

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

25 *Becoming Absorbed in Meditation* & *Courage, Confidence, and Compassion*

SHORT STUDY GUIDE

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Starting with this DVD – number 25 in our Video of the Month series – the study guides form a self-study course called *The Dynamics of the Mind*. Each study guide includes four lessons designed either for a spiritual fellowship group session or for personal study. If you are using this course on your own, or if you would like to engage in further discussion about the lessons, you are welcome to participate in our e-mail discussion group based on this course. Please e-mail to estudygroup@nilgiri.org for more information.

The DVD format offers several advantages that you may want to make use of in your study of these talks:

In order to enhance your comprehension of the talk, you can switch on the subtitles option as you watch the talk.

If you prefer to watch the talk in shorter segments, you can watch one section at a time. Go to the section menu and select the section you would like to watch. Each half-hour talk is divided into two sections of about 15 minutes each.

If your spiritual fellowship group wishes to watch 15 minutes of video per week, you can allot 45 minutes of your meeting to reading and discussion of *Conquest of Mind* (along the lines suggested below), and watch one section of the DVD before meditation. We recommend that you start meditating directly after watching the segment.

LESSON ONE

Introduction

Our focus this week is on training the mind to act in freedom, which allows us to respond creatively to the challenges that life brings. We'll start by reading an excerpt from Chapter One of *Conquest of Mind*, then we'll discuss how the Eight Points, and especially meditation and the mantram, help us respond in freedom to the unexpected problems that come up in our lives.

Reading from Conquest of Mind

Coming from South India, I had never seen surfing until I came to California. The sport still fascinates me. I stood back and watched while one brave soul turned his back on a powerful swell and tried to get to his feet. The wave picked him up and tossed him aside into its crest, spinning his board into the air like a missile. If that had happened to me, I would have swum straight for the beach and hauled myself out on the sand, leaving my board to anyone who wanted to claim it. But this fellow was made of different stuff. He retrieved his board and waited there for the next wave to come. Again the same thing happened – and again he came back for more.

The other young man had more experience. He knew just where he wanted to be, and when the next wave rolled in he caught its pace with a couple of swift, sure strokes. In seconds he was on his feet, cutting back and forth along the face of that wall of water as if making the ocean do his bidding were the easiest thing in the world.

Suddenly the wave arched overhead and crashed down, apparently drowning the poor chap in an avalanche of water. I expected to see his board shoot into the air like his friend's. But a moment later, crouching like a runner ready to spring from the block, he shot triumphantly from a tunnel of spray and swung his board up over the back of the wave, out of danger. The same waves from which I had wanted to run, he had harnessed and learned to ride.

All of us, I think, would like to enjoy that kind of mastery in living. Who doesn't respond to the thought of taking life's waves and riding them with effortless grace? Countless books and tapes today appeal to our yearning for a key to life, or at least to a part of life, which only experts know: methods, secrets, tips, or tactics for mastering the forces that otherwise master us. To judge from the records of ancient civilizations, this must be one of the oldest of human desires. Is there a key

to our destiny? If so, do we have a say in it, or are our character and fate fixed by the stars?

The Buddha's answer, set out more than twenty-five hundred years ago, has a very modern appeal. Our destiny, he said, lies in our own hands: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought. We are formed and molded by our thoughts." It follows that what we shall be tomorrow is shaped by what we think today. To this penetrating observation he added a simple twist. "Don't try to control the future," he would say. "Work on the one thing you can learn to control: your own responses."

If we merely react to life, this implies, we have no more freedom of choice than that log the ocean was playing with. We go where life pushes and pulls us. But if we can choose our responses, we have mastered life. Like a skilled surfer, we don't need to ask for perfect waves. Where is the challenge in that? We show our skill by how well we can handle whatever the sea sends.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

In your experience with the Eight Points, what has helped you in this difficult art of choosing your responses, rather than having them dictated to you by circumstances? How might you improve your practice to increase your freedom?

Inspiration

When it is time for inspiration, please read the Introduction to *Conquest of Mind*, and as much of Chapter One as you have time for. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

Introduction

This week we are continuing our study of Chapter One of *Conquest of Mind*. We'll start by reading an excerpt about getting free from conditioned responses, and then we'll explore how to use the mantram and meditation to do that.

Reading from Conquest of Mind

How many times have you exclaimed, "I wish I could stop thinking that! I wish I could stop craving this. I wish I didn't always react like a vending machine to this kind of person or that kind of situation. I wish I could be different from the way I am!" The Buddha would reply, "You can." If you have felt this desire fervently, you have what it takes to learn to live in freedom.

Each of us would like to be able to think what he or she wants to think. Yet how many do you know who can do this? The mind is very much like a television set with no controls, which goes on when the mood strikes it and shows whatever it pleases.

Imagine that you are sitting in your living room, listening to little Joey tell you about his basketball game, when suddenly the television switches on. "Here," it commands. "Watch me!" You say, "Yes, sir." You don't like the program, and you don't really want to look at television when Joey is trying to talk to you. But the TV has caught your attention. The set says, "I feel like showing this now, so you sit back and watch." And while Joey goes on, you look at him occasionally and say, "Uh-huh," but you're not really there; your mind is on the tube.

Then, abruptly, the set announces, "That's it for now." And despite your pleas, it turns itself off.

Most of us, if we had a set like this, would think we were caught in a science fiction movie. But this is exactly what the mind does. It puts on any show it likes and that is what we have to think; it switches channels when it likes and that is what we have to accept. "I can tell my hand what to do," Augustine once observed, "and it obeys. Why can't I do the same with my mind?"

Today, of course, most homes have a remote control device for the television set. You lean back in a chair, press a button, and the set goes on. If you don't like the commercial telling you what to have for breakfast, you press another button and the sound goes off. If you want to change channels, press a button; if you want to stop the show, just press again – whenever you choose. So when I go to a friend's home to watch tennis, my host puts the remote control in my hands. I watch Boris Becker play Ivan Lendl, and the moment a commercial cuts in or the commentators start talking about how much money is at stake, I turn off the sound and rest my eyes. This is using television in freedom, and it is the way to use the mind in freedom too.

People sometimes object, "Having a trained mind sounds so mechanical! What about spontaneity, creativity?" Even with television, I think you will agree, nothing is more mechanical than sitting on the couch like a potato and watching whatever comes on. It is the same with the mind. Nothing is less spontaneous than thinking whatever pops into your head, because there you have no choice. Almost all thinking is conditioned, stimulus and response. Only when choosing in freedom does the human being truly come to life.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

Does this sound familiar? Are there times in your life when you find your mind behaving like this science-fiction TV set? How have you used the Eight Points to counteract that? How might you use them more – and particularly the mantram – to get control over this mental process?

Inspiration

When it is time for inspiration, read the following introduction and play the first of the two talks on this DVD, "Becoming Absorbed in Meditation," which is about 27 minutes long.

The most important part of this talk comes at the end, when Sri Easwaran outlines a deep and challenging ideal in meditation – total absorption in the inspirational passage. Leading up to that, he is commenting on a practical set of verses from the Dhammapada. He presents the spiritual life as a reversal of the normal perspective, which limits our vision and life. Throughout this talk he contrasts the "normal" and spiritual perspectives on pride and embarrassment, selfishness and selflessness, security and insecurity, and shows how the spiritual life leads to true security, which then helps us reach for absorption. The presentation here is not a judgmental or moral one, but a dynamic one. We are being shown a way to direct our mental activity towards the most positive outcomes.

LESSON THREE

Introduction

This week we're continuing our study of Chapter One in *Conquest of Mind*, entitled "Thinking in Freedom." Our theme has been the difficult art of responding in freedom – learning to set aside our conditioned reactions so we can respond to challenging situations calmly and creatively. This week we are going to concentrate on attention: how we can enrich our relationships by learning to focus our attention steadily.

We'll start by reading an excerpt from the chapter, then discuss its application to our practice. Sri Easwaran has just been writing about how restlessness and an inability to focus attention can make us lose interest in those we love, and disrupt our relationships:

Reading from Conquest of Mind

We do not lose interest in people because they get less interesting; we lose interest because our mind is restless. It is the nature of an untrained mind to keep moving, moving, moving. But the mind is infinitely teachable. You can make it natural for your mind not to move, but to dwell like a laser wherever you place it. That is the secret of genius, and it is the secret of satisfying relationships too. When you tell your mind "Stay," it will stay. You can keep giving Joey your full attention instead of letting it be snatched away by the TV. You can keep giving your partner your respect and love even if he gives you cause for feeling differently.

Most wonderfully, I think, you can bring back all the delight and freshness you first felt in any personal relationship. What made those moments memorable was that your attention was riveted on the object of your love. When your mind is trained, you can keep this sense of delight and wonder alive always; it will actually grow with the passage of time. This is the greatest wealth a human being can have: relationships that never turn stale or sour but go on growing in depth and beauty.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

In this excerpt, Sri Easwaran has given us a way to measure our progress along the path of freedom. Can anyone give an idea of what that measure is? [Leave time for a few answers here, then go on to:] Freedom in directing our thoughts and attention can be measured by how rich and fresh our relationships are, by our own reckoning. In other words, we ourselves will

feel that our relationships “never turn stale or sour but go on growing in depth and beauty.” Progress will show itself by how much this already applies in our relationships with others.

How have you used the Eight Points, and especially One-Pointed Attention, to renew or enrich relationships? What more might you do?

Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read from Chapter Four of *Meditation*, by Eknath Easwaran, “One-Pointed Attention.” Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON FOUR

Introduction

We're concluding our study of the first chapter of *Conquest of Mind*, on the theme of "Thinking in Freedom." In the past three sessions we've been discussing the difficult art of exercising conscious choice over the thoughts we think and the ways we direct our attention.

This week, we'll consider the attitude we bring to this difficult work. We'll start with a reading in which Sri Easwaran is comparing meditation and the allied disciplines to the strenuous, often thankless work that is required of ballet dancers.

Reading from Conquest of Mind

I remember the first time I saw Rudolf Nureyev, one of the greatest ballet stars of the modern world, doing scenes from *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet* – gliding and pirouetting without effort, springing into the air as gracefully as a deer. He has taught his body to listen to whatever his creative impulse commands, and to obey so effortlessly that defying gravity seems natural. You just run and leap, run and glide; it's not hard at all.

Later, in a documentary, I saw some of the scenes behind the scenes, where great dancers work at their art for five or six hours every day. Some of the exercises they were doing were most uninteresting – in fact, they were downright dull. We like to think of ballerinas as glamorous, doing glissades and leaps and pirouettes all day. The fact is that if you want to be a ballerina, you have to spend thousands of hours doing one of the most boring exercises I can imagine: clinging to a bar and kicking up your legs over and over, while you perspire and get more and more disheveled.

To me those dancers looked like galley slaves, standing there chained to the bars. The slave driver comes and says, "Now: one, two, three; one, two, three," and they kick, kick, kick, day in and day out. People like me would say, "I'm not interested, thank you. Where are the thrills? Where is the glamour? Who is that man to say 'one, two, three' and make me kick my heels in the air?" Yet this is what is required to train every part of the body to listen to you. Spontaneity, as any artist or athlete will confirm, comes only after lots and lots of disciplined practice.

That is exactly what I would say about training the mind. If a ballet star has to practice for hours every day, following a special routine under very watchful guid-

ance, should we find it any easier to undo old, rigid, conditioned ways of thinking? The amazing thing is that it can be done at all – and that anybody can learn it, anybody who is prepared to put in the effort.

After seeing the kind of training Nureyev must have undergone, I realized anew why genius has been called just an infinite capacity for taking pains. Dancers like Nureyev are gifted, but their gift is not in having been born with the grace of a deer; it is their immense dedication. So too with the spiritual geniuses of the world: men and women like Teresa of Avila, the Compassionate Buddha, Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi. They also devoted their lives to training for mastery: not to be able to dance with ease but to be able to love with ease, to think in freedom, to make every response to life a matter of their free choice. By their lives they show us what it means to be a human being.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

In this excerpt, Easwaran emphasizes the difficulty of spiritual disciplines. Sometimes these disciplines are boring, at other times unpalatable. What makes us keep at it? What makes this kind of hard work attractive?

Easwaran seems to be trying very hard to prepare us for difficulties. How does it help to be prepared for difficulties in your practice of the Eight Points? What helps you feel prepared for difficulties? How can you bring greater effort to your practice?

Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, read the introduction below and watch the second of the talks on this talk, "Courage, Confidence, and Compassion," which is 27 minutes long. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

This talk is a continuation from the last one, dealing with absorption in meditation. This week, Easwaran is exploring ways in which we can conserve our vital energy – our prana – a key to deep absorption. Prana is often drained by fear.

People who attend our retreats sometimes ask, how do we deal with fear? This talk gives a fascinating answer: learn to use fear to help you avoid situations that will endanger or handicap you. The key was brought out in this month's readings: we can control the thinking process through constant practice, and that control will give us mastery over our lives. What had been handicaps now become assets. Again, as it was last week, the focus is on the dynamics of the thinking process, not on moralistic judgments. As in *Conquest of Mind*, Easwaran is explaining

the mental dynamic which underlies so many of our personal and international problems, and is showing how to use meditation to set them right.

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