

The Talks of Eknath Easwaran: Tape 21

Study Guide for ***The Buddha on Life and Nirvana***

The Stages of Life

Introduction

This month's videotape is drawn from one talk given by Sri Eknath Easwaran in April, 1980, close to the end of a long series of talks on the Dhammapada of the Buddha. It is a profound and wide-ranging talk, spanning the cycle of birth and death, and offering a dazzling description of the state of changelessness, or nirvana, to which the Buddha's teachings direct us.

Sri Easwaran begins *The Stages of Life*, the first section of this tape, with the Buddha's description of the free and changeless state of an illumined person, from the 26th chapter of the Dhammapada: "Wanting nothing at all, doubting nothing at all, master of his body and mind, he has gone beyond time and death." He goes on to examine the difficult path of spiritual growth that leads to it. The challenges are daunting but there is something in the human being that responds to such challenges, that delights in the difficulty and danger of surfing high waves. The prize, he says, is the state the mystics call immortality.

What follows is one of the most touching and vivid explanations of immortality in Sri Easwaran's teachings. He tells the story of a human life from the perspective of Hinduism and Buddhism: from childhood through teen-age, then through the twenties, forties, sixties, and into old age, death, and rebirth. If we look deep enough into our consciousness, we will discover that there is a changeless core of our personality that is untouched by these physical changes. Even a little of this awareness can release us from great fears and bring deep peace. As we enter each new stage, we no longer mourn what has passed, but celebrate the opportunities for growth that are to come.

Practical Exercise

In this month's exercises we will attempt to taste for ourselves a little of the changeless state of the mystics, and so get a better understanding of what they mean by "immortality."

In this first exercise we will work in the area of cravings. Go through the meditation passages in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*. Choose a passage that speaks to you of a state free from craving. Read it through several times. You may also want to copy it out to carry with you. Then, during the day, when you find yourself craving something unbeneficial – for example, a rich, unnecessary treat, or a movie that will only agitate your mind and bring no benefit – get out the passage and read it through a few times. Then use the mantram to keep your inner balance as you resist the craving.

The purpose of this exercise is not so much to conquer the craving (though that would be a welcome side-effect!) as to start to notice that, while one part of the mind is clamoring to fulfill the craving, another part of the mind seeks freedom from that craving. In the image Sri Easwaran uses in this talk, you are reminding yourself that the craving is actually a kind of thorn, which is not pleasant but painful, and that letting go of the craving will bring a sense of peace and joy. The passage and the mantram here represent the Atman, the changeless core of our personality. By clinging to them in the midst of a turbulent state of mind, we can begin to taste a small fraction of the mystics' experience of a state "beyond time and death."

Recommended Reading

The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living, Volume One, Chapter Two, commentary on verses 13-30.

Suggested Passage for Meditation

What Is Real Never Ceases.

The Other Shore

Introduction

In this second half of the talk, Sri Easwaran begins with a precise examination of the way we usually see the world – divided into the things and people we like and the things and people we don't like. This duality (often unconscious) determines not only how we act, but how we see life.

It is possible, however, to jump beyond those opposites. "Then you find that you have jumped into a state of consciousness where all is one." This leap, by which we leave behind the shore of separateness and move toward the other shore of unity, is very demanding, and requires long training.

The fruit of this work – the state of Nirvana or complete freedom from change and impurity – makes all the effort seem a small price. As Sri Easwaran puts it: "The person who is at home with everybody, who loves everybody, who wants the welfare of all, who strives for the welfare of all – for that person sorrow has ended, permanent joy has come. It is this ability to contribute to change war into peace, hatred into love, disunity into unity, that all of us are striving for."

Practical Exercise

In this exercise we will continue our attempt to get a taste of the changeless state by applying the same method to the mental agitation caused by excitement.

Once again, go through the meditation passages in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* and choose a passage that speaks to you of a peace that is not troubled by elation and depression, in which you might hope to "go beyond pleasure and pain into a state of permanent joy."

Then, later, when you find yourself getting elated or excited about something pleasant or fortunate, try to remember the passage. Get it out and read it through. Go for a mantram walk to steady your mind.

As you resist the urge to get excited by dwelling on your good fortune, can you observe the part of your mind that longs for a peace untroubled by such agitation? Try to resist the excitement long enough to see that this longing is there. With regular practice, you can learn to draw upon that longing to re-establish peace in your mind whenever you find yourself off-balance.

Recommended Reading

The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living, Volume One, Chapter Two, commentary on verses 55-72.

Suggested Passage for Meditation

The Illumined Man

Weekly Lesson Plan

[A note to BMCM Satsang Coordinators: During this month's lessons, the discussion and exercises often refer to *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*. It may be helpful to ask the members of your group to bring their copy with them, or for you to bring extra copies for members to use during the sessions.]

Lesson One

This month's lessons will be focused on gaining an experience of what the Buddha and other mystics call the state of changelessness, or going beyond duality to discover unity.

In this first lesson we will work in the area of cravings. Whenever we experience a craving, the mind is tangled in duality – the thing we want appears very vivid and desirable, while other things seem uninteresting or unattractive. This duality is a sign that our mind is intensely involved in the world of change – we don't have what we want, and we long for a change that will bring it to us. By contrast, says Sri Easwaran, the mystics are free from cravings. They feel contentment, and even joy, whether life brings pain or pleasure. Inwardly they experience unchanging fulfillment, which enables them to act with great effectiveness in the constantly changing outward world.

Go through the meditation passages in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*. Choose a passage that speaks to you of a state of complete contentment, free from craving. Read aloud to the group the passage you've chosen.

Then, reflect on the following questions: If this passage were vividly present in your mind when you are faced with a craving for something unbeneficial – such as a rich, unnecessary treat, or a movie that will only agitate your mind and bring no benefit – how would it change the way you relate to that craving? How might you bring this passage to life in your consciousness?

When it's time for inspiration, watch the first talk on the tape, *The Stages of Life*, which is 33 minutes long, or read from the second chapter of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*, Volume One. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Two

We are continuing our focus on changelessness – how we might gain a glimpse of the state the mystics speak of, beyond time and death. This week, we are again exploring the challenge of resisting cravings.

In the talk we watched last week, Sri Easwaran compared cravings to thorns. They actually bring us pain rather than pleasure. He refers to Sri Ramakrishna's advice: "the way to pull out that thorn is to get a bigger thorn, and use it to pull that thorn out, and throw both the thorns away." Then he explains that the second thorn is endurance: "So, in order to get over cravings, to get over petty,

private, personal longings, which do nobody any good, including ourselves, there is a great deal of endurance that is required, a great deal of inner toughness.”

Go through the meditation passages in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*. Choose a passage that speaks to you of a state free from craving, with a special emphasis on building endurance and patience. Some or all of the group can read aloud the passage they’ve chosen. If you prefer, you can continue using the same passage you chose last week

Questions for reflection: What qualities in the passage would you like to incorporate in your daily life? How might you use the Eight Points to do that? Can you recognize the part of yourself that is drawn to the state of freedom from cravings? How might you stay more deeply rooted in it?

The purpose of this exercise is not so much to conquer the craving (though that would be a happy side-effect!) as to start to notice that, while there is one part of the mind that is clamoring to fulfill the craving, there is another part of the mind that seeks freedom from it. The passage here represents the Atman, the changeless core of our personality. By clinging to it in the midst of a turbulent state of mind, we can begin to taste a small fraction of the mystics’ experience of a state “beyond time and death.”

When it’s time for inspiration, begin (or continue) reading from the second chapter of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*, Volume One. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Three

In this lesson we will continue our attempt to get a taste of the changeless state. This time we will apply the same method to the mental agitation caused by excitement.

Once again, go through the meditation passages in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* and choose a passage that speaks to you of a peace that is not troubled by elation and depression, in which you might hope to “go beyond pleasure and pain into a state of permanent joy.” Read your passage aloud to the group.

Questions for reflection: In your experience, what are the signs of excitement? Have you noticed the connection between excessive excitement and a feeling of “let-down” or disappointment? Sri Easwaran is suggesting that we can avoid that roller-coaster of elation and depression, thereby gaining a permanent joy. How might you remember the passage you’ve chosen (or remember to repeat the mantram) when you’re feeling excited or elated? How might you use the Eight Points to increase your desire for permanent joy and learn not be swept away by temporary good and bad fortune?

When it's time for inspiration, watch the second talk on the tape, *The Other Shore*, or continue reading from the second chapter of *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*, Volume One. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Four

In last week's tape, Sri Easwaran quoted a verse from the Bhagavad Gita, in which the Lord, as Sri Krishna, exhorts his friend and student Arjuna to engage in the battle for self-realization, "Having made yourself alike in pain and pleasure, profit and loss, victory and defeat, engage in this great battle."

Questions for reflection: How might you apply this teaching to your practice of the Eight Point Program? What does it mean to meditate, use the mantram, and practice the allied disciplines without distinguishing between pain and pleasure, profit and loss, victory and defeat? The Gita seems to be implying that the spiritual goal is beyond these dualities, and that when we can keep our minds even we are more effective, more at peace, and more joyful. In your practice of the Eight Points, what has helped you maintain full, unchanging effort? What hinders you? Through this month's lessons, we have tried to glimpse the state of changelessness. Have you gained any insights that you'd like to incorporate in your daily life? How might you use the Eight Points to make those changes permanent?

When it's time for inspiration, watch the second talk on the tape, read from *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living*, Volume One, Chapter Two, the commentary on verses 55-72. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

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