

The Fifth Agreement Summary

By Don Miguel Ruiz

What exactly is critical thinking?

The Fifth Agreement builds on the self-help cult classic *The Four Agreements*. It explores self-mastery, the pursuit of wisdom, and finding our ultimate truth. By upholding this agreement, we'll be more enlightened.

You may remember *The Four Agreements*. The first is to be impeccable with our words, to empower ourselves and others. We shouldn't tear others down, and we should also encourage ourselves so that we thrive. Secondly, whatever happens, we need to learn not to take it personally. If other people use their words to tear us down, belittle us, or spread rumors, this is a reflection of their character, not ours. Thirdly, never make assumptions. If we don't know the answer to something, we should have the curiosity to ask questions and seek the truth. Finally, no matter how difficult it may seem, we always need to do our best.

The Fifth Agreement brings in another element of Toltec wisdom that guides us towards mastering ourselves and cultivating a deep sense of purpose and awareness. The authors provide us with more spiritual and ancient teachings, astute wisdom, and ways to put this knowledge into practice. In so doing, we'll learn the secret to lasting happiness.

This brief summary will guide us through *The Fifth Agreement*. We'll learn about truth, reality and fantasy, and why learning to listen is such a crucial skill. We'll also explore skepticism and critical thinking, and how we've come to accept the world as it's been constructed.

The World We Live In

When we talk about freedom and independence, what does this mean?

Put another way, what are your beliefs about the world?

We live on planet Earth; it's round, there are oceans and continents. Planet Earth is part of the solar system. One would find it difficult to argue with these facts, because skeptics in the past have already been proven wrong. When we embark on scientific discovery, we make claims, skeptics weigh in, and eventually, we accept the hypothesis as truth or fiction. Some things are quite simply, just facts.

However, a lot of our reality isn't factual; it's constructed. You may remember the line from the *Truman Show* that we like to use quite frequently at Briefer: 'We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented.' In other words, we live in a world filled with discourses, ideologies, and beliefs that aren't necessarily a depiction of reality. The message of this book is to embrace skepticism, learn to listen to alternate views, and develop the art of critical thinking.

The Power of Perception

At the heart of *The Fifth Agreement* is the power of perception.

For example, what makes something right or wrong? How do you know unequivocally, that something is wrong?

Perhaps your perception of right and wrong comes from a religious belief? If this is the case, what's the reason you belong to a particular religion? Is it because you grew up with this faith? Perhaps you were introduced to religion later on in life? Maybe you gave up your faith? Whatever the case, your religious views are part of the reality that you've created for yourself. And this is where things become complicated. If you talk to most people about their religion, they will all argue that theirs is the "correct" one. Who is right? What is the *truth*?

When it comes to religion and matters of faith, science can't help us come up with a definitive answer. So we have to learn to think critically and question what we're being sold through religious narratives. How do we perceive religion? And, although there are no real answers to these questions, the whole point of *The Fifth Agreement* is to cultivate a sense of curiosity and skepticism about the world we live in. Furthermore, it's our duty to educate ourselves about other people's beliefs, and listen to what they say, regardless of whether we agree with them or not.

However, it's important to note that there is such a thing as "absolute truth." Absolute truth is science. Certain things are undisputed facts, and we can't argue with these truths. How we *interpret* science and how we *perceive* the world is art. So, there's a difference between truth and perception. It's our job to realize and acknowledge the difference between truth and perception, and science and art.

Perception is something that differs significantly among people. We perceive things differently depending on our moods, how we interpret the world around us, our worldviews and beliefs, our social and cultural backgrounds, and so forth. The fifth agreement is all about perception and looking at the big picture. We often talk about "big picture thinking" or "thinking outside of the box," but what do these sayings mean, and how do we put them into practice? Practicing the fifth agreement is like completing a puzzle. You may have a box of puzzle pieces, but until you fit them together, you can't see the big picture. And, the big picture is often about interpreting and decoding symbols.

The Power of Symbols and Words

We often experience anxiety and confusion because our bodies are at odds with what's going on in our minds. And, as we grow older, life gets a lot more complicated.

When we're young, our likes and dislikes are so easy to navigate. We discuss favorite pizza toppings, favorite movies, favorite colors, favorite Ninja Turtles, and so forth. So much of our formative years are based on binaries, but the world becomes more complex as we grow up. The simple and intuitive world that we create begins to collapse.

We perform a kind of mental iconoclasm. This is because we create our worlds using a series of symbols. The words we use, the objects around us – these are symbols, and they help to construct the world. Baudrillard famously discussed symbols in his seminal work, *Simulacra and Simulation*. The central thesis is that we build a "shared existence" through our perception of reality and symbols. And, each culture is taught to understand this reality and what the symbols represent or signify.

Sometimes the symbols become bigger than the thing that they represent. And sometimes, the symbols are copied. Is a fake symbol less real than the original? And what makes something genuine or authentic? These are questions that we need to ask ourselves when we question the truth and the world around us.

The Fifth Agreement is to see the world through our own belief systems, and then to look at how our beliefs shape our reality. Why do we accept the symbols around us as reality? And how have we been indoctrinated into accepting a "shared existence?"

One of the primary ways is through language. We begin using words to allocate meaning to the symbols and objects around us. A toddler will point to an object and assign the prescribed word that she has been taught. She will be praised if she uses the "correct" word. Once we learn to use words, we create language.

Once we have a basic grasp of language, we begin to develop a sense of morality and ethics. We usually start by learning about "right and wrong," "good and bad," and "reward and punishment." In short, we learn about behavior. We observe behavior, we buy into what constitutes good behavior, we believe it, and we agree with it. Rules work because they're universally regarded. Parenting and teaching promote the belief that good behavior is rewarded, and consequences are often viewed unfavorably. We're told there are "consequences for our actions."

We set these standards, we live by them, and we agree with the system. We learn because we pay attention, and we pay attention to the symbols that teach us about life, people, and the world. As a child, we might be shown a picture of a heart. Later we learn that a picture of a heart isn't simple. It can be interpreted and interrogated in a range of different

ways, depending on context. Does it mean love, passion, heart health, romance, the organ that pumps to keep us alive?

Symbols and words also come to represent how we interpret the world, and they're the things that we imagine to be real. What is beauty? What is ugliness? These are things that have been constructed around ideals and standards. But who decides this? Who decides what's beautiful and what's ugly? These are the things that we need to look at a lot more critically.

The Power of Happiness and Truth

On a scale of one to ten, how happy are you? What would make you happier and more fulfilled?

Most of us think we would be happier if we had more symbols, more objects, more wealth. The truth is that so often, our pursuit of happiness makes us miserable because we grow frustrated and despondent. *Sapiens* revealed that so much of what we have, comes from the idea of a "shared imagination," and happiness and freedom rely on this premise. What is happiness?

Happiness, like everything else, is culturally, socially, politically, and economically determined. Happiness depends on the company that we keep, our hormones and chemicals, the conflicts we face daily. When we question why we're unhappy, sometimes it's because we have expectations of what it means to be happy. Where do these expectations come from?

The Fifth Agreement advises us to search for our own truth, find out who we

really are, and figure out what's really important. This process comes down to understanding that we've constructed the world and the expectations we have for ourselves. We've constructed beauty, success, achievement, intelligence, and so on.

However, this doesn't mean that reality doesn't exist. There's no doubting reality. Certain things are real, and certain symbols are real. Nonetheless, how we perceive these things is what truly matters, and this is where self-mastery comes into play.

The Power of Self-Mastery and Doubt

To achieve self-mastery, there are three things that we need to master: awareness, transformation, and faith.

Firstly we need to accept absolute truths. Some things are real, but this doesn't mean we take the world for granted. We need to distinguish between what's real and what has been constructed. We've learned that this comes down to how we perceive and interpret reality. Symbols are real, but their meanings are adaptable. Hence we can change how we see beauty, ugliness, success, intelligence, etc.

As the saying goes, "all that glitters is not gold." Just because something may look beautiful doesn't mean that it is. We tend to overinvest in symbols, and they often have a lot of power over us. When iconoclasts destroy images and symbols, they do this as a form of rebellion. Their belief is that the symbols, usually religious, have become more potent than what they're representing, so they destroy them. There's usually an alternative narrative that they're peddling, and a new symbolic order is created, which again shows the tenuous position symbols have. The

power of symbols is that there's buy-in. As soon as there's no buy-in, the symbol loses power.

So it's always a good idea to harness the power of doubt. We need to be critical and skeptical when new symbols come along. We need to remember that just because something is glittering, it may not be gold.

One of the most important agreements we can make with ourselves is to seek the truth. This means that we need to listen. While we may not always agree with the views and beliefs of others, we have to commit to listening. Once we have listened, we can interpret what symbols we're being sold, what views of the world we're being led to believe. This will help us get a step closer to reality and the absolute truth.

In order to clear all of the confusion and anxiety, we have to be the type of skeptics who are good at listening. We mustn't immediately dismiss the views of others, but seek to find the truth when we listen to other people. Once we realize that we can only find the truth when we listen to others, we're a step closer to mastering ourselves.

In Conclusion

In a world of fake news, deep fakes, conspiracy theories, and a general sense of disenchantment and mistrust, a book like this is even more relevant than ever.

Critical thinking is something that needs to be taught and taken seriously, because the world is becoming increasingly complex, and the ground beneath us is constantly shifting. We need to learn to question our perceptions and our versions of reality. We need to interrogate our

symbols and how we use language to represent ourselves and the world. And we need to listen. We need to listen to ourselves and to those around us.

Most crucially, instead of "accepting the reality of the world with which we're presented," we need to question it, we need to interrogate it, and we need to listen to it.