

Study Guide for

When the Mind Is Still

When the Mind Is Still: Part One

Introduction

“When the Mind Is Still” is an extraordinary talk by Sri Eknath Easwaran, summarizing the insights and outlook of the sages of ancient India. As he unfolds these glimpses of the supreme reality, he also shows how they can transform our daily life and our world.

The sages began their search for ultimate truth with the observation that the world about us is ever changing and cannot satisfy our need for a joy that lasts. They then extended that insight into the realm of thought to observe that there is continuous flux within us as well. It is useless to cling to the impermanent whirl of emotions, opinions, and thoughts for our security. We must look beyond the mind to find something changeless.

The main obstacle to this search for the changeless is that our view of the world is shaped by our mind. The restless, turbulent activity of the mind can grasp only that which is changing. If we want to discover and grasp something that is changeless, we can't use the active mind to perceive it. Instead, we need to fashion a different instrument of observation, as Gandhi did, by cultivating an unshakable faith that all of life is one. This faith gradually helps us still the mind and unify our consciousness, which brings us the capacity to make a great contribution to life.

Practical Exercise

In our exercise we will explore the challenge of seeking the changeless amid the changing.

As Sri Easwaran notes in this talk, our mental landscape is constantly changing. One day we like something, the next day we don't. One day we're contented, the next day we're restless.

During the coming week try to observe this changing landscape by focusing your attention on one area – your attitude towards work – and observing the changes that occur daily. At the end of each day, take a few minutes (no more than ten) to note in your journal some of the varied reactions and feelings you had toward your work that day. In particular, note tendencies such as:

- giving attention to what you like and avoiding what you dislike
- being unable to concentrate on necessary jobs you dislike
- varying responses to your co-workers

As the week progresses and you identify these variations, try to make your attitude as changeless as possible toward the same situations in your work. When you find your mind distracted by liking or disliking, or dwelling excessively on something pleasant or avoiding something unpleasant, try to give pure, concentrated attention to the work in front of you, without judgment or comment. In relating to others, try to be as one-pointed and understanding as you can. As you deepen your concentration, allow your mind to forget about its liking or disliking and get absorbed in the task before you.

Recommended Reading

Introduction to *The Upanishads*, translated by Eknath Easwaran.

Suggested Passage for Meditation

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad, “The River of God” in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.

When the Mind Is Still: Part Two

Introduction

Part Two begins with the conundrum: If all of life is one, why do we see each other as separate? Sri Easwaran traces the tragic consequences of this misperception – the conflict and poverty that arise when society forgets that every life is precious and every child needs to be protected. As the awareness of unity dawns in us through meditation, our consciousness gradually expands to embrace all of life.

Sri Easwaran then turns his attention to the method by which this transformation is achieved. First, in the stage of *dharana*, the seeker becomes more and more absorbed in the search for a changeless element beyond the mind. Then, in *dhyana*, meditation opens up the inner realms of consciousness, and the seeker comes to understand how to transform negative emotions into positive. Finally, in *samadhi*, the mind becomes still. Time and space are transcended. This still mind is the instrument of observation which enables the seeker to perceive life as it is, one and indivisible.

This realization releases a flood of energy and creativity to solve the problems of life and brings a joy greater than any worldly satisfaction.

Practical Exercise

In the second half of the talk, Sri Easwaran describes the realization of the sages, that the core of consciousness is identical in all living creatures. While this realization may still be far from us, we can gradually accommodate ourselves to it, and even taste a bit of it, by living *as if* we perceived life in that way.

This week, look for opportunities to “put yourself in another’s shoes.” If there is someone around you who is irritable or out-of-sorts, or who rubs you the wrong way, try the following exercise.

Quite often, when a person near us is in a bad mood, our own mood also shifts. We may get a little grouchy or irritated, or we may start to feel insecure or restless. When this happens to you, start repeating the mantram and try to withdraw your attention from your reaction. Strive to maintain a state of patience and equanimity towards that person, and so to understand them a little better. By doing this, you are reducing the separateness between you, and experiencing a small taste of unity.

Please use your common sense in practicing this exercise. This is an inward experiment and does not necessarily imply a change in your outward behavior towards that person.

In some cases, it would not be appropriate or even safe to change your outward behavior towards a person who is acting angrily. However, in such circumstances it is always helpful to use the mantram to reestablish calm in your own mind, which will help you know how to respond appropriately.

Suggested Passage for Meditation

Yoga Vasishtha, “The Lamp of Wisdom” in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.

Weekly Lesson Plan

Lesson One

This month we will be watching and studying Easwaran’s commentary on the sages of ancient India. We start with the idea of seeking the changeless amidst the changing. Please read the following excerpt from the transcript of this week’s talk:

Some of these great sages made a great generalization that everywhere in nature there is ceaseless change.... All nature is a flux, ceaseless change, never the same from minute to minute, and it is this ceaseless change that they began to study – which has been done in the West too by great observers of nature, by great poets of nature, by great scientists.

But one of the most amazing feats of genius, of sheer creative genius, that has ever been attained by human beings was when these mighty observers, men and women, suddenly began to see a similar world of change within the human mind, which has never been done in any other civilization. It was amazing. They said, “Look, it’s not only in the external world that seasons change, seasons change in the mind of the human being too.” And they would trace changes in attitude, changes in affection: good will giving way to ill will, and most hurtful of all, love changing into hatred.

The greatest proof of their all-encompassing genius is when they brought these two worlds together; the world of ceaseless change in the external world and the world of ceaseless change in the internal world, and they said there is no barrier between the two. They looked externally, and they looked internally, but if you can see inside with eyes that are clear and eyes that are penetrating, you’ll see it is all a world of flux.

As Easwaran notes here, our mental landscape is constantly changing. One day we like something, the next day we don't. One day we're contented, the next day we're restless.

Let's try to observe this by reflecting on a particular area of our lives – work. Take a moment to reflect on the past week or two in your work. Can you see how the attitude of your mind varied from day to day, hour to hour? Here are some examples:

- giving attention to what you like and avoiding what you dislike
- being unable to concentrate on necessary jobs you dislike
- varying responses to your co-workers

How might you bring an element of the changeless into these situations, using the Eight Points? How might you become steadier and less likely to change inwardly in response to external events? We'll take up that question in more detail next week.

When it's time for meditation, please watch the first part of this videotape, which is 29 minutes long. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Two

This week we are continuing the theme we took up last week: discovering the changeless amidst the changing phenomena of life. In the last exercise, we examined the changing nature of our minds in relation to our work, and we reflected a little on the questions, How might you bring an element of the changeless into these situations, using the Eight Points? How might you become steadier and less likely to change inwardly in response to external events?

This week, let's reflect on areas of our life other than work. In what areas are you troubled by the changeability of your responses? Where would you like to be more consistent? The following is an exercise that might help. How might you apply it in your life?

Try to make your attitude as changeless as possible toward the situations that tend to push you off balance. When you find your mind distracted by liking or disliking, or dwelling excessively on something pleasant or avoiding something unpleasant, try to give pure, changeless attention to the work in front of you, without judgment or comment. In relating to others, try to be as one-pointed and understanding as you can. As you deepen your concentration, allow your mind to forget about its liking or disliking and get absorbed in the task before you.

When it's time for inspiration, read the following sections from the Introduction to Easwaran's translation of the Upanishads: The opening section (pages 7-9); and "The Supreme Science" (pages 14-23). Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Three

This week, we continue our study of Easwaran's commentary on the sages of ancient India, directing our attention to an insight he brings up in the second half of the talk: the core of consciousness is identical in all living creatures. As he puts it, "In my body, which is just like yours, there is the inestimable core of pure consciousness, which is exactly the same as the core of pure consciousness in others. There is no difference at all."

While this realization of unity may still be far from us, we can gradually accommodate ourselves to it, and even taste a bit of it, by living *as if* we perceived life in that way.

This week, let's reflect on the opportunities in our life to put ourselves "in another's shoes." Quite often, when a person near us is in a bad mood, our own mood also shifts. We may get a little grouchy or irritated, or we may start to feel insecure or restless. When this happens to you, it's a good idea to start repeating the mantram. Strive to maintain a state of patience and equanimity towards that person, and so to understand them a little better. By doing this, you are reducing the separateness between you, and experiencing a small taste of unity.

Have you tried to do this in your practice of the Eight Points? What have you observed? Where else in your life might you practice it? Using the Eight Points, how else might you strengthen your ability to understand and sympathize with others?

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the second half of the tape, which is 28 minutes long. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Four

This week we conclude our study of Easwaran's commentary on the sages of ancient India.

In the reading we'll do later, there is a paragraph that describes deep meditation, in which concentration becomes so complete that the body is forgotten. Please read it and reflect on the questions that follow:

In meditation, as the mind settles down to dwell on a single focus, attention begins to flow in a smooth, unbroken stream, like oil poured from one container to another. As this happens, attention naturally retreats from other channels. The ears, for example, still function, but you do not hear; attention is no longer connected with the organs of hearing. When concentration is profound, there are moments when you forget the body entirely.

In last week's talk, when describing this state (called *dharana* in Sanskrit), Easwaran talked about the way in which the ancient sages developed their capacity for such absorption. Throughout the day, he said, they maintained their focus on their spiritual growth:

They'd be thinking about it while walking, they'd be thinking about it while going to sleep, they'd be thinking about this all the time so they had only one gigantic all-consuming thought. All other thoughts – of my pleasure, what I shall eat, what I shall wear – all these were consumed in this one gigantic, titanic inquiry which is dharana.

Please reflect on your life and choose one or two areas or times in your day when you might imitate this attitude, turning an ordinary activity into an opportunity to grow more deeply committed to your spiritual life. How might you use the Eight Points to transform those areas of your life?

When it's time for inspiration, please read the last two sections of the Introduction to the Upanishads, (pages 23-30). Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

*Blue Mountain Center of Meditation
Post Office Box 256, Tomales, CA, 94971
800 475 2369
info@nilgiri.org
www.nilgiri.org*

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