Eknath Easwaran on Meditation & Spiritual Living

Blue Mountain Journal

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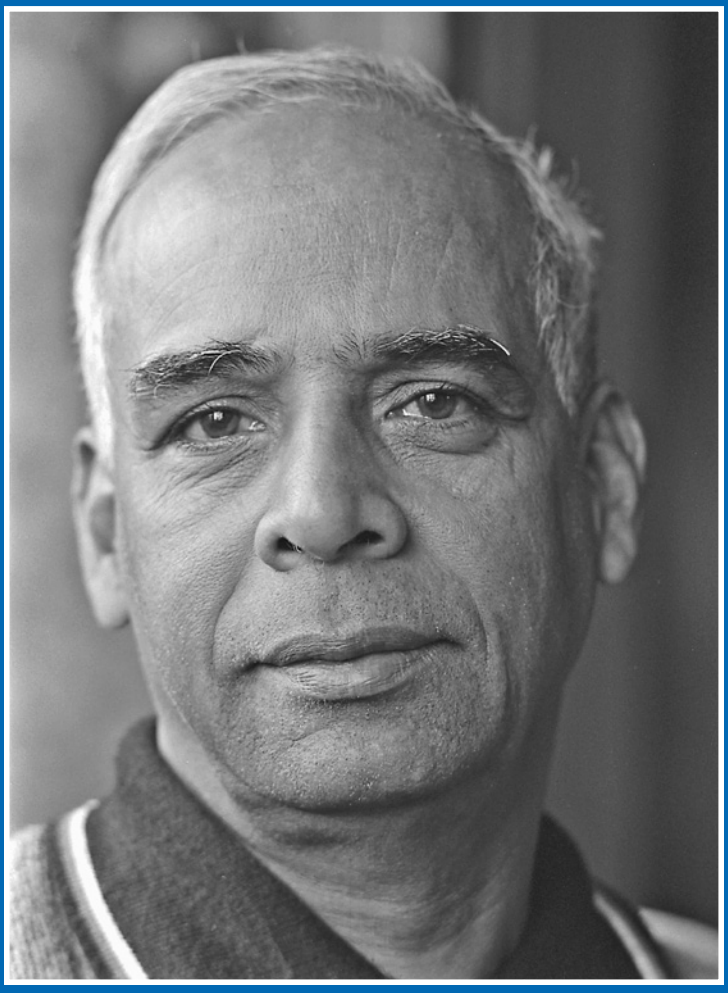

Kindness

In this Issue

Quoting a medieval mystic, Easwaran opens the first article in this issue: “Here we have the secret of the spiritual life.… “Be kind, be kind, be kind.”

Easwaran also links kindness with strength: “To me it means the internal toughness to take whatever life deals out without losing your humanity. It is those who never stoop to retaliation, never demand an eye for an eye, who are truly strong. They have the toughness to be tender, even sweet, while resisting violence with all their heart.… This kind of opposition requires detachment, toughness, and real love.”

In other articles he notes the “close connection between patience, kindness, and love,” and tells us that kindness to others also means being kind to ourselves: “When you are always kind to others, kindness becomes an attitude. Your natural response is to be kind. Then you cannot help being kind to yourself as well.”

Tips from Easwaran help us to make kindness attainable, and community stories put a face on how we can strive to be kind in the midst of our householder lives.

May this issue help us all to spread kindness.

– The BMCM Editorial Team

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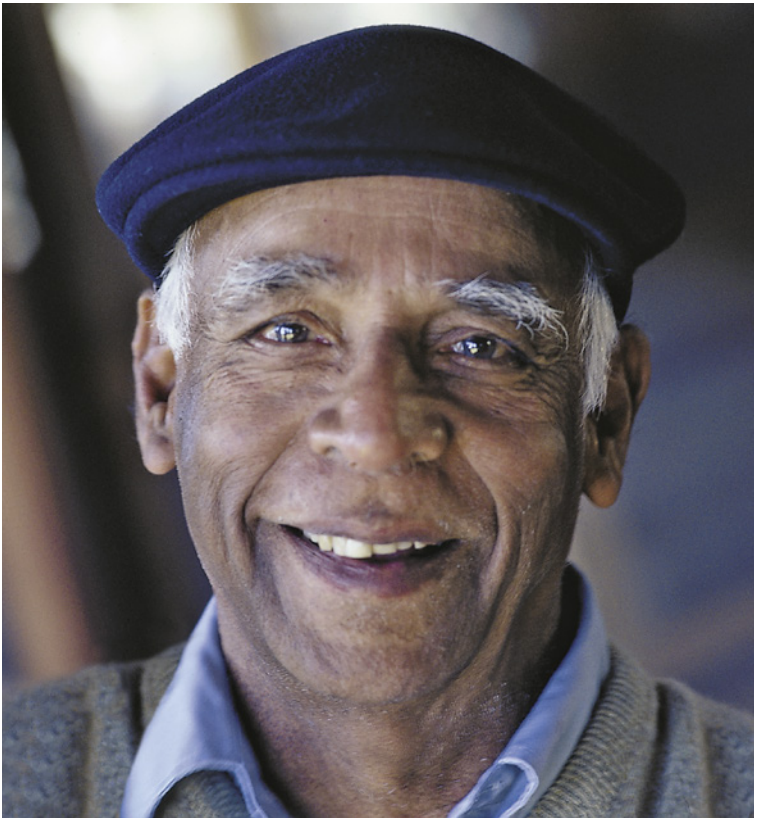
A Habit of Goodness

Eknath Easwaran, from *Words to Live By*

The conditioning of stimulus and response, "an eye for an eye," is strong. But as meditation deepens, you find there is a fierce satisfaction in letting go of your own way so that things can go someone else's way instead. Gradually, you develop a habit of goodness, a positive passion for the welfare of others. In terms of emotional engineering, you are using the mind's enormous capacity for passion to develop the power to put other people first: and not just verbally, but in your thoughts and actions as well. Eventually kindness becomes spontaneous, second nature; it no longer requires effort. There is nothing sentimental about this quality, either; kindness can be as tough as nails.



Eknath Easwaran, 1960s

Kindness

Eknath Easwaran, from *The Constant Companion*

Here we have the secret of the spiritual life in just one word. The great medieval mystic Johan Ruysbroeck, when asked how to become perfect, gave the same answer: "Be kind, be kind, be kind." When we remove all unkindness from our deeds, words, thoughts, and feelings, what remains is our natural state of love.

This may sound simple, but it demands many years of sustained effort to eliminate all unkindness from our inner and outer lives. Some would say that this is humanly impossible – that it is beyond human nature to return kindness for unkindness even in our thoughts. Only when we see someone who has attained these heights do we begin to say, "Maybe it is possible, after all." When we come in contact with such a person, we know there is no limit to the human capacity to love.

This is the role of the spiritual teacher, and it carries great responsibility. A spiritual teacher cannot ever afford to give in to anger or impatience. Whatever the provocation, he or she must maintain this never-changing attitude of love and forgiveness. The word guru literally means "heavy" – one so heavy that no storm can uproot him, as heavy as a mountain that withstands the hurricane without flinching.

Train your mind in patience and endurance

Strength is often equated with the capacity to attack, but to me it means the internal toughness to take whatever life deals out without losing your humanity. It is those who never stoop

to retaliation, never demand an eye for an eye, who are truly strong. They have the toughness to be tender, even sweet, while resisting violence with all their heart. By contrast, those who are ready to strike back at the slightest provocation are not strong but fragile. They may espouse a higher view of human nature, but almost anything can break them and make them lash back at those they oppose.

When someone is being sarcastic or cruel to you, the natural response is to retaliate. If you want to be unshakable, you have to train your mind in patience and endurance, the most grueling training that life offers. Life shows no mercy to those who lack this inner strength. Every virtue requires the toughness never to retreat in the face of challenge.

It is a very poor evaluation of human beings to think that impatience and violent reactions are part of human nature. We have to look to people like Mahatma Gandhi, kind under any provocation, to see what human nature is really like. Gandhi's life showed over and over that even a violent person will respond if exposed to someone who, by being always kind, focuses consistently on the highest in our nature.

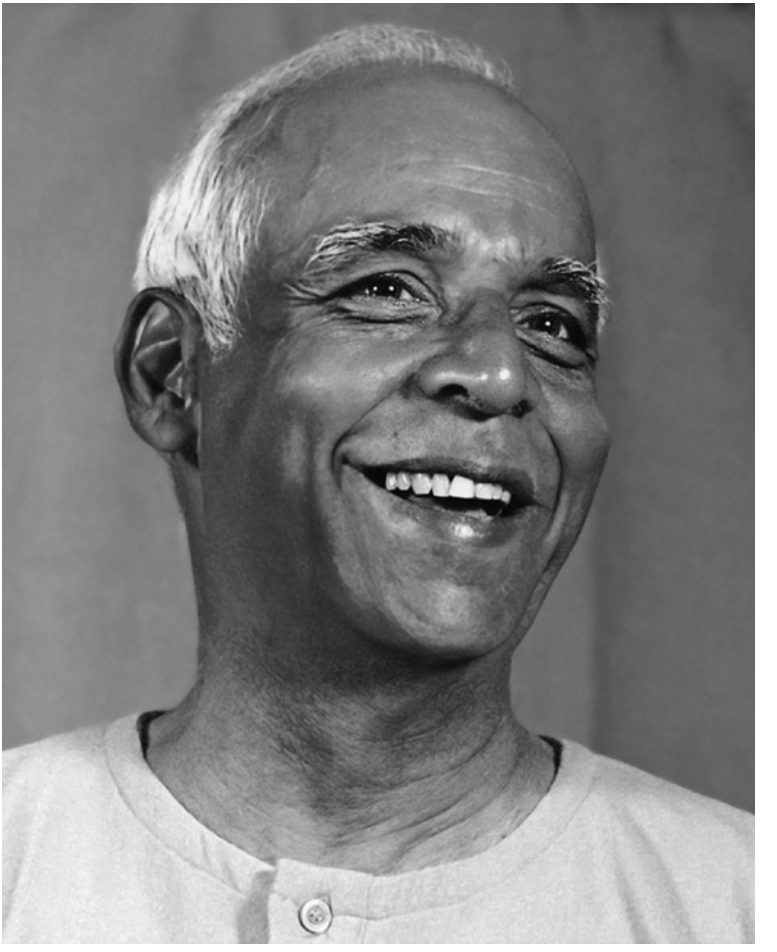
A curious mix

As meditation deepens and the mantram begins to get established, some interesting developments take place in the mind. Resentments and hostilities that used to torment us will be getting weaker, yet they will still be present. It is a peculiar position. You find a little resentment, a little sympathy – a curious mix.

For example, suppose somebody is rude to you. You don't like the fellow, but you don't dislike him either – a great advance from your previous attitude. You may feel hostile for a moment, but you know that hostility no longer has the power to push you into doing or saying something you will regret. And because you know you are in control, that experience will leave no residue of resentment in your mind. I don't mean you will like that person, not at first – in fact, for five minutes or so you may positively dislike him. But afterward you say to yourself, "Oh, the fellow comes from a broken home, went to a rough school, fell in with the wrong company; that's why he has become like that."

Once you know you can transform negative feelings in this way, you have won a great victory. Even so, you can't expect to sail through the world in complete tranquility. When people criticize you unfairly, you are not expected to say "Thank you." When they denounce you, you're not expected to praise them. Such responses would be unnatural and unrealistic. The spiritual life requires artistry, and often we may have to answer personal attacks with tender but firm opposition. We should never connive at discourtesy or unkindness, for others' sake as well as for our own.

This kind of opposition requires detachment, toughness, and real love. But when these are present, they generally disarm the other person. In time they may even win him over as a friend, which to me is one of the greatest thrills life offers.



Eknath Easwaran, 1970s

Choose Kindness

Eknath Easwaran, from *Strength in the Storm*

As a boy, growing up in a South Indian village, I learned to ride an elephant the way teenagers today learn to drive a car. In our part of India, elephants are loved and deeply respected. They work in our fields and forests much like draft horses in the West, and have for thousands of years. They are highly intelligent, sensitive, loyal creatures, and the bond between an elephant and its trainer, or mahout, goes as deep as any family tie.

Elephants are very gentle. If you offer one a peanut on the palm of your hand, it won't grab; it will take the nut delicately with the tip of its trunk without even touching your skin. But its physical prowess is legendary. It can pull up a tree by the root and swing it around with its trunk as if it were a toy. Every creature gives way to the elephant; it has no natural enemies.

All ancient armies had infantry and cavalry. But Indian armies had elephantry too, and they were mightiest of all. A trained elephant will not turn back from battle. It would rather die than run away. And when an elephant goes into battle, its strength and endurance are so tremendous that no matter how many arrows find their mark on its body, it ignores them and presses forward gallantly into the thick of the fight.

How we should go through life

Why am I telling you about elephants? Because this is how we should go through life, the Buddha says. It's one of my favorite verses: "Suffer harsh words as an elephant suffers arrows on the battlefield. People are people, often ill-natured."

Unkind words can cause lasting wounds. People will hurt you – but you can choose not to hurt them back.

This is the authentic keynote of the Buddha. He doesn't pretend that everyone is divine, everyone an angel. He says, "Frankly speaking, most people lack courtesy. You can expect to be hurt. But you have a say in how much you are hurt – and how you are going to respond. Be like an elephant, the mightiest of creatures. Shrug off harsh words and move on."

Disagree without being disagreeable

Because words can't be seen, we throw them around without much consideration for their effect. But words are things. In fact, they are even more thinglike than material objects. If you are hit by a rock, the wound might take days to heal. But harsh words can cause a wound that festers for years, and the pain may last a lifetime.

Words leave lasting impressions. Dr. Wilder Penfield, the great Canadian neurosurgeon, described vividly the experiments that demonstrated how electric stimulation of the brain can revive experiences we thought were long forgotten. It's all still there, recorded deep in consciousness – emotional depth charges ready to explode when they are triggered.

Any little act or remark that fails the test of kindness – a joke, a wisecrack, thoughtless gossip, a judgmental opinion we pick

up and pass on without consideration – can wreck a relationship, destroy trust, even cost a job. But the most glaring failure is the everyday quarrel. We just don't seem to know how to disagree without being disagreeable.

Don't get into quarrels in the first place

It starts simply enough: someone says something we disagree with, and for some reason we get angry. Or, of course, we say something they disagree with and they get angry. Either way, after just a few words, tempers fray and language starts deteriorating.

How many times have I heard even educated people begin an emotionally charged dialogue with the best of intentions: "We won't quarrel. Let us confine ourselves to the subject at hand." Within five minutes one is saying, "That's not what you told me last Saturday in front of the Wide World of Shoes!" And the other replies, "That wasn't in front of the Wide World of Shoes. It was the Narrow World of Shoes." Anything to quarrel, anything to contradict. After that, the argument has nothing to do with the subject. It is mostly "You must have done this even as a child" and "I've heard stories about the way you behaved in high school." We may know we are being foolish, but by then we are caught; we can't escape.

All of us have been in arguments like this.

Whenever I found myself caught in a foolish situation I used to ask my grandmother, "Granny, if you found yourself in a situation like this, what would you do?" It took years for me to understand her simple answer: "Son, I wouldn't get into a situation like that."

This is very practical advice. Don't get into quarrels in the first place. If you do find yourself getting caught in one, close your mouth, start your mantram, and take the closest exit. If you can, go for a fast walk – even five minutes will help to quiet your mind. You'll be surprised at how effective this is.

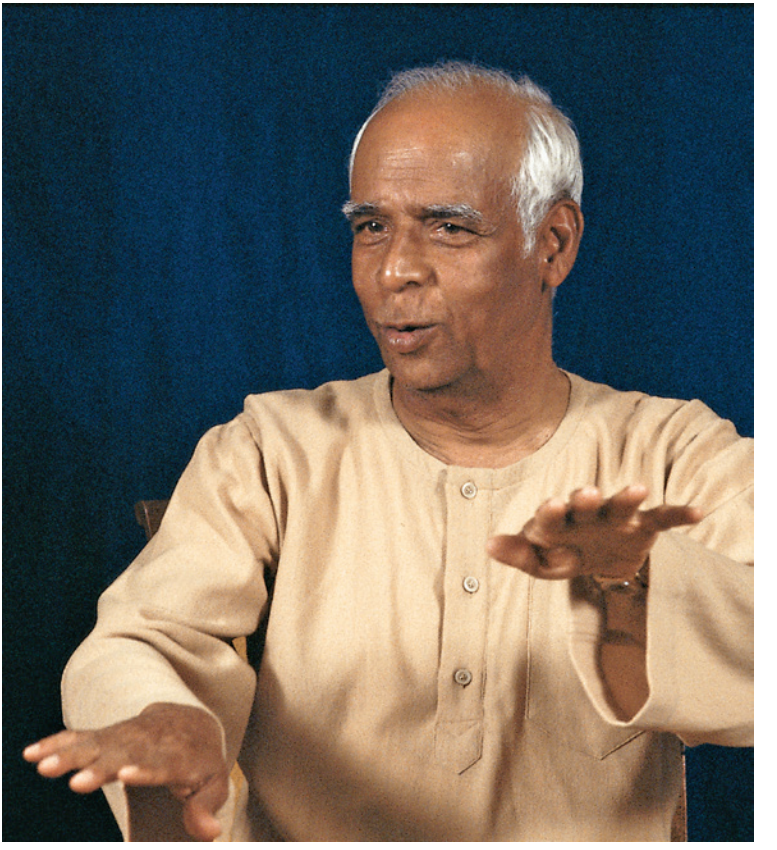
Even if somebody is being rude or unkind, it doesn't help to be unkind in return. It doesn't help the point you are trying to make, it doesn't help them, and it doesn't help you. The more unkind you are, the more angry the other person is going to be – and then the more angry you are going to be, until two people have ceased to be civilized human beings and have gone back to a previous stage of evolution.

If we could see what happens in the mind at times like these, we would be embarrassed. The mind simply slips out of control, like a speeding car that careens all over the road. Only when we have some say in where our attention goes can we keep our hands on the wheel.

Learn to be patient under provocation

That is where the mantram can help. When you see your mind beginning to speed up, step on the brake and stop the words that are about to burst forth. If necessary, put your hand over your mouth – or bite your tongue; it won't hurt as much as words you'll regret later. When you are sure your mind is under control again – and only then! – you can reply with words that are kind, constructive, and respectful.

If we were to ask the Buddha why we lose control at times like these, he would point out that the mind never was really in our control in the first place. The very nature of the mind is to



Eknath Easwaran, 1970s

be fickle, distractable, constantly in motion – in a word, to do whatever it likes. It can't bear not having its way. It can't bear to be contradicted, so we get angry and lash out with hurtful words. Most of us would be chagrined to see the underlying message: "You aren't worth my respect. My ideas are superior; you don't count."

To break this cycle, we have to reverse the process and learn

to be patient under provocation. That's why the Buddha tells us to put up with hard words like an elephant shrugging off arrows. He's not being ancient India's answer to Ann Landers. He's a spiritual teacher, and he's telling us how to live in freedom instead of simply reacting to what others say and do. Shrug off the daily darts and arrows that life sends, he is telling us, but never shoot arrows at others. Never upset people with harsh words or actions.

Never be unkind to them or treat them with lack of respect, however they might behave themselves.

In other words, he is saying, we should be prepared for a certain amount of impoliteness and discourtesy in personal relationships, not because people are bad but because they can't control their minds – just like us.

The other person is just like you

One of the curious foibles of human nature is that we expect others to show courtesy to us, but we also expect them to bear with us if we happen to be a little rude now and then. We expect to have our way, but why should others have theirs? It's good, I think, not to get upset if you find somebody not showing respect to you, for the simple reason that you may well not be showing enough respect yourself.

Here the Buddha asks a simple question: "If you get displeased when others are unkind to you, why don't you get displeased when you are not kind to others?" There is no mystery about these things. You don't like anyone to be unkind to you. Why don't you remember that the other person is just like you? Like you, he doesn't like unkind words. Like you, she appreciates courtesy and respect.

Oddly enough, the person who usually gets upset is the man who expects extreme courtesy for himself, the woman who finds it easy to be discourteous to others. The realist says, "Well, the world is like that. It takes all sorts. Sometimes I let words slip that I regret. Why should I be surprised if it happens to others also?"

The implication is revolutionary

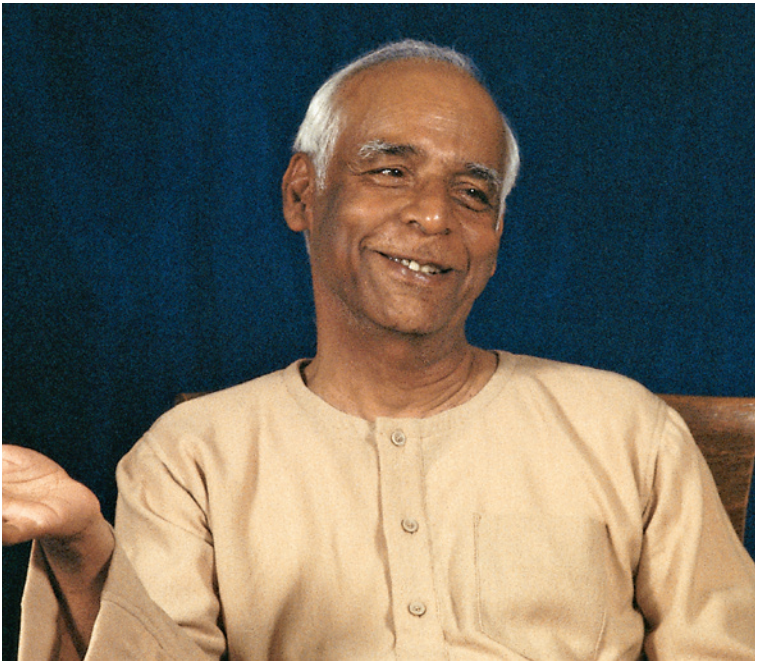
This simple shift in attitude can save us a lot of grief. The Buddha is not simply reminding us that people are going to upset us. We already knew that. He is saying that if we get upset, it's because we're upsettable. And the answer is to make ourselves unupsettable – which everyone can do with practice.

This is a remarkable point. Just think: you don't have to be upset in an upsetting situation! All of us have times when life doesn't bother us and other times when one wrong word sets us off like a volcano. What makes the difference? Only our state of mind – which we are learning to control.

This is the benefit of practicing kindness, and the implication is revolutionary. If we want not to be upset by rude words and unkind behavior, the answer is for us to be courteous and kind. It may not have an immediate effect on those around us, but with practice it becomes a shield so strong that other people's behavior will not bother us at all.

This doesn't mean making a doormat of yourself

Believe me, for those of us who have had our intellects honed to be sarcastic, it's very difficult to keep from using sharp words. When you're being criticized or attacked, it's almost considered



Eknath Easwaran, 1970s

an intellectual responsibility to answer back with compound interest. And that's just what I used to do in faculty meetings, along with everyone else – until I began to understand that if somebody attacked me, there was no need to get angry. It didn't improve the situation on any level – and besides, something within me rebelled against being bounced around like a rubber ball. So I started repeating my mantram silently and keeping quiet.

It was not at all easy. Worse, it was misinterpreted. Somebody who used to keep quiet would think I was at a loss for an answer and join the others in jumping on me. It was

difficult training, but very soon I began to see that I was getting detached – not from my colleagues, but from my own opinions. When they were criticizing my ideas, they weren't criticizing me. They were criticizing a statue they had sculpted and set up in the corner. Why should I be bothered if they threw darts at a statue they themselves had made?

This doesn't mean making a doormat of yourself. Just the opposite. It is training – learning to get your mind under control. The first goal is to break the connection between stimulus and response. Later, once you have a measure of detachment, you can reply to criticism without identifying yourself with your opinions or the other person with hers, choosing words that are kind, respectful, and to the point. The key is to have a choice.

Face opposition firmly but tenderly

The more insensitive the other person is, the more reason for you to alert your mind to be calm and compassionate – and, if necessary, to face opposition firmly but tenderly. We aren't helping inconsiderate people when we give in to their demands or let them walk all over us. It only feeds the habit of rudeness to let them have their way. We have to learn to show respect by opposing them – tenderly, nonviolently, but firmly.

This is a lesson all of us need to learn, and it's not at all easy. Particularly in relationships where both parties are insecure, each will feel resentment but neither will say no because of fear that the other's affections may change. This is very common today, especially between parents and children. In such cases it is especially painful – and all the more necessary – to learn to oppose tenderly, with detachment and respect.

Criticism can be useful only when it is constructive. Comments can be useful only when they are friendly. Persuasion can be useful only when it is loving. Even from the point of effectiveness, then, unkind comments only add to the problem. Disrespectful criticism makes the situation worse.

Get a little detached

Often, of course, it is necessary to make a constructive comment or suggestion. It is the mental attitude – the tone, the respect, the genuine concern – with which we put forward ideas opposed to others' that makes the contribution effective.

I would suggest that whenever you feel you have to make a suggestion opposed to someone else's, take time to get a little detached from the situation by repeating the mantram silently. Then, when your mind is calm, offer your suggestion in a friendly, warmhearted manner with genuine respect. This takes practice, but you will find that it works. It is effective.

Most personal disagreements, I would say, arise from the unwillingness to see the other person's point of view. It is not that we have to accept it, but under no circumstances should we refuse to acknowledge that the other person has a point of view – one that deserves to be listened to with respect and evaluated with detachment.

Most of us acknowledge this in principle, but in practice it is all too rare. It took years of retraining my mind to learn to listen with respect to opinions utterly opposed to mine, weigh them objectively, and either retain my own opinion or revise or throw it out according to what I learned.

When we are able to do this – to be completely loyal to our

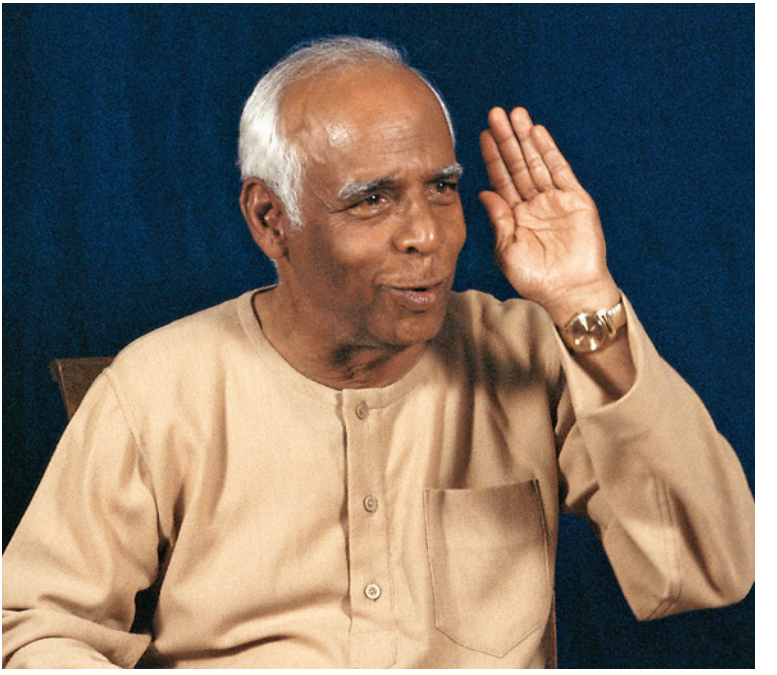
own ideals while respecting the integrity of those who differ from us – often they begin to respond. What matters is the friendliness we show, the attention with which we listen – and, more than any thing else, the complete absence of any sense of superiority. The superiority complex is most rampant where our sense of separateness is inflamed. The less separate we feel from those around us, the less superior we will feel too.

Unshakable in any storm

While I was teaching literature, I had a colleague whose manner and opinions were opposed to mine in every conceivable way. I probably worked on that relationship throughout my tenure on campus. Not only did I learn to stay calm when he attacked me; I went out of my way to be kind to him. I don't think the effort ever made much difference to him. Our relationship never changed: I never did succeed in winning him over.

But that didn't matter. What was thrilling to discover was how much I had grown by trying. Because of that challenge, I learned to make myself unshakable in any storm of criticism or ill will. That skill proved invaluable later, and those years of trial gave me one of the most important lessons I have ever learned in personal relationships.

Facing anger in particular – your own or others' – is one of life's best opportunities for training. It's very much like learning to lift weights. You start by lifting chairs, then tables, then a desk, and after a while you're lifting a VW Bug. You can pick up a thousand pounds like one of those Russian weight lifters, raise it over your head – "clean and jerk" – and then drop it onto the mat with a lot of noise.



Eknath Easwaran, 1970s

It is the same with anger. You start with those absurd little quarrels about the Wide World of Shoes. As you learn to be patient, you get confidence. Next time, when a bigger outburst comes, instead of retaliating, being unkind, or making sarcastic remarks, you use the incident to train the muscles of your patience by repeating the mantram.

A sign of immense strength

Just as we admire people who can lift a thousand pounds, we all benefit by being with somebody who can be patient under attack, kind when opposed, and detached enough to see the

situation clearly and compassionately. This is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of immense strength. (Remember the Buddha and his elephant?)

Athletes, I understand, often keep a daily record of their training. In the same spirit, I take a few minutes every evening to get a bird's-eye view of training my mind and see where I can improve the quality of my daily behavior.

This is not a negative survey. You are not finding fault with yourself. You are asking, "Where can I be a little more patient? Can I be a little more loving toward Amelia tomorrow? Can I be a little more helpful to John?" These are positive ways in which we can improve the quality of our daily living tomorrow in the light of what we have done today.

Interestingly enough, this makes every day new. Tomorrow is never the same old day. There is always something more to be done: one or two more steps to take on the path upward, some greater care to avoid the mistakes that all of us make in some small way. Instead of repining over mistakes or being resentful over them, I would suggest taking every possible care not to repeat those mistakes tomorrow and make at least a little improvement in your daily behavior.

Move in the world with true freedom

This is why we have been given the competitive instinct: not to compete with others, but to compete with ourselves. Every evening you can look at yourself in the mirror and say, "You did a pretty good job today, I agree. But watch out! Tomorrow I'm going to outdo you."

When you refrain from unkindness, you are uncovering your

real nature. Unkindness is not really characteristic of anyone. Beneath the selfish conditioning that brings such sorrow to us and others is a core of goodness that is an essential part of the human personality. The behavior that covers this goodness is a mask, which we gradually remove in the natural course of spiritual growth. We don't have to make ourselves loving; we have only to remove unkindness from our speech and finally from our hearts.

If we can be kind when others provoke us, we move in the world with true freedom.

Those who have learned to be kind in the face of provocation move in the world with freedom. Their love flows to all around without any question of "Is he being nice to me? Is she being kind?" Life holds us hostage with such questions. But when we attain the stage where there is no possibility of my dancing to your tune or making you dance to mine, we are free. Life cannot dictate to us; we can choose how we respond.

Give Up Anger

Excerpt from Easwaran's translation, The Dhammapada

Give up anger, give up pride, and free yourself from worldly bondage. No sorrow can befall those who never try to possess people and things as their own.

Those who hold back rising anger like a rolling chariot are real charioteers. Others merely hold the reins.

Conquer anger through gentleness, unkindness through kindness, greed through generosity, and falsehood by truth. Be truthful; do not yield to anger. Give freely, even if you have but little. The gods will bless you.

Injuring no one, self-controlled, the wise enter the state of peace beyond all sorrow. Those who are vigilant, who train their minds day and night and strive continually for nirvana, enter the state of peace beyond all selfish passions.

There is an old saying: "People will blame you if you say too much; they will blame you if you say too little; they will blame you if you say just enough." No one in this world escapes blame.

There never was and never will be anyone who receives all praise or all blame. But who can blame those who are pure, wise, good, and meditative? They shine like a coin of pure gold. Even the gods praise them, even Brahma the Creator.

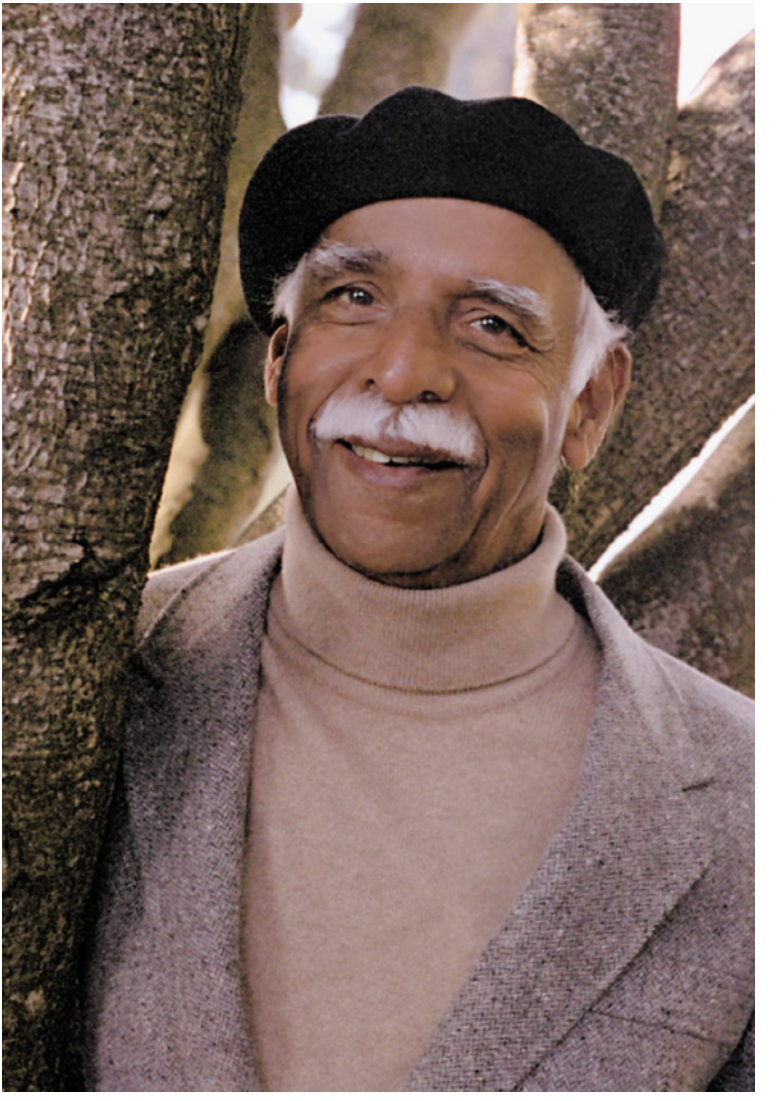
Use your body for doing good, not for harm. Train it to follow the dharma. Use your tongue for doing good, not for harm. Train it to speak kindly. Use your mind for doing good, not for harm. Train your mind in love.

Tips from Easwaran on Being Kind

From a selection of his books

- If I can listen to you with respect, it is usually only a short time before you listen with respect to me. Once this attitude is established, most differences can be made up.
- Whenever you find someone who is not as skillful as you are, or as efficient, or as secure, instead of criticizing or comparing, the best service you can render is to help and support. If it is necessary to oppose or correct that person, you can always do so with sympathy, kindness, and respect.
- When someone is unkind to us, we need not take it personally. Why should we? We are not getting hurt; if anyone is hurt, it is the other person.
- If you really want to get even with someone, be more forgiving; kindness exchanged for unkindness comes out even. What people call getting even is only getting odd.
- When you are always kind to others, kindness becomes an attitude. Your natural response is to be kind. Then you cannot help being kind to yourself as well; you will develop a habit of supporting yourself.
- If we strive to maintain an unbroken code of courtesy, consideration, and kindness in the numberless encounters of daily life, we may be able to sneak up on the Self. Even this is far from easy; it requires complete vigilance every day.

- How do you go about getting rid of self-will? You can't throw it in a Goodwill box! Nobody wants it, I assure you; it's like nuclear waste. Thérèse has a characteristically beautiful solution: we can wash it away by practicing kindness and consideration toward everyone, even if only on a limited local stage.
- So now is the time to prepare. Do not accumulate any unfavorable karma; do not leave kindness for tomorrow or selflessness for next week. Life is a process; we are shaping it with every thought.
- Go slowly, and remember that it is always better not to act in the heat of the moment. Whenever time allows, instead of responding immediately to an unwise demand, take a mantram walk first, meditate, and then speak when you can do so with kindness and patience. Remember, too, that the very best way to change someone is to begin with your own example.
- Meditation generates power that needs to be put to constructive use, particularly in healing our relationships. Francis once said that we pray to partake of the peace of the Lord, but that the hours of the day are meant for spreading this peace in the places where people dwell. When things go wrong at home, for instance, we need to try to remain patient and sympathetic.
- Memorize a passage on kindness, on goodness, and then drive it inward every day, deeper and deeper into consciousness. If you persist, you will become that kind, good person on which you meditate; it cannot fail.



Eknath Easwaran, 1980s

Patience, Kindness, and Love

By Eknath Easwaran, from *Take Your Time*

We expect professional and financial success to require time and effort. Why do we take success in our relationships for granted? Why should we expect harmony to come naturally just because we are in love?

Naturally there are going to be differences when two people are in love. Even identical twins have differences of opinion, and they come from the same combinations of genes and the very same background. Why should two people from, say, New York City and Paris, Texas, expect life together to be smooth sailing?

When irritations or conflicts occur in a relationship, my advice is, don't move away. Don't say, "I am not going to talk to you; I don't want to see you." Instead, that is the time to say, "I am going to get closer to you anyway. I am going to try to put your welfare first."

There is a very close connection between patience, kindness, and love. Yet this word "kindness" is so simple – so humble perhaps – that we seem to have forgotten what it means. It opens a great avenue of love. Most of us can be kind under certain circumstances – at the right time, with the right people, in a certain place. If we find ourselves unable to be kind, we may simply stay away. We avoid someone, change jobs, leave home. But in life we often have to move closer to difficult people instead of moving away.

Obstacles that stand in the way

I believe that it comes naturally to us to want to contribute to the welfare of those we love. But I am enough of a realist to understand that there are obstacles that stand in the way of the free flow of concern and compassion for those around us. If we understand these obstacles, we will be better prepared to overcome them.

In most disagreements, it is really not ideological differences that divide people. It is often self-will, lack of respect, putting ourselves first instead of the other person. Sometimes all that is required is listening with respect and attention to the other person's point of view.

Instead, most of us carry around a pair of earplugs, and the minute somebody says something we don't like, we stuff our ears until we can start talking again. Watch yourself the next time you find you are quarreling with someone you love. It won't look like a melodrama. It will be more like a situation comedy on television: two people trying to reach an understanding by not listening to each other. One person is saying, "What did you do the other day when I asked you to wash the dishes?" And the other replies, "What about you?" Can you imagine anything more ridiculous? They are not trying to settle their differences; they are trying to make sure that neither of them will forget.

To stop this quarrel, simply listen calmly with complete attention, even if you don't like what the other person is saying. Try it and see. Often the action will be like that of a play. For a while there is the "rising action": his temper keeps going higher, her language becomes more heated; everything is heading for

a climax. But often enough, the ending is a surprise. The other person begins to quiet down. His voice becomes gentler, her language kinder – all because you have not retaliated or lost your respect. Whatever happens, you walk away feeling better about yourself. You have stayed kind, kept your cool, not let anger push you around. The taste of freedom that brings is worth any amount of practice.

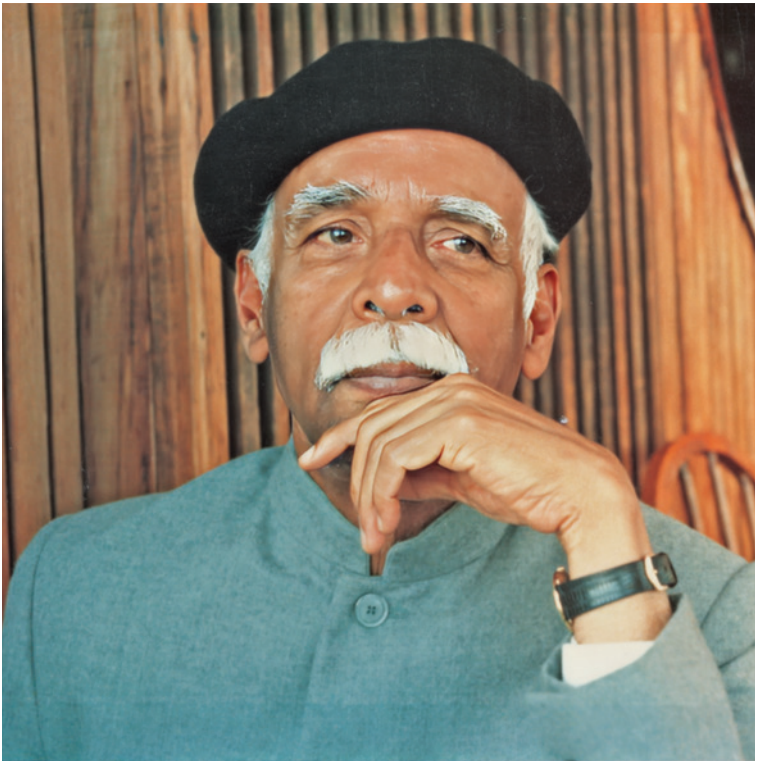
Lower the defenses

The more defenses we carry, the more insecure we feel – because defenses prevent us from moving closer to others.

In personal relationships, most of us are far from free. We are always wondering how the other person is going to react – always fearing an attack, a snub, or perhaps just indifference. So we have all kinds of ego-defenses – moats of suspicion, drawbridges of diffidence, walls of rigidity, and several inexplicable trapdoors. With all of these barriers, we expect to sit in our citadel undisturbed, the ruling monarch of our realm. But just the opposite is true. In fact, the more defenses we have, the more insecure we feel, because it is these defenses that prevent us from moving closer to others.

When we practice giving our best without getting caught up in others' attitudes and reactions, we find that they often begin to lower their defenses, too. Little by little, centimeter by centimeter, the walls begin to come down. Then they too can give their best to the relationship without anxiety or fear.

If just one person in a group is always on guard, it is natural for everyone else to raise their defenses also. It becomes a reflex. As soon as we see someone who is on guard, we say, "He makes



Eknath Easwaran, 1980s

me feel uncomfortable." We retreat into our citadel, draw up the bridge, close the trapdoors, and wait until he goes away. But the secure person, the person who is comfortable with herself and tries to remember the needs of others, makes everyone else comfortable as well.

To love, we need to be sensitive to those around us – not racing through life engrossed in all the things we need to do.

Heal bonds that have weakened

So much of the richness of life is to be found in companionship that I cannot stress strongly enough how important it is to heal bonds that have weakened and to bring freshness back to relationships that have grown stale.

Most relationships begin to fall apart through disagreements, and disagreements are not settled by argumentation and logic. They are resolved – or, more accurately, dissolved – through patience. Without patience you start retaliating, and the other person gets more upset and retaliates too. Instead of retaliating with a curt reply, slow down and refrain from answering immediately. As soon as you can manage it, try a smile and a sympathetic word.

There is a close connection between speed and impatience. Impatience is simply being in a hurry. Our culture has become so speeded up today that no one has time to be patient.

People in a hurry cannot be patient – so people in a hurry cannot really love. To love, we need to be sensitive to those around us, which is impossible if we are racing through life engrossed in all the things we need to do before sunset. In fact, I would go to the extent of saying that a person who is always late will find it difficult to love; he will be in too much of a hurry. A late riser will find it difficult to love; she will always be going through the day trying to catch up.

Anger can be contagious – but so can peace of mind. Which do you want to spread?

*

Remember the needs of the whole

Do you remember the scene in *My Fair Lady* when Eliza accuses Professor Higgins of being insensitive? He reacts with utter amazement. "Insensitive?" he replies. "Me? I am the soul of sensitiveness. Consideration is my middle name. Kindness and I are never parted." This is the self-image most of us have: "I couldn't possibly be selfish or insensitive or unkind." And, in a sense, it is true. Most of us are not unkind people; the problem is the racing, speeded-up mind. To be sensitive, we have to place the highest priority on slowing down and giving full attention to what we do and to everyone we live and work with.

As the mind slows down from sixty thoughts per minute to fifty, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, we begin to see people more and more clearly. Even in many intimate relationships, people don't really see each other. That is why they act insensitively: they hurt each other, not willfully, but because they simply don't see. In order to see those around us, to understand their needs and reflect on how we can contribute to their welfare, we need to slow down the furious activity of the mind.

Learning to love comes easily when we remember the needs of the whole. We simply have to ask: What will benefit my family most? What will benefit our children most? What will help us to make a contribution to life? If we ask these questions, we shall find we are learning to love naturally – and that our welfare, too, is included in the welfare of the whole.

The Miracle of Illumination

Shantideva

As a blind man feels when he finds a pearl
in a dustbin, so am I amazed by the miracle
of Bodhi rising in my consciousness.

It is the nectar of immortality that delivers us from death,

The treasure that lifts us above poverty into
the wealth of giving to life,

The tree that gives shade to us when we roam about
scorched by life,

The bridge that takes us across the stormy river of life,

The cool moon of compassion that calms our mind
when it is agitated,

The sun that dispels darkness,

The butter made from the milk of kindness
by churning it with the dharma.

It is a feast of joy to which all are invited.

Community Stories

Kindness and Community at 38,000 feet

I had used frequent flyer miles hoping to get on the waiting list for an upgrade to business class on my roundtrip to China, but now settled into the next best thing — a bulkhead seat with extra leg room. Shortly after takeoff, the head flight attendant came to my side. She nodded and smiled, knowingly. I nodded and smiled back, unwittingly.

Finally, she said, "I guess you know why I'm here."

"I have no idea why you're here."

Seeing that I really was ignorant, she patiently explained that the three steel-reinforced holes in the bulkhead ahead of me were designed to hold a bassinet. Then she steeled herself, "I have champagne, whiskey, mixed drinks... various snacks."

I stared back, trying to comprehend, and she repeated the list of enticements.

Finally, I realized, "Oh. If you want me to move so that someone doesn't have to have an infant on their lap for the next 16 hours — where do I go?"

She relaxed and pointed to an open seat behind me. I apologized to the adjacent elderly couple who no longer had room to spread out. They nodded.

In the new locale, I closed my eyes, repeated my mantram, and fell into a restless sleep.

I awoke to the sound of a three-year-old scurrying past me, as his mother and infant sibling snoozed in the seat and wall-mounted bassinette ahead. Instinctively, I joined hands with the previously grumpy-looking man across the aisle who

now had a grandfatherly twinkle. We corralled the youngster to keep him from making a break down the aisle. The three of us shared a mischievous look at the three-year-old's mother, and then found ourselves sitting on the floor together as the man and I pulled out everything from our carry-on bags that possibly could function as a toy. The elderly couple joined in with encouraging smiles from their seats.

When the young one started yawning, we suggested he take the stuffed rabbit left in his seat, and snuggle up to his mother. He did, and soon was asleep.

The flight attendants covered him with a blanket and started hanging out in our little micro-community, offering snacks and whispered stories. I noticed that no one was leaning on their armrests, leaving them for their neighbors. No one was sleeping, but we shared a quiet peacefulness.

On my return flight, I got what I'd wanted originally and was upgraded to business class. In a fully reclining seat, I slept better (the mantram still helped), and I had my choice of five gourmet meals. My fellow travelers and I each were in our own pods, entitled, and solicitously waited upon by the flight attendants.

I don't remember much about my business class flight. Certainly, none of the faces. But I still remember each young and old smile from my fellow travelers in coach class, and the contagious culture of caring that we shared.

I think we were put here, not to seek and relish little pleasures and privileges, but to take every opportunity to be kind.

– A passage meditator

My Practice Helped Me to Be Kind

Soon after moving to a forested, rural area of Northern California after retirement, I got involved in our Firewise Community—a group of a dozen residents trying to improve wildfire preparedness for about a thousand households.

We have projects both big and small, and fundraising to do, and not enough people, which sometimes brings stress. We each have our strengths and challenges, and our treasurer, in particular, tends to see the negative in many situations. She always responded to requests and provided good information, but only after a lot of complaining, which was difficult for everyone.

About a year ago I became chair of this group, shortly after we decided to move all of our financial information into a new online accounting system. While our treasurer was originally on board with the idea, by this time it was clear that it was too much change for her. I was not looking forward to being the one to manage the process—we still needed her to be part of the transition.

Seeing things from another's perspective

I know that my 11 years of regular meditation, and even longer use of the mantram, helped me navigate this challenge with more artistry than I could have before I began the eight-point program. It wasn't easy, and I definitely made mistakes.

The process took over a year and was very painful at times. There were several incidents during the year where I was frustrated with how she treated the people involved, including me. But when things got tense, I slowed down and tried to see things from her perspective. And I learned that when I spoke from the heart and let her know how her harsh words made me feel, and

that we were both working toward the same goal, she always softened, and we moved forward.

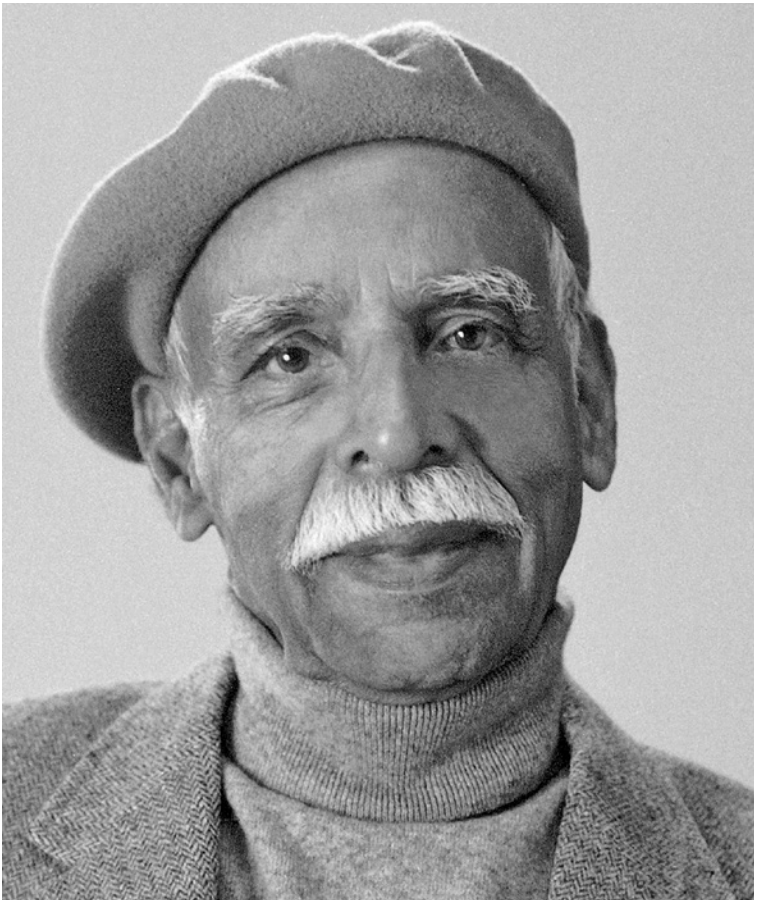
She recently decided to step down as treasurer (but remain on the board). To be honest, I was relieved, as was the rest of the board, and was happy to move on with our annual fundraiser and the busy holiday season. But after a few days I began to think about how she had stepped up to this brand-new organization five years ago and offered to help with something she knew how to do. I considered how I might feel if I were in her shoes—perhaps a relief from stress and responsibility, but also a bit of sadness about not being needed in the same way.

My daily meditation is the foundation

I decided that we needed to give a thank you gift for her five years of service. We collected enough for a generous gift card and put together a basket of goodies and I delivered it to her house. She was both surprised and grateful. I sat and talked with her for a while, and learned about some of the hard things she had been through this year. And I thought about all those times when my practice helped me to be kind even when I was hurt and frustrated, and how that must have changed her perspective.

In reflecting back on what I learned over the year, I'm grateful for how the eight-point program has helped me in this role and in life overall. My daily meditation is the foundation of my becoming a more patient person and being more able to see things from others' perspectives. The mantram helps me to slow down and focus my attention on what's important. And I've had the opportunity to practice putting others first, treating them with kindness and receiving kindness in return.

– A passage meditator



Eknath Easwaran, 1980s

Our Real Nature

Eknath Easwaran, from *Essence of the Bhagavad Gita*

One of the characteristic contributions of the Bhagavad Gita is its emphasis on life as a duality. Pleasure and pain, heat and cold, honor and dishonor, profit and loss, friend and foe – paired phrases like these, in the Gita's usage, are shorthand for the position that life as we experience it is always an encounter with opposites. However much we might wish this were otherwise – and always wishing it to be otherwise seems part of our mental makeup – no one has ever succeeded in isolating pleasure and avoiding pain, in winning respect without incurring disapproval, or generally getting anything the way one wants in any aspect of life at all. It simply is not possible; that's not how life is.

Of course, we all know this, but that doesn't stop the mind from incessantly wishing that things were different – which, as my grandmother liked to say, is like asking a banana tree to give you mangoes.

However, the Gita isn't talking about being realistic about what we want. It is making a point that is absolutely central to understanding how to live. The duality of life as we experience it is not a feature of life as it is; it is imposed by the makeup of the mind itself. It is an *upadhi*, an apparent limitation imposed on reality by each level of the mind.

In fact, at one of these levels – that of *buddhi*, the intellect or higher mind – defining opposites is the basic function. Its very purpose is to make distinctions, so that we can decide what is beneficial and what is not, what is true and what is false, and so

forth. We would be well enough off if things stopped there, but they do not. The lower mind steps in to insist on what it desires, which of course is often opposed to the higher judgment about what is beneficial; and the stickier our attachment to getting what we want, the more likely it is that the higher mind is going to get overruled. At the physical level, the body and senses join the discussion with their own insistence on getting what is pleasing. And at the root, as usual, is the ego, with its division between itself and the rest of life.

We don't have to live this way

This makes life a roller-coaster ride. The mind is constantly up, down, or wobbling, depending on how much we like or dislike what the world is giving us at the moment. Happiness will come our way today, sorrow will come tomorrow, and we get elated when happiness comes and downhearted when sorrow follows. Similarly, as long as we are susceptible to adulation, we are going to be susceptible to censure; as long as we get elated by success, we will get depressed by failure.

We will be happy when people like us and unhappy when we think they don't. This is the practical meaning of that abstract idea about a split in consciousness: it drives the mind to constant turmoil and vacillation.

And the Gita, of course, is telling us that we don't have to live this way. We can't stop life from going up and down, but we don't have to go up and down with it. Instead of wishing the world would give us what we want, we can, through the disciplines of yoga, go beyond the duality of a divided mind. And when we do, we find that instead of liking this and disliking that, we live

continuously in a higher state that the Upanishads call *ananda*: joy. Liking and disliking are emotions, pleasure and pain are sensations; all these belong to the phenomenal world. Joy is a state of consciousness, on a different level altogether.

The Indian scriptures illustrate this with a beautiful image. In a tropical country the weather can be quite dramatic, particularly during a monsoon storm. You can watch masses of indigo-blue rainclouds gather at the horizon and sweep towards you minute by minute till they cover the sky, so you can see neither the sun during the day nor moon and stars at night. But the sky itself is unaffected. When black clouds come, the sky doesn't curl up and hide; it's not even touched, and we know it's only a matter of time before the clouds are swept away. Similarly, the scriptures say, when thoughts flit across the mind, they needn't affect us. Even disturbing thoughts such as anger or fear, which come to all of us, are no more than clouds that darken the mind as they pass.

Agitation in the mind will stop

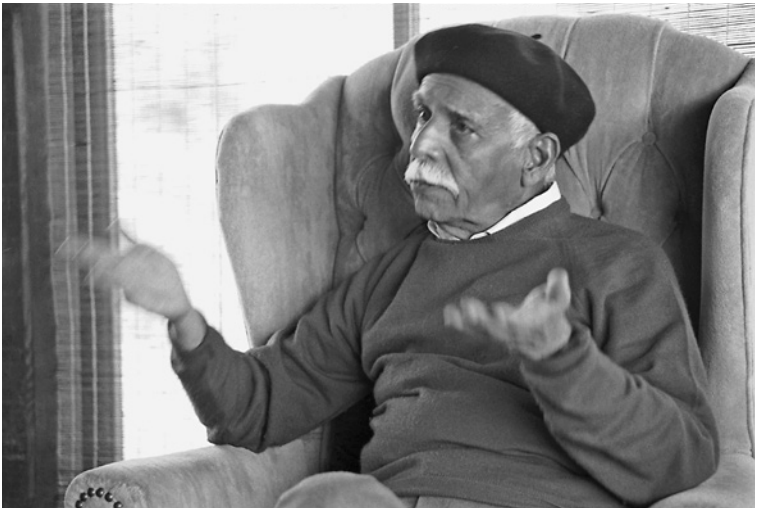
In practice, this means that when negative thoughts come, we can try to behave as if we are not influenced by them. For example, even if you don't like somebody, try to behave as if you do by talking to him with respect and listening to his point of view. All you have to do is not act on what you feel. Don't use harsh words, don't walk out, don't refuse to cooperate. Every time you try this, it brings more detachment. It is difficult; no one has ever called it easy. But if you can practice this systematically, day by day, most of the agitation in the mind will stop, which means there is no wear and tear on the nervous system.

Our real nature

Of course, the comment this immediately provokes is, "Isn't this utterly hypocritical? Does the Gita want us to pretend?" Not at all. This is our real nature; it is anger that is hypocrisy. Even if kindness seems a pretense, it is being true to our real Self. All things considered, given that we are dealing with many years of conditioning to the contrary, it is remarkable how quickly we come to understand that this is our real nature. This can happen almost miraculously when consciousness is unified, as Sri Krishna promises in verses that have consoled millions:

> Whatever you do, make it an offering to me – the food you eat, the sacrifices you make, the help you give, even your suffering. . . .
> Even sinners become holy when they take refuge in me alone. Quickly their souls conform to dharma and they attain to boundless peace. Never forget this, Arjuna: no one who is devoted to me will ever come to harm. (9:27, 30–31)

To practice this, it is helpful to think of ourselves as actors learning a role. I discovered this when I was a professor in India just learning to meditate. When I started climbing the academic ladder, on the first day I had to lecture in class I wanted to produce a good impression. I imagined my students going home and telling their parents, "He is it!" Unfortunately, I don't think I succeeded in producing that impression. I was too attached to what my students would think of me, so I couldn't really give my best.



Eknath Easwaran, 1980s

Distinguish between a person and a point of view

As I began to practice meditation, however, I realized that I was not really a fledgling professor; I was the Self, and had no need to woo the opinion of students because the Self is complete. Gradually this brought some detachment, so that when I had difficult students, I found I could move closer to them. The more detached I became, the easier it was to identify myself with my students and understand their needs. Instead of dwelling upon myself and getting caught up in other people's opinions, I could concentrate on doing a good job.

Of course, this was difficult. Every day brought problems, not only from students but from other faculty members, the financial committee, even the janitor. But I kept concentrating on doing my best – and then, when I left campus for the day,

I dropped that role like a cloak, so that I didn't take those problems home with me; I left them on my desk. "All the world's a stage," I used to remind myself, "and professors and students merely players."

As your mind becomes more even, less susceptible to ups and downs, you will find it easier to distinguish between a person and a point of view. To most of us, the person is the point of view – or, perhaps, the point of view is the person. We identify people with their politics or their opinion of other generations or even their preferences in what they wear, and of course with their outbursts of temper or the difficulties we think they cause. When we think, "She was so harsh to me," we are identifying that person with these words. Actually, the Gita would say, there is no connection between that person and that particular outburst. There is no more basis for identifying people with their opinions than for identifying them with the colors they wear. When we are able to distinguish between a person and his opinions, we begin to see the unity of life: not only with individuals, but with countries, cultures, and races as well.

Every moment we have a choice

"Wait," we want to protest. "Isn't this a counsel of perfection?" Perhaps, but even if perfection is beyond our reach, that does not mean we should fail to reach for it. In fact, the Gita would say we should all be perfectionists because the seed of perfection is within us. Compared to the exhilarating creativity of cultivating this seed into full bloom, I think the satisfaction even of practicing the fine arts is negligible – and I say this after nearly half a lifetime of immersion in poetry, fiction,

and classical music and dance. The pursuit of perfection in one's own life is simply on another level: life is a much richer medium than any art at its disposal. In that sense I would say that Mahatma Gandhi and Francis of Assisi were great artists, working on their lives every minute.

In whatever walk of life we may be engaged, once we take to meditation, life becomes vibrant with meaning because every moment we have a choice – if you like, between immediate personal gratification and personal growth, between personal desires and the welfare of all. It is this exercise of choice that slowly begins to transform all that is ugly in our life and consciousness into a work of art.

According to the Gita, each of us can develop the capacity to unbuild the edifice of personality that has been built under the pressure of personal pleasure and profit and then rebuild it brick by brick in the image of the perfection placed before us by our real nature. Whatever mistakes we may have committed, whatever faults we feel burdened by, in our heart of hearts we are one hundred percent pure, one hundred percent perfect. Gradually, we can identify ourselves completely with this purity and perfection that is the Atman, the Self within.

Flexible whatever life brings

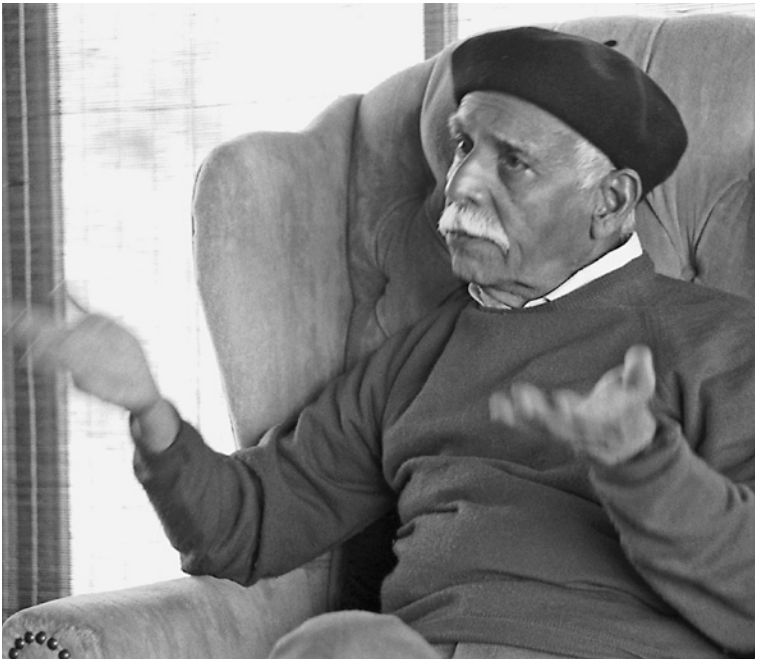
Until we try it out, we cannot understand what joy there is in this. Even though in the early days it may not be very pleasant – in fact, we may positively dislike doing what we are doing – over a longer period, life becomes joyful and free. It is when we get caught in things we like that we make ourselves rigid; it is a grand experience to be elastic and flexible whatever

life brings. Then we are never forced into the position "I don't like this, so I will not do it; I like this, so I will." In the language of the Gita, this is bondage; the goal of yoga is freedom.

When the mind is even, we can be comfortable everywhere. The Gita's language is quite homey: *prasanna cetasa*. The mind is cheerful always, so cheerful that it almost smiles. Many of us, however, have a self-willed streak in consciousness that isolates us from others and prompts a nagging sense of not being at home anywhere, of not belonging. Wherever we go, we are uncomfortable; we travel in a cage of insecurity. The problem lies in the state of consciousness, so that is where the correction has to be made. Changing to a deeper level of consciousness brings an increasing sense of unity that makes us comfortable with everybody.

We need to be with others

A young friend recalling her university days once told me that when she arrived in New York, she lived at first in what she called "rather ratty digs." I had the impression that "ratty" was more than metaphorical. She didn't waste time trying to patch up the place; she simply moved on as soon as she could find somewhere better. It is the same in meditation. You may remember my saying earlier that in meditation, instead of trying to fix problems one by one, we go to the root: the mind. What this means is that we gradually move to a deeper level of consciousness, and when we do, we see that the problems belonging to the previous level have simply been left behind. Instead of trying to fix up the tenement of the mind, we just move on to a place where we can feel more at home.



Eknath Easwaran, 1990s

To cultivate a sense of kinship with others, of course, we need to be with others, work together with others, to rub off the angles and corners of personality. Many people have difficulty in building satisfactory personal relationships, primarily because they haven't learned this skill. If one word is said that they don't like, they get agitated; if one act is done that they do not like, they get agitated. If they do not get their way, they get agitated; if others get their way, they get agitated. All this can be set right through the simple practice of learning to be more patient.

Make the mind unupsettable

The Gita praises patience the way Linus Pauling praised vitamin C. "Emotional flu is coming, bad-relationships flu is coming, insecurity flu is coming; start inoculating yourself now with vitamin P. You don't have to go queue up in line, don't have to feel the prick of the needle, don't have to get fever for twenty-four hours, don't have to go around with an aching arm; you can do this right where you are."

Sometimes, of course, no patience is required of us. People are nice – that is, they agree exactly with what we say. But sometimes they are not very nice. They don't want to follow our way of thinking: they have their own way – and that's what upsets us. When the mind has been conditioned to separateness, there's a little voice that whispers, "Quit. Run." All you want to do is to rush out, jump on your Honda, and blaze off into the sunset. That's the time when you stay in your chair, plant your feet on the ground, and stick it out. Don't leave the room and walk out; that is running away from the battle. It's a simple suggestion: not to move away from people who upset you, because this is how we learn to make the mind unupsettable.

And that's the challenge. You not only stay where you are; you move closer. Your body may flinch, but you sit down patiently and listen with attention – perhaps to things that set your teeth on edge. Then, if necessary, you state your own views with quiet detachment and complete respect. This requires a lot of practice, and for a long time there will be some people with whom the best you can do is to stay out of their way and avoid confrontation and deprecation. As with learning any skill, you can expect mistakes. But this is the kind of practice that is necessary to

feel comfortable with everybody, and even a little of it pays off handsomely.

What you learn by living with people

It follows that by dropping out of life, avoiding people, playing the lone wolf, we actually forfeit the opportunity to grow. I have met a few people who have a gift for isolating themselves like this; wherever they go, they build a wall around themselves. My heart goes out to such people because they are self-made prisoners, for whom even a little release is painfully difficult. Even if you have trouble with those you are living with, Sri Krishna would say, it's much better to live with them and learn to resolve quarrels than to move away. Look upon it as an opportunity to learn the give and take of life.

When Christine and I were in India in the sixties, we met one solitary Hindu hippie. He was an unusual person, quite sensitive, but he had dropped out of life. He had become so much a prisoner of himself that we could hardly understand his conversation; he hadn't talked to people for so long that his voice was almost inaudible. When we met him he had wandered up to the Blue Mountain, where he spent about a year near where we lived. Gradually he began to feel closer to us, so we saw him more and more often. He used to think I was too fond of people and tried to tempt me to walk with him into the mountains or forests. I would protest, "We're already in the mountains! I like mountains and forests and rivers, but it's people that I love. I like being with people all the time, and if I can't get peaceful people, I would rather be with troubled people." He began to think that there was something lacking in my character.

Then one day, at the ashram where we were conducting the meditation, he had to work shoulder to shoulder with another young man who was hot-tempered. They traded some unkind remarks, and this Hindu hippie, who prided himself on being nonviolent, took a spade and was about to fight. He came to see me in the evening and I said teasingly, "You're not a hippie. Where is your flower power? This is all fist power."

He got quite ashamed. "How is it," he asked, "that I don't know how to deal with this? How can I get so angry?"

I told him, "This is what you learn by living with people. Everyone gets angry sometimes, but you have run away from your family and community; you don't have the facilities for training. It is difficult to live with others, but that's the only way to learn." I could sympathize with this question, though. It's a universal question; even Arjuna asks, "What makes me do these things, Krishna? As if compelled to, against my will?" It's an inability we can all confess to. Sri Krishna will give a detailed answer, but the gist of it is simple: Change your consciousness not to change. That is the secret. When consciousness does not change, does not vacillate, we can be the same person always.

This is what we try to do in meditation. When you keep bringing attention back every time it wanders, what you are learning is to keep your mind from going up and down. For most of us, the mind goes up and down most of the day. Sometimes we are up, sometimes we are down; sometimes we are high, sometimes we are low; and each time we see the world differently, so we relate differently to other people. When consciousness is unitary, we can relate the same way every day, everywhere, to everybody.

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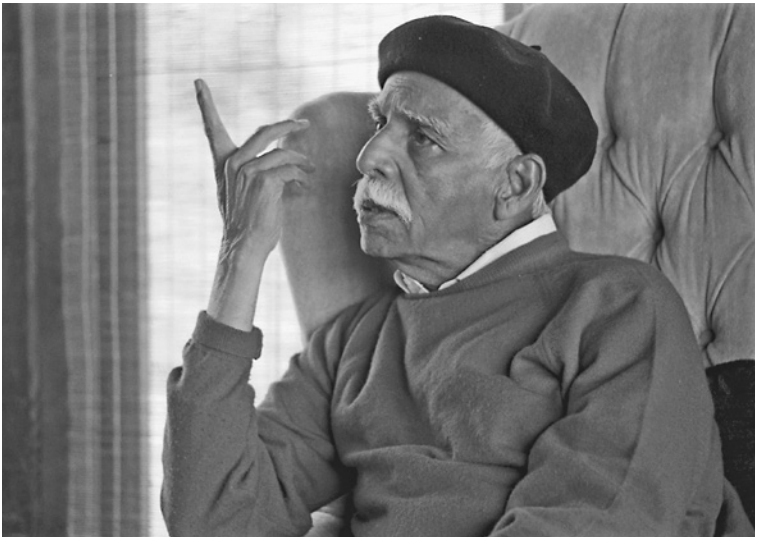


Eknath Easwaran, 1980s

Likes and dislikes

Most of the time, what we use the mind for is simply to dwell upon ourselves – our needs, our wants, our likes and dislikes – and if that tendency is not resisted, it can quietly get worse. When we yield to a craving or act on an urge, when we act or even talk unkindly, we are sharpening our likes and dislikes, increasing the sense of separateness, and moving farther away from our real Self.

In the case of people who indulge in this kind of thinking often, self-will becomes so inflated that they cannot stand any opposition or contradiction. They find themselves unable to go against their dislikes; they must always have what they like. In such cases the split is becoming wider, which means there are often conflicts even over trifling things. This can reach such

an extreme that the person is not able to function in life; living and working with others has become impossible. Sadly, there is really no limit to this because it takes place in consciousness, which has no boundaries. There is a limit to how much potato salad one can eat, but there is no limit to how much we can indulge in thinking about ourselves.

Wherever there is disharmony or personal difficulties, you may be certain that likes and dislikes are involved. When we dislike someone's behavior, for example, what we are really saying is that we would like to regulate that person's mind – make him think the way we do because our way is superior. Particularly in quarrels between two people who are emotionally entangled, this is often the crux of the matter: each wants to control the other's thinking. The Gita says reasonably, You can't regulate the way other people think; it's not possible. Why not try to regulate your own thinking instead?

Understanding stress

Here, I think, the Gita makes an important contribution to understanding stress. In this view, the stress we take on ourselves is often due to no more than selfish attachment. At work, for example – assuming that we are talking about psychological rather than physiological stress – what makes a job stressful is often not so much the task itself, but the mind: dwelling on how much we dislike it, dwelling upon ourselves, worrying, wishing things or people would be different, letting ourselves be thrown between conflicts like a Frisbee. "What has he done to me? What has she done for me?" – always making ourselves the frame of reference. As long as consciousness is

divided between I like this and I don't like that, I like him and I don't like her, that division will be a prolific ground for breeding stress. Just as malarial mosquitos flourish in marshy places, stress flourishes in a divided mind.

In this view, nobody makes us insecure except ourselves. Nobody is pouring turmoil into our mind except ourselves, by giving inner significance to events in the light of our own mental makeup. You may remember the observation of an eminent physiologist: nobody knows what the external world really is; all that we know is what we experience, our own nervous system. And the nervous system is dumb. It doesn't know how to make choices. Give it pain, it will get roused; give it pleasure, it will get roused, and all the time we think we're reacting to something outside.

When we say "I don't like that person," what we are really saying is, "This is what my nervous system is recording, and I don't like it. If I go near that person, I break out in a rash. If I work with that person, I get migraine. If I live with that person, I cannot sleep." We are not really saying anything about that person; we are talking about the state of our nervous system, saying we don't like to work with our nervous system.

That's the ridiculous side of it. Why should that bother us? As the Gita says over and over, these are reactions between two external objects; why should we jump in?

> When the senses come in contact with sense objects,
> a person experiences heat or cold, pleasure or pain.
> These experiences are fleeting; they come and go.
> Bear them patiently, Arjuna. (2:14)

Learning to keep an even mind

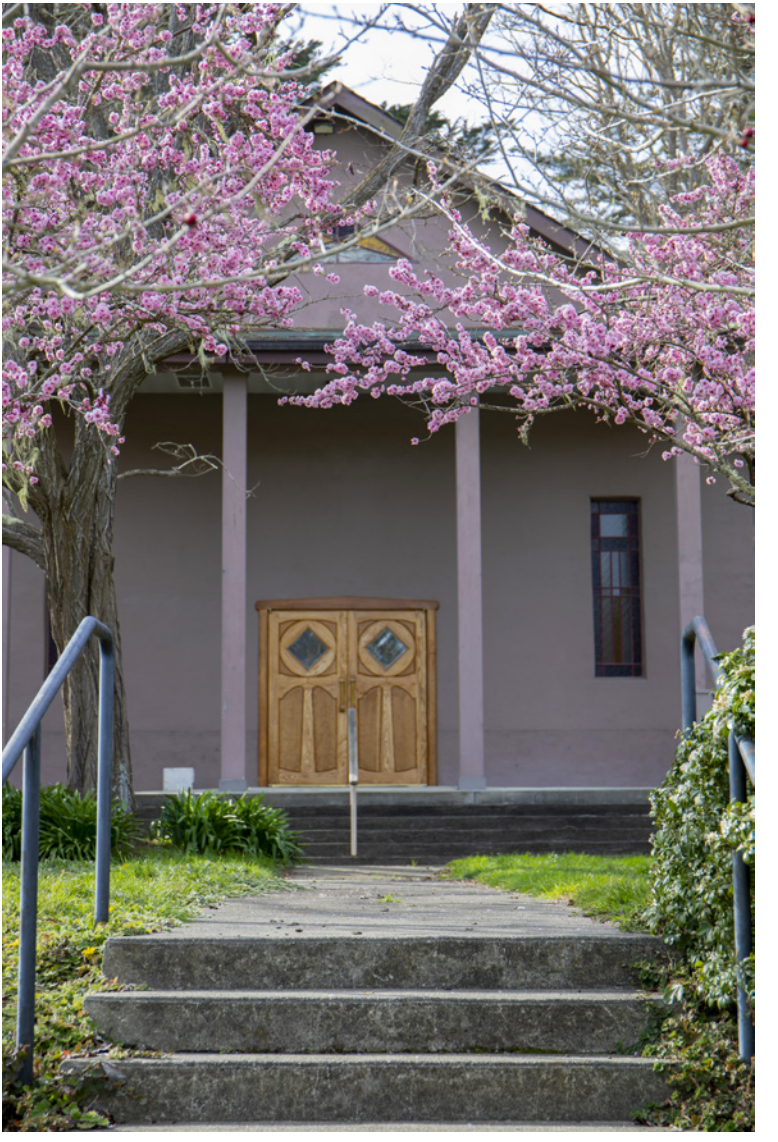
If the cause of personal stress is not outside us but arises from our perception, it follows that by reducing likes and dislikes, we can gradually change the internal significance we attach to external events. Once we do this, we see that events are just events, neither pro nor con, neither for us nor against us. Similarly, people are just people, neither for us nor against us. That is why the Gita says that when we see life as it is, we see that there is no cause for personal sorrow. That one insight brings compassion and the precious capacity to help without judging or getting burned out.

Learning to keep an even mind like this is practicing yoga on the surface of life, in our everyday behavior. But as we go on practicing, behavior is increasingly guided by the higher mind rather than the lower, which means that consciousness is changing. We are healing the split in personality, and gradually the process works deeper, so that what begins as training attention becomes, in time, training of the will, and eventually training of desire. In other words, the unification of consciousness gradually moves, level by level, deeper and deeper into personality.

Move to a deeper level

There is an intimate connection, therefore, between problems in meditation and problems in daily living. Difficulties in meditation can throw light on everyday problems, and by learning to solve those problems in meditation, we can learn to solve them during the day as well. If you are systematically keeping your mind on an even keel, keeping attention one-pointed on

the task at hand, using every opportunity to teach the senses to listen to you, and trying to turn your sensitiveness away from yourself to respond to the needs of others, meditation will deepen rapidly. Soon you will be able to look back and see how many personal problems that pertain to a particular level of consciousness are left behind when you go deeper. Instead of trying to tinker with one problem after another, for which there is no end, we simply move to a deeper level where these problems cannot reach, cannot even follow.

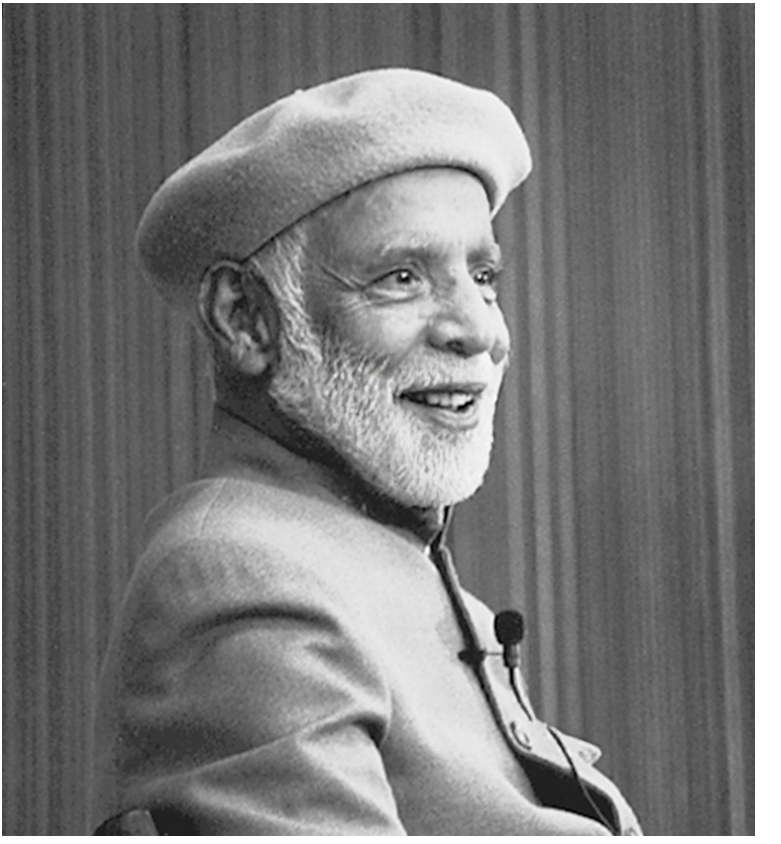


Shanti meditation hall, Ramagiri Ashram

The Best

Lao Tzu

The best, like water,
Benefit all and do not compete.
They dwell in lowly spots that everyone else scorns.
Putting others before themselves,
They find themselves in the foremost place
And come very near to the Tao.
In their dwelling, they love the earth;
In their heart, they love what is deep;
In personal relationships, they love kindness;
In their words, they love truth.
In the world, they love peace.
In personal affairs, they love what is right.
In action, they love choosing the right time.
It is because they do not compete with others
That they are beyond the reproach of the world.



Eknath Easwaran, 1990s

Being Kinder to Yourself

Eknath Easwaran, *Words to Live By*

When you feel angry towards someone and want to say something unkind, that is all the more reason to speak kindly. If someone provokes you and you respond with anger, you are reinforcing anger as a part of your personality.

So returning kindness for unkindness is not simply being kind to that particular person. You're being kinder to yourself, because you are undoing a compulsion, taking one more step towards being free. You are turning wrath away from yourself, as well as being kind to the other person.

The deconditioning process is straightforward enough: when anger comes up, don't act on it. When it tries to tell you what to do, say no. Repeat the mantram, go out for a long, brisk walk if possible, and throw yourself into hard, concentrated work, preferably for the benefit of others. When you can shift your attention to your work or to the mantram, you have shifted it away from the anger. Immediately the anger-tendency is weakened a little.

Easwaran's Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation

1. **Meditation on a Passage** Silent repetition in the mind of memorized inspirational passages from the world's great religions. Practiced for half an hour each morning.
2. **Repetition of a Mantram** Silent repetition in the mind of a holy name or a hallowed phrase from one of the world's great religions. Practiced whenever possible throughout the day or night.
3. **Slowing Down** Setting priorities and reducing the stress and friction caused by hurry.
4. **One-Pointed Attention** Giving full concentration to the matter at hand.
5. **Training the Senses** Overcoming conditioned habits and learning to enjoy what is beneficial.
6. **Putting Others First** Gaining freedom from selfishness and separateness; finding joy in helping others.
7. **Spiritual Fellowship** Spending time regularly with others who are practicing passage meditation for mutual inspiration and support.
8. **Spiritual Reading** Drawing inspiration from writings by and about the world's great spiritual figures and from the scriptures of all religions.

About Eknath Easwaran

Eknath Easwaran (1910–1999) is the originator of passage meditation and the author of more than 30 books on spiritual living.

Easwaran was a professor of English literature at a leading Indian university when he came to the United States in 1959 on the Fulbright exchange program. A gifted teacher, he moved from education for degrees to education for living, and gave talks on meditation and spiritual living for 40 years.

In 1961 he founded the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, a nonprofit organization that publishes his books and video and audio recordings of his talks, and offers retreats and other programs.

Easwaran lived what he taught, giving him lasting appeal as a spiritual teacher and author of deep insight and warmth.

Further Resources for Learning to Meditate and Deepening Your Practice

From the BMCM Programs team

Introductory Webinars

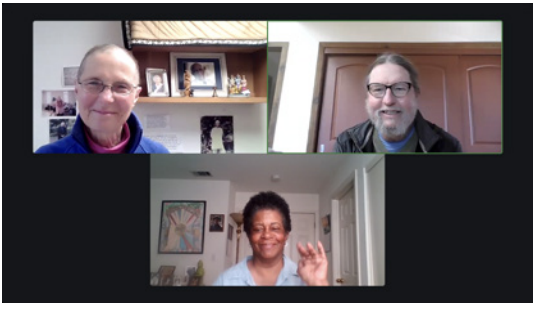
A chance to try out passage meditation.
www.bmcm.org/programs/introductory-webinar/

Introductory Weekend Retreats

Everything you need to get your passage meditation practice started.
www.bmcm.org/programs/introductory-weekend-online/

Passage Meditation – A Complete Spiritual Practice

Easwaran's classic manual, available in print and as an ebook and audiobook.



BMCM Satsang Live

BMCM Satsang Live Our twice-weekly online satsang, open to everyone. Find more at **www.bmcm.org/community/bmcm-satsang-live/**.

BMCM eSatsang Our weekly write-in study of Easwaran's books and journals for dedicated passage meditators. See **www.bmcm.org/community/esatsang**.

Online Retreats, Webinars, and Workshops for 2025

Our online retreats and programs have become the training ground for those of us who yearn to join Easwaran in making the spiritual renaissance a reality. In the retreats, you will experience turning to your practice, to Easwaran and his teachings, and to a strong spiritual schedule. The retreats combine contemplative activities with practicum times in which you apply your practice directly to your own unique home environment.

Returnee Workshops:
March 8, May 31, October 4

Introductory Weekend Retreats:
March 14–16, June 20–22, September 26–28

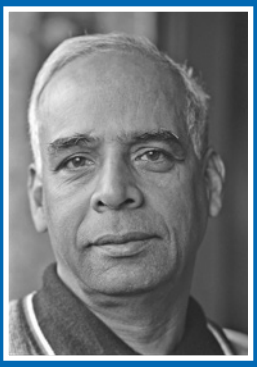
Returnee Weekend Retreats:
April 11–13, November 7–9

Introductory Webinars:
May 10, August 16

Setu (Senior) Retreat:
September 12–16

Weeklong Retreats:
October 17–21

For more information about upcoming events, including fees and financial aid, visit our website at **www.bmcm.org/programs**. We'd love to have you join us!



There is a very close connection between patience, kindness, and love. Yet this word "kindness" is so simple—so humble perhaps—that we seem to have forgotten what it means. It opens a great avenue of love.

—Eknath Easwaran

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