

*Study Guide for*

**C H R I S T I A N**

**M Y S T I C S**

**E A S T &**

**W E S T**



*Sri Eknath Easwaran*

STUDY GUIDE FOR  
*Christian Mystics*  
*East & West*

*How to Use This Course*

This video is part of an ongoing monthly series in the teachings of Sri Eknath Easwaran. The talks on this tape, like all of Easwaran's talks, are rich and deep in content. They shed light on many aspects of life, but their true value emerges as we try to apply their teachings in our daily lives. The *Guide* is meant to be used in conjunction with a daily practice of Easwaran's Eight Point Program, based on passage meditation. We do not recommend following the Practical Exercises if you are not practicing this program according to the instructions given in Easwaran's book *Meditation*, which can be found on our Web site, [www.nilgiri.org](http://www.nilgiri.org). A list of those points can be found at the back of this *Guide*.

The Practical Exercises are suggestions for you to explore as they seem appropriate in your life. If you are already familiar with Easwaran's books, you will have seen some of these exercises before. But we suggest that you take this opportunity to really put them into practice, and discover their great power to deepen your spiritual life. Try them in moderation, exercising your common sense and not taking them to extreme lengths. Easwaran always emphasized the importance of the middle path.

Before or after watching each talk, we suggest that you read through the notes and the Practical Exercise. Then, after watching the talk, try to put the exercise into action in your life. A week or so later, you may find it interesting to watch the talk again, with the experience of the exercise fresh in your mind. You may want to note the results in a journal.

A week-by-week curriculum for studying this tape, in coordination with readings from Easwaran's books, is available for use by Blue Mountain Center Satsangs and other interested individuals. If you would like to receive this curriculum via e-mail, just let us know and we will gladly send it to you. A full listing of our Satsang groups is available on our Web site. For more information about this series, other publications of Easwaran and Nilgiri Press, and a schedule of retreats based on the Eight Point Program, please contact

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# *The Divine Ascent*

## *Introduction*

The two talks on this tape, both given in early 1987, provide insights and inspiration for the practice of meditation, drawn from the mystical traditions of Eastern and Western Christianity. In Easwaran's presentation we see very clearly that the great mystics of all traditions speak from a common experience of union with the noblest element of human nature.

In the first talk, Easwaran draws upon two mystics who are revered in Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions: Saint John of the Ladder and Saint Maximus the Confessor. His delight is evident as he explores this trove of spiritual guidance, and notes the many points of correspondence with his own experience and the writings of other mystics.

In addition to providing many insights into deepening meditation, this talk can help deepen our confidence in spiritual disciplines by reminding us that the state of consciousness they lead to transcends all religious and cultural boundaries.

## *Outline of the Talk*

Easwaran begins by quoting a passage by Saint John of the Ladder on prayer – which Easwaran equates with the form of meditation he teaches.

Then he reflects on the saint's name, saying that the ladder is a fitting reminder that practice is more important than theory. He jokes that, in his course on meditation at U.C. Berkeley, students “were asked to bring a ladder.” In other words, the emphasis was on the actual practice of meditation, which is sometimes overlooked when scholars propound theories of mysticism.

He reads and comments on John's advice: “Try to lift up, or rather shut off your thoughts, within the words of your prayer. And if in its infant state it wearies and falls, don't give up; lift it again. Instability is the nature of the mind.” In other words, we should bring our attention back to the words of the inspirational passage whenever it wanders. As in soccer or any other sport, dedicated practice is a sure path to mastery.

At times, however, this endless repetition can be tiring, and at other times our efforts can take us so far that we feel out of our depth. When that happens, devotion to a spiritual figure – such as Jesus Christ, Sri Krishna, or the Buddha – can steady the mind and restore faith. As Saint John puts it: “If you persevere indefatigably in this labor, He who sets the bounds of the sea of the mind will visit you and during the prayer will say to the waves, ‘Thus far shalt thou come, and no further.’”

Next, Easwaran reads a passage by Saint Maximus the Confessor on the climactic stages of spiritual progress: “The highest state of prayer, it is said, is when the mind

while praying leaves the body behind and the world behind and is completely devoid of matter and form.”

Easwaran says that this state of intense focus on the inspirational passage, in which all our attention is absorbed in the sacred words themselves, leads to a state of true self-knowledge, in which we discover our unity with all life: “When you’re neither aware of the external world, nor aware of the internal world, I discovered, ‘Hey, that’s me!’ And that ‘me,’ that ‘I,’ includes everybody.” This discovery enriches all our relationships and opens up a new understanding of happiness: “I become most happy not when I try to make myself happy, but when I am happy in your happiness.”

To attain that high state, a firm will and steady effort is required. Easwaran goes on to emphasize once more the need for systematic daily practice of meditation. About the inevitable problem of distractions he says, “It is not in meditation that I avoid these distractions, it is during the rest of the day.” Therefore, using his own example, he counsels us to be very careful about talking too much or too little, eating too much or too little, sleeping too much or too little. It is very beneficial to give more of our time to activities which help others, and less to activities which we formerly enjoyed. “When I began to do all this I discovered to my great satisfaction that my distractions had lost weight.”

To conclude, Easwaran reads another description of mystical union, this time from the poetry of the Western Christian mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg.

## *Practical Exercise*

In this talk Easwaran says that the secret of happiness is that we become most happy not when we try to make ourselves happy, but when we are happy in the happiness of others. This capacity to feel the joys and sorrows of others is closely connected with deepening meditation. In our practical exercise we will explore that connection.

In a situation where you have a choice of entertainment, try to choose what others like, and enjoy their enjoyment. Look for opportunities to be happy in the happiness of others, whether you are gratified by the activity or not. For example, if your friends like to hike, go with them and enjoy their enjoyment, even if you'd rather be reading at home. Or you may choose to go to the opera with your spouse when you'd prefer a movie. Or you might choose your parents' favorite food at a restaurant, rather than your own.

It's good to use some discrimination in this exercise, but try to overcome your likes and dislikes to really participate in the joys of others. After you have done this, observe the effect on your concentration in meditation. With practice you will find that it is a very effective way to reduce distractions.

## *Further Reading*

Chapter 5, "Great Things" in *Seeing With The Eyes of Love*.

## *Passage for Meditation*

Dov Baer of Mezhirech, "You Must Forget Yourself in Prayer," in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.



# *The Fruits of Meditation*

## *Introduction*

Here Sri Easwaran comments on lines by the medieval German mystic and poet, Mechthild of Magdeburg. Teacher and counselor to many disciples, Mechthild was recognized as a saint in her own day. She lived a vibrant and productive life for more than seventy years.

To Easwaran her longevity (which was exceptional, given the life expectancy of that era), her creativity, and her endurance are representative of the benefits that come to sincere seekers on the spiritual path. Though not all mystics enjoy good health and long life, all of them do find that their natural gifts are greatly amplified. In his talk, he traces the connections between the profound peace of mind we can attain through meditation and ten such marvelous qualities promised in Mechthild's poem.

## *Outline of the Talk*

Easwaran begins by comparing Mechthild to Mahatma Gandhi, finding them similar in many ways. Both Mechthild and Gandhi displayed immense vitality as well as productivity in a selfless cause, because in meditation they drew from an endless reservoir of love, devotion, and resourcefulness.

Easwaran then comments on each of the fruits of meditation, which Mechthild represents as "choirs," or divisions of angels.

*"In the first choir is happiness, the highest of all gifts."* Easwaran connects this with the mantram *Rama*, which means "joy," and by extension, all mantrams: "The mantram *Rama* can establish you in its joy, where you'll always be in a state of deep joy." In that state grief itself is transformed into joy: "Grief brings out a very original capacity, a much longer reach, greater supporters, greater resources to bring peace where there is war, love where there is hatred."

*Gentleness.* This kind of gentleness is rooted in bravery, which allows us to be gentle under attack. It is a vital qualification for *ahimsa*, Mahatma Gandhi's term for nonviolence. With sustained practice, such gentleness will permeate our speaking, acting, and thinking, and will have a powerful effect on those around us.

*Loving Kindness.* This quality is also prized in Buddhism, as *maitri*, a feeling of universal friendliness.

*Sweetness.* Easwaran connects this sweetness with a Sanskrit name for Sri Krishna, *Madhura*. "This kind of love is always with us," says Easwaran. "It is very hard to learn and very precious to have. We will be at peace with everybody, not only with our friends, but also with those who may not be friendly towards us."

*Joyfulness.* This is a joy that communicates itself to others. When such a joyful person enters a room, they bring a kind of spiritual fragrance, which lingers even after they have left.

*Honorable Rest.* In order for us to truly rest, the mind has to be quiet. The mantram and meditation gradually still the mind, bringing rest and renewal to the nervous system. This state can continue throughout the day if we learn

to act selflessly, in a detached manner, without thought of pleasure, profit, or prestige. To work in this way, with our center at peace, reduces agitation, preserves (and even increases) our vitality, and makes our sleep deeper and more restorative.

*Riches.* Of these riches Easwaran says: If you want to be really rich, contribute to life. If you want to be really healthy, remember the needs of others. The more you give, the richer you'll become.

*Merit.* With daily meditation, your goodness grows, your love grows, your capacity for service grows, you grow.

*Fervent Love.* In Sanskrit, such fervent devotion is called *bhakti*, a state of boundless love which reaches out to all of life.

*Pure Holiness.* At this stage comes the discovery that, as Easwaran puts it, "The world is full of God." With this state will come a total sense of fulfillment: "Your heart will be flooded with love a million times, for all those who need your loving service."

### *Practical Exercise*

In this exercise we will continue our effort to reduce distractions in meditation by changing our habits during the day. This time our focus is on Training the Senses.

The fourth choir in Mechthild's poem is sweetness. As Easwaran points out, this sweetness has nothing to do with cake and candy. As a way to experience spiritual sweetness, try the following exercise.

In a situation where sweets are laid out before you, such as a holiday celebration or an office party, try to control the

temptation to “dive in.” There’s no need to abstain completely. In order to share in the spirit of the gathering, you may want to enjoy one or two things. But inwardly try to direct your attention towards the sweetness of attending to others. Listen to their conversation with sympathy and warmth. Pay close attention to their needs and try to forget the presence of the “sweets.” Can you taste the sweetness in this shift of attention? Do you see how its savor lingers much longer than the taste of the candy, and reduces not only your weight but your distractions?

### *Further Reading*

Chapter 6, “Nothing Fuller” in *Seeing With The Eyes of Love*.

### *Passage for Meditation*

Mechthild of Magdeburg, “Lord, I Bring Thee My Treasure” in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.

## Terms & References

**ahimsa** [a 'not'; *himsa* 'violence'] Nonviolence.

**Arjuna** Sri Krishna's disciple and friend in the Bhagavad Gita.

**Babes in Arms** Movie starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland made in 1939.

**bean chair** A kind of chair popular in the 1970s and 80s – essentially a very large bean bag.

**Blue Mountain** Mountain range in South India.

**Christina** Young friend of Easwaran's.

**Das Atman** (*das* 'servant'; *atman* 'Self' – the innermost soul in every creature, which is divine) Pun in reference to *Das Kapital*.

**Das Kapital** (1867) By Karl Marx; the inspiration for Communist Russia.

**Divine Effects of Love** "The Wonderful Effect of Divine Love," a famous passage from the *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas a Kempis.

**Divine Mother** The feminine aspect of God, worshipped in many parts of India.

**Donne, John** (1572–1631) English mystical poet.

**Dow Jones** An industrial average on the American stock market.

**Foligno, Angela of** (1248–1309) Italian mystic.

**Francis (of Assisi), Saint** (c. 1181–1226) Christian mystic. Easwaran refers to The Prayer of Saint Francis (including the line, "For it is in giving that we receive").

**Gandhi(ji), Mahatma** (1869–1948) Led India to freedom through a thirty-year struggle based completely on nonviolence.

**John of the Ladder (John Climacus)** (c. 570–649) Author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* and abbot of the monastery on Mount Sinai.

**karma yoga** The path of selfless action.

**karma yogi** One who practices karma yoga.

**Kotagiri** Town on the Blue Mountain where Easwaran lived with his mother.

**madhura** sweet

**maitri** friendly

**Maximus the Confessor, Saint** (c. 580–662) Monk and abbot in Constantinople.

**Mechthild (of Magdeburg)** (c. 1212–1282) Catholic German mystic.

**Meera** (c. 1498–1547) One of the best-loved Hindu mystics.

**my teacher** Easwaran's reference to his grandmother, his spiritual teacher.

**namarupa** [*nama* 'name'; *rupa* 'form'] Refers to the phenomenal universe of separate objects and creatures.

**nishchala** unmoving

**Norwich, Julian of** (c.1342-1416) English anchoress and mystic.

**Patanjali** Ancient Indian sage and philosopher. Author of the *Yoga Sutras*.

**Philokalia** "Love of the Beautiful," a collection of texts written in Greek between the fourth and fifteenth century by spiritual masters of the Orthodox tradition and first compiled in the eighteenth century.

**Pickle Family Circus** A theatrical circus in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Rama** "Prince of Joy," an incarnation of God in the Hindu tradition.

**Ramdas, Swami** (1884–1963) Hindu pilgrim and mystic.

**samadhi** [*sam* 'with'; *adhi* 'Lord'] Union with the Lord; a state of intense concentration in which consciousness is completely unified.

**Self** The innermost soul in every creature, which is divine.

**Seraphim (of Sarov), Saint** (1759–1833) Orthodox Christian mystic.

**Somnus** The Roman god of sleep.

**Sri** A title of respect originally meaning “Lord” or “Holy;” in modern India, simply a respectful form of address.

**Sufi** An Islamic mystic.

**Taylor, Elizabeth** American actress.

**Theory and Practice of Meditation** A class taught by Easwaran at the University of California, Berkeley.

**Thomas a Kempis** (c. 1380–1471) Christian mystic and the author of the *Imitation of Christ*.

**Upanishads** India’s ancient scriptures, dating back to 1500 B.C.E.

**Valentine’s Day** Named after Saint Valentine, patron saint of lovers.

**The Way of a Pilgrim** Anonymous story about a pilgrim devoted to repeating the Jesus Prayer, as known and practised in the Orthodox church.

## *The Eight Point Program*

- 1. Meditation*
- 2. The mantram*
- 3. Slowing down*
- 4. One-pointed attention*
- 5. Training the senses*
- 6. Putting others first*
- 7. Spiritual companionship*
- 8. Reading the mystics*

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