

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

29

Inner Freedom & Beauty
Finding Unity in Personal Relationships

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 e-mail 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

With this month's study of Chapter Five in *Conquest of Mind*, we are entering deeper waters. Our curriculum will give us a chance to reflect on who we really are and what our real nature is, deep beneath the surface of consciousness. The central image of this chapter is the lake of the mind. When the mind is agitated, swirling and heaving like a lake on a windy day, we see nothing but the fragmented surface of life. But as the mind calms down and the waves get smaller, we begin to see through the waves to catch little glimpses of our deeper Self. Our emphasis this month will be on reducing the waves of agitation in our mind, with the goal of getting acquainted with some of the hidden spiritual riches of our true Self.

Reading

My friends' children have been learning to swim, and throughout the summer I received glowing reports about how well they were doing. At the beginning, I remember, the children themselves turned in a very different story. "Just looking at all that water makes me scared," they told me. "I'll never be able to swim!" They believed that, and they acted on it. When their parents drove them into town for lessons, there was wailing and gnashing of teeth all along the road.

Now these same children have invited me to preside over their graduation from swimming school. They look forward to coming to the pool now; they swim back and forth, play games underwater, even dive in the deep end. This did not come about overnight. It came through hard work, under the guidance of a good swimming teacher who knows just how to demonstrate the strokes and skills she wants her pupils to develop.

The transformation starts in the "kiddie pool," where drowning is difficult even if you have a talent for it. There the children learn to duck their heads under the water and hold their breath. They learn to blow bubbles. They hold on to the side and learn to kick.

Finally comes time for the big pool, of which they are scared stiff. This is only natural; after all, the water is over their heads. To their vivid imaginations, drowning is too distinct a possibility to ignore, lifeguard or no lifeguard. And it looks so far from one side to the other!

Partly they are persuaded into the water; partly, I suspect, they are pushed. They feel this is a monstrous unkindness. "We're land creatures," they want to argue. "Why should we learn to get along in an alien element?" That is a logical question.

But after a while, through guidance and experience, they lose that fear of the water. Now they are at home in the pool.

We accept this as a natural part of a child's education. Learning to do stunts in the water is part of growing up.

If we never get the opportunity to see somebody do such wonderful things in the mental world, it is mainly because our civilization offers no real facilities for training the mind. But with the right training, any of us can learn to be at home in the world of the mind, just as those children learned to be at home in the water.

Classical Indian mysticism compares the mind to a lake, which for most of us is continually lashed into waves by the winds of emotional stimulus and response. The real storm winds are four: anger, fear, greed, and self-will. One or another is generally blowing; if it's not the southerly, it's a nor'wester. As a result, the water is in a constant state of agitation. Even when the surface appears calm, murky currents are stirring underneath.

Through meditation and the other powerful allied disciplines, however, the lake of the mind can be made absolutely clear. When not even a ripple disturbs the surface, you can look into the crystal waters of the mind and see the very bottom: the divine ground of existence which is the basis of our personality.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Sri Easwaran speaks of four winds that disturb the surface of our consciousness. Please take no more than five minutes to reflect on the past week, and note three things that agitated your mind. Simply write them down without comment, and make a brief note of which of the four "winds" – anger, fear, greed, or self-will – was blowing most fiercely at the time. Be sure not to take longer than five minutes for this part of the exercise.

Then go on to the second part of the exercise, which is just as important. Write your mantram for five minutes. Concentrate on the mantram and don't dwell on the things that agitated you. If this exercise appeals to you, you can do it once a day for the next two weeks. It's important not to dwell on the causes of agitation, as that will defeat the purpose of the exercise. Rather, keep your focus on the mantram and treat the agitating thoughts and memories as distractions.

What results do you note from this experiment? If you were to do it regularly, how might it help you develop a calmer, healthier attitude toward the things that agitate you? How might you become more adept at noticing agitation as it first starts, and applying the mantram to it?

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read the rest of Chapter Five.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

This month, we are studying Chapter Five in *Conquest of Mind*, with a special focus on reducing agitation in the mind. Our goal is to gain a deeper understanding of who we really are. Last week, we worked at identifying the causes of agitation, and used the mantram to reduce their effect. We'll repeat that experiment this week, and examine some of the ways we can reduce the agitation that arises due to surface differences between ourselves and others.

Reading

Classical Indian mysticism compares the mind to a lake, which for most of us is continually lashed into waves by the winds of emotional stimulus and response. The real storm winds are four: anger, fear, greed, and self-will. One or another is generally blowing; if it's not the southerly, it's a nor'wester. As a result, the water is in a constant state of agitation. Even when the surface appears calm, murky currents are stirring underneath.

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Christian mystics call this center of personality "the Christ within." In Sanskrit it is called simply Atman, "Self." But the Buddha did not even go that far. He made no attempt at all to tell us what we shall see there. Always practical, he leaves the labels to us; his job is to get us to make the discovery ourselves. "You don't have to accept anybody's word for this," he would say. "Dive deep and see for yourself what you find."

Despite all the words that scholars have written on this subject, we can understand this supreme discovery only when we experience it ourselves. This is the great paradox of

mysticism: until you enter nirvana, to use the Buddha's term, you will not be able to understand what nirvana is.

We can get an intriguing clue, however, through this image of the lake of the mind, which fits well with the Buddha's concept of consciousness. On the surface level of awareness, everyone seems separate. We look different, wear different clothes, have different speech patterns, different ambitions, different conditioning. This is the physical level of awareness, below which the vast majority of us cannot see because of the agitation of the mind.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Sri Easwaran says that the agitation of the mind keeps us from seeing beneath the fragmented surface of life, in which all of us appear separate. Separateness gives rise to various negative traits, such as jealousy, competitiveness, lack of understanding, and impatience. Let's repeat the exercise we did last week, but aim it this time specifically at the agitation that arises from a fragmented vision of life:

Please take five minutes (not more!) to reflect on the past week, and note one or two instances of separateness – such as disagreement or jealousy or mistrust – that agitated your mind. Simply write them down without comment. Be sure not to take longer than five minutes for this part of the exercise. It's fine to take less than five minutes.

Then go on to the second part of the exercise, which is just as important. Write your mantram for five minutes, letting go of all thought of the things that agitated you. If it appeals to you, you can do this exercise once a day. It's important not to dwell on the causes of agitation, as that will defeat the purpose. Rather, keep your focus on the mantram and treat the agitating thoughts and memories as distractions.

When we become aware of the discomfort that comes with a feeling of separateness from others, it can motivate us to let go of that separateness. What are some practical ways in which you've used the Eight Points to overcome separateness and draw closer to others? How might you use them more effectively?

Watching the Talk

When it's time for inspiration, please read the following introduction and watch the first talk on this DVD: *Inner Freedom and Beauty*.

In this talk, Easwaran shows how the Buddha questioned the standard assumptions of his day, and turned them into tools for teaching us that it's not what we wear or how we look that counts, but how we think and live. He outlines some of the stages in developing this awareness. First, we develop detachment by learning to respond freely, with equanimity, no matter what happens. This freedom brings us the ability to love deeply and well. From love comes a beauty that is not affected by outward changes. Finally, we find the ultimate freedom, which he speaks about at the end of the talk: we get free from our *samskaras* – the conditioned patterns of thought and habit which affect not only our mind but even our body.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

LESSON THREE

Note to coordinators of spiritual fellowship groups: You may want to ask members to bring their copies of God Makes the Rivers to Flow to this meeting, since the discussion period includes reference to that book.

This month we are studying Chapter Five of *Conquest of Mind*. For the past two weeks we have concentrated on reducing the agitation that arises due to negative forces in our life. Now we shift our focus to the calming effect of positive forces. We'll reflect this week on the goal we're moving towards – becoming aware of the unity of life.

Reading

Just below the surface is the level of personal, individual consciousness, a comparatively shallow region which is easily stirred by the winds of sense impressions and emotions. The more physically oriented we are – that is, the more we identify with our bodies and feelings – the more caught up we will be in this mind-world of constantly changing forms. In this state it can be quite a chore to get close to other people; all our awareness is caught in the things that make us seem separate from them and unique. Their differences seem to keep getting in our way.

Underlying this level, largely unsuspected, is what the Buddha calls *alaya-vijnana*: “storehouse consciousness,” the depths of the collective unconscious. There is only

one alaya-vijnana; at bottom, everyone's unconscious is one and the same. The deeper we get, the more clearly we shall see that our differences with others are superficial, and that ninety-nine percent of what we are is the same for all.

To the extent that we can turn our back on our petty, private mind-world and learn to dive into deeper consciousness, we can free ourselves from the influence of the storms that stir up those shallow waters at the surface. At the same time, as we get deeper, we move closer and closer to other people; we feel closer to life as a whole. This, in effect, is what learning to swim in the unconscious is all about.

I have read of people who can race along on a Harley-Davidson and leap over a row of cars. This is an accomplishment, I agree. It requires daring, training, and resolution. But of what real use is it? By contrast, with that same kind of daring, you can learn to go deep-sea diving in the fathomless lake of the mind. In our contemporary world, when most people, I think, feel helplessly at sea, this is a vital gift. When you master it, your life becomes a beacon that others can follow.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Easwaran is pointing us toward an experience of unity: "The deeper we get, the more clearly we shall see that our differences with others are superficial, and that ninety-nine percent of what we are is the same for all."

Think of some instances in your life when you and others seemed united. How did the state of your mind add to this? At what times in your life do you feel most united with others? At what times do you feel most united within yourself? Choose an inspirational passage from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* that embodies that experience for you. See below for a selection to start with.

How can you use the Eight Points to bring more of such unity to your day? In particular, how might One-Pointed Attention help? Easwaran has said that finding unity within – by unifying our attention – helps us find it outside as well, among the people in our life. Have you noticed that dynamic? Can you give examples? Take a look at your life and note where you fragment your attention – by doing two things at a time, for example, or by quickly alternating between several different tasks. How might that fragmentation of attention make it harder to feel unity with others? How might splitting attention agitate the mind? Where might you start to unify your attention?

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read the following passages from the new (third) edition of *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*:

Let Me Walk in Beauty (p. 188)
Simple Union (p. 170)
The Real Lovers of God (p. 148)
You Must Forget Yourself in Prayer (p. 61)
Epistle on Love (p. 140)
Duties of the Heart (p. 154)
Finding Unity (p. 145)
United in Heart (p. 102)

In a spiritual fellowship group, you may want to ask members to read aloud the passage they selected during the discussion period.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

LESSON FOUR

This week we complete our study of Chapter Five in *Conquest of Mind*. We have been exploring how agitation in the mind keeps us from seeing our deeper identity — our true Self, which is one with all life. Last week we discussed ways to draw closer to that ideal of unity. This week we'll focus on how we might live it out better in our relationships, thereby calming the waves of the mind.

Reading

The mind, of course, has been the subject of very serious study. But from the point of view of spiritual psychology, how can we expect to understand the mind by using the same methods we use to study the physical universe? The very concept of entering the unconscious while conscious is beyond the scope of our imagination. We identify ourselves with the mind, so how can we expect to study it objectively? As long as we believe we are the mind, we take for granted that we can find fulfillment by catering to its demands and living for its private satisfactions. And as long as we remain at the surface like this, we can never see through the mind clearly. We have little choice but to be tossed about like a toy boat in its fierce storms.

But we can learn a different perspective. In meditation we discover that we are not the mind. It is an inner world of its own, an environment we can learn to move through. Just as those children now go to the pool with eagerness on their faces, when I find tempests rising in the mind I have learned to swim with joy. I can dive to the bottom and bring up pearls, the infinite inner resources that are the legacy of us all. Instead of feeling threatened by adverse circumstances, I can remain calm and help to change those circumstances. Instead of moving away from difficult people I can actually enjoy their company, move closer to them, and win them over.

This vast treasury is within the reach of all. Sri Ramakrishna, one of the greatest mystics India has ever produced, sang ecstatically of what waits to be discovered at the seabed of consciousness:

Dive deep, O mind, dive deep
In the Ocean of God's Beauty;
If you descend to the uttermost depths,
There you will find the gem of Love. . . .

Once we have learned to dive deep in meditation, there is no end to the resources we can bring to our daily life; there is no challenge we will be unable to meet. Each morning we can descend to the depths and gather armloads of precious jewels: breathtaking gems of love and wisdom, lustrous pearls of patience and compassion. We can distribute them freely, knowing we have an infinite inheritance from which to draw every day.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In this reading, Easwaran mentions one of his favorite strategies for affirming the unity of life: “Instead of moving away from difficult people I can actually enjoy their company, move closer to them, and win them over.” This is indeed a terribly demanding art — one that should not be leapt into without care and preparation. In fact, we will concentrate this week only on the first of these challenging assignments: enjoying the company of difficult people.

One of the major obstacles to enjoying the company of people who “go against our grain” is that their very presence (or even the thought of them!) agitates our mind. Therefore, this is a good opportunity to apply the skill we polished in the first two lessons: repeating the mantram to calm agitation. You may want to try the following exercise. Write the name of the person you're having difficulties with at the top of a page. Then take a few minutes to write down the person's good qualities, or things that this person has done to help you or others in the past. Now write your mantram on the rest of the page. This exercise gives you a chance to “re-engineer” your response to that person in private, before the agitation stirred by their presence makes it harder to concentrate.

In what other ways have you used the Eight Points to change your attitude towards difficult people in your life? On what occasions are you a “difficult person” and how might you change that? How might you better live out the vision of unity described in your meditation passages?

How might you keep your attention unified – not speeded up or agitated – when in the presence of difficult people? One strategy that Easwaran recommends in this week’s talk is to listen attentively to what the other person says, even if it may be a criticism of you or your opinions. Have you tried to do this? How did it feel while you did it? And how did it feel afterwards? What role did concentration play?

Watching the Talk

When it’s time for inspiration, please watch the second talk on the DVD, *Finding Unity in Personal Relationships*.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

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