

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

30

The Spiritual Fight
Seeing Life Clearly

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

In last month's lessons, we pondered two ancient spiritual questions: Who are we? And what is it that keeps us from realizing our true nature? This month we continue that inquiry, with a special focus on the most persistent and challenging of spiritual obstacles: negative thinking. Sri Easwaran will analyze, precisely and practically, the habitual thought patterns that cause most of the trouble in our lives. Guided by his analysis, we will delve into techniques for improving our practice of the most important tool for self-discovery: meditation.

This week's reading, drawn from Chapter Six of *Conquest of Mind*, suggests that progress in meditation is very closely tied to our attitude towards ourselves and others. We can lift up and ennoble that attitude through little choices throughout the day, and, in so doing, leave behind a swarm of unwanted distractions in meditation.

Reading

"I try hard in meditation," people sometimes tell me. "I have thirty minutes in the morning and thirty more in the evening, and I really give it my best. But I don't seem to be able to go deeper. What can I do?"

"If you are trying consistently to concentrate on the inspirational passage during those thirty minutes," I reply, "you are doing very well. But if you want to dive deep, you have to give your best during the times that you're not meditating too. It is not only during meditation that we make progress in training the mind, but also during the rest of the day."

Once we get beneath the surface of the mind, we begin to see that there is a very close connection between the kinds of distractions we have in meditation and the kinds of problems we face in daily living. It is these problems that prevent us from diving into deeper levels of consciousness. They are both internal and external. They arise in the mind, and we encounter them there in meditation; but because they shape our actions, we also encounter them during the day in a hundred and one disguises.

Sri Aurobindo, one of twentieth-century India's most luminous figures, has a good motto for reminding us of this: "All life is yoga." Every moment, he means, is an opportunity for training the mind.

The explanation of this is simple. Every moment, from the time we get up in the morning until we go to bed, we have a choice: to give our attention to ourselves, or to give it to those around us. If we indulge ourselves during the day, we should

not be surprised to find strong distractions in meditation the next morning. On the other hand, if we reduce the number of things we do just to please ourselves, distractions will be fewer and concentration deeper.

I would go so far as to say that dwelling on oneself is the root cause of most personal problems. The more preoccupied we become with our private fears, resentments, memories, and cravings, the more power they have over our attention. When we sit down to meditate, we cannot get our mind off ourselves. With practice, however, we can learn to pay more and more attention to the needs of others – and this carries over directly into meditation. Less self-centered thinking means fewer distractions, a clearer mind, fewer outgoing thoughts to impede our gathering absorption as meditation deepens.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Easwaran is making a clear connection between self-centered thinking and our problems – both external and internal. He says, “I would go so far as to say that dwelling on oneself is the root cause of most personal problems.”

If you give it some thought, this analysis is rather surprising. Most of us, if asked to identify the root cause of any particular problem, would probably blame it either on someone else, or upon ourselves. What Easwaran is suggesting here is that neither we nor others are the root cause of most problems. Rather, it is self-centered thinking: “The more preoccupied we become with our private fears, resentments, memories, and cravings, the more power they have over our attention.”

Please reflect on your daily thinking patterns and come up with a few small examples of this kind of self-centered thinking. Try not to see this pattern as something personal, but as a mental habit, something that can be changed with practice. In what ways might such self-centered thinking cause distractions in meditation and other problems? How might you use the Eight Points to modify that thinking habit? What effect might that change have on your meditation? Is there a particular inspirational passage or book of spiritual inspiration that might provide a model for this change? (For instance, the second stanza of the Saint Francis prayer has helped many people overcome self-centered thinking.)

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read all of Chapter Six in *Conquest of Mind*.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

In this week's reading from *Conquest of Mind*, Sri Easwaran takes us deeper, below the level of garden-variety distractions that arise in the first few years of meditation to the "really big fights" that meditators face when they dedicate themselves sincerely to daily practice.

It's important to remind ourselves here that great practical benefits accompany this struggle to master the "powerful currents of negative thinking that swirl deep in the unconscious mind." As we gradually leave behind the self-centered thinking that creates distractions in our meditation, we also leave behind many of our problems. Relationships improve; we feel more secure and vital; we gain a new sense of meaning in life. With these positive changes, our confidence grows and we dare to hope that we can transform long-standing patterns of negative thinking that have hemmed us in for years.

After years of practice, there may come a time when the clouds of daily distractions part for just a moment, and offer us a glimpse of the abiding peace and love that is our birthright. It is then that this spiritual fight to dispel the darkness and reclaim our true Self becomes attractive to us, even urgent.

Reading

No one begins to meditate without a mind full of distractions. "The mind is restless, turbulent, powerful, violent," says the Bhagavad Gita. "Trying to control it is like trying to tame the wind." So when somebody complains to me about meditation being difficult, my only consolation is, "Just wait. It's going to get a lot harder." Gaining control over one's own mind is the most difficult task a human being can undertake. All this preliminary sparring with distractions in meditation is to prepare us for the really big fights to come, when we struggle to transform the powerful currents of negative thinking that swirl deep in the unconscious mind.

This is a miraculous achievement, but there is no miracle about how it is accomplished. It requires a lot of hard work. When your meditation is progressing well, if your mind goes into a negative mood – about yourself, about your problems, about other people, about the state of the world – you should be able to switch your attention away from the negative and focus it on the positive. By doing this over and over again, you can reach a state in which negative thoughts cannot even appear on the scene. Then your behavior is always kind, your words are always helpful, and your life becomes a positive influence on all.

This lofty achievement, of course, is slow in coming. After the honeymoon with meditation is over, people often tell me, “I have more trouble with my mind now than I did when I started. Am I going backwards?”

“No,” I reassure them. “It is possible to go sideways in meditation, but not backwards.” Then I explain what is probably happening. In the early stages, all of us have a thousand little imps of distraction dancing around. As we move into deeper levels of awareness, this number is reduced to two or three; but then they are no longer imps. They are big, burly distractions, waiting for an opportunity to knock us to the floor.

This may sound bad, but it is really an encouraging development. When you have a thousand imps hitting you from all sides, how do you guard yourself? It is much better to have one big distraction right up front. It may be Goliath, but at least you know what you are dealing with, and you can train yourself to deal with it too.

These big fellows are not really distractions. They are *samskaras*: deep, conditioned tendencies to particular ways of thinking and acting, usually negative or self-willed, which have been dug in the mind through many years of repeating the same thought over and over.

Most of us, for example, have an anger *samskara*: an automatic response to want to lash out at others or ourselves when things do not go our way. At critical moments like these, it can be most helpful to remember that the disturbance has little to do with, say, whether someone took our parking place or we had to wait in line at the grocery store. Beneath every separate incident of anger, resentment, hostility, and irritation lies a single reflex in the mind which says, “I don’t like this! Hit back.”

Greed – not only for money but for material possessions, for pleasure, for power – is another root *samskara* in the deeper consciousness of us all. It may show itself in different ways, but the drive is the same: we feel incomplete, so we try to manipulate things and people to get what we can to fill the vacuum inside us.

As meditation deepens we begin to recognize these ways of thinking in ourselves, and it may seem as if meditation has brought them on. I can assure you, they have been there all along; we simply haven’t noticed them. Only as the mind begins to clear can we look down through the glass-bottomed boat that is meditation and see these monsters lurking below.

When we find ourselves face to face with a *samskara* in meditation, there is no need to get rattled or try to run away. This is what you have been training for. A kind of Madison Square Garden has been rented in the mind, and we are in the

ring. Every morning's meditation begins another round. But to win, we have to carry the fight out of meditation and into daily living. Samskaras may originate in the mind, but they express themselves in words and actions. To oppose them, we have to learn not to act on them – not to do what our compulsions demand.

This is terribly difficult; otherwise, a compulsion would not be a compulsion. But there is Job's consolation in knowing that we cannot run away. We may want to jump out of the ring and make for Brooklyn, but there is no Brooklyn in the mind. The samskara is inside us; wherever we go, it has to follow. Even if we refuse to fight, the Bhagavad Gita says, our very nature will impel us into situations where we have no choice. When we are against the ropes with a burly samskara and cannot escape, reason and self-respect agree: Why not make a good job of it and try to win?

Whatever romantic notions we may have about spiritual growth, it never really happens in a short time. Like the Thirty Years' War, this war within goes on and on. There is so much to transform! Naturally there come times when the mind gets tired and complains. "Why not call it off for a while?" This cannot be done. Once we come face to face with a samskara in deeper consciousness, we are in the ring with it until we win. As my grandmother used to tell me, "The Lord will never put on your shoulders even one pound more than you can bear. But," she would always add, "you will never have to carry one pound less, either." Otherwise we would not grow.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In this reading, Easwaran is presenting samskaras as firmly entrenched habits of negative thinking, and he suggests that meditation will gradually bring us the capacity to transform these negative thoughts into positive ones: "When your meditation is progressing well, if your mind goes into a negative mood – about yourself, about your problems, about other people, about the state of the world – you should be able to switch your attention away from the negative and focus it on the positive."

Whether we are dealing with surface distractions or with the deepest samskaras, all that is required of us is this effort to transform negative to positive.

What does this mean in daily life? When we switch our attention away from the negative and focus it on the positive, how does that help us and others? In many places, Easwaran emphasizes that this positive focus is not a "Pollyanna" approach in which we neglect to deal with negative situations. Rather, it is a constructive approach. Reflect on your experience. Are there some situations that would benefit if you paid more attention to the positive? How might

you do that, using the Eight Points? In what way would you need to be careful not to “gloss over” problems, but to deal with them both positively and constructively?

Watching the Talk

When it's time for inspiration, please read the following introduction and watch the first talk on the DVD, “The Spiritual Fight.”

Easwaran is commenting on the last chapter of the Dhammapada, in which the Buddha tells us to cross the river bravely – to face and overcome our inner obstacles on the path of *sadhana*, or spiritual practice. A person who practices spiritual disciplines is considered a *sadhak*.

Later in the talk, Easwaran presents the tools we need most for this difficult challenge. He says that meditation is a tool for giving us accurate long-distance vision – to understand the long-term consequences of our attitudes and actions. That gives us motivation to change our *samskaras*, our ingrained negative habits. And the mantram helps us to make day-to-day improvements in those attitudes by giving us access to deeper consciousness.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

LESSON THREE

This week we are continuing our study of Chapter Six in *Conquest of Mind*, in which Sri Easwaran is examining the interior obstacles – called samskaras – that keep us from knowing ourselves as we really are.

In this lesson we'll focus especially on how samskaras affect our vision – the way we see ourselves and others. As meditation deepens and we learn to look past our conditioning to glimpse the best in ourselves and others, a world of new possibilities opens before us.

Reading

Eventually, we are trying to extend the influence of morning meditation until it becomes like a thread running through the day. Then there is a continuous connection between meditation and daily living. The timeless values on which we are meditating begin to transform every word and action. And in turn, meditation improves. When we try to show goodwill to everyone, to work harmoniously even with those from whom we differ, we find to our delight that meditation deepens swiftly.

Samskaras have a way of fogging vision so that what we want looks like what is really best, and what is right looks out of the question. In this kind of fog everyone needs a friend with clear vision who can block the path to disaster and say no. That is one function of a spiritual teacher.

In the countryside where I live there is a long road consisting mostly of bumps and potholes. On one side is what appears to be solid ground, covered by tall grass and California poppies. Actually all this growth conceals a deep ditch, which might qualify for the *Guinness Book of Records* for the number of cars, trucks, and even tractors that have fallen into it and had to be hauled out. One friend of mine got concerned about this and posted a discreet sign that said euphemistically, “Soft Shoulder.” But vehicles kept buttressing the Guinness claim. After a year or so, my friend dropped the euphemisms and delicate lettering. Now there is a big sign that warns clearly, “DITCH!”

A samskara is not a soft shoulder; it is a deep ditch. If we get stuck in one – an addiction, a recurring personal problem, a compulsive relationship – we should count ourselves fortunate to be hauled out, even if the price is heavy. And if someone we know is about to fall into a ditch like this, it is not very loving to say, “Well, if I were you I’d consider changing my direction. But I don’t want to infringe on your freedom of choice.” It is not much of a sign of friendship just to say “Good

luck!” and offer the address of a good garage. Even if the other person will not speak to us for a week or so, we should have enough love in our hearts to block his way. Then we can offer support while helping him to correct his negative samskara – not by preaching, but by our own example.

Here we encounter an interesting quirk of human nature: often the things we want most to correct in others are things we do ourselves. I hear both sides of this in my privileged role as spiritual teacher. A friend will come and confide to me, “That Eunice is so unkind! You’ll never believe what she just said to me.” I reply gently, “Do you remember when we met Eunice at the Bijou last month? That is just the way you talked to *her*.”

Sooner or later, the Buddha would say, the way we behave to others has to come back to us. That is the meaning of that much-misunderstood phrase “the law of karma.” If we want people to be kind, the very best way is to learn to respond to others’ needs exactly as if they were our own. No one likes to be treated rudely, to be rushed or belittled or ignored. Everyone appreciates patience, kindness, forgiveness, and respect.

As we practice this, we forget ourselves little by little – our problems, our little personal desires, our conveniences, our opinions – not only during the day but in meditation too. Then, when we sit down to meditate, there are no more distractions about our income tax or the letter we owe Aunt Julie. “Like bees returning to the hive,” Saint Teresa of Avila says beautifully, “which shut themselves up to work at making honey,” all our thoughts gather on the words of the meditation passage and remain absorbed there, deepening our awareness for the day to come.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In this reading, Easwaran makes a provocative statement about the way we see life: “Samskaras have a way of fogging vision so that what we want looks like what is really best, and what is right looks out of the question.”

Have you observed this dynamic in yourself? Remember the definition of two major samskaras that we read last week:

“Most of us have an anger samskara: an automatic response to want to lash out at others or ourselves when things do not go our way. At critical moments like these, it can be most helpful to remember that the disturbance has little to do with, say, whether someone took our parking place or we had to wait in line at the grocery

store. Beneath every separate incident of anger, resentment, hostility, and irritation lies a single reflex in the mind which says, 'I don't like this! Hit back.'

"Greed – not only for money but for material possessions, for pleasure, for power – is another root samskara in the deeper consciousness of us all. It may show itself in different ways, but the drive is the same: we feel incomplete, so we try to manipulate things and people to get what we can to fill the vacuum inside us."

Have you noticed the action of these samskaras in yourself and others? When they are active, how do they affect your vision? How can you use the Eight Points to free yourself of their influence and clear your vision?

Watching the Talk

When it's time for inspiration, please read the following introduction and watch the second of the two talks on the DVD, "Seeing Life Clearly."

In the reading we are studying this month, Easwaran says that we can deepen our meditation by reducing the degree to which we dwell on ourselves. In tonight's talk, he's giving us a careful exploration of how we can do that by learning to see life clearly.

This talk was given on the occasion of the Buddha's birthday. So Easwaran takes up several of the points of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, especially:

Right Understanding: seeing life as it is, so that we can have rich, permanent relationships based on true understanding.

Right Purpose: having a high spiritual purpose to help us make wise decisions.

Right Speech: learning to speak in a way that is pleasing to the ear and pleasing to the heart.

During the talk, Easwaran refers to a South Indian dance concert he had attended in Berkeley the night before with many of his friends.

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

LESSON FOUR

In this week's reading we return to the main theme of Chapter Six in *Conquest of Mind*: every activity in our day has a role to play in deepening our spiritual life.

Sri Easwaran's path is one of active engagement with the world around us, contributing our best to family, workplace, community, and world, while maintaining a calm center within, peaceful and friendly even under trying circumstances. One of the vital necessities for such a life is sound rest and deep meditation. In this last part of the chapter, Easwaran draws a portrait of a truly restorative evening and night, which soothes the heart and inspires the mind, preparing us for the next morning's meditation and a fulfilling day to follow. In our reflection questions, we'll give some thought to how we can establish such a haven of well-being in our daily schedule.

Reading

The thread of meditation running through your day can be extended into the evening too. If you want to go forward even in your sleep, I can share a secret which I learned over a period of ardent experimentation. Have your evening meditation reasonably early so that you have time for half an hour or so of spiritual reading before you go to sleep. And choose your reading carefully. It should be positive, strengthening, and inspiring, and it should be more than just good literature or philosophy; it should be a piece of scripture which you respond to deeply, or writing stamped with the personal experience of a great mystic. Read a little, slowly and reflectively, giving the words a chance to sink deep into your consciousness. Then put the book aside, turn out the light, and fall asleep repeating your mantram: *Jesus Jesus, Rama Rama, Barukh attah Adonai*, whatever it may be.

It may take time, but gradually this sequence of meditation, spiritual reading, and falling asleep in the mantram will become a smooth current that goes on flowing in consciousness even while you sleep. As meditation deepens, you may find you have a remarkable night life. You may hear the words of your meditation passages reverberating in your mind, or hear the mantram being sung with a kind of unearthly beauty. You may dream of what you have been reading: you may see Saint Francis, for example, in your dreams, strengthening your heart or giving some practical advice. All this can be deeply inspiring, as if you had actually been in Saint Francis's holy company or heard the words of the Shema from the lips of Moses himself.

Even the kind of night we have, then, is of our own choice. If you have been kind throughout the day, turning your back when necessary on personal likes and dis-

likes, and then given your best in meditation and fallen asleep in the mantram, you will go forward even while you sleep. Even in sleep we can be shaping our lives!

In this way, with meditation and daily living supporting each other, your spiritual growth will be swift and sure.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

This portrait of an ideal evening routine is very inviting, but can seem like a distant dream for anyone with a busy life and many responsibilities. It is rarely successful to try to change one's evening routine all at once. Rather, as Easwaran often said, it's best to start *poco a poco*, little by little.

If you were to change one small part of your daily routine to make such an evening possible, what would it be? In the long run, where in your life might you apply the discipline of Slowing Down, so that you'd have more time for such evenings? Right now, your life may be too busy to contemplate a major change in your level of activity, but there might be a time in the future when that would be more possible. What might you do to prepare yourself for such a time, using the Eight Points?

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read Chapter Ten of *The Mantram Handbook*, "The Goal of Life."

Conclude with thirty minutes of meditation.

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