

## Study Guide for *Facing Life's Toughest Challenges*

*Note: The label on the tape incorrectly reverses the order of the talks. The actual order of the talks on this tape is:  
Courage and Gentleness  
Death and Immortality*

### ***Courage and Gentleness***

#### ***Introduction***

The two talks on this videotape provide encouragement and practical advice for coping with some of the most daunting challenges life presents. The first talk, given in August 1978 is a commentary on Easwaran's favorite verses from Chapter 23 of the Dhammapada:

*Patiently I shall bear harsh words as the elephant bears arrows on the battlefield. People are often inconsiderate.*

*Only a trained elephant goes to the battlefield; only a trained elephant carries the king. Best among men are those who have trained their mind to endure harsh words patiently.*

*Mules are good animals when trained; even better are well-trained Sind horses and great elephants. Best among men is one with a well-trained mind.*

*No animal can take you to nirvana; only a well-trained mind can lead you to this untrodden land.*

For Easwaran, true strength shows itself in kindness, and true courage in gentleness. With practice, we can make those qualities our natural response to difficulties – even painful ordeals like criticism and opposition. The key to success is to keep ourselves in training, by looking for every opportunity to use the Eight Points during the day.

He ends the class with a delightful account – drawn from a documentary film – of the struggles and hard-won accomplishments of aspiring ballet dancers in Russia. With similar dedication, he says, and systematic daily practice, it is possible for all of us to transform our ordinary daily life into a great work of art.

### ***Practical Exercise***

Our exercises for this tape will train us in the art of patience. This week, choose two challenges to bear patiently:

1. Choose some sense habit, such as a food item or a particular form of entertainment, which you would like to modify or leave behind. Rather than yield immediately to the desire for that experience, defer it for a while. If possible, you may want even to skip it, but don't push yourself too hard. The point here is not so much to change the habit immediately, but to extend your patience, which will eventually lead to mastery.
2. Choose a relationship that you would like to improve. Within the limits of common sense and knowing your own capacities, try to extend your patience in that situation. It may be that you will listen a little longer, or with a little more compassion or attention than usual. Or you may make a friendly remark or do something helpful for the other person.

As you face these challenges, take mental note of the discomfort involved, but remind yourself that you don't need to panic. If necessary, repeat the mantram silently to calm the mind. Keep your focus on the purpose of the exercise – to build your patience.

### ***Recommended Reading***

From *The Dhammapada*: Chapter 16, "Pleasure"; Chapter 17, "Anger"; Chapter 23, "The Elephant."

### ***Suggested Passage for Meditation***

*The Bhagavad Gita*, "The Illumined Man."

## ***Death and Immortality***

### ***Introduction***

Sri Easwaran delivered this talk in February 1981 just a few weeks after his mother passed away.

His topic is the spiritual perspective on death. *What happens when we die? What can we learn from the deaths of those who are dear to us? How can we go beyond death to discover a changeless foundation for our lives?* Sri Easwaran provides answers to these questions in this talk, which is at once intimate and universal, lofty and practical.

He begins with a tribute to his spiritual teacher, his grandmother, who gave him the secret to going beyond death. He goes on to evoke the poignant transience of life, quoting poems by Emily Dickinson and A.E. Housman. From this awareness, he says, comes the desire to live each day as fully and as spiritually as possible. And he ends the talk with a story from his time as a Fulbright scholar in Kansas, which provides a humorous but deeply insightful perspective on what death is, and how we can transcend it.

### ***Practical Exercise***

In this talk, Easwaran suggests that by becoming more aware of our mortality we can gain new motivation in our efforts to be patient with others and get free from cravings.

Continue for another week the work you began in the first exercise – bearing two spiritual challenges patiently. This week, however, choose a passage from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* that brings alive the connection between a spiritual perspective (awareness of the transient nature of life) and greater patience and self-control. Find ways to link the inspiration of the passage with your efforts. For example, you might try one or all of the following:

1. Memorize the passage and start using it in meditation.
2. Write out the passage and carry it with you, referring to it whenever you can or need to.
3. Read it according to the instructions for *Lectio Divina* on pp 268–269 of the third edition of *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.
4. Read the passage every morning before or after meditation.
5. Repeat it aloud.

### ***Recommended Reading***

*Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living, Volume One: Commentary on Chapter 2, verses 12–15.*

### ***Suggested Passage for Meditation***

The Katha Upanishad: “Perennial Joy.”

## **Weekly Lesson Plan**

### **Lesson One**

#### **Introduction**

This month our lessons will lead us through exercises that will help us face life's toughest challenges with patience and grace.

#### **Discussion Question**

In the video this week, Sri Easwaran is commenting on these lines from the Dhammapada:

*Patiently I shall bear harsh words as the elephant bears arrows on the battlefield. People are often inconsiderate.*

*Only a trained elephant goes to the battlefield; only a trained elephant carries the king. Best among men are those who have trained their mind to endure harsh words patiently.*

*Mules are good animals when trained; even better are well-trained Sind horses and great elephants. Best among men is one with a well-trained mind.*

*No animal can take you to nirvana; only a well-trained mind can lead you to this untrodden land.*

Please reflect on these questions: Where in my day is my patience tried by other people? How have I used the mantram, slowing down, or other points to increase my patience in that situation? Where might I use them better?

When it's time for inspiration, read the introduction to "Courage and Gentleness" and watch that talk (the first on the tape), which is thirty minutes long. For those not using the videotapes, please read the section entitled "Freedom in Personal Relationships," from *The Mantram Handbook*. Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

### **Lesson Two**

#### **Introduction**

Last week we began a series of lessons on building patience through the Eight Points. This week we will be applying ourselves to develop patience in dealing with sense habits and cravings.

### ***Discussion Question***

As we did last week, we will be focusing on these lines from the Dhammapada. This week, our attention will be on the idea of training.

*Patiently I shall bear harsh words as the elephant bears arrows on the battlefield. People are often inconsiderate.*

*Only a trained elephant goes to the battlefield; only a trained elephant carries the king. Best among men are those who have trained their mind to endure harsh words patiently.*

*Mules are good animals when trained; even better are well-trained Sind horses and great elephants. Best among men is one with a well-trained mind.*

*No animal can take you to nirvana; only a well-trained mind can lead you to this untrodden land.*

As Easwaran said in last week's talk, the process of training the mind is very rewarding but is also long and difficult. Among the toughest challenges are those times when we need to modify the way we use our senses, sometimes by defying a craving or by changing a longstanding habit.

Easwaran's approach to sense training is characterized by gentle, persistent effort. How might you use the Eight Points to combine gentleness with persistence in training the senses? How might I build up my patience to endure the little discomforts that often accompany changing habits? How does it feel to defy a longstanding habit or sense craving? How can we "work" with that feeling, having patience with it instead of running from it, or trying to cover it up?

When it's time for inspiration, please read from the Dhammapada: Chapter 16, "Pleasure"; Chapter 17, "Anger"; Chapter 23, "The Elephant." Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

### ***Lesson Three***

#### ***Introduction***

In this week's videotaped talk, Sri Easwaran speaks eloquently about the transience of life, and suggests that by maintaining a spiritual perspective on life we can gain new motivation for deepening our practice of spiritual disciplines. This week and next we will be exploring that connection.

#### ***Discussion Question***

In this talk, Easwaran refers several times to the Katha Upanishad, in which Death appears as a teacher, giving precious lessons in living to the young hero of the story, Nachiketa. Please read

the excerpt below (the first stanza of the passage, “Perennial Joy”) and reflect on these questions: “How would it affect your practice of Training the Senses and Putting Others First if you were to remember these lines always? How might you start to remember them more often and therefore be more patient with the challenges that arise with spiritual practice?”

*The joy of the spirit ever abides,  
But not what seems pleasant to the senses.  
Both these, differing in their purpose, prompt us  
To action. All is well for those who choose  
The joy of the spirit, but they miss  
The goal of life who prefer the pleasant.  
Perennial joy or passing pleasure?  
This is the choice one is to make always.  
The wise recognize this; the ignorant  
Do not. The first welcome what leads to joy  
Abiding, even though painful at the time.  
The latter run, goaded by their senses,  
After what seems immediate pleasure.*

When it’s time for inspiration, please watch the second talk on the tape, “Death and Immortality,” which is thirty-one minutes long. For those not using the videotapes, please read the Katha Upanishad in *The Upanishads*, translated by Eknath Easwaran. Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

#### ***Lesson Four***

##### ***Introduction***

This week we conclude our series of lessons on building patience.

##### ***Discussion Question***

Last week we explored how the spiritual perspective of the Katha Upanishad might deepen our capacity for patient persistence in our practice of the Eight Points. This week we will do the same with a selection from “The Illumined Man” in the Bhagavad Gita.

Read the following selection and reflect on these questions: Which qualities in this passage would I like to incorporate in my daily life? How might I remain more aware of the spiritual dynamic this passage portrays, and how might I live differently with that awareness? How can I use the Eight Points to do that?

*Even as a tortoise draws in its limbs  
The wise can draw in their senses at will.  
Though aspirants abstain from sense pleasures,  
They still crave for them. These cravings all  
Disappear when they see the Lord of Love.  
For even of one who treads the path  
The stormy senses can sweep off the mind.  
But they live in wisdom who subdue them,  
And keep their minds ever absorbed in me.*

*When you keep thinking about sense-objects,  
Attachment comes. Attachment breeds desire,  
The lust of possession which, when thwarted,  
Burns to anger. Anger clouds the judgment;  
You can no longer learn from past mistakes.  
Lost is the power to choose between the wise  
And unwise, and your life is utter waste.*

*But when you move amidst the world of sense  
From both attachment and aversion freed,  
There comes the peace in which all sorrows end,  
And you live in the wisdom of the Self.*

When it's time for inspiration, please read from *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living, Volume One: Commentary on Chapter 2, verses 12–15*. Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

## **Terms & References**

**Atman** “Self”; the innermost soul in every creature, which is divine.

**Baryshnikov** Famous Russian ballet dancer.

**Bihar** State in India where the indigo satyagraha campaign was formed.

**The Children of Theater Street** Documentary about ballet training in Russia, narrated by Princess Grace of Monaco.

**dhobi** An Indian washerman.

**Dialogue with Death** Title of Eknath Easwaran's book based on the Katha Upanishad.

**Dickinson, Emily** (1830–1866) American poet.

**Francis (of Assisi), Saint** (c. 1181–1226) Christian mystic. Saint Francis referred to his body affectionately as a donkey, calling it “Brother Ass.”

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

**Grace, Princess** American-born film star.

**Greyhound** American bus company.

**Housman, A.E.** (1859–1936) An English poet.

**Idler** Title of a periodical by Samuel Johnson.

**Johnson, Samuel** (1709–1784) English author.

**Kanthaka** Name of the Buddha's horse. When the Buddha renounced the world to follow his spiritual path, he rode on Kanthaka until continuing on foot. Kanthaka, mourning his master's departure, shed tears and died of a broken heart.

**Kerala** Southern state of India, from which Sri Easwaran comes.

**Kirov School of Ballet** Ballet school in Russia.

**Lincoln, Abraham** (1809–1865) American president.

**Mahabharata** A battle epic of ancient India.

**mahout** One who trains and rides elephants.

**Martya** Mortal.

**Nachiketa** The teenage boy who visits the King of Death in the Katha Upanishad.

**Nijinsky** Russian ballet dancer.



**nirvana** [*nir* “out”; *vana* “blow”] Extinction of self-will; self realization.

**Nureyev** Russian ballet dancer.

**peccavi** [Latin] “I have sinned.”

**Prana** Vital energy, the power of life.

**Ramakrishna, Sri** (1836-1886) Bengali saint of the nineteenth century. Here, the reference is to the story of an Indian sage who gives spiritual wisdom to a snake. The snake is told to repeat a Holy Name rather than bite. Many years later, the sage returns to find the snake weak and feeble. The sage instructs the snake to protect itself by hissing.

**Ramayana** The great epic poem composed by the sage Valmiki.

**Rambler** Name of an American car; also, the name of a periodical by Samuel Johnson.

**Sadhak (m.) sadhaki (f.)** A spiritual aspirant.

**sadhana** A body of disciplines or way of life which lead to self realization.

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

**satyagraha** [*satya* “truth”; *agraha* “firmness”] “Soul force.” The name given by Gandhi to his nonviolent campaigns.

**Sind** Province formerly in British India, now in Pakistan.

**sukham** Happiness

**sukhiyan** A south Indian sweet made with sugar and fried bananas.

**Wordsworth, William** (1770–1850) An English poet.

## Sanskrit Verses Quoted in These Talks

***Bhagavad Gita, Ch 12 verse 6: Ye tu sarvani karmani, mayi sannyasya matparah,  
ananyenaiva yogena mam dhyayanta upasate***

ye = those who

tu = but

sarvani = all

karmani = deeds

mayi = in Me

sannyasya = renouncing

matparah = the 'Me-highest' ones (i.e., those who are intent on Me as the highest goal)

ananyenaiva = [ananyena - with no other] + [eva = even, alone, indeed]

yogena = with yoga, i.e. practice; ananyenaiva yogena = with no other yoga

mam = on Me

dhyayantas = meditating

upasate = they worship

But they for whom I am the supreme goal, who do all work renouncing self for Me and meditate on Me with single-hearted devotion . . .

***Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 12, verse 7: Tesham aham samuddharta mrityusamsarasagarat  
bhavami nacirat partha mayyaveshita cetasam***

tesham = of them

aham = I

samuddharta = savior

mrityusamsara-sagarat = from the samsara-sea of death

bhavami = I become

nacirat = soon

partha = O Arjuna

mayy = in Me

aveshita = entered

cetasam = of thoughts

. . . these will I swiftly rescue from the fragment's cycle of birth and death to fullness of eternal life in Me.

***Bhagavad Gita, Ch 2, verse 64: Ragadveshaviyuktaistu vishayan indriyaishcharan  
atmavashyair vidheyatma prasadam adhigacchati***

raga-dvesha-viyuktas = one who is freed from passion and hatred  
vishayan = sense objects  
indriyais = by the senses  
charan = moving  
atmavashyair = by self-restraints  
vidheyatma = the self-controlled one  
prasadam = satisfaction, peace  
adhigacchati = he attains

But when you move amidst the world of sense, free from both attachment and aversion, there comes the peace . . .

***Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2, verse 65: Prasade sarvadukhanam hanir asya upajayate prasannacetaso  
hyashu buddhiih paryavatisthate***

prasade = in satisfaction, peace  
sarvadukhanam = of all sorrows  
hanis = the cessation  
asya = his or her  
upajayate = it comes about  
prasanna-chetasah = the satisfied-minded one, the contented, cheerful one  
hi = therefore  
ashu = quickly  
buddhiih = the intelligence/enlightenment  
pari-ava-tisthate = it becomes quite steady

. . . in which all sorrows end, and you live in the wisdom of the Self.

***Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18 verses 36–39.*** Although Sri Easwaran does not comment directly on these verses, they provide the background for the approach to life and death he offers in this talk.

*Now listen, Arjuna: there are also three kinds of happiness (sukham). By sustained effort, one comes to the end of sorrow.*

*That which seems like poison at first, but tastes like nectar in the end – this is the joy of sattva, born of a mind at peace with itself.*

*Pleasure from the senses seems like nectar at first, but it is bitter as poison in the end. This is the kind of happiness that comes to the rajasic.*

*Those who are tamasic draw their pleasures from sleep, indolence, and intoxication. Both in the beginning and in the end, this happiness is a delusion.*