by nature: we cannot change the mechanisms in nature (production of resources and absorption of wastes) and we have to adapt to what they are, globally as human race, if we want to survive in the long term.

### B) Two ethical criteria as choices how to behave:

- The law of balance is on one hand in itself narrowly connected with these two parameters concerning the right management of our resources and wastes, but it is not a mechanical law because on the other hand it introduces an ethical criteria: the choice for measure and balance in order to behave in the restrained way and to transmit to our children a world which is in the best possible state. Our attitude towards nature and its cycles is therefore not only a practical problem, only linked with the two mentioned parameters; it is also an ethical and social choice for justice and right behaviour.
- The law of equity also differs from the two mentioned parameters because it is, as the law for balance, an ethical and social criteria. It means that we are free to choose to respect the requirement for justice and equity or not, because it is a moral stand and because

we will recognise this necessity only if our human community - whether local, regional, national or global - is mature enough to practise this moral value.

We have now to look at the different aspects of these parameters and criteria, concerning:

- 1) the nature of our needs,
- 2) the integration of our needs into natural cycles,
- 3) the recycling of our wastes into resources,
- 4) the practice of balance
- 5) the choice for equity.

### 1) The nature of our needs

***Our needs do not exist as such; we are creating them in defining our own scale of urgency through our choices / priorities.***

Only part of what we call generally our needs are real (needs for food, shelter, respect, love) while other needs are more due to our negative tendencies (greed and frustration) and to our need for refuge in illusion (wealth and power) or are even artificially created (by publicity or fashion for instance). We have therefore first to reconsider the nature of our needs in order to judge whether they are essential. And we also have to adapt their satisfaction to the degree of reconstitution of the resources we need for it. Whatever our needs are, we need to adapt them (in quality and quantity) to the capacity of our social and natural environment to reconstitute the necessary resources and to absorb consecutive wastes. Without respecting this basic condition of our survival, we simply destroy our environment and the source which nourishes us; our refusal to adapt to these evident constraints is in fact a form of slow suicide.

Needs are a very subjective concept. Is everything that I can desire a real need? certainly we have to learn how to distinguish needs which constitute a positive evolution of our being and needs which mean a regression in our personal or collective evolution. Nobody else than ourselves is in the right position to decide what is essential for ourselves, according to our priorities, but our decision is nevertheless very meaningful for others, through the impact it has on cycles and on the social network. Indulging priorities will encourage indulging wants while more restraining values will foster more restrained and mature behaviours.

### 2) The integration into natural cycles

*Satisfaction of our needs must integrate into natural cycles and respect the fluctuations in the availability of resources*

In our society we base our activity on what we call our needs and we do not care for our surroundings - our natural and social environment - which provides us with the means to satisfy these needs. This is a terrible inversion of the laws of nature: in fact nature - and this includes us, as part of nature - has always to adapt to what is available, and it cannot, without destroying itself, exploit what does not exist or what does not get reconstituted. Resources are produced by cycles of production and these cycles are themselves dependent on wider cycles which are never stopping fluctuating. Nothing remains therefore stable. Our adaptation to the given conditions of our survival must then respect the laws of natural cycles and fluctuations.

Resources are produced by cycles of production: seeds, soil, sun and water produce plants which produce flowers and then fruits and other seeds, and the cycle can start again. These cycles are themselves dependent on wider cycles (days, months, seasons, years, eras) which

are all evolving and fluctuating: periods of scarcity alternate with periods of abundance, drought with floods, heat with cold, because of cycles but also beyond the relative regularity of cycles.

The first step on the path of ecology consists in recognising not only the existence of cycles in nature but more essentially how much cycles are the basic law of nature and how much the adaptation to these cycles should be the basic law for our own social life. There cannot be any survival without the respect of the given natural cycles. This is why we have to integrate each of our activities into these natural cycles.

Nothing in nature is produced outside cycles. These cycles can be very short (a day for the life of an insect) or they can be very long (hundreds of millions of years for the constitution of fossil fuels or even longer for the formation of mountains, planets, stars). Some of these cycles repeat themselves regularly in a very similar way, like the seasons; others do not at all, like the formation of fuel or the folding of mountains, which have happened as unique cycles of transformation: it is then more appropriate to speak of processes than of cycles.

Nothing exists as such but everything is created as the product of an evolution. We ourselves are also fruits of an evolution based on cycles and we are also continuing to evolve, until death changes our body into something which returns to dust while our soul transforms into a further mysterious stage, about which everybody has their own representation.

Mature societies learned to adapt to fluctuations in the rhythms and cycles of nature because they recognised their own dependence on, and the necessity to respect, these laws of nature.

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### 3) No wastes

*Nature does not know wastes: wastes are nothing else but resources which are absorbed (recycled) in a defined time span.*

The concept of waste has been invented by our society in order to describe what we produce ourselves which we do not know what to do with. In nature everything gets re-absorbed according to a defined rhythm. There is no waste; every product (or so-called waste) is a resource for the next stage of the cycle, until it is completely re-absorbed and therefore has disappeared. Re-absorption of wastes is not different from the production of resources; it belongs to the same and unique process.

The natural way of reusing wastes is simply what we call also recycling. Recycling means the reintegration of some of our products into the natural cycle of absorption-production. Recycling is a basic requirement for our life; it means our adaptation to the natural rhythm of this absorption-production process. As we cannot change the nature of the cycle, we have also to respect its rhythm and duration (its speed). Cycles, in this concern, are narrowly linked with time and space: they happen at a given time, in a given place, at a given speed. The same should also be true for the adaptation of our needs to available resources.

In the same way as our activities have to adapt to the natural rhythm of production of resources, they also have to adapt to the natural rhythm of absorption of our wastes, because it is a same and unique cycle. Ideally it should be done on the local level, it means in respect of the local constraints. We can only burn as much wood as our local forests produce; we can only produce wastes (for instance CO<sub>2</sub>) at the

rhythm it can be absorbed by the environment. We will see later how this law is in fact modified by the requirement for equality and justice in sharing resources and privileges among people who experience different conditions of surroundings and lives.

### 4) Balance and measure

*The need to integrate our activities into the natural cycles implies the practice and the sense of balance and measure.*

The practice of balance and measure is at the same time a recognition of the reality of natural cycles and also of the ethical necessity to practise a form of equilibrium in our relationship with nature and with our social milieu. It is therefore not only the recognition of an objective reality which is given by our context but it is also a stage of maturity for the community in recognising the need for a balanced way of using the available resources in order to satisfy the most important needs, to allow everybody to have access to the gifts of nature and to be willing to transmitting to our children a world in the best possible state.

Between the reality of natural cycles which provide resources and absorb wastes and the flexibility of our needs, we have much room for adaptation. It is important to notice that our basic needs for survival (food, shelter, clothing) require relatively little means in comparison to our more greedy needs for mobility or luxury goods. This means that we can easily reduce our impact on our environment and yet satisfy our basic needs, if we stop consuming the goods which have the heaviest impact, it means principally the ones which use a lot of energy for their extraction, transport, transformation or distribution. In this sense, self-limitation is really the solution because it modulates our consumption with the natural availability of

necessary resources and their reconstitution. It is an important key for a change in our way of life to know that self-limitation does not reduce our way of life by diminishing our access to essential goods but that it only changes our quality of life in something more simple and more centred on essential goods: our consumption is strongly reduced but our quality of life improves, in giving more space for what has more value.

The satisfaction of needs for basic immaterial aspects of life, like education and health, requires only a minimum of infrastructure and of material goods, such as water supply, sanitary equipment, basic simple buildings. It requires also only a minimum of tools and products, and a basic contribution in the form of work of trained people. It means that a form of basic collective equipment does not request extraordinary means to satisfy basic needs, as long as it remains oriented towards the satisfaction of fundamental needs only and as far as it is related to an extensive number of people it serves. This is why it is a deep shame that our modern society does not bother or even refuses to provide this minimum quality of life to the ones who need it. The will to provide this quality would not reduce our own quality of life; it would only increase our sense of justice and our ability to access peace.

The satisfaction of immaterial needs such as our personal development, recognition, love or spiritual search does not need any material support, or very little. It is true that the more any community wants to orient itself toward the satisfaction of immaterial needs, the less it will impact on its environment.

In case of scarcity - whether real or projected - commerce and nomadism or migration can always provide a part of the answer. Nomadism transports people towards goods, commerce transports

goods towards people. But transport and migration consist in exporting the local imbalances towards other regions. All regions are certainly not equal in their potential to provide the necessary conditions for a good life, and transport can provide therefore a way to establish a form of balance and equity. How far is this yet sustainable?

### 5) Equity

*The practice of equity means an ability to protect the essential meaning of common goods and to control the way they are shared.*

In our modern world, 10% of the world's population (it means roughly the equivalent of the population of Europe and the US) consume 80% of the world's wealth. It is a scandalous inequity which costs a lot to the human race, inasmuch as the excessive consumption of a few destroys the subsistence frame of so many and as the accumulation of so much wealth by such a small minority deprives so many people of what is in fact a common good, i.e. the heritage of common experience (knowledge) and of what nature and common effort makes available in principle for all of us. Only the maturity of a whole community enables management of the way common goods remain common and are not monopolised by a few and how goods of all kinds (vital or not, material or not, essential or not) can be shared in an equal and just way.

In our society, transport and commerce have not been a way for more equity and balance, but on the contrary for a stronger exploitation of the poorest. Transport has helped to concentrate riches in the hands of a few privileged nations or social classes. The means of transport and commerce remain means which can provide more equity for the majority, but we have chosen to use them for our own advantages as

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a minority. It is our choice because we behave in a greedy and ignorant way. But if we become more aware of the negative consequences which this attitude generates, then we may change our stand and choose to strive for more equity, which will certainly bring us more happiness too.

Not everybody has the same needs but everybody has an equal right to have their own needs satisfied. This statement does not provide a simple rule for the way of sharing the available goods, but it shows how only a deep sense of equity can help the community to control the forces of market in order to correct the tendency to accumulation of common goods in the hands of a few.

The local community has to remain in control of the forces which rule the market. Human values must keep in control, as it has been said before. It is important to underline how much the material and immaterial goods which nature provides and which the community produces are in fact the many products of a common effort. We will describe this important point further, because it plays an essential role in our understanding of our economic relationships, but, at this stage, it is necessary to make a few statements which allow us to better understand the necessity for clear choices and to better describe the role of guidance the community has to play.

Most of the goods which nature provides and which the human community produces are in fact, or should be, common goods, because they cannot belong to anybody or they derive from goods which cannot belong to anybody. This is why these goods are called the commons: sun, earth, nature, air, water, food, biodiversity, natural cycles are evidently necessary goods which do not belong to anybody and which are essential and should remain accessible to everybody. Similarly, education, knowledge, health, shelter are necessary

common social goods which result from the common human experience; for that reason, they are or should be provided by the community to everybody and they have to be transmitted as widely as possible to the younger generations.

Even the fact of enjoying good intellectual or artistic faculties is more a gift of nature than a personal privilege. Because they got their education freely and because their personal gifts come from nature, the lucky people who have the privilege of enjoying a further education should also recognise their moral obligation to serve the community because they have the privilege of accessing a knowledge which is in fact a common good. This form of generous sharing, which our society practises in educating its members, allows some people to become more enriched and more influential than others; this privilege of benefiting from this special gift explains the reason why these people should not be able to accumulate more than others but, on the contrary, should feel responsible for giving back to the community the produce of this privileged evolution.

It explains also the reason why the community must do everything that is possible in order to maintain this common goods in common hands and to avoid goods such as food, water, shelter, knowledge, health, becoming a privilege in the hands of a minority. It explains also the reason why it is a scandal when a minority assumes the right to make these commons its own privilege and refuses anybody else accessing this wealth. So far, this statement is certainly a little bit general and simplistic but it is enough to show how far the option for equity in the local community is an essential dimension for harmony and justice and how it can only happen if the community is mature and strong enough to keep control on these important issues.

### *The potential of commons*

*The commons are the goods which do not belong to anybody but remain accessible to all as common wealth*

The commons have always existed and have always been protected. Only a recent evolution has allowed them to dissolve and to be monopolised by a minority. Natural cycles, biodiversity, air, sun, water, knowledge, spirituality, public space, silence have little in common but they are all part of what we call the commons. They are the necessary goods which nature and society provide freely and which must remain accessible to everybody. The sharing of these goods is the condition for an harmonious and rich community life and for the best opportunity of personal thriving for each member of the community and even for strangers.

This notion of commons has been completely falsified by the practice of market economy which does exactly the opposite to protecting the commons. Liberalism tends on the contrary to monopolise the commons. We will show further how liberalism is in fact a force of destruction which takes the substance of everything which can provide a profit, even at the cost of destruction of the social network and exhaustion of natural resources. It has no respect for the commons because it tries to use them for its own profit and tries to prevent others to access them; it believes that the access of others to this common wealth, knowledge for instance, can only provide an obstacle to its own private success inasmuch as success is believed to rely on competition, domination and if possible elimination of competitors.

This short and very simplified description underlines the necessity for the community to be aware of the forces which try to monopolise these commons and try to prevent their accessibility for all. The lack

of awareness of our society of the importance of these common goods has considerably weakened their role: health and education are more and more privatised, public services disappear and are replaced by private companies which aim only at profit (transport, communication, water supply), public space is no more accessible to the public unless under strict and very functional conditions (traffic, walk), knowledge and expensive forms of education become more and more privileges and secret goods owned by private businesses.

This is why the community must develop the necessary tools for protecting the nature of commons and ensuring their free access.

### **3) THE DIMENSION OF COMMUNITY**

After describing the direction for change and the important role of the collective dimension, we have to describe how the role of the local community is important, why it is the right place for our empowerment and for the expression of our common choices and how it becomes a changing force in the local life.

#### **The anchorage in the place**

We are creatures who live in a material world; thanks to this connection with matter, our environment becomes visible and palpable and we can see the effects of our acts and attitudes. The place where we live remains the ideal place for this connection between us and the world. The local community becomes in this way the social place where we discover new ways of expression, based on cooperation more than competition.

#### **The place of our empowerment**

*The local community is the place where change can take place because it makes relationships visible and it has the right size.*

Our choices as translations of our spiritual values and of our confrontation with the depth of life need to find a material form of expression. It can find the right form only in a place where the scale is small enough to make the relationships between actors as well as the links between causes and consequences visible and understandable. The local community is the ideal place where this form of understanding and of expression can take shape. This is why it is the place where change can take place.

The difficulty in our modern society is to know how to cope and to interact with complexity. The laws of corruption and of whitewashing, which I have quickly mentioned in this introduction and which I will describe further, show how we are prevented from understanding what is really going on and how we get yet personally involved in it. It is why our involvement can only find a right form of expression where we can see clearly how causes bring consequences about. The visibility of what happens is an important factor which allows us not only to take a stand but also to find a concrete way to express our truth.

*Change* has to take *place*. This verbal expression underlines the link between the necessary *change* and the local *place*; it says how our life is in fact rooted in the *place* where we live. This understanding of the event as something which is narrowly connected with the *place* also has its expression in the same way in other languages; the expression *avoir lieu* in French or *stattfinden* in German expresses this same idea of something which takes shape because it takes *place*.

On one hand the local community is the place for readability and clarity of expression, on the other hand it is the place where change can take shape and become concrete and visible.

#### **The different forms of place**

*Different words describe our relationship with our surroundings, like Earth, environment, milieu, land, territory, space, cosmos.*

These different words express different qualities of relationships with our physical surroundings. They are therefore the expressions of the many ways we relate to this entity, with more or less respect and awe.



They are also the expressions of the various degrees of our understanding how much we are dependent and have to rely on the place where we live.

- Earth/soil: with small e, the earth is the raw material, the soil we use, but it can also be considered as the sacred place of our origin (my soil) or the sacred soil which nourishes us. With capital E, the Earth is our planet and this body which is alive and sacred, and constitutes a complexity which has its own rules and autonomy we have to respect.
- Milieu: the milieu is more the social context in which we live and whose part we are; we can extend this understanding to our physical context, because our own core forms a whole with nature and the Earth. The word *milieu* means etymologically *centre* or *core*. We cannot consider our context as something which is completely independent of us because we depend on our core or centre and on each other: we depend on our physical milieu for nourishing ourselves and it depends on our respect not to be destroyed by us.
- Environment: the word itself, on the contrary, means etymologically surroundings, i.e. *what is around*, in opposition to *what is in the centre*, this meaning insists on the fact that it is something which is distinct from us (around us). The destruction of nature is the result of this misunderstanding of the environment as a stock of raw materials we can use for our convenience, without limits. Ecology has rehabilitated the environment as something we depend on and we must be in harmony with. But, even in this more complete perception, the environment does not recover its dimension of living being which we are part of.
- Land: the land is the solid ground, what makes us rooted. It is the place where we belong, with an accent on ownership (my land) as a well-defined portion of the surface of the Earth, which I can use

for my own purpose and whose access is forbidden to others without my consent. It is essentially defined by its clear limits which make the exclusion visible; it is in fact a part of commons which has been diverted from its purpose which should consist in nourishing the local community. Land should not be owned because it is a gift of nature, in a very limited quantity which remains constant and cannot be increased; there is no reason, except a historical one, which can justify or even explain why someone could use land and exclude anybody else from this same right. We have yet certainly a need and even a right to use the land and to be responsible for it, as it nourishes us as well as it is a very important anchorage for the local community; land should be in fact managed by the community. Its ownership is nothing else but a diversion from its original nature, which is to be a part of the commons; it is not a good which can be produced but it is like air, water, sun, biodiversity. Without land we cannot live.

- Parcel (plot of land): when geometry interferes with the earth, it gives birth to the cadastre, which is the subdivision of the whole earth in small pieces which people can own. Most of the plots of land we own have been stolen one day or another, through violence, war, conquer, colonisation. The squattocracy is the social group of people who own the land which has been stolen in the previous centuries: this is especially true in countries like the United States, Canada or Australia which have been conquered recently and whose indigenous inhabitants have been disowned, although they were not owners in the sense we understand it now, because they were part of their own milieu whose fruits they enjoyed. This previous practice shows us clearly the difference between exclusive private ownership and inclusive collective use (enjoyment) and care. Private property is the way to deprive (others) and to be deprived (of what is not mine).

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- Territory: the territory is the piece of land which is enclosed in its limits and whose surface allows an animal or a community to find the necessary resources for its survival. Because of this understanding of territory, which is dictated by our need for survival, territory has soon taken on a military meaning. It becomes the enclosed surface which the community has to defend against invaders. It is also therefore the portion of land which is subjected to the authority of a given administration body. When freed from the false understanding through the geometrical approach (cadastre), territory is more defined by its many centres of attraction (accents) than by its limits.
- Space: this is, in geometry, the surface with its height or depth. It is also inevitably connected with the dimension of time, and with all the symbolical dimensions of what makes this space special for each of us: mountains, nature, built environment, cathedrals, castles, main public spaces (buildings, squares, streets), personal memories which are attached to places, personal use of the different places.
- Universe/cosmos: this is the wider space, the astronomical space, but it is also the space which has its own orientation and sense of evolution. The cosmos includes not only the visible space but also the forces which rule it.
- Place: the place is in fact the local tiny portion of space where we live, but which makes all these different dimensions visible; it is in fact the local visible expression of the Earth and the cosmos through our own personal and collective practice.

### *The territory as a network of relationships*

*The territory is not an enclosed surface, but it is a living network of existing and potential relationships between actors in a same place.*

The territory is the synthesis of all components which, by chance, fate or will, coexist and interact more or less consciously in the same space. It reveals also the potential of all the possible connections and complementarity which have still not been actualised. It is also, as landscape, the visualisation of this incoherent network of relationships and of the dominating values which guide it.

These considerations are inspired by a research about territory in a work group<sup>5</sup> I took part in. They remain nevertheless my personal observations:

- 1) The territory is the synthesis of all the components which act in the same space: this synthesis is just the result of juxtaposition and of interaction; it is a consequence of intended cooperation as well as the fortuitous fruit of collision. It shows the conflicts as well as the harmony which arise in combining the different expressions which take shape in a same place.
- 2) The territory shows the potential of all the possible connections which still have not been actualised: through a common localisation arises the possibility for meeting of many actors who live side by side while ignoring what their proximity could make possible. This is especially true in a society which bases its development on competition and which does not recognise how much a local consensus can be the base for the fuller expression of the local potential of every precious actor.
- 3) The landscape as a visualisation of this network and of the values which guide it: it is fascinating to see how much the landscape is an expression of our values and priorities. By observing it and reading in it as in a book, one can become aware of the main streaks which foster our society. In some place, the highway and the shopping centre as well as the contrast between the different

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<sup>5</sup> Alliance for a responsible and solidary world, Fondation Charles Leopold Mayer, 42 rue St Sabin, 75011 Paris.

qualities of neighbourhood will be the dominating features, while elsewhere the harmony and the human scale will predominate. In traditional societies like for instance Saharan Algeria or medieval Italian town structures, the mosque or the church clearly dominates the market place as in these societies the sacred prevails on the profane. These differences of expression illustrate and reveal therefore the differences in the values and in the dynamic which foster and nourish different networks of relationships.

Therefore, the local community becomes the ideal place where this network of local relationships can express its full potential and where it can become the main force for a change towards more human relationships and more equity.

### *Our future is our business*

*If we want to control our future, we can do it, but we need to cooperate in agreeing locally on a common social project*

The local community takes shape as a network of balanced and mature relationships and becomes alive inasmuch as we show ourselves capable of shaping our collective life, as the inhabitants of one same and common place, by empowering our social group to become its own master; this can happen only if we decide to take responsibility for our own future. If through our participation (democracy and marketing) we become really the necessary actors who make our world what it is, then the corollary means that our future is our business. This is a potential reality which will become real only if we understand it and if we are ready to fight for it, and, before all, if we can agree about a common project with all members of the community: which kind of future do we wish for ourselves?

The local community becomes then the real place for our empowerment

A local community is not only a gathering of people who share some good time by practising sport together or taking part in leisure activities at the club or having some fun at the pub. It takes shape if it is able to empower people to get control over their own common destiny. It means that the local community is the place where people come together in order to take decisions which concern the kind of future they wish for themselves and their children and to implement the means to achieve these aims.

Therefore, the community must agree about its own project for the future. This common project does not arise by itself; it is a long process which can only take place if the members of the community are aware of its necessity and if they are ready to discuss it with the other members who inevitably have other ideas and representations for this future. Because of these differences, the design of this project goes then through a form of negotiation between the different members and groups of interests within the local community. This discussion is the opportunity to envisage different variations of future and to study the different aspects of the common destiny. This process can only lead to a consistent result if the members are ready to change through this process, which will lead the community to a further and deeper degree of maturity.

### **Towards a community consensus**

Given the importance of this process of designing the community's own future, it is necessary to describe here a few conditions which can allow a form of agreement and even of consensus to arise.

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### *The anchorage of community in consensus*

*The local community gains the best coherence in shaping its future when it can base its project on the best possible consensus.*

Shaping the common project cannot happen in an authoritarian way but only through choices made in common by the many members of the local community. These choices will best lead to a practical implementation and to a coherent evolution if they arise in the best possible form of consensus, despite the high variety of actors and the wide diversity of personal interests which are inevitably included.

Although it is probably the most requiring way of taking common decisions, consensus is the best possible form of coming to an agreement because on one hand it forces the community to consider the interests of any larger or smaller category of its members and on the other hand it requires from the members that they understand clearly why the present choices are made and why they should be capable of accepting compromises in order for this agreement to be possible and to become reality.

If choices are made by consensus, this form of unity offers the best conditions for the implementation of the decided measures and for the active participation of all the members in the actualisation of what has been decided.

The form of consensus is a good means to avoid the polarisation which a vote at the majority would inevitably generate. It is also the best way to allow minorities to express themselves and to be heard.

Consensus is inevitably a form of compromise which reveals the precise state of maturity of all the members. It is the best possible agreement, given and despite the diversity of positions and interests. This diversity in the community itself is a positive aspect as long as it is respected and as it does not create scissions within the community.

Consensus is the best form of mutual understanding in order to propose a medium way for the resolution of antagonistic forces. The balance between antagonistic forces is certainly a law of nature because it is the law of general equilibrium. Our body finds its own balance through the action of antagonistic muscles; cold and hot, dry and humid, dark and light are antagonistic influences which find their own balance by acting moderately and integrating the action of the opposite force. Balance results in nature out of the action of these antagonistic forces, more than by the controlled effect of one unique and well measured force. When balance is achieved by the action of many antagonistic forces, it is safer and healthier than by the action of only one responsible actor. Consensus is therefore the organic resultant of the composing vectors. It arises naturally through the interaction of all acting members, thanks to a significant effort for mutual understanding and for respect of minority positions.

### *The project as a myth*

*The common project of a community grows and evolves through time; it is like an image of happiness, like a guiding myth.*

Many aspects of the quality for the future that the community wishes for itself are very precise and explicit, but many other remain in the realm of generalities and dreams. They form therefore a kind of myth which is the story and the dream of this community. Truth can only be evoked by images or tales. As the fairy tales, they are guides for

our behaviour, although we know that they are not true stories in terms of history, but they remain true because they teach us how to improve and how to deepen our values and behaviours. They become in this way our guides for participation; they help us to integrate in a more global project and to know how to compromise on minor aspects in order to be part of the whole.

Fairy tales are very important; they are not only stories for children, but they contain a deep truth, which could not be expressed in such a subtle way if it were told directly, without a sort of code. The code works like a screen, which partly hides the truth and helps therefore the listener to be more receptive and to be in charge of his own interpretation. Religion, very often, uses mythical stories for teaching the way. Jesus used parables without which his disciples or followers would not have understood his message because their minds were full of principles and concepts they had inherited from sclerotic structures of thinking. The myths and fairy tales speak to our whole being and not only to our rational mind. Therefore they have more chance to open us to their message. This form of using myths was especially true in the Greek antic religion and culture whose tales we still tell today and whose tales have impregnated our sciences, especially psychology and sociology.

Therefore myth also becomes a way to express the collective project in a less precise and constrained way than according to only practical or organisational considerations. The common myth becomes a sort of ideal picture of the community we dream of. It does not need to be a realistic picture; it is the guide which leads us and helps us, individually or in small groups, to find our way into the actualisation of the common project.

### **The 4 feet of the community process**

***The community process stands on 4 feet: identification, consensus on aims and means, need for maturation, need for assessments.***

The process which fosters the community is a long-lasting transforming process which relies principally on four necessary components:

- 1) the capacity of the local group of people to identify as a whole without excluding any member,
- 2) the capacity to agree on a minimum of priorities, which everyone has to respect, and to choose the most suitable means to achieve the different goals, with the acceptance of the possible negative consequences of these choices, as side effects,
- 3) the need for a long process of learning through experience and for a growing maturity which will later improve the quality of the process and help to its actualisation,
- 4) the need for regular assessments, based on the original options which have to be adapted after the assessment.

We will examine each of these components in more detail.

### **1) Identification as a group**

***The community must identify as an inclusive group, defined by its nucleus of attraction (functions, values) more than by its limits.***

The easiest form of identification for a group of people usually comes as a group of users for a given perimeter. The limits are therefore more significant, in a first stage. But the development of community life will create a nucleus of attraction, or many: these nuclei can be material functions or spiritual qualities. They will act as many

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magnets which hold the community together and attract new members. If the local territory is understood as a network of existing as well as potential relationships, the community becomes more inclusive and enhances more the social role of each actor than the economic one. With a higher level of consciousness and sense of equity, it will even avoid marginalisation of the weakest or poorest.

Even nomadic societies identify with the place where they live. Local traditions inherited from ancestors who have lived in the same place are participating in reinforcing the sense of belonging. Too much mobility as it is the case in the United States or in Australia makes this identification through belonging and through the growth of local roots more difficult, but the special quality of life the local community can offer, especially when it empowers its members to have a better control of their own life, is a significant force of attraction in order to help people to feel more rooted in a place.

Where economic laws or social values lead people to be very mobile and to change their place of residence because of better buy or sell values of housing, of increased social or professional status, of better possibilities for higher incomes, local groups will find it harder to build a local community in which people could be committed to a long-lasting local project. On the opposite, more traditional societies will have more ease to build their own local projects on the already existing links between people which have been created by the inheritance of a long-lived rooted belonging. While economic mobility dissolves social links, which are the necessary base for building local community, the understanding of the territory as a relational network reinforces the opportunity to identify in an inclusive way with the local group. Marginality arises more easily in an anonymous social frame than in a network of conscious and personalised relationships.

The community can be very small; it can be the village or the whole town, but it can also be the town quarter or even the narrow neighbourhood. It can start at a very small level, and then increase. There is no restricting rule. As soon as two people meet, they can build a community. A couple is a community, a family too.

### 2) The 3 objects of consensus

*Consensus concerns: a) the form of development, b) the suitable means for its implementation, c) the possible consequences.*

- 1) The community has to describe which kind of development and future it will try to implement. This is the description of the ideal which people wish for themselves and their children. It can concern minor or major aspects of life. As an organic process, consensus will grow with time from marginal aspects to more central ones and it will embrace new aspects of common life.
- 2) The community also has to decide which are the most suitable means to reach the described aim and to agree to use them and to respect the given conditions. These means can be technical ones, but most of the time they are rules which people have to respect: conditions for behaviour and choices, quality criteria, self-accepted limits of one's own freedom because of the quality such restrictions can bring.
- 3) The community also has to agree to bear the consequences of these choices which can be unforeseeable but have to be faced as inevitable continuations of the choices, unless they oppose the choices themselves.

These three topics for consensus set the frame for the picture. It is important to see that they start with marginal aspects of life, before

they can touch on what is really essential. They can first concern the embellishment of the local public garden, and then only later the priority of buying locally or of using exclusively renewable energy.

The first important step consists in bringing people together in order to take a common decision concerning their own common future. In fact, this first step is the most important; it is where change happens, it means when change starts to take shape, even on a very tiny scale. Once the process has started, it will develop as far and as long as people can see that it can bring more quality into their life.

The way people are ready to bear the consequences of the common choices is the real test. The consensus is then no more in the discussion - i.e. in words and decisions - but in everyday life. The behaviour of each member shows how far the consensus is real. This form of faithfulness to the decisions which have been taken together is essential for the success of the process. It is where solidarity shows how much people are committed to one another.

### 3) The learning process

*There is no recipe for community life and consensus. Each community has to learn through its own experiences.*

The search for the ideal form of development as well as for consensus is a dynamic process which changes people, the way they look at life, their understanding of what happens around them, and the meaning of community life. It is why this process is an organic one which grows and changes with time. Maturity is the fruit of a long evolution which never finishes.

The real meaning of this search process is the metamorphosis of community links; they cannot pre-exist the process, they can only arise out of it. This process is rich because it is life itself which tries to find an expression beyond any ready made solution. Requirement for consensus is therefore very important because it does not avoid the difficulty of finding a true commitment for everybody. It is not the simple rule of the domination of the majority but it is the way to allow everybody to express their needs. The requirement to achieve consensus focuses essentially on the quality of the process, because it has to encompass everybody, more than on the result of this process, as a decision which should bring the right solution. The fact of concentrating on the process itself avoids simple solutions and is life giving, because life arises in the interaction between people.

### 4) The need for regular assessments

*Regular assessments must refer to the options which have been chosen by the community; then these options have to be adapted*

In our political life, assessments are very easily manipulated in order to show better successes. But the aim of an assessment is to evaluate what has gone well and what has not. The negative aspects are even more important because they are the ones which need to be changed. This is why it is important that the assessments are made in reference to the original choices and not to the already modified orientation; assessments are therefore a way to review the original choices and to adapt them.

Any process should define clearly which is the list of criteria which have to be applied; this is the grid in reference to which the assessment happens. This clarity of method is important because it shows that the process cannot be manipulated by anybody and people

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can therefore trust the transparency of the way decisions are taken and evaluated. Transparency is certainly the main argument for trust and it makes further evolution easier and clearer.

### **The 6 laws of project arising**

*We can describe 6 laws which characterise the way a common project takes shape in a larger community.*

These 6 laws are the following:

- 1) the negative law of consensus,
- 2) the law of initialisation of the process,
- 3) the law of the ideal level of competence,
- 4) the law of social alternative model,
- 5) the law of marginal arising of projects,
- 6) the law of harmonisation of conflicts.

We will look at each of these laws in more detail.

#### **1) The negative law of consensus**

*Consensus grows, when it becomes clear that what is excluded from consensus will be controlled by others in their own interest.*

Consensus arises first from the awareness of a negative statement: every aspect of our life which we cannot find any minimum of consensus about will be managed by competition, which will prevent cooperation, or by third parties, who will act only in their own interest; in both cases, it will be against community interest. Therefore any compromise, any minimum agreement is better than no agreement. This negative law helps to make concessions.

Consensus seems to be impossible to reach as such. But no consensus can be worse than anything else, because the absence of consensus leaves others to decide for us. Maybe the level of consensus we are capable of reaching now is very minimum, but it is already better than nothing, and it can grow further later, when people will recognise that the first step has brought good fruits.

If for example the community does not agree about how to restrict the use of water, bigger consumers, like some famous soft drink manufacturers, will have no limits and will be free to consume as much as they want, condemning many small consumers to suffer of not getting the minimal quantity of water that is vital for them. Or if a local community is not capable of defining clear conditions for the establishment of a new shopping centre, this new business will impose its own law upon the local economic network; small retailers will disappear and the profit made by this new business will be reinvested elsewhere.

#### **2) The law of initialisation of the process**

*The first step is to start the process and to escape the influence of forces which have an interest in avoiding the consensus happening.*

The most important difficulty is to have people recognise their common interest and how much consensus, even minimal and on small objects, can provide a better quality of life for all. It is better to start with little steps in order to make people secure, to allow them to recognise the fruits of such common process and to let the process grow organically according to the general maturity. Many private interests will try to express themselves in order to prevent the process



from happening, in convincing people of little details, without declaring the real intention or reason for their opposition.

It is part of the process to measure how much people are authentic when they express their concerns. Very often we are even not aware ourselves how much our speech is an expression of our privileges or interests and how much it is unable to grasp what the common interest is. The process shows how much we are dependent on the general interest, although it is hard for us to understand it.

Will for consensus can only arise when people can see how much their personal interest depends on the quality of community life and therefore how important it is to clearly identify the priority of common good over private interests. We will later look at the necessary conditions for starting this process.

### **3) The law of the ideal level of competence**

***The ideal level of competence is in general the lowest one, i.e. the most local one, on which the problem can be solved.***

This law is a good argument for empowerment of people and of the local community. It is at the most local level that the best competence is met: at the same time, it is the best place for the best knowledge about the problem and for the most direct impact of measures, because of proximity. It is also the level where it is the easiest to correct the measures, because it is the level where consequences can be observed and evaluated.

We have the tendency to propose technical advice from specialists, but it is clear that people who are directly concerned know best the different aspects of the problem, even if they are very often not aware

of it. It is usually because of lack of empowerment and of possibility to act (oppression, exploitation, lack of practical means), and not because of a lack of knowledge, that poor populations cannot cope with their own situation. Of course the lack of possibilities to act prevent the existing knowledge to become aware and to develop. And specialised knowledge can also be a precious contribution.

The inhabitants of a town quarter are better prepared to see the possible improvements. Maybe they miss the necessary technical skills which can be easily provided, but the option must remain theirs.

### **4) The law of social alternative model**

***The community project has to actualise more human quality in relationships: it is in fact a proposal for a social alternative model.***

The need for a better quality in human relationships will lead the group to practise according to other values and to implement in this way a kind of new social alternative model. As we have described it, self-limitation, cooperation and social control on the market are the basic options of the new paradigm which will foster another form of society. It starts in a very practical way, at a very simple and pragmatic level, and it can develop in a form of model which can inspire other communities to become clearer in their own options and to adopt also priorities which are not purely material.

The simple fact of refusing that the law of greed, the law of competition and the law of profit have to be the leaders of our world already provides the basic condition for building a social alternative. If human and spiritual values guide our choices, then we become an alternative community by the simple fact that we make a clear choice

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about what we want, instead of trying only to get a maximum of personal advantages out of the present situation. This choice is the reversion of the inversion that market has generated by imposing its material values on people. In this simple fact, it becomes an alternative social model.

### 5) The law of marginal arising of projects

*Initiative arises because a few people see clearly what should be done and initiate change on their own small and marginal scale.*

Change takes shape in a marginal form, in little groups, where people are motivated to implement these changes for themselves. Only later, when other people recognise the value of what has been done, can these propositions be adopted by a larger number of people, for a larger community.

Truth grows through testimony and example. Only a few people are ready to experiment with other ways of organising their life. Alternative projects arise in the margin, where they are invented, tried and tested by a very tiny group of strongly motivated and daring people. Later the wider community will recognise these values and adopt them too, when the example has brought its own proofs and people are ready to recognise the improvements it brings.

In the same way, a given community which practises some alternative ways will in general tend to accentuate the alternative character of its life patterns, because experience proves that it is richer to go a more independent and creative way. Imagination therefore generates imagination. We can observe this phenomenon where a population has started to take better control of its life conditions. It is more and more ready to take further initiatives in

order to reinforce the alternative aspect of its way of life. Freedom and creativity generate freedom and creativity. In general this type of experience starts under the pressure of necessity, especially when a community is threaten in its survival itself or when the evolution makes degradation of living conditions too patent.

### 6) The law of harmonisation of conflicts

*Although community is never an ideal place, because it is where conflicts take shape, it is also the place where they can be looked at.*

Community is the place of diversity, where different people and groups come into many conflicts because of their different interests and perspectives in life. Community is therefore not an ideal place, but a place full of tensions. Nevertheless it is the best place where these tensions can find their clearest expression and can be answered in the most balanced way.

We are all dreaming of the ideal community. But it does not exist anywhere. The local community is the place where antagonistic groups of people and interests come into conflict. It is the place where the most powerful want to control social life and take advantage of the weakest; it is the place where everybody has other aspirations for their own and for common future. Nevertheless it remains the best place where all these tensions can find their expression and be understood as what they are, in order to find a minimum form of harmony. Community life is the least worse solution for human development. Without the protection of community, each of us would remain exposed to the greed and the will for power which dwell in all of us, more or less. Laws have always existed as a means of control which community can exercise; it is worth making out of this capacity of the community to foster its

own future a living and creative process, more than a dead juridical tool, and it is worth developing the potential empowerment which it represents, as a creative means for deeper experience in a spirit of cooperation, more than to submit to law with resignation and to let others use this potential for their own purpose.

### **Starting a move towards change**

For so many years, we have been talking about the necessity for change, about ecology, social justice, self-limitation and spiritual values. But little change has occurred, except at a personal or very local level; our world continues its foolish run into self-destruction. The main question is not which future we need, nor which means are necessary for implementing it, but it is about the way to move people, how to convince them (i.e. us) to undergo change, how to motivate them (us) to start a move toward change. We are stuck in our way of life and of thinking, and we remain as if paralysed. This is why it is important to look at the conditions which may move people (us) and which can liberate them (us) from their (our) paralysis.

#### **The syndrome of the boiled frog**

***A frog in a pot of water which heats up slowly will die, instead of jumping out, by incapacity of discerning the threshold of danger.***

Like the frog which does not notice when the heat becomes unbearable and therefore does not react to the deterioration of its direct environment but finally dies because of this deterioration, we have difficulty in discerning significant thresholds in a progressive process of slow deterioration. As each step of the evolution seems similar to the precedent ones, we do not notice when the time has come to react.

We must learn therefore to observe processes and to notice how they are characterised by successive thresholds. We must learn also to understand the consequences of the evolution we witness. But, before all, we have to learn how to react, and to change our behaviours, without being the slaves of our inertia and before it is time for the worst to happen.

#### **The syndrome of the sheep under common harm**

***When all the sheep of the flock suffer under a common harm, no one reacts, by incapacity of seeing how harm can be avoided.***

Like the sheep of a same flock in which all the animals are victims of the same harm and do not react because they have no point of comparison for their behaviour and no model which can show them another possible behaviour which could be able to offer a solution, we accept our common destiny and do not try to invent solutions, as long as the harm seems inexorable just because of the number of its victims. As soon it happens that someone behaves differently and in this way creates a counter-example, each member of the flock will try first to distance themselves from this marginal behaviour in criticising or ignoring it, and then will try, maybe at a second stage, to imitate it when - but only when - it becomes evident that it is the solution to the common harm.

We must learn therefore that the law of numbers is never a proof and that marginal creative behaviour has almost always to confront negative attitudes at the start: it is difficult to isolate oneself, to invent something new, to make it work properly and to become convincing, without any external support. But it is necessary.

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There is always a very strong resistance to change. This resistance is certainly one of the main obstacles for solving the problems we are facing concerning climate change, social injustice, economic exploitation, unequal sharing of riches, lack of access to sanitation, health or education for so many.

### *The 17 thresholds for a start towards change*

*We can describe 17 thresholds of significant steps which seem necessary for breaking our resignation and pushing us forth.*

These thresholds, which are necessary but not sufficient for the change to happen, can be presented as the laws of arising of a form of consciousness which will change our understanding of life and will therefore change our behaviours and attitudes. These laws are:

- 1) the law of the qualitative gain of self-limitation,
- 2) the law of priorities,
- 3) the law of necessity for change,
- 4) the law of breaking of resignation,
- 5) the law of awareness of corruption,
- 6) the law of awareness of whitewashing,
- 7) the law of awareness of (self-)destruction,
- 8) the law of compassion,
- 9) the law of freedom,
- 10) the law of community,
- 11) the law of priority of service over profit,
- 12) the law of weaning,
- 13) the law of modernity,
- 14) the law of positive exclusivity of commitment,
- 15) the law of cumulative effect,
- 16) the law of responsibility,

17) the law *each choice = a vote*.

These thresholds describe significant qualitative steps in the arising of consciousness when we consider our environment and our living conditions. Once we have seen something clearly, it is impossible to go back to the stage of ignorance. It is why these thresholds describe also quantum leaps, which bring us to a further stage of maturity or of wisdom; they are like passes in a mountain area; one has to make a consistent effort for climbing the slope because one's natural tendency is to stay where one is or to choose the path of lesser resistance, but once one reaches the pass, then suddenly a new landscape appears on the other side of the mountain in a stunning way which is exhilarating and brings a complete different energy for the continuation of the walk; henceforth the slope accompanies the effort and the process has the tendency to accelerate. The pass is a visible threshold in the move for change. Each threshold is also an accelerator, because it confirms the need for change and because it makes the change more real and richer, by bringing more life into the process. Life becomes the essential energy which fosters change and increases quality.

Let us examine each of these thresholds in more detail. They are patterns of awareness which take shape in the many different possible sequences. Nevertheless to each one correspond always a triggering condition and a following quantum leap.

### *1) The law of the qualitative gain of self-limitation*

*Change in self-limitation must not be felt as a punishment but as a means to achieve a better quality of life in reaching further depth.*

The law of qualitative gain (threshold 1) says:

- The condition: when it appears clearly that a self-limited way of life offers more of the essential quality which allows depth,
- The quantum leap: then, although with less material comfort, this other simple way of life becomes more attractive, because of this qualitative gain of immaterial nature it makes possible.

Self-limitation is seen as an obstacle to happiness because it is restrictive. The quantum leap consists precisely in seeing that the material aspect is only a very partial aspect and that quality does not depend on it, as soon as our basic material needs are satisfied. Quality of life is therefore not as much dependent on our material well-being as we think it is.

### **2) The law of priorities**

***Our detachment and our capacity to give priority to choices based on spiritual values open us for a hierarchy which brings life.***

The law of priorities (threshold 2) says:

- The condition: when spiritual values (peace, justice, love) become priorities in our life,
- The quantum leap: then we feel, under our skin, the need for a real change which frees us from the heaviness of our materialistic and individualistic way of life.

The search for power, comfort, accumulation, competition, can certainly bring us some excitement and pleasure, but the effect of these gains does not last for long and we remain frustrated when they vanish. Our choices are our own responsibility; they are the key for a deeper life, if we know how to open ourselves to true dimensions.

When we discover in our mind and heart that more detachment from our material comfort opens us to other dimensions in life, we feel the need for change more strongly than when we understand it only intellectually. The quantum leap consists in this transformation in the way we feel the need for change because of our spiritual priorities.

### **3) The law of necessity for change**

***The laws of market, liberalism, globalisation dominate more and more our world and lead it to final destruction. Change is needed.***

The law of necessity for change (threshold 3) says:

- The condition: when we adopt human values for our guide and see that our economic system and model of development is destroying the essence of human relationships by exploiting everything it can (natural resources, social network, human creativity) in order to make a profit, until it is completely destroyed,
- The quantum leap: then we understand in our deepest being that change is a condition for our mere survival and that this change must reconfigure the orientation itself and the values which guide our society.

Our economic system, especially with the domination of liberalism and globalisation, changes completely the content of our human relationships - whether on the personal or on the social level - by imposing economic criteria (market values, profit, domination, exploitation). Any resources - whether natural or human or social - are considered under the economic aspect of a possible profit and have to be exploited to the core. As this system has no capacity to self-limitation, it exploits these resources until they are exhausted. It

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is therefore a means of destruction of resources and social network, which even uses the fragility caused by destruction in order to reinforce its domination on the weakest.

When we understand that this destructive characteristic of our production system is not a negative side effect of it, which could be corrected, but is in fact a main trend, without which it could not exist, it becomes evident that we must change our way of relating one to another and especially that we have to change the way we submit to economic laws. Change is a question of survival; it is also an essential condition in order to become able to establish relationships which can be fostered by human values and, in this purpose, we have, as local and wider community, to practise a severe control over economic production and exchanges.

The quantum leap consists in identifying the destructive effect of our economic system as an essential characteristic of it and in seeing how much change is therefore a necessity for our survival, if we want to escape destruction.

### 4) The law of breaking of resignation

*The laws which rule the world seem impossible to change, but have only the power which our way of looking at them gives them.*

The law of breaking of resignation (threshold 4) says:

- The condition: when we can get free of the paralysis which lets us believe that the world is made what it is by inexorable forces (market, power, greed, ignorance) which we think we cannot confront,

- The quantum leap: then our resignation breaks and vanishes, and it opens a new door for our future; henceforth a wide range of possible attitudes and behaviours appear possible which make our influence not only realistic but even necessary and freedom can become a reality.

Resignation is the fruit of despair; it is a psychological state of depression which arises because of discouragement and because of a lack of positive perspectives. This form of resignation is very often the cause of despair and unhappiness, due to the extreme cruelty of our social and economic system. We come out of this depression when we see that our situation can be changed by our own change of attitude and this new understanding breaks therefore our resignation; this is the quantum leap which allows us to feel responsible and to be free to act.

### 5) The law of awareness of corruption

*We see that most of the goods we are consuming are produced under corrupt conditions (exhaustion, exploitation, destruction).*

The law of awareness of corruption (threshold 5) says:

- The condition: when we realise that our way of life is based on privileges which have been made possible because of corruption,
- The quantum leap: then we need to revisit these privileges and we cannot accept them anymore; therefore another way of life becomes a necessity where our consumption and conditions of life do not rely anymore on such products or advantages.

We know very little about the conditions in which the goods we are consuming have been produced. Most of the goods which are

imported from poor countries have been produced in very harsh conditions: small salaries, human exploitation, no social services, political oppression, destruction of the environment, and many other aspects. Nevertheless we consume coffee, tea, exotic fruits, cotton, manufactured products, timber, fuel which have been produced in conditions we cannot approve because they are degrading human beings, they are exhausting nature and they are creating situations of violence and imbalances which are not acceptable. Products which originate from industrialised countries also have their own conditions of corruption (work conditions, ecology, health) especially concerning the way benefits and privileges are shared. Nevertheless we consume these corrupt products because we are not conscious of their corrupt nature.

Local products are well known to us; we know where they are produced and in which conditions. It is even easier for us to get a more precise idea of what these conditions are; we can always ask the producer or even visit the site. We can also rely on provided information. By buying these local products we encourage of course the respective way of producing them. If we disagree with the way they are produced, it is important that we are able and free enough to stop consuming them; we will in this way express our opposition which we can even make clearer by explaining it directly to the producer.

For products which come from other regions or countries whose conditions we do not know, it is much more difficult to know whether it is decent to consume them or not. Nevertheless, by consuming them, we vote for them.

It is evident that products continue to be produced the way they are because we consume them without questioning the conditions of their

production. This is the basic fundament of fair trading to inspect the given conditions of production and to define labels which are a form of warranties for good quality of these conditions. Our choice is therefore essential. And our freedom also to be able to say “no”. The quantum leap consists in this inner pressure to adapt our way of life to new criteria of non corruption.

### **6) The law of awareness of whitewashing**

***We see that our trade system is whitewashing the corrupt goods it is selling us by packing (cleansing) them in an anonymous way.***

The law of awareness of whitewashing (threshold 6) says:

- The condition: when we perceive that the products we consume, as well as our privileges, are whitewashed and therefore do not reveal anymore the conditions of corruption in which they have been produced or by which they have been made possible,
- The quantum leap: then we cannot consume them nor enjoy them anymore with the same indifference.

We would never buy corrupt products at this extend if it were so obvious that they are corrupt. Our ignorance or our unclear and ambiguous attitude are necessary conditions in order for trade to develop the way it does. Our contribution is necessary and therefore our cooperation is also necessary, but it can happen only if we are not ethically involved. The products have to become neutral and have therefore to lose their own expression of their origin and past. They look like any other product on the shelf of the shop. Supermarkets also have the power of making any product more neutral because it is the place for anonymity.

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We are certainly very greedy and very attached to satisfying our desires more than our moral stands. But yet we do not like to behave in a cruel way. We are not very keen either on investigating too much into what seems a bit dubious. When doubt prevails, we choose what is the most suitable for us and do not like to ask too many questions. But if it is too obvious to us that the proposed product is corrupt, we tend to find a compromise, by buying for instance another similar product whose corrupt condition is not so evident. More than our ethic, our convenience will prevail in this way. It is why whitewashing is important as much for the producer as for the consumer: the producer can sell more easily and the consumer can buy more lightly.

Our freedom, once again, consists in seeing the truth and in acting according to it, even if it is more or less hidden. The fact that it is hidden does not justify anything. Therefore our need to search for the truth remains our key to freedom. The quantum leap consists in our freedom and capacity to read what is hidden by whitewashing and to adapt our behaviour to it, even when it remains hidden.

### **7) The law of awareness of (self-)destruction**

***Every time we consume corrupt goods, we participate in destroying ourselves, the environment, and the people we exploit.***

The law of awareness of (self-)destruction (threshold 7) says:

- The condition: as soon we discover how much, when we consume corrupt goods, we participate in destroying our own know-how, the quality of our own environment, the liveliness of our social network, our ethics as well as the environment, the network and the know-how of the people we exploit indirectly - and this for

poorly apparent reasons which are in fact only illusions (short term profit, greed) -

- The quantum leap: then we feel prompted to give up the privileges and advantages which are connected with this form of consumption and we feel urged to practise more transparent commercial relationships which are more under our control.

Every time we consume corrupt and whitewashed goods, we are weakening our own local know-how and the one of the people who produce these goods, because these goods are produced only for reasons of profit and do not therefore answer either our needs or normal quality criteria. The plastic cups made in China are of bad quality and poor design; they are usually ugly and they are produced in the worst possible conditions (social, ecological, as well as technical) which destroy the local craft's know-how. We buy them only because they are cheap, although they do not last. This illusory advantage hides the many consequences of this form of consumption. It also deprives our own milieu of the possibilities for real needs for such products that local consumption could help to develop: new trades, new creativity, new form of ecology, new practice of human values, new ways for developing more imaginative and just local exchanges.

This option is not a refusal for opening to new exchanges; it is clear that these poor exchanges, that are oriented only towards immediate profit without considering further consequences, cannot provide anything positive. To be true our opening towards other cultures and further remote populations has to foster reciprocal and just relationships that cannot be destructive.



The quantum leap consists in seeing how much our behaviour according to the laws of our economic system is destructive for others as well as for us.

### **8) The law of compassion**

***Compassion helps us to foster our relationships according to the needs of others we learn to recognise, and not only to our own.***

The law of compassion (threshold 8) says:

- The condition: when we are touched by the destiny of others - whether near and visible or far and more abstract - and when we see how much damage we cause by maintaining commercial exchanges as well as cultural and political relationships which are only designed in order to defend our privileges and advantages,
- The quantum leap: then we are touched in our heart and moved to change our behaviour in order to generate happiness for all and to help poorer people to become more empowered and responsible for their own ways of life. Our world therefore widens because it includes others as part of ourselves. We become one body.

Is it acceptable that small Indian children waste their opportunities for game and education because they have to produce carpets for our own pleasure? Is it acceptable that African farmers produce our inter-seasonal beans while they do not have even the minimum for their own subsistence? Is it acceptable that we intervene militarily in other countries in order to ensure our fuel and natural resources supplies? Is it acceptable that we leave behind for our children an exhausted earth and a poisonous heap of non recyclable wastes? These questions contain in themselves their own answers.

If we want to, we have the capacity to try to see the world as it is, more or less independently from our own interests, advantages and privileges. If we are capable of compassion, we are capable of seeing the world in a way which includes others as parts of the same body in which they play another essential role, as we do too; we can even experience their presence as parts of ourselves. Our world vision is then no more egocentric but compassionate. We become free to see how others live and which consequences our common behaviour as rich nations has for them: for the Indian child, for the African farmer, for our children. Compassion makes people real to us and they enrich our own life, but they do so only if we are capable of seeing them for who they are. We become therefore keen to create a more harmonious world where they find their own happiness as well as we do. Because they become real, compassion makes them as important as we are. The quantum leap is this change of vision that compassion generates.

### **9) The law of freedom**

***True freedom makes us free from expectations of others when by habit they require from us to conform to old destructive patterns.***

The law of freedom (threshold 9) says:

- The condition: when we become aware how much the social pressure of habits and expectations from others forces us by conformity into old patterns of behaviour which we believe to be destructive (such as high consumption, materialism, greed, waste, use of privileges), in order to satisfy the desires of others and to please them,
- The quantum leap: then we become stronger and freer to be rooted in our own deep understanding of what truth is, and we

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can better express our own values, even if this form of free behaviour does not please people or if people therefore find us disturbing or mean because we refuse to give them what they want.

One of the major obstacles for changing our way of life is certainly the pressure of our nearest friends, relatives and neighbours whose influence incites us to conform to social habits in general and to their own expectations in particular concerning what we should provide them with. As we need to be loved, we need also to answer the expectations of the ones with whom we live: family, friends, neighbours, colleagues. As soon as we change our values and our behaviours, because of the new awareness which arises in us, we are confronted with the disapproval of our nearest friends. We have to face their dissatisfaction and frustration, especially when their expectations do not change that we should offer them goods and means which are no more compatible with our new awareness. Although we can be very generous, people will find us mean not to offer them what they expect: material abundance, high consumption of energy, waste of food, excessive mobility. We will refuse these things, not because they cost us effort or money, but because we become very aware that they are not integrated in natural cycles which satisfy the criteria of equity.

The quantum leap consists here in becoming free of this pressure because we become capable of conforming more to our deep understanding of what is truth and justice than to the social external pressure. This form of freedom allows us to behave in the right way.

### **10) The law of community**

***As a local community, we form a complex body of diversity and complementarity which needs to be consciously taken care of.***

The law of community (threshold 10) says:

- The condition: when we discover, through simple observation or better through compassion, that our local community forms in fact a living body with its many organs, in which we are all interdependent from each other and in which we therefore need each other in and because of our diversity and complementarity,
- The quantum leap: then we recognise this form of interdependency as a main condition for creativity for our future because this community exists in any case and, by the way it develops, determines the conditions for our personal development; we are motivated to take care of this community in the same way as we take care of our own house because it is the direct place where we have to thrive.

Community exists in any case, whether we take care of it or not, whether we make it the field of competition or of cooperation. It determines therefore the quality of our own development because it is our direct environment on which we are dependent for almost everything: access to goods of main subsistence (air, water, food, land, shelter), human relationships, work and self-expression, social recognition and support. Nowadays we are usually resigned to accept that the economy has to impose its laws and we do not take care of our local community, although, through its empowerment, we could better control the influence of economy on our lives, by giving preference to human and spiritual values in our choices. By neglecting our care for local community, we let it evolve in the way others want it to. Therefore we can observe how it disintegrates

slowly inasmuch as it integrates in the move towards globalisation where an ever fewer number of dominating forces control more and more the global network of exchanges, destroying in this way our originality and flattening diversity.

Compassion helps to recognise the bonds which link us with others, whether they are our neighbours in our local community or whether they are very distant and we are in a very minimal relationship through trade.

When we become aware of the important role that our care for our local and wider community plays in our life, we become aware of the community dimension of our acts and we are motivated to take care of it as of our own home. The quantum leap consists in this deep personal awareness of belonging to a larger body and in this personal concern for the collective dimension in our life.

### **11) The law of priority of service over profit**

***Community arises with the clear priority of a spirit of service (sense of solidarity) over competition (hope for profit).***

The law of priority of service over profit (threshold 11) says:

- The condition: when it becomes clear to us that the spirit of service is the best way to give shape to local community and to harmonise it as a body of interdependency which tries to integrate each member as a necessary part and that this active care for cooperation is a good protection against competition which can only divide social network,
- The quantum leap: then we do not act anymore only in our individual interest (person, family, company) but we start really

cooperate in building our local community as a living network and as the fruit of common effort, in the purpose of answering as far as possible the special needs of each of the members. Profit is no more attractive and any possible benefit is immediately reinvested in community well-being.

The fact that we are no more obsessed by our own interest opens us to the large evolution of our community and we start to perceive issues which are far richer than our own little issues inasmuch as they are creating a much wider dynamic which profits everyone. By our own movement of self-limitation which renounces personal profit we discover new horizons which are far deeper.

Accumulation in one's own profit immobilises riches which are therefore taken away from collective use; they become useless for most of us and are usually of little use for people who have them, especially when they accumulate more than they need. On the contrary, they would be accessible to all if they would remain in the open circuit, being in this case also available for the ones who wanted it so much for themselves.

The commons, which I described before, are the concrete form of these common goods which become available and alive when we protect them, nourish them and share them.

The quantum leap consists in this new awareness of how much cooperation offers more possibilities than competition and how far we are the first beneficiaries when we share our gifts, cooperate to the common good and take care of the commons together.

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### 12) The law of weaning

*The choice for weaning ourselves of the drug of comfort is painful, but it allows us to grow into sobriety and truth.*

The law of weaning (threshold 12) says:

- The condition: when we feel on our own skin how much our attachment to our comfort and to our privileges is affecting us as a drug does, in keeping us prisoners of our corrupt behaviour, in a regression into illusions and into criminal behaviour,
- The quantum leap: then, we want to move forwards and become free of our slavery; therefore we get new courage to undergo a painful period of weaning which teaches us to see really what is involved in our behaviour, helps us to reconnect with the deep meaning of truth and to invent new forms of alternative behaviour.

Our attachment to our own comfort is a form of drug because it makes us dependent on small individual advantages which are based on the exploitation of others. As long as we do not see this form of attachment and dependency, our comfort is acting as a drug which brings us the illusory pleasure of enjoyment but prevents us from seeing what is truly involved in our behaviour and in our attachment to these aspects of our life. It is clear that we would not be cruel enough to see what is involved and nevertheless to practise it. As soon as we notice this drug effect, we either remain attached (i.e. slaves) to our comfort as a drug which brings pleasure, or we become, on the contrary, motivated to get free of this drug. If we want to get free, we have certainly to undergo a long painful time of weaning which consists in becoming free of the use of what makes it comfortable but which is based on exploitation. The principle

obstacle to us getting free of addictions is generally our incapacity to become aware of, or to accept, the fact that we are addicted.

Cars are in general causes of exhaustion of natural resources, of pollution, of production of greenhouse effect gases (CO<sub>2</sub>), of our need to secure our supplies in oil by military actions into countries which possess this resource. Each time we drive, we take advantage of these different forms of destruction or exploitation, although we do not want to see how far they are a necessity in order for us to act as we do. Therefore the use of our car is a form of drug dependency because we have to refuse to see these disturbing aspects if we want to continue imperturbably to enjoy the mobility our car can provide. If we manage to wean ourselves from this drug dependency, we will be able to give up using our car the way we do. We will certainly lose some mobility and have to find other means of transport, and it will be painful, but we will gain in freedom in our ability to recognise what was really attached to our previous behaviour as a driver, and in our ability to be no more involved in the maintenance of these destructive conditions which were necessary for our pleasure; we will become free to recognise truth where it is. We will also become free to invent new behaviours, for instance new ways to keep us mobile.

The quantum leap consists in this switch in our mind which allows us suddenly to become aware of our addiction, to see clearly what is involved and to undergo weaning, despite the pain it brings, in order to become free and truthful, while we are no more ignoring these hidden causes of a harm which happens elsewhere.

### **13) The law of modernity**

***The choice of giving up corrupt behaviours does not lead us back into the Middle Ages; choice is a privilege of modernity.***

The law of modernity (threshold 13) says:

- The condition: when we discover that our capacity for self-limitation and for renouncing goods and privileges which generate exploitation and misery for others is in fact not a regression into a primitive state of development but on the contrary a sign of maturity which ensues from the spirit of modernity itself whose principal quality is to make choices possible in consideration of personal preferences and values,
- The quantum leap: then we discover how much this new form of freedom which modernity is able to provide is opening a whole new range of possibilities for our personal and social development which concentrate more on immaterial qualities than on material accumulation, as soon as we can be sure that our basic needs are satisfied.

Firstly, it is important to see that it is possible to do without modern technology and comfort; nothing would prevent us to do as our ancestors did: they had no computers, no phones, no cars and they were not less happy than we are. It is also important to be aware that modern technology implies the possibility to choose whether the use of it is appropriate or not. We still do not master this aspect of modernity because we are convinced that everything which is possible must be done and that everything that we can get should be bought, but, in fact, the mature stage of modernity means that we are capable of making the right choice, in consideration of our real priorities and values. It is a distinctive feature of modernity that it alleviates our material aspects of life in order to make us free for

choices based on immaterial values. The evolution of human knowledge and wisdom has not as destiny just to increase our capacity to accumulate material goods; it has to lead us on a more mature path towards wisdom and accomplishment of our vocation.

The quantum leap consists in the new perception of this possible development of modernity which is in fact its deepest characteristic.

### **14) The law of positive exclusivity of commitment**

***Because of its exclusivity, our commitment to another way of life based on human priorities makes our path more consistent.***

The law of positive exclusivity of commitment (threshold 14) says:

- The condition: when we understand that the most important choices in our life consist in a form of commitment which can only be exclusive of other possible ways, and when we accept that this exclusive form of commitment is even a fundamental condition for us being able to go deeper into the chosen way,
- The quantum leap: then we see only the positive aspect of our commitment (the depth) and no more what it excludes (the other choices); and this new understanding makes us completely free to commit seriously to our choices and helps us to focus on what we have chosen, because we do not regret any form of illusory freedom and see only the depth of our choice.

Our society urges us to keep our choices open, in order to be able to change at any time and not to exclude anything. It is why our choices cannot be, in this frame of mind, of any value, because they are always keeping the back door open and we are all the time looking at other possibilities and cannot focus on our path. This kind of choice

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cannot be a commitment. For instance we are certainly free to change our partner as often as we want, but we are also prevented in this way of entering more deeply into a true and deep relationship. This is only an illusory freedom.

When we understand that an inevitably exclusive form of commitment is the condition to go more deeply into our choices, it makes the strength of commitment more attractive because it is understood no more as a negative cause of restraining our possibilities but as a positive force which opens us to far more opportunities of rich experiences.

This new understanding of the value of commitment, which is in conflict with the current values of our society, constitutes the quantum leap which gives us the detachment from an illusory freedom and urges us to a real commitment to practise a way of life based on justice and sharing.

### **15) The law of cumulative effect**

***The cumulative effect of our respective impacts (negligible for us) or renunciations (for us a high cost) makes the world what it is.***

The law of cumulative effect (threshold 15) says:

- The condition: when we see clearly that the world is what it is because of the cumulative effect of the respective impacts of our tiny acts - which seem individually insignificant to us - as well as the cumulative effect of the impacts of our respective renunciations - which cost a lot to us because of the sacrifice they mean -

- The quantum leap: then we feel very much concerned by the responsibility of each choice we make and we start concentrating on the truthfulness of our own way of life.

This law is in fact a double law because it concerns two kinds of impact:

- 1) Firstly, concerning our actions: the impact of our personal deeds is very often not significant because each of us has only very little influence, but the cumulative effect of all our respective impacts provokes the degradation of our natural and social environment. There are no other actors than people: people in their own private ways of life as well as people in their official jobs or functions.
- 2) Secondly concerning our renunciations (our non-actions): as soon as we become more conscious of the cumulative consequences of our respective impacts and as we act more responsibly, the impact of our respective renunciations or changes of behaviour seems very ineffective in respect of the high price they cost us, each time we decide not to do something which we would like so much to do; but it is the cumulative effect of all our respective renunciations or changes of behaviour which allows us to find together an answer to the destruction of our environment and a way to implement a real improvement of our life conditions. The weaning process is very important because it makes us free to make the right choice.

The double law of cumulative effect is very important because it shows how scale and localisation are important factors. If I cut down a tree, it has no impact on the general balance of the planet, but if everybody cuts down a tree, it is an ecological catastrophe. If I cut down a hundred trees in the same spot, it has a strong impact; if we

cut down a hundred trees around the whole world, it does not have any major impact.

This double law of cumulative effect is true in what concerns the negative impact of our respective actions, it means the destruction we provoke by our personal behaviour. This respective impact is rarely visible and it is difficult to see the link between our own personal behaviour and the problems the planet is confronted with, such as climate change, exhaustion of natural resources, degradation of soils, pollution. Nevertheless this destruction is only possible through the addition of our respective impacts. It is what this law of cumulative effect tells us.

It is also true, and still more difficult to recognise, that our changes of behaviour are the condition for a change. Although they cost us a lot because they touch us in the especially sensitive place of our personal desires and aspirations, our renunciations are the only means for change. Yet they seem insignificant, especially when we consider what they cost to us and the impact they have individually, all the more so since our effort is made still more difficult if others continue to behave in a wasteful and destructive way which seems to take away any significance for our restraint.

There is in fact no pollution but by the addition of all tiny parts. There is no exhaustion of resources but by the addition of our respective tiny acts of consumption. Industry is not a consumer as such, it is an intermediate between the resources and us. Without our consumption, there would be no industry. We are the final consumers and therefore we are, all together, the cause of the destruction, and each of us in our own way. The same is true about the impact of our institutions. We are all the actors which make this impact what it is,

despite the fact that responsibility in institution is diffuse and therefore still more difficult to grasp than in our private acts.

Some people are more destructive because they consume much more than others, especially in a world where sharing of resources is so uneven. What to say about the comparison between the consumption of a rich American and of a poor Chadian? A gap of impact separates both, and therefore a gap of responsibility in the destruction of our world.

Our big mistake consists in waiting for powerful actors, like governments or economic powers to implement another form of production and consumption; it is essential to recognise that we, as simple people, citizens and consumers, are the true actors. It means that the influent actor is not the producer but the consumer. This observation is so true that it is possible for us to influence strongly the production through our consumption.

But we ignore or we do not want to recognise this truth and, because of our lack of awareness, it is exactly the contrary which happens: our docility allows the producer to define the way of consumption. Publicity - especially when it proposes special offers or discounts - is therefore a very powerful tool; it allows this form of inversion where the real actor, the consumer, becomes the object (the slave) while the beneficiary is the producer, and not the consumer. This is our upside down reality.

Therefore the double law of cumulative effect tells a mind changing truth. When this new truth becomes evident to us, we cannot ignore our power and responsibility anymore; this is the quantum leap.

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### 16) The law of responsibility

***“The enemy comes in slippers”;* numbers do not justify anything; we are in fact never followers, but initiators of behaviours.**

The law of responsibility (threshold 16) says:

- The condition: when we see that the law of numbers (the justification which says: “so many people already do this”) does not justify any behaviour, and when we understand truly in our flesh that in fact we are always the initiators of the behaviours we adopt or the initiators in promoting the values which are significant for us (it means we are never the followers, never the ones who come after others, and we are never the ones who do the same as others for the only reason that it is usually what one does),
- The quantum leap: then we become fully responsible and we accept this responsibility which nobody wants to take on; and the enemy cannot come anymore in slippers, because we watch our own behaviour and are ready to oppose therefore what is not right according to our own values and choices.

There was a book, written by an Irish man<sup>6</sup>, Hubert Butler, about the rise of Nazism, entitled *the enemy comes in slippers*. It described, through apparently insignificant facts, how Nazism has established itself slowly in Germany, without anybody reacting because everybody was adapting and following what others did. Conformity to common behaviour is very often the way evil establishes its power.

We say: I can take this plane today, because it is flying in any case, even if I do not take it. I can therefore fly without problem, because the plane will in any case produce CO<sub>2</sub>, even if I do not fly; my

renunciation of flying will not prevent the plane producing CO<sub>2</sub>. The fact seems certainly true, because, in this peculiar unique case which is considered out of a context of repetition, the plane will fly if I fly or do not. But the truth is: the plane is flying because people are flying; I have to become aware that I am in fact the first passenger and the plane is flying for me. I do not join others, who are already flying, but they are joining me as first passenger. Or still better: we are all the first passengers. Without this straight and most requiring way of looking at reality, there cannot be any responsibility of anybody for anything. Responsibility would dissolve. It is how Nazism and many other evils establish their power.

The quantum leap consists in accepting oneself as the initiator of anything one does or thinks or promotes, and never as the follower of what others do. One becomes therefore responsible for each aspect of one's acts.

### 17) The law of each choice = a vote

***Each choice is a vote which encourages the production or the behaviour or the belief which is validated by this choice.***

The law of *each choice = a vote* (threshold 17) says:

- The condition: when many people start to behave rigorously in accordance with their beliefs and values, by practising small choices in everyday life which they consider as truthful,
- The quantum leap: then the influence on commercial circuits, on political decisions and on common customs becomes significant and powers adapt their strategies to such new paradigm, by opposing it if they feel their interests are under menace, or by supporting it if their interests are confirmed by it, maybe without

<sup>6</sup> *The Enemy comes in Slippers* (approximate title) is one of many essays by Hubert Butler.



any personal conviction but only because of the number of people who support this new paradigm.

This is the law of choice as a vote which should transform our life, making each choice a personal and independent step. Small choices are very important in our life because they are the way to find our expression in everyday life and they are the acting force which fosters the meaning of our acts. Therefore it is important to see how far each choice has an important implication, because of the double law of cumulative effect: it makes each of our choices an important step in the way we are responsible for the world we are creating.

This law of each choice as a vote is a very demanding stand: the smallest act becomes a form of personal expression. And especially it forces us to express ourselves through our way of life, through our personal choices, more than through our discourse. Our talk is only a help in making more explicit what our attitudes and behaviours already say clearly. If we respect this fundamental law, there can be no contradiction in our life. Of course it takes a lot of courage and detachment to be able to reach this high level of requirement; it is real truthfulness. Yet we remain imperfect beings!

The corollary of this law says that we can only act in conditions which are clear to us, and that we can only consume products which have been produced in conditions that we can know. Therefore it is an encouragement to consume more local products and to use more local services where we know who does what and under which conditions.

This law has its limits when its application threatens the one who applies it. But even this limit depends on our degree of freedom and of our degree of commitment which defines how far we are ready to

go and which price we are ready to pay in order to practise our own truth.

The quantum leap consists in the insight that we are the real actors of our common evolution and that power results of the cumulative effect of what we submit to, tolerate, accept or confirm. We become the main actors and truth becomes our main criteria in our choices and behaviours, whether others do the same or do not..

### *The dynamic of change*

*Change takes place in a progressive way which involves persons, groups and communities in a dynamic and organic growth.*

When a few persons are motivated to change their way of life because they feel deeply the need for change and because their resignation has been broken and the practical means for this change become visible to them, a peculiar dynamic starts which links the different persons, especially little groups as well as the local community, and this dynamic provokes a form of growing solidarity and maturity which is, at the beginning, materialised in small actions and attitudes, in very pragmatic first steps which could seem incoherent but which have the merit of starting a move towards change.

This last option is different from the precedent because it concerns the way change starts to happen when move towards change has started. The first actions are incoherent and arise more in small groups which act in a marginal way, until it becomes more solid and convincing.

## **Community and self-limitation**

The action has to be first individual but it cannot be only individual. Small groups of friends or neighbours are the intermediate form where change happens. Together a small group of people can better share their observations and ideas, and they are a support for each other in their will to practise another way of life. They can start sharing goods, tools, cars, ideas, and they can implement new relationships.

But finally the local community is the place where a common image of the future takes shape, step by step, and where consensus is created. Maturity in this process grows slowly, organically. Maturity is not given; it becomes more consistent in the process of discovering the common good and interest. It is why the change is a peculiar dynamic which carries in itself the seeds of its own growth. The move towards change has to broaden and to deepen and to become more coherent in including the broader part of the community, until it really becomes a common project.

Change consists in this new quality which appears when members are committed to their personal as well as collective choices and when they conform their behaviour to the common values and options which become ever clearer and grow also with the move. This new coherence, which only the collective dimension can provide, brings the action to another level of impact, like multiplying the effects of each action. The sum is more than the addition of the parts. The materialisation of all the quantum leaps we have described is made visible by this other quality which appears when the community practises according to common values and priorities which have been agreed about. Change then becomes real and visible for all.

#### **4) THE DIMENSION OF TRUTH**

So far I have tried to show how a qualitative change needs to be based on personal and collective choices which concern human and spiritual priorities, and I have described a few laws which make the different steps of our maturation more understandable. It is time now to describe in more detail in which ways self-limitation, as an expression of truth, may allow this perspective of change to take place, in order to create a society which could be more just and more respectful of nature.

##### **Self-limitation**

The main trend of our western society is fostered by the laws of market economy which reveal at their paroxysm in the present trend for globalisation. We have said how much this option is a restricted one which reduces life to its minimal material dimension and flattens it into a monotonous plain, into a landscape without any accent and how much even it is a fundamental inversion of the meaning of life. It is probably the reason why so many people are unhappy who follow the average pattern of a material oriented society: they work hard but happiness escapes, and very often the spiritual dimension in their life is reduced because they do not find any help to lead them on this path; churches are too formal or too moralistic; sects are a form of exploitation and of false use of power; new age is too vague and creates illusion, and our secular society has lost the sense of the sacred. But, despite these fundamental lacks of meaning and guidance, life remains far richer and deeper than a mere run for material comfort. More than wide and broad (i.e. the many possibilities that it offers), life is high and deep (i.e. the search for meaning that it allows), but this depth is not immediately perceptible.

##### **The 2 types of civilisations**

*Traditional cultures adapt to nature through self-limitation, while western cultures try to dominate nature through technology.*

- Civilisations which tend to adapt and to live in harmony with their environment are the traditional ones which do not have powerful means to transform their context and therefore have to respect the laws of nature, in order to survive. They prefer to develop a harmonious relationship with their environment. Adaptation and harmony are the main themes of an attitude which does not explore the limits of what is possible. These traditional cultures practise self-limitation because it allows them to remain in balance with their environment which they cannot afford to destroy, as much for practical reasons (their need for their own subsistence which this environment provides) as for spiritual reasons (their respect for a world which appears sacred to them because of the subtle link which they experience with it). There is no main project of future transformation, but life consists in helping the environment to provide what is needed and in sharing it in the community.
- Civilisations which do what they can in order to dominate their environment are the ones which use science and technology as means to adapt their context to their will and project, instead of adapting themselves to external constraint. They think it is right to try to transform their environment for the purpose of making it what they want it to be, for satisfying their desires. Our western civilisation belongs to this category: control and domination are the main themes of our interaction with nature and with other civilisations. Destruction results out of this pattern which is self-

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centred and which threatens therefore our own survival because it does not consider any limits.

We will be able to become a mature community only if we see the fundamental difference between on one hand a society which is capable of self-limitation in order to respect the laws of the environment as well as to integrate into nature and into the wider social network, and on the other hand a society which is obsessed by its own projects and desires and which cannot see or respect any limits in its way of pursuing its goals, which are generally mainly materialistic.

This simplified description shows how self-limitation is the key for balance and for sharing, as it becomes clear that any excessive behaviour leads to destruction of the environment and of the inner social substance.

### *Self-limitation as negative and positive modes*

*Self-limitation is at the same time a negative mode (restriction of doing harm) and a positive one (opening to a better quality of life).*

Basically self-limitation is, as I said, a movement of spontaneous restriction which is a creative opening to the other invisible dimensions in life (human and spiritual values, depth). In order to have access to this mysterious depth, self-limitation is necessary. It is therefore not a sad punishment, but it is a rich practice of what could not be experienced otherwise:

- Firstly, self-limitation allows us to stop destroying the environment and the social network in which we live; this is what

we could call the negative restriction, i.e. a restriction in our way to be destructive.

- Secondly, self-limitation allows us to have access to more depth, by diminishing the pressure of the material constraints of our life, which have the tendency to invade any empty free space or time, and by giving priority to the immaterial dimensions of our own life: peace, justice, love; this is what we could call the positive restriction, i.e. a restriction which opens us to the deeper meaning of life.

It is essential to understand that self-limitation has these two negative and positive aspects which are linked and even impossible to dissociate.

By our way of consuming natural resources and exploiting anything which can provide profit, our society is destroying not only nature but also our social network and especially the trust human beings can have in others. By restraining ourselves in this trend which has nowadays actually no limit, we will reduce our negative impact on our natural and social environment. While self-limiting our material way of life, we will reduce our ecological footprint (our impact on nature) or our carbon footprint (how much CO<sub>2</sub> we produce) because we will become able to live with less, especially because our basic material needs (air, water, food, clothes, shelter) can be satisfied with very little means. It does not mean that we should have only the minimum; it means that we can reduce our impact as much as we are ready to. This aspect of our self-limiting attitude is called negative because it consists in not doing something which is destructive.

On the other hand, self-limitation simplifies our way of life; we have less material worries, because we need less. We do not need to care for the machines we do not have any more because they are no more

necessary to us and we do not need to maintain and clean a huge house if we live in a simple and smaller one. We do not have to work so much because we do not need a big income. We have therefore more time and more receptiveness of mind in order to concentrate on what really matters for us. Simplicity is a positive way which makes us available to experiences which were not foreseen. In most spiritual tradition, simplicity is the way for wisdom, because we need to be free in our mind and spirit if we hope to grow on the path of wisdom. It is not a path we can plan, it is a path which surprises us at each step; it is why simplicity becomes a condition to have access to the reality which is behind appearances. This aspect of our self-limiting attitude is called positive because it opens us to an unknown dimension which we do not experience when we are fully involved in the normal trend of our western society which wants to grab always more and more.

For instance self-limitation is the attitude which refuses to take a plane because it is a main cause of climate change and therefore the restraint in flying will diminish a negative impact. But it is also the choice for travelling by train or even for walking because a slower way of transport is better adapted to our faculties and we have in this way the opportunity to better observe our environment and to be enriched by what we would have missed in travelling at a high speed. We will cross the intermediate countries we would not have seen if flying. Self-limitation is in this case the eulogy of slowness. Only a clear and conscious way of giving up speedy means of transport can allow us to rediscover the richness of slow motion.

### Active and reactive attitudes

*We adopt active attitudes, lead by ignorance or illusion, as well as reactive attitudes, lead by fear, anger or aggressive escape.*

Self-limitation does not concern only the quantity of goods we consume; it is a much deeper process which questions the very roots of our attitudes and behaviours. It is a necessary psychotherapy of ourselves as persons, but essentially also of our society and of the values and behaviours it fosters. This is why it is important to understand the very roots of our attitudes:

- Some attitudes are principally active; they are our active trends each time we desire an object or a sensation or we want to obtain a specific effect; these initiatives are usually based on our knowledge, or more exactly on our lack of it, i.e. on our ignorance and on our illusions.
- Some attitudes are more reactive; they are the consequences of our conflicts with the world which reveals itself to be not as we want it to; we react then with frustration, anger or fear, which generate withdrawal or aggression.

Our knowledge is very limited, despite what we think we know. We usually develop an excellent know-how in a very specific field. Tools and technology create an illusion of invincibility and of unlimited power for control and domination. Our domination of nature results from this form of active attitude which is based on ignorance, because we do not recognise how much we are part of nature and how much we have therefore to respect the laws of natural cycles. The main question in our use of technology is not how we have to use it, but how we can learn to restrict its use when its use is not appropriate. Our knowledge is made out of the addition of the many pieces we know, and we ignore the gaps and how much we ignore or

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how much we are subject to illusion. Greed is like a drug which hides still more our ignorance and illusions.

Our reactive attitudes arise because we do not find a way to be in harmony with our natural and social environment. Our desires and other active attitudes generate a form of conflict between us and the world; not so much because we are really in opposition but because our relationship with our environment does not develop as we want it to. Frustration, anger and fear arise because our plans and representations do not take shape as we had planned. We become afraid or angry because we cannot control our relationship with the world and we feel threatened or powerless. Fear and anger are certainly important causes of our negative reactions; we can completely withdraw and find a kind of illusory refuge, far from what could confront us with this external reality, or we can react aggressively and try to conquer the external world by force, when it refuses to be submissive. In this case our aggressive trend will lead us to a form of active behaviour but which will have its origin in a reactive attitude.

It is fascinating to recognise how many apparently active behaviours have their root in fact in reactive attitudes. Many forms of materialism and of diverse forms of addictions have their roots in the fear or in the anger we experience in our confrontation with the world. Self-limitation becomes in this way a form of therapy which heals us, because it touches the deep reasons for our behaviour and makes us free from a harm which is often oppressing us.

We can distinguish four different forms of self-limitation which I will describe in more detail under both aspects of the negative and the positive modes which I have just explained:

1) cartographic self-limitation,

- 2) technological self-limitation,
- 3) strategic self-limitation,
- 4) psychological self-limitation.

### 1) Cartographic self-limitation

***Our behaviours are guided by our road-map which is an imperfect representation of our world, with its own limits, holes, flatness.***

We act according to our representations which, through the chain of transformation of facts-sensations-interpretations-choices, results from our personal experiences which have reshaped our understanding of the world. Even if we have been helped by sciences, which pretend to propose an objective and true representation of our environment, the road-map we use has its own limits (what it does not consider), its own simplifications (what it cannot represent), its own holes (what it ignores), its flatness (the dimensions it is not conscious of or it cannot represent).

- Cartographic self-limitation is a negative mode in the way that a reduced trust in our representations (the map) will reduce their negative impact, i.e. the mistakes caused by our ignorance (limits, simplifications, holes, flatness).
- Cartographic self-limitation is a positive mode in the way our awareness of the deformation of the world by our road-map will urge us to search for more truth and to try to discover, beyond the appearances and our illusions of knowing, the aspects of reality which are hidden or which cannot be represented or expressed.

Cartographic self-limitation allows us to be more critical of our representations and of our attitudes. We become more modest, i.e. more sensitive to what was not foreseen or even to what contradicts

our understanding. We see better how much our mind traps us in simplified and falsified representations. Of course we do not have other means than this poor road-map, but, instead of trusting it blindly, we can update it or even transform it everyday and we can imagine new ways of representing or integrating what we discover. Knowledge becomes then something mobile and dynamic. Each new step is a new point of view, instead of being an increasing accumulation of data. In a dynamic attitude, qualitative changes can happen which provoke a deep metamorphosis of the person and complete changes of point of view; these deep personal changes or switches in our perceptions are not possible if accumulation of knowledge is no more than the constant addition of new elements into the same picture. Cartographic self-limitation and our awareness of it open us therefore to new ways of understanding reality; it becomes a spiritual path in the search for truth.

### 2) Technological self-limitation

*Our use of technology finds no limits and is very harmful in its uncontrolled effects and in its ignorance of other dimensions.*

Our technical means cannot be fully mastered because the zero risk does not exist. Accidents are unavoidable as soon as we use technical means. But our ignorance and our greed, which express themselves in maladjustment of our road-map, urge us to use technology beyond what is reasonable, and this excessive use, through its increased power, multiplies also, as under magnifying glasses, the inappropriate effects of the lacks and distortions of our road-map.

- Technological self-limitation is a negative mode in the way it reduces the harmful impact of our technical means, if we accept using them less or when we use smaller means.

- Technological self-limitation is a positive mode in the way it allows us to choose a more simple and adequate tool which will help us to better control the use of it, not only avoiding negative side effects but improving also adaptability and subtlety.

It is evident, a plane which crashes kills 500 times more people than a bike falling into the abyss. We remain blind in what concerns our use of technology: we are used to the fact that many people get killed each year in car accidents, even some of our friends or children, but it does not seem to be powerful enough to make us question whether the use of cars is worth paying this high price. Similarly, the destruction of environment has been mainly the consequence of the impact of technology. The power of our technology multiplies its negative effects.

It is important to understand that technology as such is nothing negative. It is in fact only a more or less powerful means to achieve some specific tasks and only the inappropriate use we make of it transforms it into a harmful and dangerous tool.

This is why self-limitation becomes so important; it is not at all the negation of technology, it is only the restrained and more adapted use of it, because of our awareness of the complexity of our environment and of our action. Self-limitation is also a wider awareness which is capable of not only focusing on the awaited effect of the tool but also on the way the environment reacts and how it can also be influenced in a negative way. Gentleness is certainly the main characteristic of technological self-limitation. Biologic agriculture is the best way to produce healthy food in good quantities without destroying the balance of nature, while industrial agriculture is less effective and much more harmful.

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### 3) Strategic self-limitation

*Our action into the world is very egocentric, in trying to integrate others in our projects without leaving them any autonomy.*

Our perception of our situation is very much determined by our own interests and privileges and our action is therefore much oriented by what we want to achieve for ourselves. Even when we want to be generous, our aid can become strongly paternalistic or ethnocentric, or even answer our need for power or influence. We rarely act against our own interests for the purpose of truth or justice. In behaving in this way, we are not open to respect the autonomy of others and we exclude them from our projects or allow them only to integrate in the form which suits us or which we are capable to accept.

- Strategic self-limitation is a negative mode in the way it reduces the negative impact of our egocentric way of thinking, every time we accept leaving more space for the initiative of others and each time we remain open to their influence.
- Strategic self-limitation is a positive mode in the way it consciously opens a free space for others to contribute in a richer way to the common good by expressing more freely their own faculties and it allows thus diversity and complementarity to express a wider range of perceptions and creativity.

Our strategies are moulded on our convenience. Self-limitation in our strategies will allow others to integrate better in our proposals as autonomous people with their own perceptions, priorities, aims and skills. It will help them to bring their own contribution in more diversity and complementarity. The process is no more pre-defined but it remains open to the flow of life, and it is the transformation of

a social body which becomes capable of integrating its many diverse parts.

This other form of openness practises a free form of respectful confrontation for different representations and behaviours. The common project is no more a one way road which remains well contained between its edges, but it becomes an open structure which is able to integrate many contributions of different natures which can even be antagonistic in the way they present different or even opposed ways of coping with reality. In nature, as I have already explained, cohabitation of antagonistic forces is the fundamental law which creates general balance. Strategic self-limitation reduces in the same way its power for control in order to allow diversity to emerge and to offer different ways of expression for a wider creativity.

### 4) Psychological self-limitation

*People want us to be powerful and not to recognise our own ignorance; yet true honesty should be a securing factor.*

As I said before, it is already not easy for us to recognise our own limitations and our own weaknesses, although we know that this recognition would make us free to be what we are. But social pressure increases still more our natural tendency for self-delusion, by imposing its own pattern according to which we should hide behind a prestigious façade of success, power and impressiveness, although we know very well that these appearances do not express what we are. Thus we feel trapped in a role which does not suit us. In fact the free recognition of our own limitation, of our ignorance and of our subjective behaviour should be a proof of honesty which should convince people to trust us, more than when we try to do as if we were all-knowing and almighty.



- Psychological self-limitation is a negative mode in the way it will reduce the destructive impact of our incapacity to show our limitations, each time we show ourselves capable of more humility and of letting the other know how much we are confronted with doubt and questioning.
- Psychological self-limitation is a positive mode in the way it allows truth to be told and people to face complexity and to take their own responsibilities, without hiding behind formal or social roles and without pretending that specialists are capable of solving all problems.

Most of the time, we feel very perturbed when specialists do not take on themselves the responsibility of solving our problems. We prefer when they play a formal role which secures us, although we know, out of our own experience, how much it is a form of delusion because each of us has their limitations. Specialists need their own aura of power. But in fact we shall be much more convinced of the faculties of a specialist who recognises the limits of his possibilities. It is in this case more challenging for us, but it makes him more real and more human, and therefore more trustworthy.

Self-limitation opens new doors. It not only reduces the negative impacts of our false attitudes but it allows also situations to be described as they are, in their whole complexity, without hiding the gaps of our ignorance nor the limitations of our action. Therefore everybody has to face their own responsibility. The complementarity between members of the same community appears stronger because we need to rely on any possible contribution in order to face complexity. The prestigious role of the specialist is shown in its nakedness and truth, with its own limitations. The uncovering of

delusion is a freeing process for everyone although it is also a difficult confrontation with truth and complexity.

### *Self-limitation as a brake on complexity*

*Because it makes everything more understandable, self-limitation limits globalisation, complexity, anonymity and even poverty.*

Self-limitation is the tool for simplicity and for transparency. It reduces complexity. It prevents situations developing in something which becomes too complex or out of hand. Small is beautiful. Therefore it is a brake on greed and on superfluous means or aims. It is an awareness that simplicity must be preserved because it is the condition for happiness, in the way it allows everybody to understand how things run. It is the contrary of virtuality which grows out of complexity and allows people to behave in a false way because the effects of their acts cannot anymore be related to their cause.

Self-limitation reinforces the local dimension of community. Actors are better known because they are neighbours. Decisions are more under control because they depend on the local network and on its maturity, especially on its capacity to limit the means to what is manageable.

Self-limitation cares for a form of local self-sufficiency, at least for the most basic needs for food, water, air and shelter. External exchanges come in a second stage and should not menace the inner balance of the community.

Complexity is therefore avoided and transparency of relationships makes everything more understandable. Virtuality cannot delude so easily, because of visibility and of small scale which allow to better

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recognise how causes lead to consequences. In a local community, everybody can read what happens and can understand it. Anonymity is a characteristic for oversized societies.

As every member becomes more real and respected, poverty can be better cared for.

It does not mean that the local community has to be afraid of wider exchanges; it means only that liberalism wants to expand economic exchanges not because it cares for the well-being of local communities but because it is a means for profit, i.e. for exploitation. The corollary of this statement is that we have to protect ourselves and our neighbours against this external pressure which tries to exploit us. The local solidarity and awareness of what is going on are certainly the best possible answers to this menace.

Therefore self-limitation is a necessary condition for an improved control on our own future. It shows how much it is a positive and creative attitude. Although it makes life materially more simple and therefore more effortful, it allows us to concentrate on real human priorities.

## The power of Truth

The choice for self-limitation represents a courageous choice, because it is not the easiest way to go and it requires determination, especially when people around us make other choices which are more fashionable.

As a summary of what has been said in the previous pages, we can say that our testimony is the main power we have: it is the power of truth. We can in fact only express what we live truly.

### Satyagraha - power of truth

*Gandhi has been one of the most accomplished examples of the power of truth, by preaching only what he practised rigorously.*

The power of truth - Satyagraha in Sanskrit - is the power of our personal coherence and freedom when they are rooted in a rigorous practice of what we truly believe in. Life does not need any discourses. It needs testimonies by people who are really committed to the practice of their spiritual path and detached enough from their privileges and comfort in order to be able to truly practise what they believe in. Truth is in this case the personal version of what one believes in; therefore it becomes a personal testimony.

Gandhi has opened a new spiritual path for our modern age. He has demonstrated how much one can be powerful in defending spiritual priorities when one is free from one's own privileges and comfort and when one is committed to the practice of truth. Life takes shape through our many choices in life. Each choice is therefore a testimony and must remain in agreement with our personal values and priorities. This power of our truth is the key of our life and the key for our spiritual path. It is also our tool for change and for our creative integration in the body of local community.

When we become faithful to our truth, we do not need any more to explain how it should be done, but our discourse can be reduced to explaining only what we are doing and why.

Truth, when it is incarnated, becomes very powerful.

*The roots of truth*

*Gandhi has showed us how truth is rooted in sharing, in simplicity, in detachment, in non-violence, in readiness to pay any price.*

Truth has to be rooted:

- in thirst for sharing because we are one body,
- in simplicity because it gives up anything which is not essential,
- in detachment because it cannot be prevented by anything,
- in non-violence because peace and compassion are the true forces of the spirit,
- in faithfulness and readiness to pay any price for this commitment, because truth is the absolute value.

This way of understanding truth and of expressing how to practise it provides us certainly with a good representation of how to engage in personal change and how to find a way of commitment within the local community. It is not a ready made answer but it is the incentive to enter a deep process of personal deepening which will lead us to express our belonging to the further dimension of a wider body: our family, our neighbourhood, our local community, our nation, or even the whole humanity and the whole universe. This is before all the incarnation of a spiritual choice. The way is long but it can only be rich and deep: it is the way for life.

### **5) TEN COMMITMENTS FOR DAILY LIFE**

In order to recreate community and to start the move towards change, we can conclude the present essay with the list of the following commitments we can propose for a change in our attitude.

#### **10 commitments for community and self-limitation**

***To recreate community and start a move towards change, we should conform in our daily life to the following 10 commitments.***

- 1) *Reality beyond appearances: Life is not only matter; it is subtle and deep; it is mainly about values like justice, peace, equity, love. We believe that it has a mysterious meaning which remains always beyond our representations, always unfathomable. We want to put our search for meaning and for depth at the core of our personal and collective live, while practising ethical values and integrating into the wider web of life with other sentient beings, in harmony with nature and its laws. We can rely on traditional philosophical and spiritual teaching as the heritage which tells us about the past experience of humanity in its relationship with life and the Unfathomable; nevertheless it has been rigidified by institutional transmission; and we need again and again to test it through our own experience, while yet remaining open to the Reality we never can grasp.*
- 2) *The chain of transformation: Our representations arise out of our experiences with life, out of a chain of understanding which transforms facts into perceptions, perceptions into interpretations, interpretations into choices, choices into acts and attitudes, which in turn generate new facts. Everybody has another perception (one's own truth), yet there is only one*

*Truth. We believe that change is today urgent because of the collapse of our environment and of our society; yet change cannot happen for merely practical reasons; it has to be guided by immaterial or spiritual choices for a better future. We believe that this necessary change is in fact the ideal opportunity for developing a new anthropology, for the practice of a better quality of life based on less material and more immaterial values, and we want to make these qualitative choices now.*

- 3) *The power of our choices: Individualism leads us into regression and conformity, and not to freedom. In order to be made free from egocentric perceptions, choices must concern our common future as a human community which takes its concrete shape in our local communities. Democracy (concern of all) and marketing (involvement of all in subsistence and exchanges) are the means for our participation in making the world what it is. The Eichmann's syndrome tends to lead us into blind conformity, even when we are aware that our society practises harmful values, attitudes and behaviours. We want to become aware of the power of our choices and to empower our community to practise this opportunity for choices, even if there is a price to pay for it whether a price for truth, discomfort, marginalization or soft repression. Change can only happen from bottom up, in our own way of life.*
- 4) *The new paradigm / anthropology: Market has inverted our values and practices. As we believe in the power of our choices, we want to express our belief in a new anthropology, and restore the true form of a living community, practising self-limitation (small is beautiful), cooperation (competition mainly generates losers) and control of the laws of market by the (local) community (predominance of social choices over economic laws).*

- 5) Natural cycles and equity: *In nature, there is no exhaustion of resources and there are no wastes, because everything is integrated into cycles of transformation where "wastes" become simply the resources of the next stage of the process. First, we want to respect the basic law of natural cycles and adapt fully to its logic and constraints. Equity is the second law we want to practise, because it is the key for harmony. There can be no peace without justice.*
- 6) The anchorage in the place: *The place where we live is not an enclosed territory we have to defend against the others but a subtle open network of existing and potential inner and external relationships between people and actors who live or act in the same space. We want to become aware of the nature of this network which involves everybody and to develop its potential in order to allow all local members to find means for their own expression and needs.*
- 7) Community consensus: *We believe that consensus inside a social group describes the leading dream of the community, the myth of the ideal realm; consensus is objectively very difficult to reach; yet what cannot become the topic of consensus will be controlled by others in their own interest, probably against local interest. Hence consensus is a fundamental condition for empowering the local community. We want to help it growing slowly, step by step, first in a marginal way, later about more central issues, escaping the influences of forces which have interest to avoid it to happen. Local community seems to be the best place for consensus to take shape, because it is the level of best understanding, competency and transparency where problems can find their solution.*
- 8) Starting a move towards change: *The main difficulty is not to find solutions (we know them already more or less) but it is to start a move towards change, in breaking our own resignation and inertia. We want to practise the 17 quantum leaps or thresholds of consciousness described by the laws of change: the laws of qualitative gain of self-limitation, of priorities, of necessity for change, of breaking of resignation, of the awareness of corruption, of the awareness of whitewashing, of the awareness of (self)-destruction, of compassion, of freedom, of community, of priority of service over profit, of weaning, of modernity, of positive exclusivity of commitment, of cumulative effect, of responsibility, of each choice = a vote.*
- 9) Self-limitation: *Our society tries to exacerbates needs and excesses. We want to resist this tendency and to practise self-limitation, as a reduction of negative impacts, but also as an opening onto a new quality of life: small is beautiful. Cartographic self-limitation makes us aware of our ignorance; technological self-limitation makes us aware of our awkwardness; strategic self-limitation makes us aware of our illusion in involving others in our plans; psychological self-limitation makes us aware of our own games with appearances, and free to recognise them.*
- 10) Power of Truth: *"Be the change you want to see in the world" (Gandhi). The world is what we make it, through the cumulative effects of our deeds, which cost us a lot when we renounce on something we wish, yet of little effect when it is considered alone, but powerful in its addition to other similar deeds. We want to practise Satyagraha (the power of Truth) in living truly according to our beliefs and values.*

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## Community and self-limitation

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