

# THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

## 34 *Make Your Life a Gift* *Building Security*

### 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](mailto: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 last lesson of this curriculum, the practical 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](http://www.nilgiri.org/fellowship)

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## LESSON ONE

In this month's curriculum, we continue our study of Chapter Nine in *Conquest of Mind*, "Obstacles and Opportunities." Last month we honed the skill of identifying spiritual opportunities hidden in obstacles like sense cravings or ill will. In particular, we studied the dynamics of attention – how it can get trapped in negative habits of mind (called *asavas* or *samskaras*), and how systematic retraining can free our attention and transform our personality.

This month we examine the role of detachment. In the three remaining obstacles – laziness, restlessness, and fear – it is often difficult to spot any opportunity for growth, because the obstacle itself absorbs our attention and propels us into action. We may feel that there is no alternative but to succumb.

When, for example, we are driven by restlessness, our attention gets locked onto thoughts of things to do, people to see, places to go. The mental "screen" is so packed with information that we can't perceive the real purpose of the energy coursing through our scattered thoughts. Or when we are gripped by laziness, it seems impossible to attend to what is needed – either because our capacity for attention has been depleted through restless activity, or because our attention is locked onto thoughts of disappointment, frustration, or helplessness.

But as we use meditation, the mantram, and other allied disciplines to develop detachment, we gradually learn to spot how attention is trapped in each obstacle, and we start to release it. This week's reading gives practical clues for applying detachment to those areas in our life where we are subject to laziness.

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### *Reading*

#### **3. Laziness**

This third obstacle is easy enough to understand. Just as laziness is our enemy in making money or in gaining prestige or power, it is our enemy in spiritual growth. Hard work is absolutely necessary for excellence in any field, and nothing requires more intense effort than meditation.

This may sound odd, because intense activity is generally motivated toward goals that are just the opposite of spiritual. But over the years I have made a rather surprising observation: the person who is relaxed, easygoing, "laid back," may not be a good candidate for meditation. Such people simply may not be willing to put forth the effort required to make difficult changes in personality, or have the energy and the stamina to keep going when the going gets rough. To go far in meditation, we

need to rouse all the energy we can muster and then channel it all toward one overriding goal.

One of my favorite illustrations of this is the story of James J. Lynn, a prosperous American businessman who had spent immense amounts of time and energy in drilling for oil. Lynn was attracted to an Indian spiritual teacher named Yogananda Paramahansa, who came to this country early in this century to found the Self-Realization Fellowship. Yogananda told him, “You have a lot of energy, but you are wasting it just drilling for oil and making money. Why don’t you drill into your own consciousness and really strike it rich?” Lynn did, and the energy and self-discipline that had made him an oil tycoon took him a long, long way in meditation.

But it is not enough to be full of energy. Many people have plenty of energy and don’t know what to do with it or how to focus it, so they scatter themselves over a hundred and one fascinating projects that do no one any good. We need to be able to gather all our capacity for energetic action and then harness it to the goals of spiritual living.

To do this, we have to learn to be detached from the results of our work. Detachment brings confidence and clarity of vision. When obstacles arise, if you are detached you won’t lose your nerve; you know you can turn obstacles into opportunities. And when opposition comes, you can face it squarely and learn from it without stress or agitation. Detachment means withdrawing your personal energy from secondary activities; discrimination is seeing where to focus that energy, so that all your choices take you closer to your goal.

I must say in appreciation of this country that laziness is not a national weakness. Daring and ingenuity are qualities you seem to possess in abundance. If all this energy and enterprise can be harnessed in spiritual living, I have no doubt that our next generation will grow up in a much better world. When it comes to setting social trends, to inventing whole technologies, to setting world records, the people of this country have no equal.

What amazes me even more, however, is the kind of thing Americans do in their spare time: scaling the Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco, riding a pedal-powered glider across the Atlantic, skydiving, or ferreting out a way to tap into the computer system of a big university. You have two weeks of vacation and you can’t think of anything interesting to do, so you break the code of the university’s computer. The human being needs goals worthy of this kind of enterprise and daring; otherwise, at best, they are wasted. I am thinking primarily of young people, for I think they feel this lack of a worthy goal even more keenly than those of us

who are older. It is my fervent hope that gradually we can introduce to them goals worthy of a whole lifetime of daring pursuit.

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### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion***

In this section, Sri Easwaran is suggesting that laziness (or the lack of ability to face challenges effectively) is often the result of unwise choices in using our energy.

Reflect on your life and find a few instances in which you are “lazy.” Nearly everyone – even energetic, effective people – have pockets of resistance or dullness in their life, areas in which we just can’t give the effort or attention that is asked of us.

Determine which of these three different diagnoses are applicable:

1. You simply don’t want to put forth effort – perhaps because the task is unpalatable to you, or appears to offer no reward.
2. Your energy has been scattered and depleted due to a lack of clear focus.
3. You’ve been wasting energy in pursuits that do not lead to your true goal in life.

Now, read again Easwaran’s definitions of detachment and discrimination, and ask yourself how you might use the Eight Points to apply those qualities to this situation: “Detachment means withdrawing your personal energy from secondary activities; discrimination is seeing where to focus that energy, so that all your choices take you closer to your goal.”

When it’s time for inspiration, please watch half of the first talk on the disc, “Make Your Life a Gift.” For groups that are not using the DVD, please read this month from Chapter Three of *The End of Sorrow*, the first volume of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*. That chapter focuses on selfless work, a topic that arises frequently in this month’s lessons.

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***Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.***

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## LESSON TWO

We are continuing our study of Chapter Nine in *Conquest of Mind*, “Obstacles and Opportunities.” This week’s featured obstacle is restlessness. We’ll try to see in it an opportunity to capture, harness, and transform vital energy that can enrich our spiritual life. As we’ll see, this requires detachment – the skill of seeing the opportunity hidden in the obstacle.

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### *Reading*

#### *4. Restlessness*

The fourth obstacle, then, is restlessness. It can take many forms, but essentially restlessness simply reflects the fact that the mind cannot bear to be still. Some people do not like to do a job the same way twice; they have to keep coming up with variations. Others cannot live without something to worry about. All of us know people who have to talk. And when restlessness invades the body, we always have to be up and doing something, going somewhere – what and where do not much matter; the important thing is to keep moving.

Of course, this can invade meditation too. I still have people coming to me with a particular complaint: “After fifteen minutes of meditation I just can’t sit still.” There are all kinds of things to try when this happens, depending on the person. “Before you meditate,” I suggest, “go for a fast walk repeating your mantram. If you’re really restless, go for a short run.” But the mind is not easily conquered. “I tried that,” one fellow told me, “but after I run, I’m so relaxed I fall asleep.” Trying to corner me both ways.

Restlessness can mean different things. Often it signals the rise of energy that is crying out to be harnessed, which is a very promising sign. The person who can’t find a challenge big enough, who roams the globe seeking new places or thrills and can’t manage to settle down to a humdrum job, may be just ripe for meditation: looking for something that can’t be found in the external world, ready to turn inward.

Once you start meditating, restlessness is the same signal, but now it means the time has come to go deeper. When we hit a pocket of resistance in consciousness, a *samskara* that is difficult to face, the mind has two common ploys: either it gets restless and turns to all kinds of irrelevant distractions in the outside world, or it gets lazy and falls asleep. In either case, the strategy during the day is the same: hard, selfless, concentrated work, preferably for the benefit of others.

As long as we recognize it and harness it, restlessness is a positive sign. Restlessness is energy being released, which is bound to happen as meditation deepens. But all this energy has to be harnessed; otherwise it will drive us into irrelevant activities that at best keep us from going deeper, and at worst may get us into a lot of trouble. That is why hard, selfless work is an essential part of spiritual living.

When you feel a restless mood coming on, therefore, treat it as a hopeful sign. But be sure that you stay in the driver's seat. Don't let your mind take the wheel and drive away. This energy comes as a precious resource to enable you to deepen your meditation, expand your circle of compassion, and make a greater contribution to the welfare of others. Deeper reserves of energy are a trust; they are not meant for self-aggrandizement. My advice is to find something useful which helps other people and then throw yourself into it wholeheartedly.

Some people work eleven and a half months just to be able to sun themselves on Copacabana Beach in Rio for the other two weeks of the year. But while they are lying on the sands of Copacabana, the mind can't get out of overdrive: it is back in the office, or worrying about some domestic problem, or – most fascinatingly – off on its own vacation in some other time and place, daydreaming some fantasy or reminiscing about the azure waters of the Greek isles. This is the fatal flaw in restlessness: the mind always has to be somewhere else. The secret of joy lies in being one hundred percent where you are all the time, which means the mind has to learn to be still.

Almost every day I go for a walk on the beach, and every time it is new and fresh. When somebody says, "You must get tired of that same old beach!" I say, "On the contrary. Every day it is a new beach for me. I see it with new eyes." When nothing ever palls, nothing ever gets stale, nothing is taken for granted, then everything becomes a miracle – a miracle full of unending joy.

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### *Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

Sri Easwaran writes: "Once you start meditating, restlessness . . . means the time has come to go deeper. When we hit a pocket of resistance in consciousness, a samskara that is difficult to face, the mind has two common ploys: either it gets restless and turns to all kinds of irrelevant distractions in the outside world, or it gets lazy and falls asleep. In either case, the strategy during the day is the same: hard, selfless, concentrated work, preferably for the benefit of others."

Easwaran's all-purpose prescription – hard, selfless, concentrated work – is certainly effective for curing laziness and restlessness, *if* we can bring ourselves to “take the medicine.” Unfortunately, such work does not always seem very attractive!

When you are undertaking hard, selfless work (especially work which you would not have chosen to do for the fun of it), note the resistance that comes up, such as distraction or laziness. What form is typical for you? At what times does it arise? What is your typical response? At such times, we need the detachment to recognize that restlessness and laziness are not simply obstacles, but opportunities to reclaim precious attention and energy. Remember Easwaran's definition of detachment and discrimination: “Detachment means withdrawing your personal energy from secondary activities; discrimination is seeing where to focus that energy, so that all your choices take you closer to your goal.”

How might you use the Eight Points to apply this insight to those “pockets of resistance” that come up in your spiritual practice?

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the second half of the first talk on the disc, “Make Your Life a Gift,” or continue reading the third chapter of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*, Volume 1.

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***Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.***



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## LESSON THREE

This week we are studying the last of the five spiritual obstacles covered in Chapter Nine of *Conquest of Mind*. In the past lessons we have been learning to see the opportunities hidden in these obstacles. This week we consider anxiety.

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### *Reading*

#### *5. Fear*

The last obstacle is fear. Actually, the word the Buddha uses is a general term that includes all kinds of apprehensive possibilities: not just being outright fearful that something might happen to you or your family, but also feeling uneasy inside, uncomfortable about the future, vaguely worried, more than a little afraid.

One particularly common form this obstacle takes is anxiety – that vague sense of feeling apprehensive, you know not of what; the nebulous, lurking fear that you are unequal to life, unable to cope, sinking under some unseen pressure. Such sensations have become so pervasive that our times have been characterized as the Age of Anxiety.

As we reflect on this, we find that as usual the Buddha is talking directly to us all. Each of us is granted a certain margin for committing mistakes in life, particularly in our younger years. A certain resilience is built into our physical and mental apparatus. But we cannot expect to go on committing the same mistakes over and over and not suffer for them in time. Anxiety, in this sense, is often a helpful reminder of where we stand on the self-graded scorecard inside. It signals a kind of learning problem that can be easily solved once it is understood.

Anxiety, the Buddha would say, stems essentially from not being able to be what we want to be – which, in turn, comes from not knowing who we really are. These misapprehensions can go deep into consciousness; so please do not be impatient with yourself and expect anxiety to vanish overnight. Yet nothing dispels anxiety more effectively than meditation, because it goes straight to the heart of the problem: not on the surface, but deep within the mind. When you are meditating sincerely and systematically, every day brings you a little closer to your real Self, a little more at home in a world you can deal with. Even if there is a big gap between who you are and what you want to become, you have the tools in your hands and know how to use them. It brings hope, confidence, and the growing sense that you are equal to whatever the day may bring.

There is another secret too, one I have already mentioned. When fears and anxieties stem from low self-esteem, part of the problem is this almost universal *samskara* of judging. As we learn not to pass judgment on others, we cease to apply harsh standards to ourselves. Forgiving others, liking others, is a swift, sure route to forgiving and liking oneself.

Meditation and its allied disciplines – training our senses and passions, training attention, putting the welfare of others first – are learning tools. “Don’t pine over your mistakes,” the Compassionate One is reproaching us gently. “That will only make you more insecure and anxious.” Learn from your mistakes and draw on them to deepen your meditation. Learn from them and enrich your life.

“More than anything,” the Buddha would continue, “I want you to be free of these five obstacles. I want your physical, emotional, and spiritual health to improve, your life to be always fresh, your relationships always rich, your contribution always valued. And I want you to have the good opinion of the person whose approval is most difficult to win: yourself.” Then we can say, as the Buddha did toward the end of his life, “I am the happiest of mortals. No one is happier than I.”

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### *Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

Sri Easwaran offers a penetrating diagnosis: “Anxiety, the Buddha would say, stems essentially from not being able to be what we want to be – which, in turn, comes from not knowing who we really are.”

And he gives a practical tip: “Meditation and its allied disciplines – training our senses and passions, training attention, putting the welfare of others first – are learning tools. ‘Don’t pine over your mistakes,’ the Compassionate One is reproaching us gently. ‘That will only make you more insecure and anxious.’ Learn from your mistakes and draw on them to deepen your meditation. Learn from them and enrich your life.”

Reflect a bit on your attitude toward mistakes, both your own and those of others. Can you see the connection between a more forgiving attitude toward others and a gentler, more confident attitude toward yourself? How might you start to see such mistakes not as an obstacle but as an opportunity to dig deeper in meditation? Reflect on a few instances in which mistakes have taught you a valuable lesson, and how your practice of the Eight Points has helped you learn and incorporate that lesson into your life. How might you make such growth more habitual?

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***Watching the Talk***

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the first half of the second talk on the DVD, "Building Security," or continue reading the third chapter of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*, Volume 1.

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***Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.***

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## LESSON FOUR

In this, our final lesson on this chapter, we will undertake an exercise to wrap up our study of Chapter Nine of *Conquest of Mind*. This exercise may take more than one session to complete. Your group (or you personally) may wish to devote two weeks to this lesson, sharing at each meeting the passages you've chosen to help you transform the obstacles into opportunities for growth.

At the end of this week's session, please watch the last part of the talk entitled "Building Security" on the DVD, or continue reading from the first volume of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*. If you carry on to another session, you may go back and reread one or two of the sections in the chapter for inspiration, or watch 15 minutes of an earlier published disc.

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### *Reading Summary and Practical Exercise*

During the past two months, we have explored five spiritual obstacles and looked at ways they can be transformed into opportunities. As you face and struggle with these obstacles, the passages you meditate on will represent the opportunities hidden in them – the peace, vitality, love, and wisdom that await us, just beyond these obstacles.

In this final lesson we'll review those five obstacles and identify inspirational passages that represent the opportunity beckoning to us from behind the impediment. The five obstacles are listed below, along with brief descriptions in the words of Sri Easwaran. For each obstacle, consult your copy of *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* and choose a passage that represents to you the state of mind you might hope to experience when that obstacle arises.

For example, if ill will arises, you might aspire to maintain the state of mind expressed in the prayer of St. Francis: "Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon." If you find your mind beset by sense cravings, you might strive for the state of mind depicted in the passage "The Illumined Man" from the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita: "But when you move amidst the world of sense, from both attachment and aversion freed, there comes the peace in which all sorrows end, and you live in the wisdom of the Self."

These are just examples. Look for passages that speak directly to your heart, embodying your personal vision of the opportunities hidden in these five spiritual hindrances.

After doing this exercise, you may want to write the results on a small card and keep it with you, or develop a cycle in your meditation practice that ensures that you regularly meditate on

all of them. Or you might use a particular “opportunity” passage persistently for several days in a row if you find yourself especially challenged by one of these obstacles.

A note of caution: When you use the passages in this way in your meditation, be sure to keep your attention focused on the words of the passage. Whenever your mind strays to the obstacle it addresses, or to some other distraction, simply bring your attention back, gently but persistently attending to these words, which will carry you through the obstacle to your goal.

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## *Summary of the Obstacles*

### *1. Sensuality*

“Sensuality,” in the Buddha’s language, is not a term of moral judgment. It refers simply to our human tendency to become entangled in the impressions of our senses – to become so attached to what brings sensory pleasure or pain that we lose real freedom of choice. This is a normal biological response, but when we are trying to enter and master the world within, it keeps us oriented in just the wrong direction. To turn inward, we have to detach ourselves from the hold the senses have on the mind; there is no other way.

### *2. Ill Will*

The second obstacle, ill will, is perhaps the most serious impediment in meditation. According to the Buddha, ill will expresses itself in one hundred and thirty-five forms! Each of us has a regular catalog of them. That is what makes ill will so difficult to recognize at first, leave aside how difficult it is to tackle. If only we could get a catalog of negative mental formations like the ones that come in the mail every other week from L. L. Bean! Fortunately, says the Buddha, tackling ill will does not require becoming familiar with the whole catalog. What we have to do is learn how to undo the underlying habit of mind – again, the asava.

Sensations in the mind ferment just the way sensory impressions do. When somebody ignores our predilections or fails to do things our way, we get an unpleasant feeling which is familiar to everyone. At first it may last no longer than writing on water. But when this feeling comes frequently, it starts fermenting. Now, just as with a sensory experience, we don’t have to feel dislike every time life crosses us; we can simply withdraw our attention. But when our attention is riveted on ourselves, every negative experience adds to the alcohol content of our ill will. The diagnosis is penetrating. We develop a tendency to dislike – not just to dislike this

or that but simply to dislike, period. Whoever comes in the way of that dislike gets it.

The Buddha uses strong language here, to shake us out of our bad habits. You are not being very bright when you dislike someone, he says. Don't blame that person; he or she has merely happened to come in your way. Your disliking asava is inside, fermenting away; that is all that is happening.

### ***3. Laziness***

This third obstacle is easy enough to understand. Just as laziness is our enemy in making money or in gaining prestige or power, it is our enemy in spiritual growth. Hard work is absolutely necessary for excellence in any field, and nothing requires more intense effort than meditation.

This may sound odd, because intense activity is generally motivated toward goals that are just the opposite of spiritual. But over the years I have made a rather surprising observation: the person who is relaxed, easygoing, "laid back," may not be a good candidate for meditation. Such people simply may not be willing to put forth the effort required to make difficult changes in personality, or have the energy and the stamina to keep going when the going gets rough. To go far in meditation, we need to rouse all the energy we can muster and then channel it all toward one overriding goal.

### ***4. Restlessness***

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***Conclude each session with 30 minutes of meditation.***

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