LISTENING IN WITH ...

DON MIGUEL RUIZ JR. is a teacher of ancient Toltec wisdom, which originated with a major Mesoamerican culture in contemporary Mexico that predated the Aztecs. Like his famous father (don Miguel Ruiz Sr.) and his brother (don Jose Ruiz), he is a nagual (or shaman) who teaches people how to find their authentic selves so they can lead happier and healthier lives. Much of his work deals with the strong attachments we all have to our beliefs, thanks to our conditioning. Here, he talks with Unity Magazine editor KATY KOONTZ about why recognizing those beliefs that no longer serve us can be so difficult as well as how we can finally learn to let go of them.

DON MIGUEL RUIZ JR. IS A 2021 NEW THOUGHT WALDEN AWARD HONOREE

For more about this year’s honorees, see page 30.
KATY KOONTZ: You teach the Toltec tradition, which says we are all artists, although not artists in the sense most of us imagine. Can you elaborate?

DON MIGUEL RUIZ JR.: Sure. Toltec means artist. So I am an artist, and the canvas for my work of art is my life. The instruments I’m going to use to create that work of art are my body, my mind, my intent, and my will. I can create the most perfect nightmare or the most harmonious dream—and to be honest, it usually fluctuates between the two. I am the artist of my life because only I get to perceive life from my own unique point of view. This is the same for all of us.

KK: You’re a direct descendant of the Toltecs of the Eagle Knight lineage. How many different Toltec lineages are there?

MR: Oh, many. The Toltec civilization ceased to exist more than 500 years ago. Then it became an oral tradition within families, shared from one generation to another. Some families in Mexico teach it as it was 500 years ago, and then there are families like mine that adapt it with each generation. My grandmother, Madre Sarita, used to say to my brother and me that if we practice the Toltec tradition the way she practices it or the way our father practices it, we’d be killing the tradition because it has to be unique to you in the form that life teaches you.

KK: So you’ve made it a living tradition that evolves.

MR: Yes, you could say that in our family, it’s a tradition to rebel against tradition. The fact that I’m even teaching it in English, for example, is a shift right there. My grandmother broke the taboo of teaching the tradition outside the family. My father saw there was a lot of superstition in the tradition, so he decided to clean a lot of it out and leave only what he would call common-sense language. That was the birth of his first book, The Four Agreements [Amber-Allen, 1997].

KK: What inspired your grandmother to spread Toltec teachings outside the tradition?

MR: Madre Sarita was born in 1910, the year the Mexican Revolution started, so she was always a bit of a rebel. She had 13 children, and one—a son named Memin—died in a car accident when he was 19. That put her into a deep depression. Some family members took her to a curandera, a faith healer. She had an experience she couldn’t explain, but she felt better. She was so grateful that she went to her father, don Leonardo, and asked to begin apprenticing with him.

She began to practice faith healing, the part of the teachings that most resonated with her. She wanted to help others heal, both from physical ailments and the emotional wounds of conditional love. She did well and even healed someone with cancer. One of her proudest experiences was speaking to a panel of doctors about faith healing at the University of California San Diego. In fact, she was the first woman to be hired as a faith healer for the state of California, and in 2007, when she was 97, she was inducted into the San Diego County Women’s Hall of Fame. She was always a firecracker, and she just kept going. Even though she passed away in 2008, we still think of her as the head of this family.

She came from a very small town in Mexico and her family knew a lot of poverty, yet her four youngest children, my father included, were able to go to medical school. My father and my uncles would send some of their patients to my grandmother, and my grandmother would send some of her patients to them.

KK: She was a curandera, but you and your father and brother became naguals. What’s the difference?

MR: Curandero is a word used in Mexico and Latin America to describe a faith healer. The word means “person who heals.” A nagual is different. There are three definitions. The first two are spiritual teacher and spiritual guide. To understand the third definition, the most important one for me, it helps to think of physics. Physics says that for an object to move there needs to be a force that moves it. Well, for the body or the mind to move, there needs to be a nagual to move it.

We are not our bodies, we are not our minds, we are the force that animates both our bodies and our minds, the force that gives them life and makes us whole, until the moment we take our last breath. You might know this force as spirit, or soul, or intent. In our tradition, we use the word nagual. And from our point of view, every person is a nagual the moment they become aware that they are.

How do we know when a belief is inappropriate? It’s not always obvious.

MR: An attachment is a healthy thing in the sense that we engage this moment in life. But when the time comes to let go and we can’t, that’s when an attachment becomes unhealthy. We’re holding on to what we used to know because it’s familiar. At that moment a belief exists. Neil deGrasse Tyson describes the truth as something that exists whether we believe in it or not, meaning it exists with or without us. It doesn’t need us for it to exist. In contrast, a belief exists only for as long as you say yes to it. So it needs humanity—it’s a subtle but important difference.

When we attach ourselves to a belief that no longer reflects the truth, it’s now a distortion. It’s harmful because it gives us information that’s no longer relevant to our lives. But we hold on to it because we don’t know who we are without it.

It would be like me projecting an image of how my son used to be when he was 6 years old, but he’s now 16. If I hold on to that image of who he was then, I’ll never see who he really is now. Being able to unattach from what’s no longer relevant enables us to move on to the next step in our lives. It’s like swinging on monkey bars and reaching out for the next bar; if we get attached to the bar we’re on now, then we’re stuck.

KK: So we can get tripped up both by not being aware we’re attached to certain beliefs and by not realizing which of those beliefs are unhealthy.

MR: Yes, that’s the beginning of the work we do in our lives. The ability to give scrutiny to what we perceive is very important, including knowing the difference between a hypothesis, a theory, and a fact. It’s not so simple. Our emotions are real, but what triggers our emotions sometimes is not. My favorite quote of all time is one often credited to Eleanor Roosevelt, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Just as no one can domesticate me without my consent or no one can condition me without my consent because I’m the one who says yes to it.

It reminds me of the story of when Siddhartha faced the demon Mara as he sat under the Bodhi Tree. After Siddhartha refused to succumb to the temptations of Mara’s daughters, Mara got so mad he sent his armies to destroy Siddhartha. But when they shot their arrows, Siddhartha turned the arrows into roses. He simply didn’t give them permission to hurt him.

So our work is to look at our beliefs and be willing to ask ourselves, Where did I learn this from? Who taught me that? Who domesticated me with that belief? And then to realize that belief has power only because we keep saying yes to it. The moment we let go of that belief, we’re free of it.

In that moment comes forgiveness. Someone once told me that forgiveness is the moment you no longer wish the past was any different. My brother teaches a story about a scorpion that stings itself over and over again with its own tail, administering its own poison to itself. The goal is to no longer take that poison, to no longer afflict ourselves with our own intent.

KK: Toltec teachings also say that everything in the world is perfect as it is right now. How can we accept that and still work for positive change?

MR: Both in nature and in life, everything’s perfect because it exists at this very moment. But at the same time, everything is always changing and evolving, and that is also perfection. For example, we create beliefs about what beauty is. More than a hundred years ago, it was beautiful to be full-figured. Skinny people were considered ugly. A hundred years later, that’s reversed. The definition of beauty is going to change again and again. What makes it perfect is that it’s continuously flowing and changing.

What matters most is becoming aware that the reflection we see of ourselves in the mirror and the judgments we feel about it are set by agreement. If we become aware of that, then we can forgive ourselves for ever saying yes to those beliefs in the first place. Then we can be at peace with ourselves and see ourselves as we are at this very moment—as existing at point A of any direction we want to take from here.

KK: The final level of the five levels of attachment in your book is fanaticism. That subject has certainly received a lot of attention lately. Can you say more about that?

MR: What unifies all five levels of attachment is my grandmother’s question: Do you control knowledge or does knowledge control you? At level one, the authentic self, I am aware that I am alive, regardless of what I know or don’t know. At level two, preference, I’m aware that I use knowledge to navigate choice.
At level three, identity, I put on a mask, with which I get to know myself through the experience of what I know as opposed to the experience of just being alive.

At level four, internalization, I begin to use that identity to domesticate myself. Now I have to live up to expectations I have about that image, and I inevitably end up judging myself. Knowledge gives me the rules by which I will live my life.

At level five, fanaticism, knowledge has complete and total control of who I am. Now, my belief system controls my will as opposed to me saying yes to what I want to say yes to and no to things I want to say no to. I’m completely subjegated to my conditioning, and I no longer see myself as a human being, let alone as my authentic self. I now see myself (and everyone else) as the personification of an idea—as a symbol. My knowledge and my beliefs are filters that distort my perception. They blind me and don’t allow me to see beyond the tip of my own nose.

So simply put, conditional love only sees what it wants to see. Unconditional love is the willingness to see life without the filter. The more attached we are, the more our knowledge becomes a filter that distorts our perception. Don Quixote de la Mancha sees giants because if he sees windmills, then he believes he’s not worthy of the name Don Quixote. And when he is forced to see they’re windmills, then he concocts a story that his archnemesis, the magician, turned these giants into windmills just to make him look bad. It’s what we know now as fake news or false or distorted information.

We live in a time when fanaticism is making a lot of noise, but in my view, most people still live at level three and level four, identity and internalization.

**KK**: What’s the best way to get rid of fanaticism?

**MR**: Use the fifth agreement: Be skeptical but learn to listen, giving scrutiny to what you believe. Stop and ask yourself, *Is it true?* If it survives your scrutiny, you’ll say *yes* to it. Otherwise, you’ll say *no* to it. The scrutiny gives you a moment of clarity where you have a choice to continue that cycle or to let it go.

Yet in our domestication, in our conditioning, we are told that we are traitors if we ever question certain beliefs. That’s how domestication protects itself. The function of ego is to keep the illusion alive at all costs. The ability to question gives us the opportunity to see the truth, and once we question it we’ll go from fanaticism to internalization, from level five back to level four.

To go to level three, that’s where the four agreements really come in because these agreements—be impeccable with your word, don’t take anything personally, don’t make assumptions, and always do your best—are instruments that allow us to clean the channels of communication within ourselves and with other people.

When we’re able to clean those channels, we’re able to listen, and at that moment we’re able to tell the difference between a belief and the truth because we’re willing to see it for the very first time. Little by little, we heal those wounds that conditional love left in our hearts and minds. But for that to happen, that first step of giving scrutiny, being skeptical, is crucial. Skepticism is the instrument that allows us that moment of clarity.

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**don Miguel Ruiz Jr.** offers online programs and leads in-person workshops and sacred journeys teaching Toltec wisdom—on his own as well as with his father, don Miguel Ruiz Sr., and his brother, don Jose Ruíz. He is the author of five books, including *The Five Levels of Attachment* (Hierophant, 2013) and *The Mastery of Self* (Hierophant, 2016). Visit [miguelruizjr.com](http://miguelruizjr.com).