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- *The superficiality of differences between people*
- *Religions are equally valid*
- *The role of patience and compassion in spiritual development*

God joins your hands into a circle. Indeed, you are meeting as a circle, not as a line. There is so much importance that can be given to the circle. It doesn't have a beginning or an end. Your sense of community with one another and God ultimately has no real beginning or end.

It is not by chance that you are together. We have said before that you are all led here by events that shape your lives and the attitudes that emerge from those events. There is no time that you can actually claim as the beginning of your presence in this circle, for in a very real way you have always been present. Even when you did not know one another, you were present in the circle. Obviously we do not talk in terms of human time, for in human time there is a sense of beginning, progression, ending. It is rather that your lives are not to be measured in time. They are measured in existence, in a continuity, a continuousness of spirit. In such a measurement there cannot be a beginning and an end.

Meeting in a circle, though it may not be intentional as different from another formation, still is a symbol of the timelessness of your spiritual awareness, your spiritual lives, your spiritual growth. Being connected in a circle means that the lines of the circle, the borders, are really unbroken. Each of you is connected to the other.

None of you know much about the other, even after meeting so often over so many years. You do not really know one another. You know about one another, you know parts of one another. But despite that lack of intimate knowledge, you accept one another, you recognize the value of one another, and you are really free of judgment. You may have observations, but they are not judgments.

In such an environment then, you are a single unit. Think for a moment about whether this unit is any different from any other collection or assembly of people that you are familiar with. Within a significant few, recognizing the equality of all, you cannot say that this group is different from others, for that very statement would separate you from others. That separation is not God's separation. It can only be humanmade, but being humanmade, it can be destroyed by humans. The separation can cease to exist, and your sense of circle can be expanded ever wider, taking in a community or a nation, ethnic groups—all are really blended into the same unit.

You know very little or nothing at all about every individual in another community. You may know something about the character of the community, you may know something about its reputation, geography, geology, its politics, but you really don't know much about the other entity. Despite that lack of knowledge, you can achieve a sense of identity—this identity being a union, a spiritual connectedness, a willingness to

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avoid judgment, a recognition of the equal value of all. The circle then becomes complete and unbroken.

Obviously you are aware of differences between any two people, but if you recognize the superficiality of those differences, they become nearly meaningless. There is no such thing as a separation between people—only a separation in attitude or values. The more you examine the differences in attitudes between people, the more you recognize how superficial those differences really are. Certainly those differences can lead to violent confrontations, but these confrontations are nevertheless based on superficial grounds, not based on major differences, major incompatibilities. It is important to put your lives into a perspective that recognizes there are no significant distinctions between people. If you can get to this point in your perception, the differences that are observed are recognized immediately as insignificant, and one gradually finds oneself more compatible with and compassionate toward all others.

Life is filled with paradoxes. Two people can appear the same and be vastly different. Another two people can appear vastly different and be surprisingly similar. Two philosophies can appear to be in conflict with one another, and yet upon deeper examination can be seen to share common ground far more extensive than could have been imagined. You need to look beneath the surface, beneath the surface of how people behave, what they say, how they react, beneath the surface of what is apparent. Look beneath the surface of obvious differences. In so doing, you achieve a greater sense of unity among all people.

When you seek peace, you are seeking common grounds, common understandings, common perspectives, common characteristics. When you recognize how much alike you are with another, you can no longer be actively critical of the other. Certainly you can recognize the differences, but that is not being critical. Being critical implies negating the value of another human being. When you are judgmental, you are degrading that value. You are placing your standards of behavior, your standards of living, your standards of ethics, your standards of spiritual belief over those of another.

Among the religions of the world, there are no understandings that are more valid than others. The Christian philosophy is no different really from that of Judaism or Islam or any other general set of beliefs. They are independent from one another, but fundamentally seek the same objectives—namely the dignity of the human being, the dignity of all human beings, and the place of those human beings within the realm of God. The differences are cosmetic but never substantive. You must focus on the substantive. Life is really about recognizing subtle differences but accepting the total equality of everyone.

If you can achieve a place in your lives where you are not judgmental of the value of someone else, the worthiness of someone else, then you will have achieved a great degree of spiritual development. We don't suggest that you go through life viewing the world through the proverbial rose-colored glasses. We do not ask you to pretend

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that there are no observable differences between people. We do not ask you to observe the behavior of others and to approve of everything that is done. That would be naïve and foolish, for there are plenty of activities by individuals and groups that are clearly unacceptable. But you can condemn the actions of others if you feel that they are against your perception of God's presence in the world without condemning the individual.

You will never fully agree with everything that everyone does. That disagreement is not a judgment. You are responding according to your own values, and you are recognizing incompatibility of the behavior of someone else to those values. That incompatibility is fully acceptable. Nevertheless, you can treat that individual with dignity, disagreeing about details but accepting the big picture.

Patience really is about accepting, for if you are patient toward others, you accept where they are on their journey. You may not wish to be at the same spot in the journey, but you accept that position nevertheless. When you accept that position, you can be patient when you observe someone's behavior different from your perspective. Patience therefore is an expression of God's presence in society. Impatience obviously is a rejection, not only of the individual, but of God, for God is always immutably patient. It is that patience that serves as a foundation for unconditional love. The love grows out of patience. Patience also grows out of love, but love does not exist in a vacuum. Love needs to be expressed. The expression is through patience and that expression reaffirms the presence of love.

You are asked therefore to exercise a quiet presence that demonstrates patience as an illustration of love. Compassion also is an illustration of love. It also affirms the value of love, for love without compassion, just as love without patience, is not really love. Allow yourselves the luxury of growing in patience as you seek to grow in compassion. That patience, that compassion strengthens your sense of connection in the circle within which you are active.

A circle comprised of weak spots will not remain so when in contact with pressure from the inside or the outside. Its shape will change. There will be a sense of top and bottom, front and back, leading edge and trailing edge. A circle based on mutual trust, mutual patience, mutual compassion is a circle that is strong on all sides and it therefore remains a circle. Your lives, when they are supported by patience and compassion, become full lives. They become more balanced and less subject to the stresses that buffet your lives from time to time.

You ask for strength to persevere. You are really asking for balance. You are asking for balance between the pressures that you confront and your sense of identity. If the pressures are too great for your sense of identity, you are crushed. If your sense of identity is far greater than the pressures, you explode and you are no longer a circle. The shape of life becomes changed.

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We want you to continue to see your lives as a circle with those all around you. Pray for balance. Allow opportunities for that patience, that compassion to become stronger. Increase your sensitivity to your union with everyone else. Broaden your view of the circle to include all of humanity, and seek ways of affirming the value of everyone, even when you may have disagreements. Then you will be serving as a hand of God. Then you will be fulfilling the desires of *all* religions of the world—the affirmation of human dignity and the place of that dignity within the realm of God’s creation.

Patience, compassion—they both affirm love. These concepts are not just simple platitudes, statements that sound nice but have little significance. These are principles upon which you can build a life that is satisfying and rewarding with a sense of meaning and purpose and direction. It will strengthen your sense of self, and it will strengthen your sense of all that has been created. Your vision will be broader, your sense of connectedness will be intensified, and you will be afforded a much clearer view of God’s loving and radiant presence in your lives.

We bless you with that radiance. We bless you with the shape of the circle. We bless you with a sense of equality and connectedness. God’s compassion and patience may indeed become yours.

Amen.