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# The Four Agreements We Must Live by to Achieve Personal Freedom (Don Miguel Ruiz's Book Summary)

14 minute read

You don't often land upon a book that is so simple to read, and yet, so incredibly profound in its wisdom and message. *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz is one of those books. It's the only book that I reread entirely upon completing it the first time and it will be one book that I will revisit frequently over the years.

In *The Four Agreements*, Don Miguel Ruiz deconstructs the reality our society lives in today, and through his words, he reveals the source of our self-limiting beliefs that rob us of joy and self-love and create needless suffering in our everyday life. In essence, he explains the phenomenon of why "humans punish themselves endlessly for not being what they believe they should be."

That's because, as children, we didn't have the opportunity to choose our beliefs, we simply accepted the information that was passed onto us from our families, schools, and societies. And regardless of whether any ideas, values, and beliefs were right or wrong, whenever we heard an opinion and believed it, we internalized it as an agreement, and that agreement became part of our belief system. Then, we used those agreements to forgo our own identity.

In those agreements, you told yourself who you are, what you feel, what you believe, and how to behave. And in an effort to be accepted by everybody around you, you created this image of what perfection is, based on other people's beliefs.

"We have learned to live our lives trying to satisfy other people's demands. We have learned to live by other people's points of view because of the fear of not being accepted and of not being good enough for someone else," writes Ruiz.

Today, you struggle to find your place because you're constantly battling between that image of perfection that's been built on false beliefs and the image of who you really want to be. Essentially, it's a battle between being who others expect you to be versus being your authentic self. As Ruiz explains:

"Self-abuse comes from self-rejection, and self-rejection comes from having an image of what it means to be perfect and never measuring up to that ideal. Our image of perfection is the reason we reject ourselves; it is why we don't accept ourselves the way we are, and why we don't accept others the way they are."

And that image of perfection that we so desperately try to measure up for is built on complete false—or at least unquestioned—beliefs.

"We live in a fog that is not even real," continues Ruiz. "This fog is a dream, your personal dream of life—what you believe, all the concepts you have about what you are, all the agreements you have made with others, with yourself, and even with God. Your whole mind is a fog which the Toltecs called a *mitote*."

The Toltec civilization thrived in ancient central Mexico between the 9th and 12th centuries. They used the term *mitote* to describe the chaos of a thousand different voices all trying to talk at once in the mind.

In ancient India, they called it *muga*, which means illusion.

In order to clear that fog from your mind, that *mitote*, so you can start to think clearly and create a new belief system within you, one that allows you the freedom to measure up to who you want to be, and not to anyone else's version of you, Ruiz offers four new agreements to form and live by:

- 1. Be impeccable with your word.
- 2. Don't take anything personally.
- 3. Don't make assumptions.
- 4. Always do your best.

These four agreements form the practical path to personal freedom.

## Agreement #1: Be impeccable with your word.

"The word is the most powerful tool you have as a human," writes Ruiz. "But like a sword with two edges, your word can create the most beautiful dream, or your word can destroy everything around you." If you want to change your life around, the first agreement you must make with yourself is to be impeccable with your word.

The word *impeccable* comes from the Latin root of *peccatus*, which means "sin," and the in in *impeccable* means "without." So *impeccable* means "without sin." And sin, as Ruiz explains, is "anything that you do which goes against yourself." So being impeccable with your word implies not going against yourself.

It's about speaking with integrity. It's about using words that empower your confidence, but refraining from using words to put others down or speak negatively about yourself. It's about saying only what you mean and using your words to focus your attention on what you want most (what you truly love) instead of what you don't (what you fear or hate).

When you are impeccable with your word, you will experience less negative energy in your daily life, and you will have less conflict with the people around you. Most importantly, you will speak compassionately and optimistically to yourself, which will help you plant seeds of self-love in your fertile mind.

## Agreement #2: Don't take anything personally.

As discussed above, all the agreements that we hold in our minds are based on beliefs we've unconsciously and subconsciously accepted. Together, they form our worldview. What other people say, what they do, and the opinions they share are according to these agreements they have in their own minds, which means that *nothing* other people do or say is because of you—it's because of them.

Everything others say or do is simply a projection of their own reality. It's a reflection of how they think and see the world around them. So, for instance, if someone criticizes your creative work, that doesn't mean it's bad; it simply means that the person doing the criticizing is seeing things from their point of view, which is an opinion that is not necessarily true.

In psychology, this is referred to as Confirmation Bias. It's the tendency to search for, and interpret information, in a way that confirms, supports, or validates your own beliefs.

Why then do you take everything personally? Why do you believe others that you're an average writer, a terrible singer, a person unworthy of love? Why do you take it to heart when someone offends you or belittles your talent? It's not about you—it's about their own wounds and insecurities.

When we take things personally, we instantly feel offended. Our reaction then is to defend our beliefs because of the need to be right. When we take things personally, we create emotional suffering for ourselves. *We start overthinking* the comments, analyzing them, and questioning their validity. In other words, we make something big out of something so little.

As a writer, this is something I struggle with sometimes. Of course, I don't expect that everything I publish will be agreed upon by others, but I've noticed a negative thought pattern that is triggered by really critical comments. As soon as I take things personally, I start to question my credibility, confidence, and voice.

That's why I love this new agreement and do my best to embrace it. I remind myself that, just as how my opinions of others have nothing to do with them and everything to do with my values and perspectives, the opinions of others have nothing to do with me either.

So how can this agreement change your life?

Once you realize that what other people say and do is because of them, that's when you will arrive at two alternatives: You can either choose to take things personally, and thus accept the transfer of another person's emotional garbage and make it your own, or you can choose not to take things personally, which renders you immune to the negative opinions and actions of others, and thus won't make you the victim of needless suffering.

Truth is, **not taking things personally fortifies your trust in yourself**. As Ruiz goes on to explain: "As you make a habit of not taking things personally, you won't need to place your trust in what others do or say. You will only need to trust yourself to make responsible choices. **You are never responsible for the actions of others; you are only responsible for you**. When you truly understand this and refuse to take things personally, you can hardly be hurt by the careless comments or actions."

## Agreement #3: Don't make assumptions.

Consider the last time you texted your friend; she read your message but didn't reply. You assumed she was ignoring you, and you fumed. But in all honesty, she was just busy and swamped with work—the simply forgot to reply to you.

"We make assumptions about what others are doing or thinking—we take it personally—then we blame them and react by sending emotional poison with our word," is how Ruiz describes it. Doesn't that perfectly sum up your impulsive reaction in the episode above?

The tendency to make assumptions about everything is what leads us to jump to conclusions. And the problem with making assumptions is that we end up believing that they are the only truth.

It's very interesting how the human mind works. Our brains are designed to keep us safe—that's why we don't do well in uncertainty. That's also why we have the need to justify everything. It helps us explain and understand what's happening around us, and in doing so, it helps us feel safe. As Ruiz explains:

"We have millions of questions that need answers because there are so many things that the reasoning mind cannot explain. It is not important if the answer is correct, just the answer itself makes us feel safe. That is why we make assumptions. If others tell us something, we make assumptions, and if they don't tell us something we make assumptions to fulfill our need to know and to replace the need to communicate... We make all sorts of assumptions, because we don't have the courage to ask questions."

So what's the solution?

Well, it lies in that last line above: *We make all sorts of assumptions because we don't have the courage to ask questions*.

Find the courage to *ask more questions*—that's the antidote to conflict and misunderstandings. Before you jump to conclusions or make more assumptions, ask more questions. Before you jump to conclusions or make more assumptions communicate with the person as clearly as you can so you can eliminate any potential source of confusion.

This doesn't just apply to outward relationships, it also reverts back to your relationship with yourself:

"We also make assumptions about ourselves, and this creates a lot of inner conflict. I think I am able to do this. You make this assumption, for instance, then you discover you aren't able to do it. You overestimate or underestimate yourself because you haven't taken the time to ask yourself questions and to answer them. Perhaps you need to gather more facts about a particular situation. Or maybe you need to stop lying to yourself about what you truly want."

## Agreement #4: Always do your best.

For this final agreement, Don Miguel Ruiz tells the story of a man who wanted to transcend his suffering, so the man went to a Buddhist temple.

There, he asked the master, "Master, if I meditate four hours a day, how long will it take me to transcend?" The Master replied: "If you meditate four hours a day, perhaps you will transcend in ten years."

The man then asked, "Master, what if I meditated eight hours a day, how long will it take me to transcend?" The Master replied, "If you meditate eight hours a day, perhaps you will transcend in twenty years."

Shocked and confused, the man countered: "But why would it take me longer if I meditate more?" And the Master said:

"You are not here to sacrifice your joy or your life. You are here to live, to be happy, and to love. If you can do your best in two hours of meditation, but you spend eight hours instead, you will only grow tired, miss the point, and you won't enjoy your life. Do your best, and perhaps you will learn that no matter how long you meditate, you can live, love, and be happy."

The fourth agreement you must make with yourself is the promise that you will always do your best to do your best. This is the one agreement that allows the other three to become deeply ingrained habits:

- I will do my best to be impeccable with my word.
- I will do my best to not take anything personally.
- I will do my best to not make assumptions.

It's not about doing more or less, it's about respecting yourself and honoring the work in front of you by doing your best. It's not about overworking yourself to the point of burnout, it's about giving your best and most honest effort with the time that you have.

That's it.

Here's how Ruiz puts it:

"When you overdo, you deplete your body and go against yourself, and it will take you longer to accomplish your goal. But if you do less than your best you subject yourself to frustrations, self-judgment, guilt, and regrets. Just do your best—in any circumstance in your life. It doesn't matter if you are sick or tired. If you can always do your best there is no way you can judge yourself. And if you don't judge yourself there is no way you are going to suffer from guilt, blame, and self-punishment."

When you do your best, here's what you can expect:

- When you do your best, you become less concerned about the future by keeping your attention on today.** You stay present and just take it one day at a time because your sole purpose will be to give your best energy and attention to whatever you're doing right here, right now.
- When you do your best, you will be proud of yourself and thus, you will learn how to fully accept yourself.** As you give your best effort and reflect on the effort you're putting in, the results you're getting, the progress you're making, and the mistakes you're learning from, you will witness your evolution before your eyes, and thus, you will naturally grow more content with yourself.
- When you do your best, you will avoid self-judgment, self-abuse, and regret.** Building on that second point, given the inner-integrity that speaks from giving your best, you will be okay with whatever the outcome is. Because you're being fully immersed at the moment, and because you're allowing yourself to fully be, you will naturally surrender to the flow of life—to the outcome of your effort—and thus, whatever happens, you know you'll be okay. There's no space for self-judgment, abuse, or regret when you genuinely know that you've garnered your best effort.

But here's the caveat: **In order to do your best, you must take action for the love of it, not for the sake of the reward.**

Think about it. If you're working solely for the reward (the paycheck), you're missing the point of why, and so you'll naturally resist the work. As a result, doing your best transforms into a mountain too steep to surmount because you're avoiding the action, or doing it from a place of hate, fear, and insecurity. *Your only driver is the reward in sight, when it should be the action itself.*

You're taking action because you have to not because you want to. The farmer is rooted in need and fear, the second is rooted in purpose and love. And your goal should be to lean into the second.

"Doing your best is taking action because you love it, not because you're expecting a reward. Many people do exactly the opposite: They only take action when they expect a reward, and they don't enjoy the action. And that's the reason why they don't do their best. If you take action for the sake of it, without expecting a reward, you will find that you enjoy every action you do. Rewards will come, but you are not attached to the reward."

At the end of the day, when you take action because you want to, not because you have to, you will enjoy it more. You will do it for yourself, not for the sake of pleasing someone else. You will do it for the pleasure of doing it, for the joy. And when you take action because you want to, not because you have to, you'll find it much easier to do your best.

The beauty of it all? By doing your best, over and over again, you become a master of your craft.

Live by these four agreements and you will achieve your personal freedom.

"The real you is still a little child who never grew up. Sometimes that little child comes out when you are having fun or playing, when you feel happy, when you are painting, or writing poetry, or playing the piano, or expressing yourself in some way. These are the happiest moments of your life—when the real you comes out, when you don't care about the past and you don't worry about the future... The freedom we are looking for is the freedom to be ourselves, to express ourselves. But if we look at our lives we will see that most of the time we do things just to please others, just to be accepted by others, rather than living our lives to please ourselves."

The freedom we are looking for is the freedom to be ourselves.

Our cruelest selves. The truest self that is buried deep underneath the rubble of broken beliefs. The truest self that is hiding behind the facade of illusory perfection of what society expects you to be.

By being impeccable with your word, not taking anything personally, not making assumptions, and always doing your best, you're working from a place of love, not fear. And you're training yourself to focus solely on what you can control.

Doesn't that place you in a position of power?

Don Miguel Ruiz pens his book to a close with these last words: "Maybe we cannot escape from the destiny of the human, but we have a choice: to suffer our destiny or to enjoy our destiny. To suffer, or to love and be happy. To live in hell, or to live in heaven. My choice is to live in heaven. What is yours?"

Suffering is as much of a choice as happiness.

As you practice living by these four agreements, you will have made the choice to carve out your own sanctuary of heaven on earth, and so your life will slowly begin to change for the better. You will feel alive again, liberated in energy and strength. And most importantly, you will find the emotional, mental, and physical freedom to be your truest self and fully express yourself as you please.

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