

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

27

Getting Free from Negative Thinking
&
Transforming Anger into Kindness

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 BMCM 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 e-mail 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 select the option of watching the talks with subtitles. After selecting “Play Talk” from the main menu, choose one of the options on the left-hand side of the screen.

If you prefer to watch the talks in shorter segments, you can watch one half at a time. Each DVD contains two 30-minute talks, each of which is split into two sections. After selecting “Play Talk” in the main menu, choose the section you would like to watch.

If your spiritual fellowship group wishes to watch 15 minutes of a talk per week, you can allot 45 minutes of your meeting to reading and discussion (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

The central theme of this month's study guide is training – the spiritual exercises that will make our mind fit enough and our self-will slim enough to face life's challenges with equanimity and compassion. In Chapter Three of *Conquest of Mind*, Sri Easwaran uses the example of physical exercise to illustrate the comprehensive training regimen he recommends for the mind. This week we'll take up the idea of stretching – which is as important for a meditator as it is for a runner or gymnast.

Reading: Training the Mind

Recently my wife and I took some friends to San Francisco. The day was beautiful, bright and sunny without being uncomfortably hot, and the air was so clear that we had a full view of the Berkeley hills across the bay. As we crossed the Golden Gate a light breeze was blowing, making the water dance with sunlight.

We went straight to the Marina for a walk. I like to watch sailboats under full, colorful sail, and I enjoy the birds – sea gulls, curlews, and the unabashed pigeons that come and look you straight in the eye as if to say, “What have *you* brought for me to eat?” But what especially fascinated me was a number of people running around the Marina lawns, stopping in turn at certain places to do a specific routine: jumping, bending, twisting, stretching. The city had put up exercise stations, it seems, so that men and women could come there regularly to keep fit. You start at Station 1 and do the recommended exercises; then you jog on to Station 2, and so on around the field.

I watched one man do an exercise over and over flexing and extending first one leg, then the other, again and again and again. I felt sure he had an objective in view; probably he was trying to develop certain muscles for a particular sport.

On the far side of the park, some other fellows were apparently trying to push their car to get it started. “They're just doing their stretches,” my wife explained.

With so many runners in this country today, we are familiar with scenes like this. Everybody knows about warming up and cooling down and all the rest. But what most people do not realize is that the mind needs to be stretched too. The purpose of warm-up exercises is to keep the body supple so that you do not strain a muscle. If you go out to run when your body is stiff, every muscle will complain; the real race will be to see which one quits first. Similarly, if you try to work with difficult people – including yourself – when your mind is stiff, you are bound to get tense. Your patience may snap; your digestive organs may go on strike. You may

have trouble sleeping at night, and if you do succeed in falling asleep you may not want to get up. Meditation is warm-up exercise for the mind, so that you can jog through the rest of the day without getting agitated or spraining your patience.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

Reflect for a few minutes (not more than 5 minutes total) on your daily life to identify one area where your mind is “stiff” and inflexible. Where do you operate “on automatic pilot,” responding in a conditioned way to people or situations? Can you identify a habit of mind (called a *samskara* in Sanskrit) that regularly interferes with the way you’d like to be? A few examples might be:

- * Getting easily frustrated with people who don’t move as quickly as you do
- * A habit of being late
- * Frequently finding fault with others

How might you use the Eight Points to gently stretch this stiff part of your mind? Remember: just as physical stretching needs to be done gently and gradually, this kind of internal stretching requires a slow, sustained approach. What one small thing might you do this week to stretch yourself? In particular, when might you use the mantram more?

Reading for Inspiration

When it’s time for inspiration, please read the rest of Chapter Three of *Conquest of Mind*. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

In last week's lesson we started our spiritual workout with some stretching. This week we get down to some serious exercise: turning annoyances into opportunities for growth. It's hard work, but the reward is what Easwaran calls artistry in daily living – the feeling that every moment in our life has a purpose and contributes to the joy of those around us.

Reading

At each station on the Marina course, I noticed, the signs not only give instructions in an exercise, they also explain its purpose. “Do this to strengthen the muscles of the back.” “This will help to flatten your stomach.” Just as there are certain exercises for toning a particular set of muscles, there are special exercises for developing a fit personality. Every provocation is an exercise for developing patience; every opportunity to retaliate offers a chance to harness your passions. The question is the same as in a physical fitness program: how much do you want to get in shape?

Every difficulty during the day can be looked on as an exercise station like those on the Marina. Often the breakfast table is Station 1. It has certain mental bars and rings and stands, and just as the athlete I saw was strengthening his leg muscles, you can use life's inevitable annoyances to strengthen your love, patience, and respect.

Most breakfast trials arise from being rigid about what we like and dislike – which, incidentally, is the source of much of the agitation in personal relationships. “I don't like that job, I don't like her, I don't like this, I don't like that.” Listen to people and you can hear this refrain everywhere.

If we live alone, we may not hear these notes of pique as the ego expresses its little preferences. But breakfast with family or friends is a different story. You like your coffee strong; she likes hers light. He wants eggs and you can't stand them. Isn't there a king in an English nursery rhyme who turned his kingdom upside down to get breakfast *his* way? “No one, my dear, would call me a fussy man; I simply like a bit of butter for my royal slice of bread.” If the ego could be king, most of us would sound too much like this to be attractive. Artistry in living begins with learning to be flexible for the sake of those around us.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

Easwaran here makes an intriguing promise: “You can use life’s inevitable annoyances to strengthen your love, patience, and respect.” In the DVD we’ll watch this week, Easwaran gives a strategy that may help us in this very difficult task of turning annoyances into exercise stations for the mind.

He says that it’s possible to identify the nature of our thoughts, and exert some quality control over them. Returning to the factory image he used in last month’s readings, he says that the mind factory produces three kinds of thoughts: selfless, selfish, and mixed. Naturally, selfless thoughts are quality products: patient, kind thoughts that add to the welfare of others without even considering our own benefit. Unfortunately, those thoughts tend to appear less frequently than what he calls “rejects” – selfish thoughts that consider only our own benefit, even at the expense of others. Those rejects, he says, should be sent to the dump. In other words, we should give them no attention and try never to act upon them. But there is a third category of thoughts that constitute the majority of our mind factory’s output: thoughts that are partly selfish, partly selfless.

In responding to life’s annoyances, our mind often comes up with this sort of mixed-quality thinking. Please reflect on your experience and try to identify the selfish and selfless elements in the thoughts that come up when you’re annoyed. In these “mixed” responses, how might you use the Eight Points to add a little more selflessness and reduce the selfish element? In other words, how might you use annoyances to help you build your capacity to think more of the needs of others than of your own?

Watching the Talk

When it’s time for inspiration, please read the following introduction and watch the first talk on this DVD, “Getting Free from Negative Thinking.” Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Our theme in the chapter we’re studying is training. In this DVD Easwaran – commenting on the Dhammapada of the Buddha – presents the skills that come from that training. First and foremost is the ability to leave behind negative thinking. Or rather, to be able simply to tell our negative thought patterns to leave. In Sanskrit, those negative habits of thought are called samskaras, which Easwaran defines as selfish impulses and negative emotions. Now, in his usual fashion, he is trying to make these intangible mental processes tangible and understandable, so he illustrates with some anecdotes from his time as a college professor in India. He even compares samskaras to unruly students, drawing caricatures and showing them to each other. It’s not so far-fetched! Sometimes we can catch our negative thoughts drawing caricatures of the people around us.

One of his stories requires a little background. In 1979, when this talk was given, our Nilgiri Press was publishing a *Laurel's Kitchen* calendar. As in any printing process, some of the products turn out to be rejects. Easwaran compares our negative thoughts to those rejects.

The two other fruits of mental training he mentions in this talk are equanimity – the ability to be calm and at our best in any circumstances – and the discovery of our noblest inner qualities, our original goodness.

LESSON THREE

We're making our way through life's exercise course this month as we read Chapter Three of *Conquest of Mind*. This week we've reached what Easwaran calls Exercise Station 2: our workplace. We're going to pay special attention to the underlying mental "muscle group" here – the faculty of directing attention at will. When we are subject to rigid likes and dislikes, that faculty has gotten flabby and weak. Our attention is dragged helplessly into a tight focus on the things we like or dislike, leaving us unable to adapt to the changing, unpredictable demands life makes on us. By strengthening our ability to direct attention, we gain the strength to move freely, as Easwaran would say, amid difficult people like ourselves.

Reading

For most people, the place of work is Station 2: office, factory, school, wherever you have to work with other people. There too the story is the same, for you don't leave your dislikes at home. When you walk in, the receptionist is clipping her fingernails at her desk again, and somebody is sharpening his pencil with an unnerving rhythm. Even tiny things can irritate: "Why does he have to sharpen his pencil like that? Why does she have to clip her fingernails *now*?" I am not exaggerating. When likes and dislikes are allowed free rein, any little thing can be upsetting; clicking nail clippers can sound like castanets. What an exercise for training attention! If you can get your mind off the Spanish dancing and completely onto your work, the distractions will disappear and you will find you have reached a new level of willpower, concentration, and flexibility.

With practice we can learn not to be bothered by life's petty trials, which leaves us the vitality and resilience we need when the big trials come. We even have staying power left over when we go home. Then we can say, "Sure, the office was terrible. That's just why I want to show you how much I love you." Anyone who can say that will be cherished everywhere. Nothing can disturb such a person's love or loyalty.

A friend of mine worked for years as a machinist. Machine tool technology can bring together very disparate individuals, and Ed found the differences trying. I reminded him, "Differences are only natural where people work together. You don't come from the same place or share the same family background. You had different parents, grew up with different values, faced different challenges. You shouldn't be surprised to discover you have conflicting ways of doing things."

I called up what little I knew about machine work. "Don't you have a polisher there?" I asked. "Sure," said Ed. "Several of them."

When you go off to work tomorrow, don't tell Laurel you are going to fabricate flywheels. Say, "I'm off to do more polishing." That is one function of the workplace that people never think of: it is a place where you can smooth and polish the rough spots of your personality.

"Smooth and polish," of course, is a nice way of saying there is going to be abrasion. This is not pleasant, I agree. But it can be highly artistic once you get the hang of it. Isn't lens grinding an accomplished art? A skilled worker can polish a piece of glass into a precise, powerful lens. Similarly, meditation can shape and polish personality into a lens that concentrates and magnifies the greatest of human resources.

With everybody at work needing more polish, of course, the day is full of opportunities for exercise. If you want to see how your meditation is going, measure yourself against this course. You can draw up a checklist: Station 2, the switchboard operator; Station 3, the staff meeting; and so on through the day. When you make a harmless statement and your boss gets irritated, that is an exercise station. She doesn't want to be unkind, but the teeth of her mind are on edge. Snapping back at her is like lying down in front of the exercise sign and saying, "I can't do it!" You lose the opportunity to strengthen a particular muscle. If the exercise is stressful, that is precisely because you need it. As in physical fitness, you just work on it a little; soon you will be doing it effortlessly.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

At the beginning of this week's reading, Easwaran says, "When likes and dislikes are allowed free rein, any little thing can be upsetting; clicking nail clippers can sound like castanets. What an exercise for training attention! If you can get your mind off the Spanish dancing and completely onto your work, the distractions will disappear and you will find you have reached a new level of willpower, concentration, and flexibility."

Please reflect on your experience. Are there times when your attention is riveted like this on something that is annoying? It is very difficult at that time to withdraw attention from it. How might you use the Eight Points then as "first aid" to get free?

Elsewhere, Easwaran makes the interesting connection between such moments and the mind's tendency to dwell on pleasant things – things we like. When we indulge this habit, it weakens our capacity to deal with things we dislike. Where in your life might you spend less time and energy dwelling on the things you like? Which of the Eight Points would help you do that, and how?

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, read Chapter Five (Living in Freedom) in *Take Your Time*.
Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON FOUR

This week we conclude our study of Chapter Three of *Conquest of Mind*. Our theme is “Slimming the Ego.”

Reading

To judge from the best-seller lists, millions of people today are interested in slimming down parts of their anatomy. One advertisement proclaims, “A flat stomach is beautiful!” For me, a flat ego is beautiful. A big ego has sharp angles and corners that stick out everywhere; we cannot get near such a person without getting hurt. But when you have reduced the rough bulges of self-centeredness to the bare minimum, you can jog through the day without stress or effort. When you come to an exercise you do it smoothly and gracefully, bounce to your feet, and run on.

The more we indulge our personal demands, on the other hand, the fatter the ego grows. This fierce drive of self-will – *I must get what I want, I must have my way* – makes us insecure, disrupts our relationships, alienates others, and lowers our self-esteem. Anybody who expects people to let him have his own way is going to have a miserable time in personal relationships. Even where beauty is concerned, I would say it is much more important to have a flat ego than to flatten any part of the body.

The exercise for reducing the ego is simple: put the welfare of others before your own. Pay more attention to their needs. In other words, go against self-will. Isn't that what reducing means? After all, if you have put on extra pounds through overeating, you don't expect to lose weight by eating more. You do the opposite. Similarly, when your needs conflict with those of others, the exercise is to try to look on their needs as your own. Often you will discover that it costs you nothing to yield – except, of course, your ego's gnashing of teeth. Let them gnash. You are growing, gaining great strength for facing challenges more worthy of your steel.

I always try to make clear that this does not mean making yourself a doormat, saying yes to anything people say or do. Putting the welfare of other people first is not the same as doing whatever they want. If someone close to you wants something that is in no one's best interests, or something which you feel is wrong, it is necessary to say no, respectfully but firmly. The point of this exercise is not to weaken good judgment but to reduce self-will: to become more sensitive to others' needs and less insistent about our own, which often turn out to be only rigid likes and dislikes in disguise.

For the adventurous, here is a special exercise for trimming away self-will: don't spend time only with people you like. Now and then, take a walk with someone you dislike; take that person to lunch. And don't always talk to the same people at work; cultivate relationships with everybody. You will be expanding your consciousness, pushing the frontiers of your world outward.

In every fitness program, of course, it is stick-to-itiveness that counts. You get nowhere if you exercise by fits and starts. Don't go out one day and do a lot of exercises, then get depressed the next day, go to bed, and skip the program completely. Keep on exercising, whether it feels good or not. That is how you develop a fit will and a svelte, attractive personality.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

The DVD we'll watch this week brings out the connection between self-will and anger. Easwaran speaks about monitoring our SWQ – self-will quotient. Please reflect on this concept, and see if you can identify the ways in which you might be increasing your SWQ by giving in to your likes and dislikes. How might this increase the likelihood that you will get angry? What opportunities do you have in your life to reduce your SWQ, and “slim down” your self-will? Which one opportunity might you start with?

Watching the Talk

When it's time for inspiration, read the introduction below and watch the second talk on this DVD, “Transforming Anger into Kindness.” Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

This month we have discussed the idea of “reject thoughts” – those thoughts which we'd rather live without. In this talk, Easwaran is focusing especially on one sort of reject thoughts – angry ones. He starts with the insight that anger is its own penalty, and he points out some of the less obvious forms of anger, such as the perception that others are hostile to us, or the inability to appreciate others.

Then he goes on to look closely at the anger process, as if beneath a microscope. He traces the roots of anger to what he calls inflated self-will – the thought that we must have our way no matter how it affects others. When self-will is inflated, it can't help but be violated, bringing anger. So reducing self-will is a key to being free from anger, which is very important for health and happiness.

Now we often hear the objection, “But how is it possible to be happy if I'm denying myself all the time?” In answer, Easwaran gives a wonderful account of how he

finds happiness in the happiness of others – in this case the cows and other animals that enjoy the coming of the November rains. He also treats another objection: “So if we don’t lash out at people, how do we deal with situations where others are taking advantage of us?” And finally he returns to our theme of training: “every opportunity for facing anger can be used exactly as an opportunity for training.”

Incidentally, you will note that Easwaran refers to jumping on a trampoline. For a time one of his forms of exercise was jogging in place on a rebounder.

Finally, since this talk is actually a continuation of the one you watched in week 1, it begins by repeating Easwaran’s opening lines from the first half.

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