

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

26 *Changing the Thinking Process* & *The Space between Thoughts*

SHORT STUDY GUIDE

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This study guide is part of 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 email discussion group based on this course. Please email 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 tape.

If you prefer to watch the tape in shorter segments, you can watch one segment at a time. Go to the menu and select the segment you would like to watch. Each half-hour talk is divided into two segments 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 segment of the DVD before meditation. We recommend that you start meditating directly after watching the segment.

LESSON ONE

Introduction

This month, as we read and study the second chapter of *Conquest of Mind*, our focus will be on what Easwaran calls the “thinking process.” Once we have learned to control and direct our thinking process, Easwaran says, we become able to make lasting beneficial changes in our character, conduct, and consciousness.

In this first lesson, we will read and reflect on the first section of the chapter, dealing with the dynamic which governs all our conditioned behavior: stimulus & response.

Reading

When I came to Berkeley as a Fulbright scholar in the early sixties, I found a house near a place called Live Oak Park. On the edge of the park sat a couple of tennis courts, and here several days a week the city had stationed a tennis coach with a very good reputation. I had played a bit of tennis in India and had enjoyed it, so I said to myself, “Why not go and benefit from his expertise?”

One morning I carried my racquet over and approached him. “All right,” he said, “stand over there on the other side of the net and let’s take a look at your game.”

I ran to the other court. “Okay,” he called, “go ahead and serve.”

I tossed the ball in the air and hit it for all I was worth. He returned it nicely, I must say. We exchanged a few shots – you might even have called it a rally. I served a few more balls, and then he came to the net and looked at me. “Let’s have a chat,” he said.

I felt flattered. “In only five minutes,” I asked myself, “have I impressed this coach so much? Maybe I have the makings of a Big Bill Tilden.”

“Won’t you sit down?” he said. Then he asked innocently, “Where did you learn to play like this?”

“Oh,” I said, “in India. Right at my university.”

“Who taught you?”

I had him there. “Nobody,” I said. “I taught myself.”

He grimaced. “That’s what I thought!”

And like a really good coach, who is interested not so much in pleasing you as in improving your game, he started in without preamble: “The way you stand is wrong. The way you hold the racquet is wrong. The way you throw the ball in the air is wrong. The way you approach the ball and swing is wrong. Naturally,” he added kindly, “the way you miss it is wrong too.”

My face must have fallen, because he smiled and patted me on the shoulder. “There’s no need to feel discouraged,” he said. “That’s how people who teach themselves tennis usually start.” And he proceeded to give me a list of instructions, ticking them off on his fingers: one, two, three, four, five. “Start doing all this,” he assured me, “and things will begin to go right.”

My grandmother, my spiritual teacher, used this same approach to teach me how to live. You should not picture Granny as a gentle old lady in a rocking chair. She was active and vibrantly alive, tough and tender at the same time, and although she used words sparingly she made each one count. Clearly but compassionately, she would tell me just what I was doing wrong. Then, largely by her personal example, she would show me how to change.

Once, I remember, I got into a senseless squabble with a classmate and came home hurt and angry. Granny took one look at my red eyes and asked, “What happened, son?”

With the simplicity of youth I replied, “Raman called me names.”

My mother would be very tender on these occasions. “Don’t worry,” she consoled me. “What does he know? You’re really a very nice boy.” But Granny just asked, “And then what?”

“Well, he was rude to me, Granny, so I was rude back!”

She shook her head slowly. “What is the connection?”

I had no answer, of course. Then came the words I dreaded most to hear from her lips. “You’re such a bright boy. Tell me, what does his being rude have to do with what you say or do?”

“But Granny,” I said, “he’s impossible to get along with!”

“There is only one person in the world you can hope to control,” she replied drily, “and that is yourself. Work on how you respond. Otherwise you are like a rubber ball: he throws you against the wall and you bounce back.”

Of course, just hearing this kind of advice does not necessarily help much. If my coach had merely said, “You don’t hold the racquet right,” it would not have improved my tennis game. I would have objected, “Show me how I’m holding it wrong and how to hold it right!” What made Granny a consummate teacher is that she could always show me how to solve my problems: by working on my own mind.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

In what areas of your life do you see yourself limited by stimulus/response thinking? Choose one particular area where you feel limited, and where you would like to change. For this reflection exercise, choose a relatively small challenge – one which may be difficult, but could be conquered with some persistence in the Eight Point Program. How does the stimulus/response connection get the better of you in this situation? Does hurry and the speed of your thinking play a role? Do you find that being preoccupied with your own agenda, with little thought for others, makes you more susceptible? What other factors come into play to make you respond to life’s challenges in a way you regret? How might you use the Eight Points to free up some space between stimulus and response?

When it’s time for inspiration, please read the rest of the chapter, entitled “Living Skills,” in *Conquest of Mind*. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

Introduction

This month we are studying Chapter Two of *Conquest of Mind*, entitled “Living Skills.” Our particular focus is on what Easwaran describes as the thinking process. By mastering this process, we can gain mastery over our lives.

In this week’s reading, Easwaran presents the mind as a kind of factory, turning out thoughts at great speed, most of which are rejects. In this reading and in the talk we’ll watch this week he makes the compassionate point that these “reject thoughts,” like anger, resentment, and selfish grasping, are not really us. We should not identify ourselves or others with these thoughts. Rather, we should learn to see these negative traits simply as products of a flawed thinking process – and learn to repair that process to produce loving, beneficial thoughts.

Reading

One of the major difficulties in learning to train the mind is that it is so hard to stand back and see our thoughts clearly. The mind – everybody’s mind – is a vast factory, producing a continuous stream of thoughts of every description: a wisp of anxiety followed by a strong desire; then another anxiety, a palpable fear, two or three irrelevant memories, a surge of anger . . . the assembly line goes on and on. Most of us see ourselves as nothing more than the product of these thoughts. That is where the danger lies.

This mind factory reminds me of the cotton factories in British India. Madras has produced fine cotton for centuries, but when new manufacturing techniques were introduced they slowed production considerably. We Indians had to wait a good while before getting an opportunity to buy. When the finished product finally appeared in the store, one table would have a small stack of fine cotton, called hanava, and another table would boast a huge pile of rejects. There was a fascinating variety of these. I remember picking up a nice-looking shirt that wrinkled up later like a prickly pear. When my laundryman tried to wash it, disastrous things happened.

Most of the products of our mind factory, too, are rejects. The reason is simple: out of ignorance, or under the banner of some naive notion of freedom, we refuse to

supervise production. Our philosophy is free enterprise, “make whatever you like,” and that is what rejects are all about.

Anger makes a good example. All of us know people who are accident-prone: on their way to deliver a few words in front of the Garden Club they drop their pen, and when they bend over to pick it up, their feet get tangled in the microphone cord and down they go in a heap. It can be tragic. Yet how many more of us are anger-prone! All it takes is thinking angry thoughts a thousand times, enough to make anger a reflex. Then we are capable of flying off the handle and saying and doing unkind things with no provocation at all. This is merely a case of the machines of the mind taking over and running us, which is what conditioning means. Such a simple diagnosis of a terrible problem! But it points the way to a solution, for it locates the answer in the mechanics of the mind.

If you go on turning out the same kind of reject thought over and over, the machinery becomes conditioned: it begins to specialize in manufacturing that particular type of thought. Then, just as the machines in a garment factory might stamp out the same pattern of shirt from several different fabrics, the machines in your mind factory will keep on producing the same pattern of thought. Whatever you put in, you get the same old response: anger, hostility, suspicion, jealousy, whatever the mind has been habituated to turn out.

When we see someone reacting like this we say, “That’s the kind of person he is.” What we should say is “That’s the kind of mind he has” – or, more accurately, “That’s the kind of thinking his mind does.” He has let his mind factory turn out the same response again and again, and now it produces automatically.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

Easwaran says that we tend to identify ourselves with the products of our “mind factory.” We say, “That’s the kind of person I am.” How might you learn not to identify yourself with your thoughts? Easwaran seems to imply that – if we are to see ourselves and others as we really are – we need to have freedom in the way we respond. We need to be able to choose our thoughts, rather than just let them happen.

Let’s try an experiment. Take a few minutes to reflect on your own “mind factory,” especially at those points in your day when it produces “rejects.” What are those occasions? What are the first symptoms that “reject thoughts” are being produced? Please reflect on how you can use the mantram, slowing down, and one-pointed attention as soon as the first symptoms of “reject thoughts” occur – in order to develop freedom in the way you respond.

When it's time for inspiration, please read the introduction below and watch the first talk on this DVD, "Changing the Thinking Process." If you are not using the videos, read "Freedom in Personal Relationships" from *The Mantram Handbook*, by Eknath Easwaran. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

In the readings we have been doing, Sri Easwaran has been explaining how the thinking process – the foundation of what we call our personality – can be changed through a long process of spiritual training. Making these changes can lead to tremendous improvements in our physical, emotional, and spiritual life. In this talk, he refers to those beneficial changes under the general topic of health.

This talk includes a marvelous description of Easwaran's meditation, in which he shows how, with intense concentration, the inspirational passage can become a deeply personal message of transformation.

He closes with an inspiring portrait of the person who has truly trained the mind – secure, content, joyful, and heir to a seemingly inexhaustible supply of patience and endurance. He illustrates that state with the story, drawn from the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, in which the heroine Draupadi receives an inexhaustible cooking vessel from Sri Krishna, who is considered an incarnation of God in the Hindu tradition.

LESSON THREE

Introduction

We are continuing our study of Chapter Two of *Conquest of Mind*, entitled “Living Skills.” Last week, Easwaran compared the mind to a factory, working all the time and turning out many rejects. This week he explores that comparison further and makes an interesting suggestion. By meditating on inspirational passages, he says, we can provide the mind factory with “better raw material.” In our discussion we’ll try to understand how we can use this dynamic to change our thinking patterns.

Reading

Not only could my tennis coach see clearly what a player was doing wrong, he had a systematic method for showing how to set things right. We can do the same with the mind. Through personal experience, I have developed a method for introducing quality control in the mind: the eight points described at the end of this book, which I have followed in my own life.

I do not claim to have made these points up. In fact, part of their appeal is that they appear in all the world’s great spiritual traditions. But because of my Western training, the methods I present are not particular to any country, culture, or religion; they have been well worked out for modern times. They comprise a program anyone can follow for teaching the mind to be calm and kind, just the way my coach would have presented it: one, two, three, four, five .

First and foremost comes meditation, because through meditation we can actually lay our hands on the machinery of the mind. This is imperative, for the mind factory is already in full production: daytime, swing shift, even graveyard. Thoughts love to work through the weekend without pay, and they never call a strike. “We just get into a rhythm,” they would explain, “and we can’t stop.” With this powerful internal machinery always running, it is crucial to have a supervisor on the job.

The method of meditation I teach involves sitting quietly with eyes closed and going slowly, in the mind, through the words of an inspirational passage that appeals to you deeply. It might be a prayer, or a poem from one of the great mystics, or a piece of scripture from any of the world’s religions. This method has several direct effects on the quality of thinking. To begin with, it gives the mind’s machinery bet-

ter raw material. When you sit quietly every morning with your eyes closed, concentrating completely on words that embody your highest ideals, you are giving your mind thoughts of the purest quality to work with during the day.

A perfect example is the opening of the Buddha's "Twin Verses," taken from the Dhammapada:

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: we are formed and molded by our thoughts. Those whose minds are shaped by selfish thoughts cause misery when they speak or act. Sorrows roll over them as the wheels of a cart follow the hooves of the bullock that draws it.

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: we are formed and molded by our thoughts. Those whose minds are shaped by selfless thoughts give joy when they speak or act. Joy follows them like a shadow that never leaves them.

When it comes to substituting high quality for low, however, no passage could improve on the inspiring prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

One reason this kind of training is so effective is that it uses the same machinery that gives the mind its immense power. For meditation to work, you don't have to reason over, reflect on, question, or answer the words you are meditating on – in fact, if you do, you are letting the mind do its own thing again, letting it produce whatever it wants. Instead, all you have to do is try to give complete attention to one word at a time, and bring the mind back when it wanders. If you are giving a

word your best attention, its meaning cannot help sinking in. Anything else actually keeps the meaning from penetrating.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

Please reflect on one or two of your favorite meditation passages. You may want to read them aloud. As Easwaran says here, they provide your mind with better “raw material” for thinking. How do you see that raw material reflected in the final products – the thoughts and feelings that emerge in your day? How might you use the Eight Points during the day to help in that process, to allow more of those positive images and ideas to emerge in your life?

When it's time for inspiration, please read the introduction below and watch the second talk on this tape, entitled “The Space between Thoughts.” For those not using the videos, you may want either to read the introduction to *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* or ask members of the group to read aloud some of their favorite passages from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

In the reading we've been doing, Sri Easwaran has repeatedly emphasized the need for training. In this talk we see the practical benefits of that training – in particular, detachment.

Easwaran's main focus is on learning to find – and increase – the space between thoughts. As he will explain, the Buddha's diagnosis of the thinking process led him to discover that, though our thoughts seem continuous, they are not actually connected. When we slow down the mind through meditation, we are able to find the space between thoughts and gain the detachment we need to actually choose what we think.

When we can choose our thoughts, we can also choose how we respond to situations – even very painful or difficult ones. In the last half of the talk, Easwaran tells a story about how his spiritual teacher, his grandmother, helped him gain detachment in such a painful situation. Then he concludes with another story to illustrate the special care we need to exercise not to fall victim to compulsive thoughts and desires that speed up our mind and make it impossible to find the space between thoughts.

During the talk, Easwaran will refer to the concept of samskaras – latent or unconscious patterns of thinking which can be gradually changed through meditation.

LESSON FOUR

Introduction

We are concluding our study of Chapter Two of *Conquest of Mind*. This week our topic is one of great importance to all of us: how to deal with unpleasant memories that cause us to be upset or resentful. Our reading starts with Easwaran's account of the benefits of training the mind through meditation.

Reading

This sounds like plain, dull work, so let me show you some of its very useful applications.

For one, everybody knows how painful it is to keep thinking about an unpleasant memory. Actually, the problem is not the memory but the fact that we cannot stop thinking about it. We can spare ourselves the agitation by withdrawing the mind from that memory completely.

Is this just playing Pollyanna – hiding from problems and pretending they are not there? Perhaps it would be, if worrying could help. But worrying never helps. If you really have to think about the past to solve a problem, think about it, draw your conclusions, and then drop it; don't let your mind run on, turning out the same unproductive stuff.

Meditation can help solve such problems in other ways, too, by going to their root; I shall say more about that later. Here I am simply talking about learning to drop at will those haunting specters from the past that nag, "You're no good, you're no good," or push us unwillingly into the same old situations again and again.

Take resentment, for example. Resentment is nothing more than compulsive attachment to a set of memories. If you could peek through the window of the mind factory when you feel resentful, you would see the production line turning out the same emotion-charged memory over and over: "He did that to me in 1983, he did that to me in 1983 . . ." You are dwelling on something that took place in the past – or, more likely, on how you misunderstood that event and reacted to your misunderstanding. When you keep pumping attention into an event in this way,

even a limp little memory gets blown up into a big balloon of hostility. If you can withdraw your attention, the balloon is deflated. There is nothing more to it.

Once my young nieces brought home a box of balloons and blew them up until our living room was full of them. It was great fun until one of the balloons burst, leaving only a shred of rubber. Similarly, when you stop pumping up a resentment, there is nothing left to cause trouble. Burst balloons can bring tears to children's eyes, but a burst resentment floods the heart with relief and love.

Brooding on memories not only serves no earthly purpose, it can go on until your mind is so filled with balloons that there is no room for the joy of living. But through meditation, by withdrawing your attention from distractions, you can train your mind to the point where no memory can upset you or drive you into compulsive action.

This is not amnesia. Your memories are still there in the file if you need them. What is lost is their emotional charge. The door of the past may still open and let an old memory swagger in, clanking its chains in your face and expecting you to climb under your desk and hide. But with a trained mind you will be able to sit there calmly, watching the show with an expression of infinite tolerance. When it is finished you can clap politely and say, "Very professional performance. Now, if you're quite through, I have things to do." The poor memory, not used to this kind of treatment, will duck its head and slink out, leaving not a trace of disquiet in your mind.

There is no exaggeration in this. Through many years of practice you can gain such command over your thinking process that if there is a spurt of hostility toward someone you have only to look at your mind and say "No." The hostility will wither. If resentment creeps in you can say "Please leave," and it will go. That is why, after more than forty years, I still catch myself thinking every day, "There is nothing like meditation!"

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

In this section, Easwaran is raising a provocative question: how much of our thinking is actually beneficial, or even necessary? Let's explore that question in relation to one of the areas he mentions – worry. How can we differentiate between "productive" thoughts and worrying? Please reflect on your experience and see if you can distinguish between these two ways of thinking about the past. Now reflect on this insight: Worrying is compulsive; it impels itself.

We do not choose to worry, but find ourselves compelled to do it. How can you use the Eight Points to reduce the degree to which you are subject to such worries?

One of the key ideas in this reading is: “through meditation, by withdrawing your attention from distractions, you can train your mind to the point where no memory can upset you or drive you into compulsive action.” How might you use this dynamic to become more free from worry and resentment?

When it’s time for inspiration, please reread Chapter Two of *Conquest of Mind*, as a review. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

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