

Study Guide for
Self-Mastery

Raja Yoga: The Path to Self-Mastery

Introduction

The two talks on this videotape are filled with insights into the practice of meditation and the spiritual lifestyle that grows out of that practice. In our study and exercises we will concentrate specifically on the key issue of vital energy – how we can conserve and increase it through meditation, and how we can regulate that energy through the course of our day.

In the first talk, Sri Easwaran uses the classic image of Raja Yoga: when we have gained mastery over ourselves through meditation, our thoughts obey us. Sense training becomes natural, he says, when we have trained our thoughts to rest in spiritual ideals.

Such mastery conserves the energy that would otherwise have escaped through the senses, and Sri Easwaran gives an engaging account of one of his days to illustrate how, though he was seventy-eight at the time of this talk, he could spend the entire day teaching and guiding his students in the art of spiritual living, without feeling drained or tired.

Practical Exercise

In this talk, Sri Easwaran says that we can get clues for improving our meditation by observing our energy level through the day. To experiment with this idea, we'll pay some attention to the level of our vital energy through the day. When our vital energy is well regulated, we stay focused, determined, and enthusiastic about practicing spiritual disciplines. Generally, we feel calm, even-minded, and equal to challenges. When we have wasted our vital energy on unbeneficial, distracting pursuits, we may feel scattered, or we may feel nervous or frantic. These latter states sometimes feel energetic in a superficial way, but in terms of spiritual practice they are signs that we lack the capacity for concentration in the face of challenges.

This week, take five to ten minutes every evening to reflect on your day and notice three things:

1. When did you feel drained, depleted of the energy you need to make a good effort in your spiritual practice?
2. When did you feel that you had plenty of energy and were equal to challenges?
3. How and when were you able to replenish your store of vital energy?

Suggested Passage for Meditation

Native American Tradition, “Great Life-Giving Spirit” in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.

Recommended Reading

Chapter Four, “Finding Balance,” in *Take Your Time*.

Self-Will and Freedom

Introduction

This talk was given in January 1989 in response to a series of questions posed to Sri Easwaran on the topic of self-will and the thinking process. It provides much practical guidance, as well as a fascinating glimpse into Easwaran’s mystical experiences.

The talk begins with his careful analysis of the last line of the Prayer of Saint Francis, “It is in dying [to self] that we are born to eternal life.” Self-will often expresses itself in compulsive habits of thinking and living. To help us change these habits permanently, Easwaran presents a simple model of the process by which the mind forms habits. When we get free from compulsive thinking, we gain access to much greater reserves of energy.

In the second part of the talk, he goes on to recount in detail how he has learned to replenish his vital energy by absorbing the beauty of nature with a calm, concentrated mind.

And in the final section of the talk, Easwaran draws on one of India’s great modern mystics, Sri Ramana Maharshi, to give an inspiring picture of how the conquest of self-will frees us from identification with the body, and therefore from the fear of death. “Once you have become established in this experience,” he says, “wherever you look – the animals, the birds, the trees, the rivers, the seas, the skies – in everything you see the signature of the Lord of Love.”

Practical Exercise

In this talk, Sri Easwaran speaks of his ability to replenish his energy by absorbing the beauty of nature: “While traveling along this beautiful road in the evening, it gave me such joy to keep repeating my mantram until I got back here. There was no need; there was no agitation in my mind – it was just the very joy of doing it. The joy of seeing the Divine Light everywhere is very different from the poetical experience or the painting experience. Throughout that journey, I

used my mind to absorb the beauty of the Divine Light that I saw everywhere. That absorption, I have every reason to believe, brings a lot of energy, a lot of vitality.”

This week, try to design some activity, using one of the Eight Points, which enables you to replenish your spiritual energy. What can you do during the day, using the Eight Points, to better harness your vital energy and move from a low energy state to a higher one? What kind of right recreation (an activity that relaxes body and mind without causing agitation) helps you to replenish yourself? Try to leave some time for it regularly in your schedule, and view it as part of your spiritual practice.

Suggested Passage for Meditation

Chief Yellow Lark, “Let Me Walk in Beauty” from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*.

Recommended Reading

Chapter Five, “Living in Freedom,” in *Take Your Time*.

Weekly Lesson Plan

Lesson One

This month our focus is on conserving and increasing vital energy. In the videotaped talk we’ll watch this week, Sri Easwaran says that we can get clues for improving our meditation by observing our energy level through the day. The goal is to maintain our energy at a level that allows us to be consistently focused, determined, and enthusiastic about practicing our spiritual disciplines.

When our vital energy is harnessed and remains at a high level, we feel calm, even-minded, and equal to challenges. When we have let our vital energy run low, we may feel scattered, or we may feel nervous or frantic. These latter states sometimes feel energetic in a superficial way, but in terms of spiritual practice they are signs that we have run low on the capacity to face challenges.

Take a few minutes to reflect on how the level of your energy varies during a typical day. When do you feel drained, depleted of the energy you need to make a good effort in your spiritual practice? When do you feel that you have plenty of vital energy and are equal to challenges? How do these states relate to your practice of the Eight Points? What might you do to keep yourself more consistently in a high-energy state?

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the first talk on the videotape, "Raja Yoga: The Path to Self-Mastery," which is 32 minutes long. For those not using the videotapes, please read from Chapter Four of *Take Your Time*. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Two

We are continuing this month's focus on vital energy – how we can monitor and regulate our vital energy through the day so as to maintain our spiritual practice at its best. When vital energy is harnessed at a high level, we feel calm, even-minded, and equal to challenges. When our vital energy is low, we may feel scattered, or we may feel nervous or frantic. These latter states sometimes feel energetic in a superficial way, but in terms of spiritual practice they are signs that we have run low on the capacity to face challenges.

Last week we examined the flux of vital energy through the day. This week please reflect on what activities involving the Eight Points help you replenish your vital energy. What can you do during the day, using the Eight Points, to move from a low energy state to a higher one?

When it's time for inspiration, please read from Chapter Four of *Take Your Time*. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

Lesson Three

In the talk we'll watch this week, Sri Easwaran speaks of his ability to replenish his energy by absorbing the beauty of nature: "While traveling along this beautiful road in the evening, it gave me such joy to keep repeating my mantram until I got back here. There was no need; there was no agitation in my mind – it was just the very joy of doing it. The joy of seeing the divine light everywhere is very different from the poetical experience or the painting experience. Throughout that journey, I used my mind to absorb the beauty of the divine light that I saw everywhere. That absorption, I have every reason to believe, brings a lot of energy, a lot of vitality."

This is a useful example of what Easwaran has called "right recreation." Take a few minutes to identify (or imagine) some activity using one of the Eight Points that will replenish your spiritual energy. What kind of right recreation (an activity that relaxes body and mind without causing agitation) helps you to replenish yourself? How have you been able to include some of the Eight Points into your recreation? What forms of recreation relax and refresh you without agitating your mind?

When it's time for inspiration, please watch the second of the talks on this videotape, "Self-Will and Freedom," which is 34 minutes long. For those not using the videotapes, please read from Chapter Five of *Take Your Time*.

Lesson Four

This week we'll conclude our series on vital energy by reading and reflecting upon an excerpt from Chapter Four of *Take Your Time*. Please read the following paragraphs (aloud, if you are working with a group):

One fascinating thing about people with a lot of energy is that it's not at their beck and call. When energy is overflowing it tends to drive them; but at other times it just dries up. This is the other pole of our lives: the times when we just can't get going.

Often people have energy only when it comes to doing things they like. We all know people who have boundless motivation when it comes to doing what they want to do. They get absorbed in details that seem excruciating to us and pass hours without noticing how much time has gone by. But when it comes to activities that don't interest them, they may actually seem sluggish and even lacking in energy.

Most of us are like this. We have energy for activities that interest us, but when that energy is blocked it flows elsewhere, to something more attractive. We get busy doing those other, more attractive things and can't find time for what needs doing.

Questions for reflection. Have you noticed this mental dynamic in yourself? Have you experimented with generating enthusiasm for important but unpalatable tasks? How has your practice of the Eight Points changed the way you deal with such situations? What helps you free up the energy trapped in such situations?

When it's time for inspiration, please read from Chapter Five of *Take Your Time*. Conclude with 30 minutes of meditation.

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