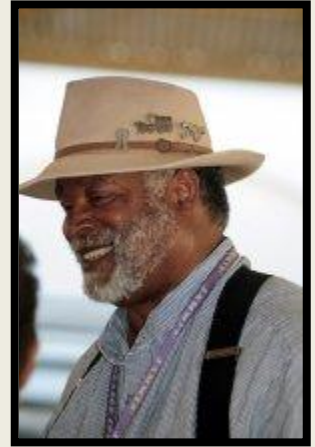


Commentary on The Four Agreements of Don Miguel Ruiz, MD.

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Don Miguel Ruiz's The Four Agreements book has improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who use this book daily to remind themselves that they can choose their own future. I urge my executive coaching clients to master the Four (five) agreements as a source to break some of the boundaries that keep clients from becoming the best person he/she can be. Most of my clients quickly learn to enjoy this little book. When I introduce my clients to The Four Agreements, I tell them that each agreement has two aspects. The aspects are easy and hard. One agreement is easy to understand and easy to do. One agreement is hard to understand and hard to do. Another agreement is hard to understand but easy to do. The final agreement is easy to understand but hard to do.

I urge my clients to notice that the agreement that is most difficult to understand but easy to do, once the agreement is understood, is the most powerful of the four agreements. I urge clients to invest the effort to understand that agreement in its greatest depth. Once understood this agreement is easy to keep and powerful to the person.

The FIRST agreement is, "*To be impeccable with your word.*" This agreement is hard to understand however, once understood is **easy to do**.

The SECOND agreement is, "*Don't take anything personal.*" This agreement is **easy to understand** and once understood hard to do. Our habit is to take everything personally.

The THIRD agreement is, “*Do not make assumptions.*” This agreement is hard to understand and hard to do once understood. The problem with this agreement is that we are unaware of when we are making an assumption, see the fifth agreement for an example.

The FOURTH agreement is “*Always do your best.*” This agreement is **easy to understand** and **easy to do**. The problem with this agreement is that our habit is to take everything so seriously that when we discover ourselves making a mistake, we are too hard on our self. I encourage my clients to celebrate whenever they catch themselves making a mistake. If you can observe yourself making a mistake, the next step is to observe yourself **one second** before you make the mistake and then live as a person who is “impeccable with his/her word.”

The FIFTH agreement is “*be skeptical, but learn to listen.*” This agreement is a special case of the third agreement because it is hard to understand and hard to do. Our habit is not to listen. In addition, we have made the assumption, that we are in fact, good listeners. Our habit is to believe that we are listening thus we have no need to improve.

Empathic listening is difficult. Empathic listening is a gift. While it is easy to become a person who can practice empathic listening as a skill, it is difficult to transform one’s self into being a full-time empathic listener who listens with empathy; when it is most important to do so, with our spouse, our children, our parents, and the people we work with daily.

THESE AGREEMENTS ARE EASY AND HARD		
	Hard to Understand	Easy to Understand
Easy to do	First Agreement: <i>Always Be Impeccable with your Word</i>	Fourth Agreement: <i>Always do your Best!</i>
Hard to do	Third Agreement: <i>Do not make assumptions.</i> Fifth Agreement: <i>Be Skeptical, but Learn to Listen.</i>	Second Agreement: <i>Do not take anything personally.</i> <i>Do not take criticism personally.</i> <i>Do not take compliments personally.</i>

I have categorized the five agreements as to their ease and difficulty. I have been coaching my clients to use the four agreements since June 2000. The most difficult of the four agreements is the first one because it is so difficult for clients to understand. Once they get the full meaning of the simple phrase, “*Be impeccable with your word;*” then they are able to live according to that agreement. However, helping my clients understand the meaning of the first agreement is a challenge with every client.

Everyone gets some of the meaning right away. Then they stop seeking deeper meanings. For example, it is obvious that Dr. Ruiz is suggesting that you cease telling falsehoods. That seems like a big enough task for most of my clients. However, one of the many deeper meanings of the agreement is “*to possess goodness in your thoughts and feelings.*” I urge my clients to “*love the people they work with daily, even if these people are despicable, greedy, cruel, and mean.*” These concepts are difficult for clients to accept.

I sense that they believe I am not serious when I suggest that my clients show (and feel) love for the terrible coworker who sees my client as an enemy. I must be suggesting this metaphorically rather than in practice. They are wrong. I mean precisely what I ask them to do. I want my clients to show and feel love for every coworker, especially those who are most “undeserving.”

¹Understanding the meaning of impeccability is elusive. In my life, impeccability means that I can never sustain a negative thought about anyone in my life. A negative thought may arise. I get them regularly. I just do not allow myself to sustain negative thoughts about the most important people in my life. I cannot allow sustaining such thoughts because I am impeccable with my word. A perfect man would never have a negative thought. I am imperfect; nonetheless, I control my actions, my thoughts, and my feelings as a choice for how I live my life. Once one understands the meaning of the First Agreement, that person can make the same choice about his/her feelings, thoughts, and actions.

My clients believe (an assumption) that they can control their actions. This belief is an illusion. It is impossible to control one’s thoughts and especially one’s feelings. I respectfully disagree with my clients. My actions are not always what I want them to be. For example, when I stand on the free-throw line I

¹ George Bernard Shaw wrote eloquently about the undeserving in his play Pygmalion. Professor Henry Higgins is complimenting Eliza Doolittle’s boozey father as being an original thinker when Alfred Doolittle proclaims himself one of the undeserving poor. Doolittle complains that he is undeserving, but says that being undeserving does not mean that his needs are less than those who are “deserving.” He challenges that because he is undeserving that he has even greater needs than a person who is deserving. Doolittle thanks the Professor for a five-pound note and refuses to take more. He claims that if he received more money that he would have to behave more respectably. In work life, nearly everyone I know can identify, immediately, someone who is “undeserved” who causes problems every day at work. How do we deal with these bastards at work? My solution is loving them.

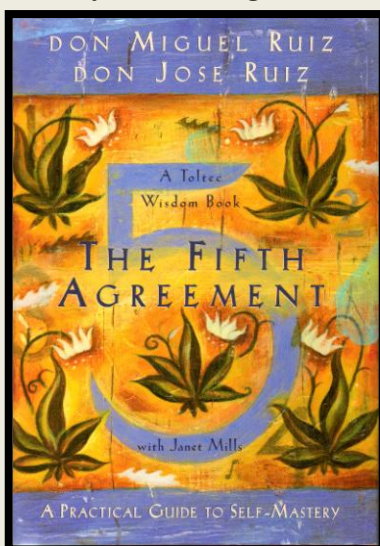
expect to make the shot, however, at least 40 percent of the time I rim off the hoop. I planned to make the shot and followed the correct procedure. The sole reason for the miss is lack of proper practice. When I am driving home in the rain I plan to drive safely on the road and avoid an accident, but that is not sufficient to prevent an accident. Short story is that our assumption that we can control our actions is attractive, however that idea is demonstrably false.

On the other hand, my thoughts and feelings have little to do with my physical ability and everything to do with my mental powers. I cannot use my mind to lift a cup of coffee; however, I use my mind to think about coffee. I can use my interest in enjoying a cup of coffee to cause the desired item to come to my hand. I even have options. I can make the cup myself. I can travel to a local shop and purchase a cup of java. Alternatively, I can decide that I will not have that cup of coffee, even when I might have a powerful craving for that delightful bean. Just because I think a cup of coffee might be enjoyable right now does not mean that this is the right time for me to indulge that urge. The feeling to have the coffee can form in my mind, but I can reject that feeling. I can choose to behave in a way more appropriate to the moment.

Be Impeccable with your word!

Being impeccable with your word means above all monitoring your thoughts and feelings. If you are conscious of your thoughts and feelings then you can choose how to behave. Choosing how to behave means that you are not a slave to your thoughts and feeling. For example, you may see danger ahead and think,

if I tell the truth, things may not turn out well for me. I fear that the truth may harm me.



How do you act when negative thoughts and feelings suggest that you lie to protect yourself? What if your lie will protect you but cause the blame to shift to an innocent person? This is not about ultimate truth, instead it is about practical matters that arise daily in our lives at home, in our community and in our place of work. There are for example, “omission lies” where, because you did

not step forward to claim the blame, a family member, friend, or co-worker bore the blame for your mistake. In some cases, unless you stepped forward, not even the person who took the fall for your error knew of your role in the problem. When you agree to live "*impeccable with your word*," then you freely step forward, without being asked, and proclaim that your actions (or inaction) caused the problem.

The difficulty with understanding the meaning of the First Agreement is that you have to dig deep into your moral core. The challenge is to determine whether you are living up to the moral code you promised God, and yourself, that you would use to guide your choices, and your actions. When one lives as a person who chooses to be impeccable with his/her word that choice requires that every feeling, thought, and action is guided by your moral principles. Being impeccable with your word is about honor and integrity to your essential moral character.

The First Agreement is about commitment, integrity, and graceful living. When you live impeccable with your word, life is easy. The agreement is hard to understand, however, once you do understand, you are already living the agreement.

Don't Take Anything Personally

The Second Agreement, "*don't take anything personally*," is easy to understand. If someone throws you an insult, don't take it personally; if someone offers a compliment, don't take it personally. Whether you take something personally is always a matter of perspective. My clients immediately understand what the second agreement is asking them to do, however they believe that they cannot control their feelings. This agreement is easy to understand, but hard to do.

If my client receives an insult she/he reacts instantly. The instinct is to fight or flee, or at least to feel bad. In addition, clients can't help but feel good when someone they love gives them a compliment. Reacting to insults (or

compliments) is merely a bad habit. Insults do not threaten one's survival. Compliments do not preserve one's survival. Personally, I enjoy a good insult thrown my way. When someone insults me, I know that there are only a few possibilities. For example, if someone calls me an asshole, maybe he has made an accurate assessment of my character. If what he says is true, and I didn't know, then this is useful information to me. Now that I have heard someone accurately describe my character, then I can start to improve myself (Alternatively, I can decide that I enjoy being an asshole. The rest of the world just has to deal with my choice.) Whatever I choose to do, I am better off. If someone in frustration calls me an asshole, then he has given me the gift of knowledge. I can use the new information to improve myself or I can continue my ways knowing the effect I am having on my friends and associates. I can't lose.

However, suppose that the person calling me an asshole has made a terrible mistake. He thinks I am a jerk, or he is angry, and wants to hurt me. Throwing out an insult is just his way of blowing off steam. I was in the path of his anger. So, he insults me, but his insult has missed the mark, is that a good reason to take the insult personally? I listen empathically as I am called an asshole and determine (correctly by the way) that though I do have an asshole, that in fact I am a wonderful, gracious, and generous human being. There are reasons this person is insulting me, however, he is not speaking truthfully. Face it, the speaker is an idiot. Why should I get upset when an idiot makes a mistake in evaluating my character as a human being? In fact, I am okay with him being wrong in his assessment. I don't get angry because I don't value his opinion of me. I do not give him that kind of power over me.

I can make the same arguments about compliments. If someone says something nice about me that is false, I am grateful that I don't feel good about the praise. Nothing could be more harmful to my success than for me to believe I possess abilities that are mere phantoms. If someone shares a compliment with me that hits the mark, I don't take it personally, because I already knew what he told me. I certainly do not give him credit for making me that way, he merely observed the way I am. I am gracious when offered a compliment, whether I believe they are being truthful or not. If they are truthful, then my gracious

response is appropriately humble. If the person gave me the compliment in error or because he wanted to use the compliment against me, my gracious response does nothing to encourage his behavior. I merely, say, “Thank you,” without the exclamation mark.

Do not make Assumptions!

There is a popular saying “when I **assume**, then I place an “ass” in front of “u” and “me.” Common experience proves repeatedly that making assumptions will get you into trouble. Few will dispute that making assumptions when you can determine the facts is a path to danger. Everyone understands the power you regain if you are able to stop making assumptions. This agreement is easy to understand. However, it is difficult to succeed with your pledge to cease making assumptions. For example, we have lifelong prejudices that color what we see. These prejudices are so powerful that we cannot directly experience them. We have made an assumption long before we knew that we did. I am a dark-skinned person with tight curly hair and general African features. Most Americans will categorize me as African-American, or Black, as soon as they see me. I am okay with that; except when their categorization puts me in another box beyond merely a description of my ethnic background.

If the person who observes me as African-American has a lifetime prejudice against African-Americans, then I am painted by their prejudice. This group identification has occurred to me hundreds of times. Once, when I was in a conversation with my personal physician, he asked me if there were large law offices owned by African Americans in Beverly Hills. When I answered no, he followed up his question with, “*I remember that you told me you were the Chief Operating Officer of a law firm in Los Angeles. How can that be if there are no large African-American law firms?*” I replied, “*there are two Black lawyers at the Beverly-Hills firm that employs me as COO; however, all the other lawyers are White, including my boss who is Jewish.*” This man had been my physician for several years. I wonder how long he had waited to ask me that question. I am pleased that he asked me. My answer helped to break down his stereotype of what kind of

person I am, and I hope broke the stereotype altogether. He assumed that since I was Black, the law office I worked for was owned by Black lawyers.

Too often we allow one characteristic of a person to tell us too much about what kind of person he or she is. For example, you know what American's think about tall, beautiful, blonde women. What do you think when you see someone with an obvious physical disability, such as limited vision or limited hearing, we often imagine that this person must not be intelligent.

Sight and hearing are unrelated to intelligence, but often Americans conflate the one with the other. When you see a bedraggled and foul odored man walking toward you, you immediately begin to place him in a box. How do you cease making assumptions when you are unaware that you are making assumptions? I have a suggestion that works for my clients.



I encourage my clients to transform themselves into full-time empathic listeners, that is, people who listen with empathy as a way of being, rather than as a learned skill. When you are a full-time empathic listener then you seek opportunities to listen to people who disagree with you. Listening to those who have opposite opinions of political, religious, and other cultural matters, breaks down your instinct to make assumptions or judgments.

When your preference is to listen primarily to those who agree with you, whether like-minded political partisans or fellow devotees in your religious faith, then it is easier to make assumptions about the “*other*” who is not in your group. Interestingly, when you begin to listen empathically to those on the inside of your group, you will notice that they are not at all as you assumed them to be. As you listen with empathy, you notice that you made assumptions about the members of your group. You notice that even your best friend is not the person you believed him or her to be. Empathic listening is a powerful tool.

One of the essential qualities of empathic listening is to suspend judgment. If you are not involved in making judgments about “everything” then you can see the world more as it is than as you imagine the world to be. When you cease

expecting the world to be what you want, then you will limit your assumptions to the most important laws of nature. That is, you are correct to expect that the physical laws of the universe will apply each morning; you are incorrect to expect that a man who writes poetry is a girly man. You are correct when you assume that if you drink too much alcohol that you will wake up with a headache; you are incorrect when you assume that a man who is a homosexual is somehow damaged goods.

Train yourself to become a full-time empathic listener. The work is hard. You cannot achieve this goal in a week, a month, or a year. Nonetheless, if you are committed to become a person who is an empathic listener, that goal is possible. Remember, the Third Agreement is hard to understand and hard to do. My new book, [Empathic Listening Made Easy © 2012](#) is a guidebook to develop empathic listening ability.

Always do your Best!

The Fourth Agreement is easy to understand and easy to do. The problem with the fourth agreement is that people have a tendency to be hard on themselves. When my clients report to me that they noticed themselves violating their word, they tell me with a heavy heart. They had believed they were making progress and now this backsliding event occurs. My spontaneous response is *"That's Great News!"* *"Catching yourself being in violation of the first agreement, is a certain sign that you are making progress."* Only those who are aware of the difference between being impeccable with their word will notice that they have violated the first agreement. Others, who are unaware, will continue as though 'nothing happened' because they are oblivious of the error.

I praise clients when they bring me news that they are able to see themselves making mistakes. This is natural behavior for empathic listeners. Those who are not empathic listeners, never notice this error. Being able to discern when you have made an error right after the mistake is the first step before you observe the error before you make the mistake. When you can see yourself just before taking action, then you have an opportunity to correct the

behavior. Human beings are prone to error. None of us is perfect. The best that I can do today is not necessarily as good as the best that I could do yesterday. Instead of dwelling on my error, I can use the mistake as a lesson. I can remember the circumstances just before the error. I can notice what I do the next time such circumstances arise. For example, the circumstance might be a heated conversation with my son. If I lose my temper and fail to listen to my son because I am angry about his behavior, then I can monitor my behavior when I am involved in a conversation with my son about his problems at school. I can use my error to see the next character trait that I will improve.

Doing your best is always possible. Your best today is not the same as your best yesterday. Be gentle with yourself. When you observe that today's best was not as good as days in the past, remember that progress is not always made in a straight line, you *zigzag* more like a sailing ship that is tacking to take advantage of a wind, even if the wind is not going precisely in your direction. If you know where you are and know where you are headed, then you will arrive at your destination, if you persevere.

Be Skeptical, Then Learn to Listen

The fifth Agreement, like the third Agreement, is hard to understand and hard to do. Americans are unfamiliar with the term 'empathic listening.' They are confused between the meaning of empathy and sympathy. My students and clients believe that empathy and sympathy are the same. Sympathy occurs when you and I feel the same way about an event. For example, if a mutual friend suffers an untimely and horrible death the friends of the deceased feel sympathy. They share the same sad feelings. On the other hand, suppose that I had a miserable relationship with your friend. The deceased man might have enjoyed a great friendship with you yet he may have been my enemy. Because you are my friend, I understand how you feel on the loss of your friend, that is, I have empathy for you. Nonetheless, I have not an ounce of sympathy for his death. His death may have no meaning to me. However, because of my love for you, I can feel empathy for your loss. Empathy means that I understand how

you feel, even though I might not feel the same as you do. Sympathy means that you and I feel the same.

Since June 2000, I have coached students and executive clients to become people who listen with empathy as an essential element of their character. Empathy is like honesty. Honesty is not a skill; it is a way of being. Empathic listening, just like honesty, is not a skill, instead it is a way of being. Either you love to listen with empathy or you do not. I coach clients/students to become empathic listeners as a characteristic of their way of being themselves. Instead of having to think about whether it is time to listen empathically, they do so as a matter of course. Dr. Miguel Ruiz, admonishes his readers to “*be skeptical.*” He is reminding us that merely because someone is a smooth talker is not proof that he speaks the truth. Magicians, politicians, clergy, and motivational speakers have learned how to gain the attention of an audience for their own purposes. Empathic listeners easily discover those speakers who speak for a purpose. If the purpose is fair and well intentioned, the listener is rewarded; however, if the purpose is foul and with evil-intention, empathic listeners quickly identify those who would harm them.

I have written the only book written intended to transform readers into living as full-time empathic listeners. I wrote this book because I could not find another book that covered this subject. The few books written about listening praise the value of being an empathic listener, however, none of them describe the steps one might take to become such a listener. In my book, Empathic Listening Made Easy © 2012, I reveal how I use my experience as a magician to transform my clients/students into full-time empathic listeners. I use a principle in magic known as “misdirection” to help my client/students feel what it is like to listen with empathy.

I expect that everyone who is reading this text has experienced being an empathic listener hundreds, or thousands of times, depending on your age. However, if you did not know you were listening with empathy, and the empathic listening moment just occurred accidentally, then you would not be able to decide to listen with empathy. When I give clients/students exercises to practice, they are able to create the experience of empathic listening. They will

be able to create that moment at will until finally they learn to live their lives as empathic listeners.

Should you desire additional information about what it takes to become a person who listens with empathy, I suggest that you visit my website, www.LeadersWithIntegrity.com. If you visit the products page you can download a free copy of the Silent Wisdom Exercise © . Practice the silent wisdom exercise at least five times in the next two weeks. Contact me after you have done the exercise five times and I will share a secret with you. The secret will help you transform yourself into an empathic listener. The secret has meaning only after you have practiced the exercise five times. I will tell you something that occurred during the practice sessions that you did not expect would occur but that I know is the only outcome. I will tell you something that you were thinking. At least four principles used by magicians are a part of this simple exercise that I call, The Silent Wisdom Exercise ©.

The Silent Wisdom Exercise © is simple and powerful. The exercise can be explained in one sentence, *“When you are in a conversation with 3 or 4 people, please count the number of pauses you notice in a five-minute span.”* That is it. Read the instructions on my website so you know what to do and how to do the exercise, however the instructions reduce to the sentence above. I am grateful to Don Miguel Ruiz, M.D. for publishing The Four Agreements (Five agreements). This little book is changing the world, one person at a time. He certainly improved my life.