

THE TALKS OF EKNATH EASWARAN

35

Tips for Deepening Meditation
The Spiritual Victory

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@easwaran.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.

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

LESSON ONE

During the last two months of our *Dynamics of the Mind* course, we gather the fruit of the past year of study and reflection. In Chapter Ten of *Conquest of Mind*, Sri Easwaran lays out five strategies for dealing with the central engine of our destiny: thought. Mastery of these five strategies (no easy task!) is all we need to leave behind our problems and reach the goal of life.

By now, the approach is familiar. Far from judgmental or moralistic, Easwaran's outlook is a dynamic one based on what he calls spiritual engineering. The mind is a field of forces. By learning how to redirect those forces, which all too often disrupt or limit our lives, we actually set them to work for us, strengthening our relationships, deepening our security, and giving fresh meaning and purpose to every aspect of our life.

We will use these last two months to review Easwaran's Eight Points as they are applied to the greatest challenges of the spiritual life. According to Easwaran, these eight disciplines, so easy to grasp but difficult to master, are absolutely essential in the last stages of the spiritual ascent. But whether we are climbing the last thousand feet to the summit or steadily making our way over the foothills, the climbing basics are the same Eight Points.

Reading

It is in the mind that the Buddha's five obstacles arise, and it is essentially in the mind that we must tackle them. The problem is that the mind is an extremely subtle thing – in fact, it is not a thing at all. You cannot go to the store and buy a *Complete Mind Repair Made Easy* manual, full of advanced circuitry diagrams and step-by-step instructions. The mind is a dynamic, ceaseless process, full of twists and turns, of intangibles and imponderables.

Yet, intangible as it is, the mind-process *can* be studied from within. More important, we can learn to change the channels through which its energies flow, which leads to the transformation of character and consciousness.

These are simply engineering skills. With the aid of meditation, I have ventured to explore every murky turn of the vast field of mental currents that we all have inside. Now, when someone comes to me with a problem, I know exactly how to put my finger on the source. Through the practice of meditation I can help that person find the leaks where vitality is being lost, re-channel a wandering flow of attention, harness the power of a compulsive attachment, unblock the flow of love when the waters have run almost dry.

It is in terms of the dynamics of these mental skills that I want to present what might be called the Buddha's five strategies for freedom. Simply by observing his own mind with detachment, he has hit upon techniques which people like you and me can employ successfully to follow in his footsteps.

The first strategy is literally "changing one thought for another": a negative thought for a positive one, an unkind thought for a kind one. "Just as a carpenter uses a small peg to drive out a bigger one," the Buddha says, "you can use a right thought to drive out one that is wrong."

When I recommend a particular set of inspirational passages for meditation, this is the purpose behind my advice. An appropriate passage for meditation has certain requirements. It should be positive and life-affirming, and it should return you to the world feeling confident and equal to its challenges. I have compiled a small anthology for meditation, *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*, with precisely these requirements in view. It is a selection of positive passages which you can use effectively to drive negative thoughts out of your mind.

The Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, which I always recommend for meditation, makes a perfect example. When used sincerely and systematically, it can replace the most deep-seated of negative attitudes with inspiring, lofty ideals.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

The first of the five strategies, then, is *substitution*, and Easwaran proposes that meditating on inspirational passages helps us "replace the most deep-seated of negative attitudes with inspiring, lofty ideals."

To experiment with this principle, let's return to the five obstacles we studied in Chapter Nine: sensuality, ill will, restlessness, laziness, and doubt.

* Come up with a thought-substitution strategy for each of those five obstacles, especially the ones that are most troublesome to you.

* Reflect on the passages you use for meditation, and find a verse or phrase from a passage that corresponds to each substitute you've chosen, as a kind of motto. For instance, in working on ill will, you may try to substitute compassionate thoughts for judgmental thoughts, and you might choose the line "If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others," by Sri Sarada Devi as a motto.

During this coming week, give special attention to your meditation as a way of deepening your efforts to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Identify some aspect of your meditation that needs improvement – such as posture, regularity, or wakefulness – and make an extra effort to improve.

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the first half of the first talk on the disc, "Tips for Deepening Meditation." For groups that are not using the DVDs, please start reading the chapter entitled "The Path of Meditation" in *Climbing the Blue Mountain*.

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON TWO

This week we continue our study of Chapter Ten in *Conquest of Mind*, “Strategies for Freedom.” We’ll be taking another look at the first strategy, which Sri Easwaran calls *substitution*: learning to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Then we’ll apply that strategy to one of the most challenging areas of sense training: learning to develop rich, loving relationships without being pulled off course by the media’s exaggerated emphasis on sex. This week’s “featured point” is Training the Senses.

As we begin the reading, Easwaran has just presented the idea that as we meditate on an inspirational passage it serves as a kind of “positive peg” that drives out the negative thoughts in our mind.

Reading

This strategy can be applied effectively throughout the day as well. We need to do this frequently, in fact, to counteract the influence of all the negative thoughts we have already driven in by thinking them over and over, with lots of help from the media. There is an art to this. With practice, as your concentration deepens, you can drive in the positive peg without any danger of smashing your thumb.

To give one small illustration, whenever somebody is unkind to me, I can immediately unroll the panorama of that person’s good qualities. Instantly the balance is set right. As with most skills, this is a matter of practice. When you are having trouble getting along with someone, a simple first step is to sit down quietly and recall how many times that person has given you support. You are using positive memories to drive out negative ones before they have a chance to crowd together and form a mob, which is all resentment really is.

Often you can do the same thing with a physical craving. Imagine, for example, that you are minding your own business when up pops a craving for something chocolate. Most of us, I trust, have experienced this. It’s not anything abnormal. But you cannot afford to go on eating chocolate every time you get the urge. Even if your waistline can afford it, you are trying to train your mind.

This may be a good time to bring out a smaller peg: take a handful of raisins and start eating them instead of the chocolate, repeating your mantram all the while. If your craving for chocolate is really strong, give yourself the raisins one by one. Chances are that your palate will eventually give up and sigh, “Leave me alone. I don’t want any more raisins, and you can forget the chocolate too.”

When it comes to sex, on the other hand, I would never recommend this approach. Trying to dislodge a strong sexual desire with a little indulgence, the Hindu scriptures say, is like trying to put out a fire by pouring butter on it – or, if you want to make the image more modern, by pouring on gasoline.

Of course, sex has a beautiful place in a completely loving, completely loyal relationship, where it expresses the deep desire to be united on a much more than physical level. But even in a loving, loyal relationship a disproportionate amount of our capacity to desire often flows into this channel, consuming our vitality. That is what makes harnessing sexual desire – not repressing it, harnessing it – one of the most practical issues in all of daily living.

What makes these impulses difficult to deal with is the fact that we keep on thinking about them. This gives them enormous power. And as if we couldn't supply our fantasies with enough material on our own, the media swamp us with images and messages designed to associate sexual satisfaction with the most unlikely services and products. Why, for instance, a car is supposed to appeal to us in this way I have never been able to understand.

When you have a strong craving that is difficult to cope with, therefore, don't spend long periods of time analyzing it, thinking it over, dwelling on it, brooding over it. Throw yourself into hard, selfless work, especially in the company of other people; you will find that a good deal of the power in that craving will be transformed as you work at deepening your relationships and your meditation.

This is an extremely important connection. I have been talking in terms of spiritual engineering, which, like physical engineering, often comes down to energy. Sexual desire is power – one particular expression of the power we use to think, to work, to live, to will, to love. And power is neither good nor bad. It can be used for creation or for destruction. It is the same with the energy of creative desire.

We need new words in this connection, and Sanskrit provides a very accurate term: *kundalini*. Kundalini is an intensely concentrated form of vital energy. It is the power behind love and the fuel for spiritual progress. When this power is released through the transformation of sexual desire, you can use it to build loving relationships everywhere. The power is the same; whether it is used physically or spiritually is a matter of direction. As you begin to realize that you are a spiritual being instead of a physical creature, you find you are drawing on this power to love all of life. Then you do everything possible to let this love flow through practical, beneficial channels.

This is the key to the puzzle of sex. When somebody tells me, “I keep thinking about this all the time,” I have a positive answer. “You’re generating a lot of energy,” I say. “You’ve got power to burn. But all that has to be used.” Otherwise, at best, it is wasted, which can have far-reaching negative implications for your health.

Those who have a number of close, personal relationships, based on tenderness and respect rather than on sex, have a perfect context for harnessing and transforming the power in sexual desire. If they pour this power into deepening their relationships, they will find that the sex urge seldom becomes oppressive and that their vitality seems unending. This is not suppressing sex or denying it but simply gaining a say in how and when it is used.

There is nothing wrong in having strong sexual urges. This is our vital capital; this is where our power lies, locked up. When we channel this power, it nourishes all our relationships. Eventually it becomes a fountain of love that flows continuously into our daily life. But most important, kundalini has an evolutionary purpose: it is the immense store of energy we draw on for the transformation of human consciousness, the fuel for the long, difficult journey to Self-realization.

I want to repeat that this is not in any way a plea for stifling the sexual faculty. It is a method for putting to work a faculty so huge that it can never be fulfilled on the physical level. Once kundalini is roused and channeled, you have a deep reservoir of tenderness that brings the capacity to touch people deeply and kindle their love and tenderness in turn, even to the point of disarming their hostilities.

This is a terribly important issue today. It is because we spend our energies so unwisely that most of us feel inadequate to do anything about the violence and alienation taking place in our communities before our eyes. Translated into global proportions, this profligate waste of time and energy on petty, personal pursuits amounts to a general lack of love for our fellow human beings. Its impact on world events today is staggering. When you are working to transform your faculties and unify your love, you can feel equal to any challenge, no matter how difficult or threatening it has become. That is our real capacity: endless.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In this lesson we are dealing with a very challenging topic. As Easwaran points out, part of the difficulty is the mind’s tendency to dwell – even unconsciously – on sexual thoughts. So in our reflection and discussion, we’ll follow one of his key methods for harnessing the energy wasted in such thoughts – we will focus entirely on its positive, transformed expression.

As background, it's helpful to clarify that we are talking about transforming sexual thoughts that occur outside the boundaries you consider right and pure – for instance, temptations outside your relationship with a spouse or partner, or a tendency to dwell on sensual images in the media. Further, please don't let your reflections or conversation dwell on any of the compulsive or negative sides of these topics. Concentrate rather on the positive, harnessed form of them.

Let's review the strategy outlined by Easwaran in this reading: Don't let your mind dwell on cravings. Instead, use that mental and emotional energy to do selfless work and cultivate a number of rich friendships based on tenderness and respect.

Survey your life and consider where you have opportunities for channeling more energy into selfless work and deeper relationships. Often we identify selfless work in its most obvious forms, such as feeding the hungry in a soup kitchen or cleaning up litter in a park. Those *are* effective forms of selfless work but there are others as well – many of them quite close at hand. For instance, spending some extra time to help your son and his friends study for a test or prepare for a big game might be just the right way to turn some unharnessed energy into patience. Or you might try cheerfully doing the dishes when it's not your turn. Where are the hidden opportunities for selflessness in your life? How might you shift your attention and energy from cravings to those opportunities? How might you use such opportunities as a substitute for indulging the cravings? How might the other Points help you do that?

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the second half of the first talk on the disc, "Tips for Deepening Meditation." For groups that are not using the DVDs, please continue reading "The Path of Meditation" in *Climbing the Blue Mountain*.

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON THREE

This section gives helpful tips for taking the mantram to a deeper level. Pay close attention to the distinction Sri Easwaran draws between reflective and reflexive thinking. In our questions we'll ask ourselves how using the mantram regularly can help us think reflectively.

Reading

The next strategy is *reflection*. When you are being propelled by a fierce craving, the Buddha says, stop and reflect on the consequences of giving in.

At such a time, of course, most of us cannot even think of sitting down to think things over. Our mind is racing, and all we want to do is jump in and act. Before trying to apply this strategy, the first thing to do is slow your mind down; only then will you be able to think clearly. Repeat your mantram until the pressure to act on the craving has abated. A fast walk repeating the mantram helps greatly, but if you cannot get out, try writing the mantram a set number of times – say, one hundred – slowly, neatly, and with concentration. As your mind grows calmer, you can make it reflect on past experience – all the consequences of similar mistakes that made you tell yourself, “Never again!”

Repeating the mantram sounds mechanical, but its effect is profound. You are actually using the power of a compulsive craving to send the mantram, with its calming influence, deep into your mind. That very act strengthens your will, increasing your ability to withdraw your attention from what you crave. Every time you do this, the mantram goes deeper; the next time, it will reach deeper still.

When you feel a strong craving to demolish a big stack of pancakes, dripping with fresh butter and maple syrup, consequences may be the furthest thing from your mind. There is nothing wrong with pancakes if you can stand the calories, but if we go on yielding time after time, we develop a habit of yielding – not just to pancakes but to anything. Any impulse, including anger, gains increasing power to claim us. “Remind yourself of these problems now,” the Buddha says. “Reflect on them, and then start strengthening your capacity to say no. It will serve you well in every activity of life.”

What the Buddha is asking us to cultivate is reflective thinking. I distinguish this from “reflexive thinking,” a phrase from Norman Cousins which aptly describes what happens in our minds when we are being driven by an urge. The Buddha is a teacher who respects our capacity to reason and reflect. Gradually, as we develop

this capacity, we should be able to consider the consequences not only of actions but of mental states like anger. We should be able to see how anger spreads and grows until it gains the power to disrupt any relationship anytime it chooses.

Then, once we understand these connections, we should start putting the Buddha's suggestions into practice. When we find ourselves in a situation in which insensitiveness or anger is urging us to ride roughshod over other people's feelings, we should summon the detachment to go for a fast walk around the block or through the woods or up and down the hall, silently repeating our mantram the whole way. Once our mind has quieted down, we can reflect with some detachment on how painful the long-term consequences of our anger are likely to be for everyone, including ourselves.

It may help also to understand the positive consequences of not yielding to a negative emotion. The ancient Hindu sages say that our normal span of life is one hundred and twenty years. This is a magnificent concept. According to them, to die at age sixty or seventy is to fall victim to a premature death. By this accounting, which does not contradict some of the current biological theories of aging, we all have potential for health and longevity far beyond what we use. Negative emotions like anger can devastate the body. By not yielding to such emotions, we can dramatically increase our chances for a long, healthy, active, happy, worthwhile life.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Find some examples in your life of both reflexive and reflective thinking. What is the difference between them? How do you *feel* (emotionally, mentally, physically) when you are doing reflexive thinking? In other words, what is a warning sign that might remind you to start using your mantram at that time?

How does it feel (emotionally, mentally, physically) when you are thinking reflectively? How does that relate to your repetition of the mantram? How might you use the mantram to stay more often in a reflective thinking mode and avoid dropping back into reflexive thinking? Which other points might help you do that?

During this coming week, look for a new opportunity every day to repeat the mantram. Take a moment at the end of each day to note it. Try to develop a habit of looking for new mantram opportunities.

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the first half of the second talk on the disc, "The Spiritual Victory." For groups that are not using the DVDs, please read the chapter entitled "Deepening Meditation" in *Climbing the Blue Mountain*.

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

LESSON FOUR

This week's reading is an eloquent testimony to the beauty and power of one-pointed attention. In our discussion, we'll focus on this important paragraph: "If you practice pulling your attention away from distractions, even minor ones, during the day, you will find distractions much easier to ignore in meditation. The habit of working with steady concentration will reward you with new depth in meditation and a mind that is unflappable in times of stress or challenge. And if you can curb the propensity to get upset or jealous or uncooperative, which is the mind getting caught in emotional distractions, you will find major stumbling blocks beginning to melt away, both in meditation and in your personal life."

Reading

The Buddha's third strategy is withdrawing attention. When distractions come in meditation, paying attention to them only strengthens them. That is the time to give more attention to the inspirational passage. We can use the same strategy during the day as well. Many personal problems involve distracted attention: the mind getting caught in an unproductive or negative track. When we learn to withdraw our attention from such problems, we begin to see that even in meditation most distractions have their source in what we do and think during the day.

You can see how rare undistracted attention is today. Everywhere we are conditioned to be distracted. When I go to a movie theater, I can't help noticing what great difficulty children and young people have in keeping their attention on a film. First they have a short conversation during the opening scenes. Then after ten minutes they get up, return with a big carton of popcorn, and proceed to give at least half their attention to that. Eventually the mind learns to be fractioned like this all the time; then learning problems are inevitable.

Much of the blame for this can be traced to the methods of advertisers. Distraction is the basis of their trade. Madison Avenue agencies have long conferences to figure out what distractions we will fall for most readily. Subliminal advertising, which they have raised to a polished skill, is designed expressly to slip distractions into our minds when we are not even aware, so that we will slip money out of our pockets with equal lack of awareness. Combine this with a television habit – Americans report that their households watch TV an average of seven hours a day – and you find that the mind is conditioned to be divided and distracted several times an hour every day.

If you practice pulling your attention away from distractions, even minor ones, during the day, you will find distractions much easier to ignore in meditation.

The habit of working with steady concentration will reward you with new depth in meditation and a mind that is unflappable in times of stress or challenge. And if you can curb the propensity to get upset or jealous or uncooperative, which is the mind getting caught in emotional distractions, you will find major stumbling blocks beginning to melt away, both in meditation and in your personal life.

“If thine eye be single,” Jesus said, “thy whole body shall be full of light.” In everyday language, when we are able to keep our attention undistracted, everything shines with wonder. Even from my own small experience I can testify to what a marvelous extent this is true. I have cultivated the habit of one-pointed attention for decades now, and today I could not divide my attention even if I tried. When your attention is complete like this, as the Christian mystic Angela of Foligno says, “the world is full of God.” Everything shines with divinity and beauty, part of an indivisible whole.

Walt Whitman is trying to express a similar idea, I think, in *Leaves of Grass*:

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.
Every square yard of the surface of the earth
Is spread with the same. . . .
What strange miracles are these!
Everywhere.

Many years ago I had a number of beatniks among my friends. When I used the word “miracles,” they would say skeptically, “Tell us about one.” Every moment you remain alive is a miracle. Talk to medical people; they will tell you there are a million and one things that can go wrong with this body of ours at any given instant. It is only because we have not developed the capacity for appreciating miracles that we don’t see them all around us. Life is a continuous miracle: not only joy but sorrow too; not only birth but death too. That is what undistracted attention allows you to see everywhere.

But the most important miracle of all, as the Bhagavad Gita says, comes in the climax of meditation: “You will see the divinity in every creature.” In the long run, this is what focusing our attention on the bright qualities in people will reveal. Once the mind learns to be completely one-pointed, it is ready for the ecstatic moment when it merges utterly with the object of its devotion. At first this happens only for a blissful instant in meditation – as one Catholic mystic says, just for the span of one *Ave Maria*. But that is enough for us to see with the whole of our being that the divinity in our hearts is our real Self, and that that shining Self is the same in all. Then being kind and loving no longer requires effort; it is our native

state. In traditional language this is the vision of God, which the great scriptures and mystics assure us we can live in continuously if we allow no other purpose to come in our way.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Let's examine the two parts of a key paragraph in this reading.

If you practice pulling your attention away from distractions, even minor ones, during the day, you will find distractions much easier to ignore in meditation. The habit of working with steady concentration will reward you with new depth in meditation and a mind that is unflappable in times of stress or challenge.

Here, Sri Easwaran is stating that one-pointed attention will help us keep our mind unflappable in times of stress or challenge. Have you noticed your mind becoming divided in stressful situations? What tips you off to this division happening in your thinking process? How might you unify your attention at such times?

And if you can curb the propensity to get upset or jealous or uncooperative, which is the mind getting caught in emotional distractions, you will find major stumbling blocks beginning to melt away, both in meditation and in your personal life.

Here is another fascinating proposition: negative emotional states are actually distractions. One practical implication is that when our mind is habitually divided, it is also highly vulnerable to emotional upheaval. Are there situations in your life in which "emotional distractions" regularly occur? How might you unify your attention at such times?

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the second half of the second talk on this disc, "The Spiritual Victory." For groups that are not using the DVDs, please continue reading from "Deepening Meditation" in *Climbing the Blue Mountain*.

Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

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