

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

32

Ease and Dis-ease
Charles the Cat

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 BMC M 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.

Note to BMCM Fellowship Group coordinators: In the first and last lessons of this curriculum, the reflection exercise includes the choice of a meditation passage from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*. You may want to let members of your Fellowship Group know to bring their copy of that book to those meetings.

If you are not currently a member of a Fellowship Group and would like information on joining one in your area, please visit www.nilgiri.org/fellowship

LESSON ONE

With this month's curriculum, the eighth in our series, we begin the second of the two major parts of our course. During the first seven months we honed our Eight Point Program skills, concentrating on the daily challenges of training the mind. For the remaining five months we will turn our attention to the overarching quest of the spiritual life: the transformation of personality – learning the art of changing ourselves, from the inside out.

The final paragraph of the chapter we will be studying serves as an ideal introduction to our lessons:

Of all that is wonderful in the human being, our most glorious asset is this capacity to change ourselves. Nothing is more significant. I admire the achievements of science, but I do not feel intimidated by the current conviction that we are what our genes are. My body is what my genes make it, but my character and behavior are not fixed by my genetic code. As proof we have the lives of great men and women of all religions who have thrown these claims to the winds with their personal transformations – from angry to compassionate, from insecure to unshakable, from human to divine. The message of their lives echoes down the corridors of time to those who have ears to hear: “You are not what your body is. Your real nature is spirit, which nothing can diminish or deny.” Whatever our past, whatever our present, all of us have the capacity to change ourselves completely through the practice of meditation.

Reading

“Like a ball batted back and forth,” says an ancient text called the Yogabindu Upanishad, “a human being is batted by two forces within”: one, the upward drive to evolve into spiritual beings; the other, the fierce downward thrust of our past conditioning as separate, self-oriented, physical creatures.

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit here is “like a ball hit by a stick held in the hand.” I don't have any idea what game the sages of ancient India had been watching, but I think tennis fits the verse perfectly. Millions of people have taken to this sport in the past few years, so it seems a natural one to use to bring this image to life.

Imagine a match between two gentlemen players who are probably among the best the game has seen: Bjorn Borg on the one side and Ivan Lendl on the other. Bjorn

caught my imagination when he came out of nowhere to win the French Open at the age of eighteen, and he has been a favorite of mine ever since. I like his manner on the court, and he has a precious quality that would serve him well if he took to meditation: like Gandhi, he is at his best when things are going against him. And Ivan Lendl, who comes from Czechoslovakia, is a serious young man with some of the most powerful strokes I have seen. One athlete reportedly asked a friend of Ivan's, "I've got to play against him; what do you suggest?" The friend replied, "A bulletproof vest."

Imagine being a tennis ball played by these two strong champions – Lendl, whose shots must travel at more than a hundred miles per hour, and Borg, who strings his racquets so taut that at night he is sometimes awakened by the *ping!* as the strings snap spontaneously under the strain. Every one of us, this ancient text says, is being played like this twenty-four hours a day back and forth between two opposing inner forces. Here are Ivan on one side of the court and Bjorn on the other, enjoying themselves immensely, yelling to each other, "Hit him for all you're worth; I'll slam the poor fellow back!"

This inner tension is our evolutionary heritage. It reflects our divided nature as human beings: partly physical, essentially spiritual, constantly pulled in two conflicting directions. If this sounds bad, it is actually quite positive. For if one of these players will not let us alone, neither will the other. Built into our very nature is an inner drive that will not let us be satisfied with living at our lowest level, governed only by biological laws. Some inner evolutionary imperative is constantly exhorting us to grow, to reach for the highest that we can conceive, as if nature itself will not let us rest with anything less than spiritual fulfillment.

Sometimes when I am waiting at the dentist's office, I like to look at the popular magazines. It doesn't matter if they are a few months old; I am always interested in their slick advertisements. Either by innuendo or by outright declaration, they are all aimed at one deep, almost universal desire: to change who we are, make ourselves somehow better – richer, smarter, more attractive, more secure, more at home with who we are.

Unfortunately, these implicit promises of Madison Avenue deal only with externals: a fragrance that the opposite sex will find irresistible, a ring that will make a relationship "last for eternity," a house so spectacular that we will want nothing more but to lounge in it all day and admire the appointments and the view. Despite their sophisticated appearance, below every advertisement like this I would like to write, "This won't change you! You'll still be the same old person. You'll still have to live with yourself as you are."

Toward the end of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita there is a statement so direct, so penetrating, that it should move us to question all external attempts at self-improvement: those who are always trying to satisfy their personal desires will never find peace in this life. Such people are doomed to live in turmoil and isolation. They may live in palatial homes, hop from one resort to another, or have their photograph on the covers of the weekly magazines, but they won't have peace in their hearts. Why? Because if we cannot make changes where we really want to – in our own personality – it does not matter what else we may have achieved; we won't be able to live with ourselves. We can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but there is one person – ourself – who will look at us with a cold eye and say, "You ain't foolin' me! You're not changing yourself at all; you're not growing."

Often, I think, this is why active people are so active, why adventurers adventure and globetrotters trot: we do not want to stop and listen to that quiet heckler in the depths of our hearts, reminding us of our real job. This is ultimately what insecurity means; that is where a sense of inadequacy really comes from.

During the past twenty-five years, I must have heard the same refrain from hundreds of people, particularly those who are young: "I just don't like myself." The unspoken assumption is, "This is the kind of person I am, and it's what I always will be. If I have crippling fears, the best I can do is learn to live with them. If I am prone to fits of anger, people will just have to accept me as I am."

But we *can* change. No one need ever feel resigned and say, "There is nothing I can do." There is everything we can do. That is the purpose and the power of that persistent upward force within us: if we turn inward we can remake ourselves completely, modeling ourselves in the image of the loftiest spiritual ideal we can conceive.

The other day Christine was showing me some old photographs taken when the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation was in its infancy. Two or three of those young faces we had not seen for years. Others, no longer young, were as close as the path outside our window, where a group of volunteers was working diligently at patching old asphalt. To a detached eye, the contrast was most amusing. "Look at this picture," I said, "and then look out there. Where did all that hair go?" But those were only physical changes. Much more important – and deeply gratifying – were the changes I knew these friends had wrought in their thinking processes over years of meditation. Many of them had learned to transform anger into sympathy, impatience into patience, resentment into love: not perfectly, not always, but they knew how to do it, and they knew it could be done. What could be more exhilarating?

These are changes any one of us can learn to make. If you can be secure where you were insecure, selfless where you were selfish, if you can respect people around you even if they don't like you and you don't like them, then I will say with joy, "Yes. You really *have* changed." As Meister Eckhart would say, the pauper that you were is dead; the prince is born.

This rebirth is the purpose of meditation. It is a tremendous adventure, the greatest that can beckon to a human being. It tests every quality we possess, brings into play every faculty we have. It is for embarking on this supreme adventure that we have come into the world, and until we accept the challenge, we can never really rest content with anything less.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Note that while Sri Easwaran talks of two forces, his emphasis is clearly on the upward force. He uses an interesting turn of phrase when describing our true nature as human beings: "apparently physical, essentially spiritual." The practical implication is that, as spiritual beings, we have all we need for self-transformation right within us. We needn't try to manipulate our circumstances or import an ideal from outside. Rather, we need to ally ourselves with the upward force within us, and let it do the work.

Ask yourself: If I really could make changes – permanent beneficial changes – in my personality, what would I change, and how? Find an inspirational passage from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* that speaks of the state of mind you would like to have as your permanent experience of life. Read it through several times. In order to identify the upward force in your life, ask yourself:

- * In what part of my life is the longing for change most active?
- * Where is my inability to change most distressing to me?
- * What makes the longing for change more intense?
- * What do I do that dampens that longing and makes me forget my aspiration?

Try to memorize your chosen passage this month. We'll refer to it again.

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read the rest of Chapter Eight in *Conquest of Mind*.

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

We are continuing our exploration of the art of self-transformation as we read Chapter Eight of *Conquest of Mind*. Last week we reflected upon the fundamental changes we'd like to see in our personality, and we chose a meditation passage to represent them. This week we will do some more work on the essential skill of discriminating between what Sri Easwaran calls the upward and downward forces in our lives.

Reading

One of the greatest figures of medieval India, Ramanuja, throws light on this challenge in words that should be on the walls of every school campus, every statesman's office, every home: "What we seek as our highest goal depends upon what we believe ourselves to be."

If you reflect on this brief statement, you can get lost in its manifold ramifications. Virtually all of us believe we are physical creatures, subject to biological laws. And when you believe you are a physical creature, Ramanuja says, the highest goal you can aim at has to have physical limits. You will spend your life seeking physical satisfactions. A full diagnosis of human suffering is given in just this one line.

Like everybody else, I grew up believing that I was purely physical, a collection of biochemical constituents. My friends subscribed to this belief; my learned colleagues shared it vehemently. The world we live in is based on this view; everyone takes it for granted. Even if we believe intellectually that the human being has a spiritual side, very, very few of us can conceive of ourselves without the physical, biochemical apparatus of our body and personality.

What has changed for me since then? Everything. Not two or three things but everything. Through meditation, with the help of the demanding disciplines I followed every day in the midst of a busy life, that belief in myself as a purely physical creature has fallen away completely. Today I do not look upon myself or anyone else as physical. I identify with the Self, pure spirit, the same in all.

In this realization, the body becomes no more than a kind of jacket that you wear: you take care of it as very useful, but you never once think that it and you are the same.

Imagine if you thought you were your jacket. Taking it to the cleaners would be frightful; torn pockets would be a major trauma. It sounds silly, but that is just how most of us relate to our bodies too. To a surprising extent, we live to please our

body instead of having it help and serve us. We identify with it so closely that we allow it to make decisions for us and dictate how we feel about ourselves. When our body experiences a craving, we say it's a "biological necessity." If our appearance is less than perfect, we think there is something wrong with *us*.

It is from this obsessive identification with the body, I believe, that many physical and emotional problems arise. In meditation, as we learn at deeper and deeper levels that the basis of our personality is not physical but spiritual, such problems fall away. Often we do not even have to confront them. We simply go deeper, move away from the tenements of consciousness where they arise. You can leave psychosomatic problems hanging in the closet and find another home in a much safer neighborhood; they will never be the wiser. This approach is very different from the conventional wisdom of the modern world. It cannot work without meditation. For it is much more than a change in life-style; it is a transformation of thought-style.

As we absorb this higher image of who we are, many important consequences follow. When you know that you are essentially spiritual, you no longer relate to yourself as a creature to be satisfied with physical pleasures. You do not relate to others in terms of their physical appearance. You know that your worth derives from the eternal Self within you – and because this same Self lives in the hearts of all, you find it easy to relate to everyone with respect and love.

This change in personal relationships is one of the most joyful benefits of spiritual experience, yet it brings enormous responsibilities. When we see ourselves in all, detachment from our own ego is essential. Otherwise we will get emotionally entangled in other people's problems, which is just the opposite of love.

Much of my day, for example, is spent in guiding others in meditation, both by letter and in person. Often these friends bring with them burdensome personal problems. If I identified myself with my body and mind instead of with the Self, I would not be able to bear such burdens cheerfully day after day without ever feeling burned out. I would come to the dinner table and spend half an hour staring down at my plate, thinking, "What can I do to help this person out?" When we believe we are the mind, no matter what we are doing, part of the mind cannot help chewing the same problems over and over. During meditation our concentration is scattered; during the day our vitality is drained, our security is low, and our capacity to relate to people is cramped and constrained. Everything is affected.

Today, just because of this change of belief, I do not have any demands on my vitality that I cannot meet. I can face hard blows with equanimity, help others to solve the most prickly of problems with compassion and not get involved in the turmoil.

And when an emergency comes up, I can write a huge check against my vitality account and know that it will not bounce. There is no magic about this; anyone can learn to do it. Such benefits give plenty of motivation to work hard at changing our image of who we are – from a separate, physical creature into a whole, loving, spiritual being.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Last week we examined the action of the upward force as it manifests itself in the longing we feel for change and the distress we feel when we are unable to be who we want to be. This week we'll observe where the downward force is active in our life, and reflect on how we can extricate ourselves from it.

In this chapter we got a clue to distinguishing the upward force from the downward. Downward is “physical,” upward is “spiritual.” This is a point that bears some elaboration. Remember that Easwaran never spoke deprecatingly about the body. He always encouraged us to give our body good care: exercise, rest, food, and relaxation. But all too often, we look to physical satisfactions for more than they can give us. The physical view of life (which is closely connected with the downward force) lures us to consume and possess more and more in a quest for lasting security and happiness. In fact, says Easwaran, lasting fulfillment can come only from spiritual growth.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the ways in which your attention and desires are drawn “downward.” In what ways do you rely on possessions and physical satisfactions for security or fulfillment that they cannot give? Now think for a moment of the passage you chose last week, which represents your ideal of self-transformation. Imagine how fulfilling it would be to see that ideal appearing in your life. In what way might you start to pursue *that* fulfillment instead of the “will o’ the wisp” satisfactions of the physical?

Watching the Talk

When it's time for inspiration, please read the introduction below before watching the first talk on the disc, “Ease and Dis-ease.”

In this talk, Easwaran is elaborating on the theme of this month's curriculum: All of us can change ourselves completely through the practice of meditation. In fact, change is the very fabric of life. For those who accept the challenges of life's changes as an opportunity to remake themselves for the better, life brings the joy of self-mastery, a sense of ease and well-being even amidst the most difficult transitions. For those who try to resist change and cling to outward

physical satisfactions, life often brings suffering – a feeling of being overwhelmed and unable to cope that Easwaran here calls “dis-ease.”

Given on the Buddha’s birthday in 1979, this talk includes several terms that have become familiar in this course:

- * *duhkha*, meaning sorrow or ill health;
- * *sukha*, meaning joy or health; and
- * *samskara*, which means a latent or unconscious tendency toward a particular kind of thinking, usually negative.

Towards the end of the talk, Easwaran gives a definition that sums up the approach of this week’s lesson: “The Buddha, therefore, says, if you want life to be joyful, if you really want to be merry, if you want to win the love and respect of all, he says, put an end to your self-will. Bring your selfishness to an end and live for the welfare of all.”

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON THREE

Last week we learned to distinguish between two forces – upward and downward – that Sri Easwaran describes in Chapter Eight of *Conquest of Mind*. This time we learn a technique for allying ourselves with the upward force, so that it can help carry us upstream, through our conditioning, to the goal of life.

Reading

Only when I got beneath the surface of consciousness in meditation, many years ago, did I begin to see the play of forces between these two ideals, constantly pulling us toward different goals. Then I began to long more than anything else to win my freedom and escape being banged about on the court of life.

The cry of freedom has always appealed to me deeply. Even in my youngest days, Granny could always get me to change direction with just one question: “Don’t you want to be free?” So today, if someone is allergic to phrases like “spiritual living,” I say, “All right. Let’s talk about living in freedom.” Until we stop letting ourselves get knocked about by our biological conditioning, we don’t have any idea what freedom really means.

Remember the Buddha’s words: “All that we are is the result of what we have thought.” If our thinking is based on stimulus and response, he is trying to tell us, then most of us live like puppets, moved by patterns of thinking built up over years of repetition. These habits of mind cause us to say and do certain things habitually. They motivate our actions and mouth our words, and we just go along.

When we lose our temper, for example, it is as if anger were a puppet master, sticking two fingers up into our head and stimulating all the old control centers to make us move. “Start fussing and fuming *now!* You know how. Remember?” When we act on these angry impulses, we are adding to our habitual angry response. After a time, we have precious little choice in how we respond to the frustrations and irritations of everyday life. Someone gets in our way and we can’t help exploding. It is not as if we choose to get angry. Anger – what yoga psychology calls the anger *samskara* – is making our decisions for us.

The same mechanism is at work in all our rigid, conditioned emotional reactions – resentment, jealousy, lust, anxiety, greed, self-will, and their hundred and one relations. We would be amazed if we could look below the surface level of consciousness and see how many of our problems are caused by these deep-seated habits of

thinking. This is a distressing sight, but it serves a vital purpose: it fires the desire to rise once and for all above the tyranny of our mind.

How can we do this? Is it possible not to be batted back and forth between spiritual and physical demands?

Yes, the mystics answer with one voice, it *is* possible. We can learn to make every response a matter of free choice. If we can ally all our personal efforts with the upward drive of evolution, it will carry us beyond the reach of physical conditioning to a state where love, resourcefulness, and vitality are spontaneous and free.

“In the river of life,” says another ancient yoga text, “two currents flow in opposite directions. One, on the surface, flows toward sorrow, toward sickness, toward bondage. The other, beneath it, flows toward happiness, health, and freedom.” This may be fantastic hydrodynamics, but it illustrates our predicament perfectly. If we stay at the surface and do nothing, this image suggests, life will still take us somewhere – but not where we want to go. Staying in one place is not an option. To catch the deep current that leads to freedom, we have to swim and swim hard, against the flow of every conditioned response.

Again, the Buddha’s words give us the key: “All that we are is the result of what we have thought.” How does the mind become conditioned? By thinking the same thoughts over and over and over. To get free, then, we have only to think opposite thoughts over and over. That is why the Buddha called his way of life *patisotagami*: “swimming against the current” of selfish living, in order to merge at last in the flow of love that is our real nature.

This is not just for the thrill of mastery. The Buddha is not the kind of teacher to tell us to do something contrary simply because it is hard, or to do something painful simply because we learn from pain. Going against the current has a very down-to-earth purpose: the reconditioning of the nervous system, so that we can rise above the dictates of pleasure and pain.

In all of us, the nervous system is conditioned to strict one-way traffic: toward what we like and away from what we do not like. Any attempt to drive against this traffic brings a cry of protest from body and mind. This reaction is only natural; it is part of our biological inheritance. But pleasure and pain are part of life. Often we find it necessary to do something unpleasant or forgo something pleasant for the sake of a higher goal. At such times we need the full cooperation of our body and mind, a nervous system that can face life’s challenges without complaint. This is not merely spiritual living. It is the essence of a stress-proof personality, which everyone in the modern world needs.

“Yoga,” says the Bhagavad Gita, “is evenness of mind.” When you can keep your mind on an even keel in good fortune and bad, in pleasure and pain, when you can be kind to those who like you and to those who do not, then you have reached the state of yoga: you are free.

Between senses and sense objects, the Gita explains – for example, between the taste buds and a fresh pizza – there is an intimate affinity which has nothing to do with us. Our dog Ganesha has a similar affinity with buttered toast. The moment he senses a piece he has to have it, even if he has already eaten. And then he can’t just gobble it down. He has to go over to a particular spot, next to a particular yellow dandelion, and fold his paws around his toast in a particularly dainty way; only then can he eat. That is just what the senses do with sense objects, the Gita suggests, and there is no need for us to jump in. I enjoy watching Ganesha enjoy his toast, but I don’t get emotionally involved. If there is no toast for me, I don’t get depressed or feel deprived. His job is to eat; mine is to watch and enjoy.

Similarly, the Gita says, although sensory events have a compelling effect on the body and the mind, they really have nothing to do with us. We think we are involved because we identify ourselves with the body. Our real Self, pure spirit, is the detached observer, who watches life with quiet compassion, always free to enjoy.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord tells his disciple Arjuna: “When the senses encounter sense-objects, a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These sensations are fleeting; they come and go. Bear them patiently, Arjuna.”

This is profound, practical philosophy, with a touch of humor in it too. “Arjuna,” Lord Krishna asks teasingly, “When you have your bath, do you cry if the water is warmer than you like? Do you get angry if it is a little too cold?” Temperature is just the contact of water with skin, sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant. On a cold morning it is enjoyable to have a hot shower; after a hot day, it is refreshing to plunge into a cool river. Everybody finds these experiences pleasant. But we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about them. We don’t go around telling everyone in the office, “I had a hot shower this morning!” or go to bed depressed because the bathwater was too cold. It is the same with the mind. Just as we experience a momentary sensation of warmth or cold on the skin, we feel a momentary sensation of liking or disliking in the mind, as fleeting and insubstantial as a shadow.

Our usual response, however, is to cling to things we like as if they could last forever – and without realizing it, we cling to things we dislike too. When someone says something objectionable we comment to ourselves, “I don’t like that person.” And we keep on saying it, despite all the other things he or she may say or do; we

can't let go. "This is just a momentary touch of unpleasantness," Sri Krishna would say. "Why get excited over it? Don't give it any more attention than you would a tepid bath."

Of course, this is difficult to do. But even more difficult is to look on pleasure in the same way. Sri Krishna's advice here is thoroughly original. When he says, "Put up with pain," Arjuna nods; he is a warrior and can understand that. But when Krishna adds, "Put up with pleasure too," Arjuna rubs his ears. "That's right," Krishna says. "Bear it patiently. It comes and goes. Don't run after it, and don't try to cling to it when it comes your way." Pleasure is as fleeting as suffering. In fact, as the Buddha says, most of our suffering comes from trying to cling to pleasure, trying to build happiness on a sensation that comes and goes.

The artistry of this appeals to me deeply. Today, after more than twenty-five years of taking Sri Krishna's words to heart, if you see me in a pleasant situation and ask, "How are you doing?" I will say, "I'm bearing up." I am enjoying myself, but I am patiently keeping my mind unruffled too – in fact, it is only a calm mind that can really enjoy. Then, when something unpleasant comes – as it is sure to – I can say, "I'm bearing this well also." If it does not sound paradoxical, I enjoy life when fortune is against me just as I do when fortune shines.

When you apply this, you see Sri Krishna's mischievous sense of humor. After a date at a gourmet restaurant, if your boyfriend or girlfriend asks, "Did you enjoy yourself?" just say nonchalantly, "Oh, all that pleasure! I think I stood it rather well."

With this kind of detachment, pleasure leaves no residue of compulsion in the mind – no emotion-charged memory, no craving to look forward to the next time. Ordinarily, after a satisfying sensory experience, the mind immediately wants to know, "When can we do that again?" The memory sits in the mind like a time bomb, waiting for a suitable opportunity to explode into behavior again. There is very little freedom in this, which greatly curtails our capacity to enjoy. Even to enjoy a sensory experience, we have to be detached. Remember those lines of William Blake:

He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

This reading introduces us to a technique for allying ourselves with the upward force, letting it carry us upstream through the current of our conditioning. It is not always a pleasant process to swim against the current. The resistance we feel can be downright painful, like a torrent of water roaring at us with great force. If we try to do all the swimming by ourselves – through sheer will power – it's nearly impossible to keep swimming. But Easwaran's message here is that we have another force – a stronger force – working for us.

It's not easy to recognize that upward force. In Lesson One we observed that it sometimes takes the form of distress – a feeling of frustration that we cannot make the changes we'd like to make in our personality. Naturally, that frustration is uncomfortable. However, if we accept the initial discomfort, we will find that it actually works like a kind of outboard motor, pushing us upstream against the current.

In order to get this motor working for us, we need to recondition the nervous system so that the initial discomfort doesn't make us quit. This is far more than just will power – grinning and bearing it. It's training attention. We redirect our thoughts and desires into the channel of change – away from our own resistance, complaining, or desire to evade the challenge.

The key to success is the gradual approach. Divide the work up into manageable bits and keep your attention on the progress you are making, rather than on the difficulty or discomfort of the work. Choose an area where you feel distress or frustration at your own spiritual limitations. Now reflect on your progress and find no fewer than three ways in which you have improved during the past month or year (even if your success was simply to keep trying, or to have made a feeble effort when you wanted to quit). Write them down, and congratulate yourself. Now give some thought to how you will build on this success. How might you start to make such little successes habitual? Remember the clue Easwaran gives – repetition. In what ways could you begin repeating such successes? How might you keep your attention focused on these victories, rather than on the difficulty or discomfort?

Reading for Inspiration

When it's time for inspiration, please read from Chapter Eight of *Seeing with the Eyes of Love*, entitled "Love Feels No Burden."

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON FOUR

We started this month by identifying the direction we want to go spiritually – the permanent changes we want to make in our personality. Then we learned to distinguish between the two forces active within us, so that we might break our alliance with the downward force. Then we moved on to study the technique of allying ourselves with the upward force. Now, to conclude, we return to our spiritual ideal and ask ourselves how it elicits in us a passionate desire to grow and an increasing dissatisfaction with our limitations. We ask ourselves how we can nourish and harness those feelings, making them into an engine that will always carry us on to the goal.

Reading

Years ago, when my wife and I were looking at old houses, we came across a once-gracious garden with an ancient marble fountain so clogged with rubbish that not a drop of water could get through. You don't just give up such a fountain for lost. With a lot of cleaning, you can get the water to start playing again. Then grass and flowers will grow around it, and birds will come there to have their bath; it will grace the garden with its beauty.

It is the same with personality. To remake ourselves, we don't have to bring goodness, love, fearlessness, and the like, and stuff them all in somehow. They are already present in us, deep in our consciousness; that is why we can never really rest content with being anything less. If we work to remove the impediments that have built up over many years of biological conditioning, to dislodge all the old resentments and fears and selfish desires, love will flow from us like a fountain, and those we live and work with will come to us to be refreshed.

Here the spiritual figures of other times can give us confidence by their example. Ask Saint Augustine if his behavior as a young man gave any hint of the treasures of the spirit hidden inside. He would laugh. "Ask my parents," he would say. "Ask around my home town. They will tell you what a sigh of relief they breathed when I left for Carthage, burning with my desires. 'You weren't the same person then,' they say – and in a sense that is true. That young man was a pauper – insolvent, worth nothing much, a burden on most everybody. In his place today there stands a prince, bearing gifts for all."

And if we ask, "Is this a miracle, then?" Augustine would just smile. "Not at all. It is the result of a tremendous amount of loving labor. I had to teach my mind new ways of thinking. But the hardships are not overwhelming if you want more than anything else to bring your destiny into your own hands."

Of all that is wonderful in the human being, our most glorious asset is this capacity to change ourselves. Nothing is more significant. I admire the achievements of science, but I do not feel intimidated by the current conviction that we are what our genes are. My body is what my genes make it, but my character and behavior are not fixed by my genetic code. As proof we have the lives of great men and women of all religions who have thrown these claims to the winds with their personal transformations – from angry to compassionate, from insecure to unshakable, from human to divine. The message of their lives echoes down the corridors of time to those who have ears to hear: “You are not what your body is. Your real nature is spirit, which nothing can diminish or deny.” Whatever our past, whatever our present, all of us have the capacity to change ourselves completely through the practice of meditation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

This week we’ll review the assignment with which we began the month:

Ask yourself: If I really could make changes – permanent beneficial changes – in my personality, what would I change, and how? Find an inspirational passage from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* that speaks of the state of mind you would like to have as your permanent experience of life. Read it through several times. Ask yourself:

- * In what part of my life is the longing for change most active?
- * Where is my inability to change most distressing to me?
- * What makes the longing for change more intense?
- * What do I do that dampens that longing and makes me forget my aspiration?

In what three ways have you made progress toward your ideal this month? In what way have your efforts increased your longing for change? What changes might you make in the way you live your day that would help you build on your successes?

Watching the Talk

When it’s time for inspiration, please read the introduction below and watch the second talk on the disc, “Charles the Cat.”

In this talk, Sri Easwaran helps us see life’s many changes as reminders to start changing ourselves. The passing away of Charles, one of the cats that lived in the BMC community, provides the occasion for Easwaran to reflect on the meaning of death. If we are practicing the

Eight Points with dedication, the death of loved ones (and by extension all serious change) can be a goad to help us overcome the petty distractions or lack of will that hold us back on the spiritual path.

Easwaran presents the drama of life and death from the Hindu and Buddhist perspectives, through the theory of reincarnation. It is not necessary to subscribe to this belief to practice meditation or to get the most out of this talk. The point to grasp is that we can take our spiritual evolution into our own hands and gradually discover the changeless element in our personality – a living core that is untouched by any change, even death. When we base our lives on the search for the changeless, we gain the security and wisdom to transform our personality into an expression of universal love.

He quotes a verse from the Bhagavad Gita: “As the same person inhabits the body through childhood, youth, and old age, so too at the time of death he or she attains another body. The wise are not deluded by these changes.”

And he refers to another Gita verse: “As one abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.”

He also uses a few important Sanskrit terms. *Jiva* is the evolving individual soul, which takes on various forms through the course of its evolution. *Karma* is the cumulative force of life experience, which gradually teaches the *jiva* to leave selfishness behind and live in changeless love. And the *atman* is the eternal source of that love, the unchanging core of the *jiva*. To realize the *atman* is the goal of spiritual evolution, and of our practice of the Eight Point Program.

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

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