



Blue Mountain

ESTABLISHED BY EKNATH EASWARAN
FOR PRESENTING HIS EIGHT-POINT
PROGRAM OF PASSAGE MEDITATION

EKNATH
EASWARAN

has been called one of the foremost teachers of meditation in our times. From his arrival in the United States in 1959 on the Fulbright exchange program until his passing in the fall of 1999, he taught to modern men and women his eight-point program, based on his unique method of meditation on memorized inspirational passages from the world's great religions. Many thousands of people representing the full range of cultural and religious backgrounds attest to the benefits of his teaching. He continues to teach through his thirty books on spiritual living — over a million copies in print in twenty-seven languages — and through the ongoing programs and publications of the organization he founded in 1961 to carry on his work: the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation and its publishing arm, Nilgiri Press.

Letting Go

By Eknath Easwaran

THE NILGIRIS or Blue Mountain in South India is home to several famous hill stations, picturesque towns far above sea level where in colonial days the British could retreat from India's dry, dusty plains during the oppressive heat of the summer. In those days it was a rather exclusive enclave, but after independence I moved with my mother and sister to a town with beautiful vistas and meticulously kept gardens that well deserved to be called a "little England."

Many dauntless British and Europeans still lived there, but despite coming from the plains, my mother soon earned a reputation as one of the best walkers around. In the next village from us was a lively bazaar where we used to do our shopping. The bus passed right in front of our cottage, but my mother always preferred to walk. And although there was a beautiful roundabout road with a very gradual gradient, that route would have taken a couple of hours round trip. My family has always been walkers, so she would say, "Let's go straight down the hill." And she would walk downhill, do her shopping, and walk back uphill again, two and a half miles each way.

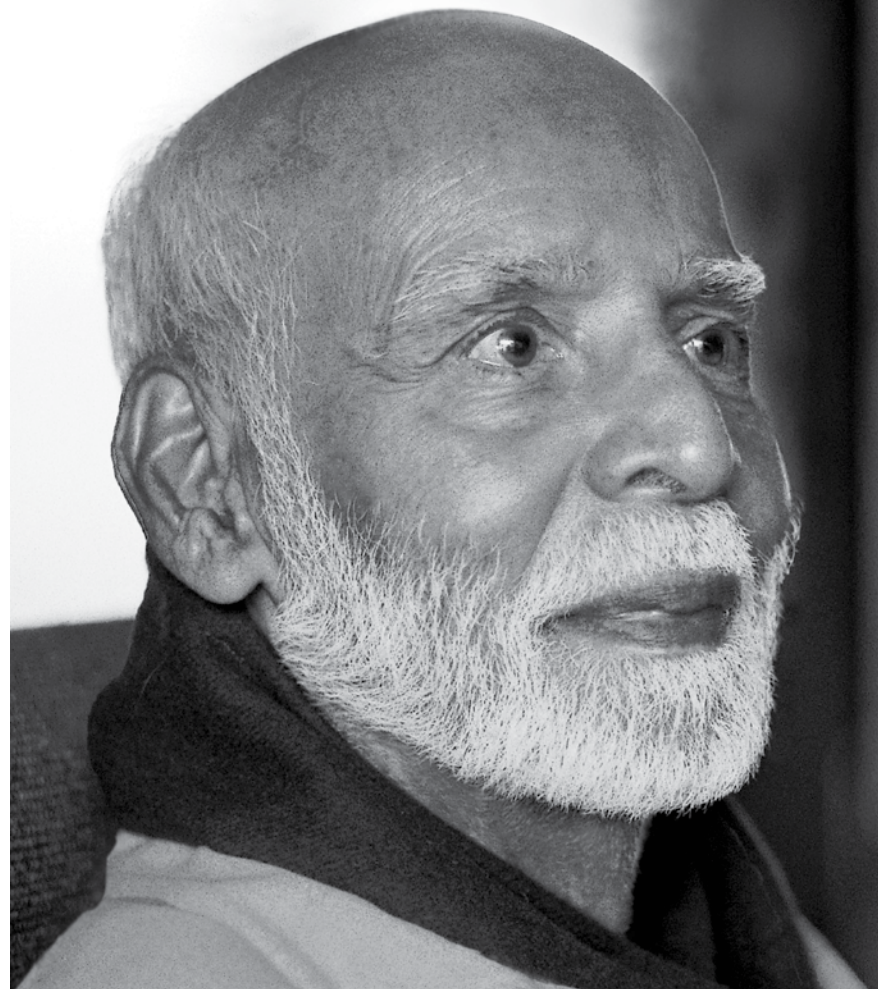
Going down was not too bad, but when time came to return, I used to suggest we take the roundabout road. "Why?" she would ask. "Let's go up the same way we came down." Halfway I would begin to pant, and to conceal from my mother that I was falling behind I would say, "Let's admire the scenery." We would stop until I had recovered my breath enough to go on. My mother was a very sagacious person, and after a while, when she saw that I was

lagging a little behind, she would say, "Son, shall we admire the scenery now?" It became quite a joke between us.

Many years later, my mother came to join us in California. Here she lived to be over eighty, and in her last years I used to remember those scenes on the Blue Mountain when I saw the difficulty she had every morning in even getting out of bed and moving about. We couldn't even let her walk by herself; she always needed support. I watched this scene every single morning, and each time I would remind myself, "You are going to be like that someday." Every one of us is going to be like that someday. There's no escape, you

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From our archives: Eknath Easwaran, 1993



BLUE MOUNTAIN

*The quarterly journal
of the Blue Mountain
Center of Meditation*

Winter 2012

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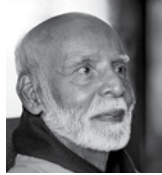
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Printed on recycled paper

The Blue Mountain Center depends on donations to carry on its work. Every gift, large or small, is much appreciated and put to good use. The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation is a 501(c)(3) California nonprofit corporation. Contributions to the Center are deductible from state and federal income tax.

1 Letting Go



We all know that the last years of life require letting go, but what does that really mean? Eknath Easwaran has a simple answer: it is letting go of physical attachments that allows the spirit to soar, by filling the mind with God.

8 The Mantram at the Time of Death



It is good to face death with courage, Easwaran says, but that is not enough: it is necessary to face death with the deep understanding that death is not the end. Easwaran explains why our greatest ally at that time is the mantram, or holy name.

10 The Promise of Immortality

"As long as we identify with the body we are fragments. But there is a much vaster 'I,' the Self, which is beyond change and therefore beyond death."

12 The Last Great Change



Daughters of two longtime senior meditators share how the practice of spiritual disciplines transformed the last quarter of their lives – and the lives of those around them.

The Blue Mountain journal is free. Postage costs apply for delivery outside the US. For a two-year subscription to Canada or Mexico, the cost is \$15. For all other countries, the two-year subscription cost is \$25. Please visit our website, www.easwaran.org, to sign up to receive the journal.

Blue Mountain Center of Meditation

The Center offers instruction in meditation and allied living skills, following the eight-point program of passage meditation developed by Sri Eknath Easwaran. The approach is nondenominational, nonsectarian, and free from dogma and ritual. It can be used within each person's own cultural and religious background to relieve stress, heal relationships, release deeper resources, and realize one's highest potential.

Passage Meditation: An Eight-Point Program

- 1. MEDITATION ON A PASSAGE** Silent repetition in the mind of memorized inspirational passages from the world's great religions. Practiced for one-half 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 other passage meditators 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.

Eknath Easwaran

Schooled in both Eastern and Western traditions, Eknath Easwaran took to the spiritual life amidst a successful career in India as a professor of English literature, a writer, and a lecturer. After coming to the University of California, Berkeley, on the Fulbright exchange program, he established the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Northern California in 1961. His 1968 Berkeley class is believed to be the first accredited course in meditation at any Western university. His deep personal experience and his love for his students have made the ancient art of meditation accessible to those who hold jobs and lead active lives among friends and family.

Time for the Spirit to Soar



Christine Easwaran

THIS ISSUE completes our survey of the four stages of life, focusing on how to make the best use of the last years of our lives and prepare for what Eknath Easwaran called “the last great change called death.”

It is twenty-one years now since Easwaran launched a comprehensive project aimed at this stage of life. He called it *Setu*, from the Sanskrit word for bridge: “the bridge from this life to the next, however that is conceived.”

The *Setu* Program is based on principles on which all major religions agree: that “death is not the end of the story,” as Easwaran put it, “but only the end of one chapter – and what comes next is shaped by how we live today.”

Moreover, he would insist, every religion agrees on the values to cultivate in preparation for this next chapter. Love, compassion, forgiveness, faith in the unity of all life – these are universals, regardless of doctrines and creeds.

Even if we do not accept that death

is not the end, he pointed out, cultivating these virtues is the best way to find fulfillment here and now: certainly at the end of life, but really at any age.

From Easwaran’s perspective, therefore, this last stage of life is a time for tremendous spiritual growth – a time when, although the body is declining, the spirit has the freedom and opportunity to soar.

This is particularly true of the last years of our lives. Then it is high time to start letting go of our attachment to things we can’t take with us – material possessions and personal attachments – so that we can work on what we can’t

and practical details about how the Indian scriptures describe the process of letting the body go.

The main purpose of all these activities at this stage of life is to fill the mind with spiritual ideals, so to spiritual reading I would add watching or listening to Easwaran’s talks – many of which are available from our website – and reducing what we take in through other media, particularly television.

Our relationships with those around us are part of this too. At this time of life more than any other, we don’t want to be adding hostility, resentment, or anxiety. Following



Easwaran’s mother, Eknath Ammal Kunchi Ammal, featured throughout our lead article. “As time passes, we can actually gain in beauty when the light is lit within.”

Easwaran’s constant urging to “be kind, be kind,” together with the mantram, can go a long way in purifying consciousness.

But the real message of the world’s scriptures is to go beyond death completely: to realize experientially that we are neither body nor mind but the divine spark that Sanskrit calls the *Atman*, the Self, which is beyond all change. This realization, Easwaran urges in “The Promise of Immortality” (p. 10), is the supreme goal of life.

Many of our older

retreatants have remade their last years in pursuit of this goal. Recently, several have closed this chapter of their story and moved on. In “The Last Great Change” (p. 12), some very close friends and longtime meditators share how their mothers’ practice of spiritual disciplines transformed the end of their lives – and the lives of those around them.

Christine Easwaran

For the Board of Trustees

help taking with us: “who we are,” as he puts it, “the contents of our consciousness.”

At this time, nourishing the spirit is our highest duty. We are preparing for a journey, and nothing matters so much as packing our bags – the mind – with lofty thoughts and ideals: through meditation, spiritual reading, and especially repetition of the mantram, as Easwaran explains in “The Mantram at the Time of Death” (p. 8), which reveals some fascinating



Easwaran on the Blue Mountain with his mother (photo right) and sister

Continued from page 1 know. It may be a little later because of the beneficial effects of meditation, but sooner or later it's going to be the same story. This is the nature of the body, to pass through all the stages of life: to grow, to age, and eventually to decline and pass away.

I have often quoted the words with which India's greatest poet and playwright, Kalidasa, describes the goal of the last of these stages: "In retirement, live like sages; at the end of life, let the body go." Most of us can relate to living like sages; even if we don't quite qualify, we can see the appeal. But "let the body go" doesn't sound appealing for any age. The words become meaningful only when we understand that they mean letting go of *identification* with the body – that is, not clinging to the body as it declines, but letting go of the obsessive idea that this failing body is what we are.

I have been looking at the commemorative volume presented to me for my eightieth birthday, *The King's Messenger*, which has a large number of pictures. On the opening pages, there I am as a teenager. Then a few pages later I am in my forties, and finally I am in my late seventies. But if you ask me how I have changed, I would not say I have grown older. My body has grown older; I have grown wiser.

This brings a new perspective to the passage of time. It is true that I can't swim or run like a child any more, but as all the great spiritual teachers say, this is nothing to gnash one's teeth about. Clinging to the body for identification can only bring increasing insecurity as we age, because we are identifying ourselves with something that is inevitably on the wane.

Fortunately, with most of us this

deep-rooted insecurity can not only be avoided, it can be reversed. Through meditation and its allied disciplines, we can actually make ourselves *more* secure as time passes – and so, in a very real sense, more beautiful. As time passes, we can actually gain in beauty. When the light is lit within, all of us can look forward to a breathtaking future of increasing beauty as we age.

The Buddha conveys the urgency of this message with a universal image. "You are about to go on a long journey," he says. "Don't you want to be prepared?" This is not rhetoric. The body may not be going anywhere, but rest assured there is an inner person with an itinerary and a destination. If you have a ticket for Europe, don't you plan what you want to take? Don't you ask in advance what the airline will allow? At this border there is no forty-pound limit: nothing

material can cross. Whatever you're carrying, you can't take it with you. The only baggage you are allowed – in fact, the one thing you can't help taking with you – is who you are: your character, the contents of your consciousness, the lifetime accumulation of all that you have thought, done, felt, feared, coveted, and loved. Don't take any negative attachments, the Buddha urges us. Don't take any anger, any hostility, any resentment, any greed or selfish craving. Throw it all out now, while you can. Lighten the load.

Older people often tell me that in these years they feel the need to get rid of the possessions they have accumulated: furniture, photographs, papers, letters. "We don't want to leave this for our children to deal with," they say. I want to tell them, "Don't spend your time on things like that now!" If you have the detachment just to call Goodwill and deal with it in a single stroke, well and good. But rather than go through each letter, each photograph, each memory, it's much better to leave everything in the garage for those who come after you. I can assure you that they will attend to it with much more detachment, and letting it go now will be far less painful than having it torn away at the time of death. At this stage of life, more than ever, why stir up the past? Work on what you want to take with you: don't work on your past; work on who you are and what you want to become.

Reducing Body-consciousness

There are a million and one ways in which we can reduce our identification with the body a little every day. My books are full of practical suggestions. In this stage of life, however, the most important strategy is to fill our consciousness with God – or, for those who find that wording problematic, to fill our minds with the loftiest thoughts we can conceive. The

dynamics of this solution are simple: with repetition, the lofty, inspiring thoughts and images that we choose displace the negative ones that have accumulated through habit or conditioning.

First and foremost, therefore, comes the regular, systematic, enthusiastic practice of meditation. Filling the mind with the inspiring words of the world's great scriptures, saints, and mystics is the very essence of my method of meditation.

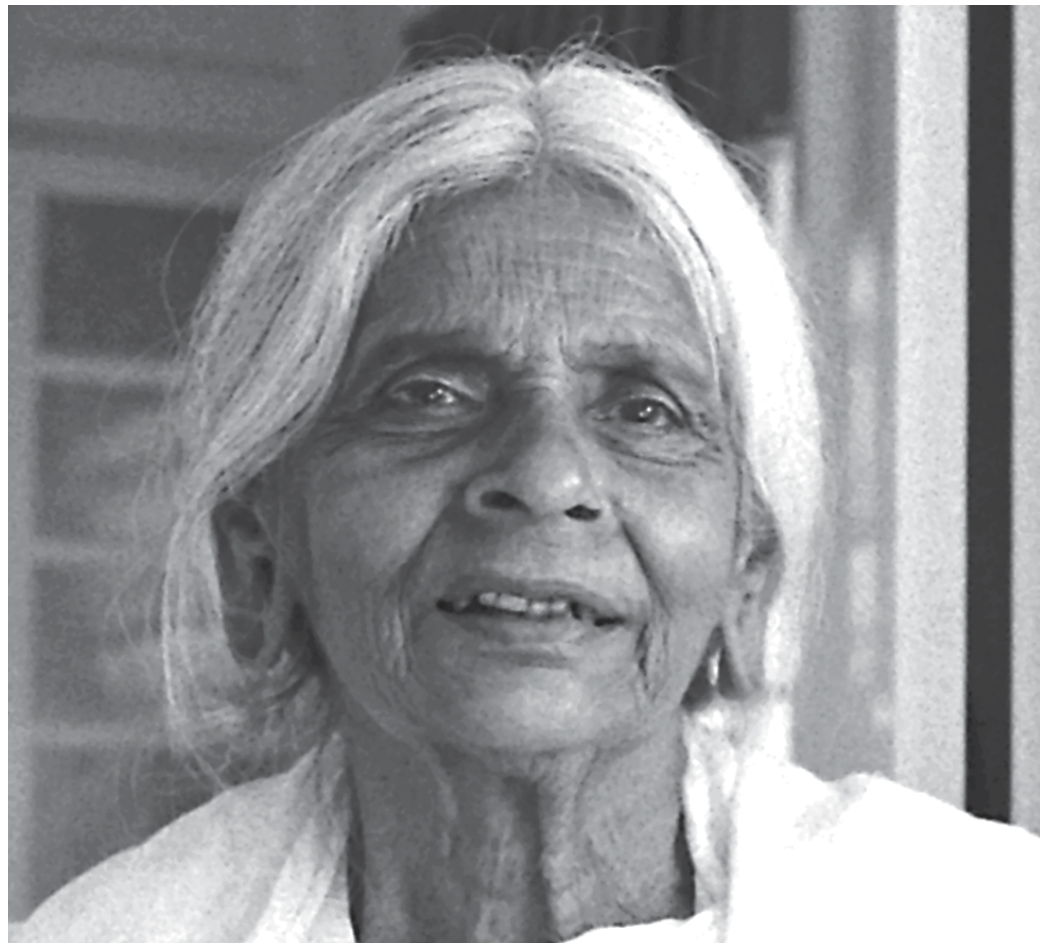
For those who are already in the last quarter of their lives, taking up meditation can be daunting. That is why I urge everyone to begin as soon as possible. But even if your body is failing, it is very helpful to set aside a special place for meditation and commit yourself to half an hour every morning, as early as possible, trying your very best to go slowly through the words of a passage from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* that appeals to you deeply.

Choose a passage that embodies the highest ideals you would like to embody in your life. Try to memorize the passage beforehand, but don't let the difficulty of memorization keep you from giving your best at the same time every day. What matters most is full effort. Do your best to bring your period of meditation to the full half-hour every morning. You will be amazed to discover that this can be done, and when the task has seemed impossible, the achievement brings a thrill of mastery that will repay your efforts a millionfold. That is the taste of freedom: you will know then that rising above identification with your failing body is within your reach, so long as you go on striving.

Here I can offer my own example. After years of the unremitting pain that followed my eightieth birthday, my memory – which had been excellent even in childhood – began to fail me. It would have been easy and natural for me to take for

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Easwaran's mother at Ramagiri





In the Ramagiri kitchen, 1972, helping the dinner crew cut vegetables for the evening meal

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granted that I could not train it again. Instead I reminded myself that I was memorizing these passages as an offering to God. That brought great motivation. I began to carry verses with me wherever I went, even in the glove compartment of our car, so that whenever I had a few moments I could take them out and try to commit them to memory verse by verse. At first it was terribly frustrating, even painful, but eventually I found that I had managed to fill my consciousness again with many, many beautiful passages I thought I had lost. In this connection, we can all draw inspiration from a great song in the Indian tradition where Sri Krishna tells us, “Sometimes I like to play my music on a broken reed.”

The Mantram

In the final stage of life, however, the

premier discipline is the mantram. Repeat the mantram as much as you can – essentially, whenever you are doing something that does not require full attention. Repeat it *more* than you can! From year to year, no matter how much I thought I was using every spare minute for the mantram, I consistently found more time for it. If you can repeat it when you are walking fast, you will find that the rhythm of your footsteps blends with the rhythm of the mantram to steady the rhythm of your breathing, with which the activity of the mind is closely connected. It is also very helpful to write the mantram, and I always suggest carrying a little notebook for that purpose so that you can make use of every spare minute that comes your way.

But especially important, even essential, is to learn to fall asleep in the mantram. Every evening, just before

bed, do at least fifteen minutes of spiritual reading – preferably after your evening meditation, if you are able to fit this in. Then put your book aside, get into bed, close your eyes, and start repeating the mantram until you fall asleep in it. This one apparently simple skill is far from easy, but with practice everyone can learn it, and nothing will prove more valuable through the vicissitudes of aging and especially at the very end, when life is fading and the mind needs something to hold on to.

Using the mantram as much as possible during the day fills consciousness with the holy name, keeping negative thoughts out. For this reason the Gita calls the mantram the greatest purifier on earth. It reminds me of those floating sweepers that I used to see circulating around in swimming pools, scooping up any leaves that might have blown onto the water. That is just what the mantram

can do with negative thoughts.

Of course, we have a role to play ourselves in keeping consciousness pure. It is especially important at this stage of life to protect ourselves from letting deleterious stuff into the mind. Older people are particularly susceptible to what goes into the mind through the mass media – especially television, which studies have shown is easily confused with real events.

In fact, at this stage of life, even the smallest points of my eight-point program take on new significance. Something so apparently trivial as eating and reading at the same time divides consciousness just when it is most urgent to consolidate it – and slowing down to give complete concentration to the task at hand will help greatly to keep your mind calm and steady as the body declines.

Likes & Dislikes

In all these ways, what we are really doing is keeping the mind off its favorite activity: dwelling on ourselves, on all the little wants and fears that come with thinking of ourselves as separate, physical creatures. Most of the time, this is all that what we call thinking amounts to, and its usual form of self-expression is in likes and dislikes. “I like this; I don’t like that. I like him; I don’t like her. I want this; I don’t want that. I, I, I.” This kind of unspoken activity is so common that we are probably not even aware of it, but it goes on almost constantly at every level of consciousness. And the object of that activity – what we like or dislike – is essentially irrelevant. Liking and disliking is a habit of mind; it has to go on no matter what is claiming our attention.

The practical application is simple: by learning to juggle with your likes and dislikes, doing things we dislike when they are beneficial and not doing things we like when they are not, we can undermine body-identification at a very deep level. You can

make a game of this and actually enjoy it: for example, the next time you go out for ice cream, choose a flavor your friend or partner likes instead, or one you dislike yourself.

This simple exercise can be practiced everywhere, and it pays dividends in a million and one ways – not least of which is increasing flexibility and patience in a time of life when rigidity and impatience can take over. But the greatest dividend of all comes at the end of life, when it becomes necessary to let go of all our attachments and preferences.

Here the practical objection comes: “But I have strong selfish impulses. I have compulsory urges. I find it very difficult to put others first. I can put myself first effortlessly; that is natural. But putting others first goes against my grain.” I would reply, “Actually, we become natural when we put others first. That is the message of nature, to live in harmony with all life. Putting ourselves first is just conditioning.”

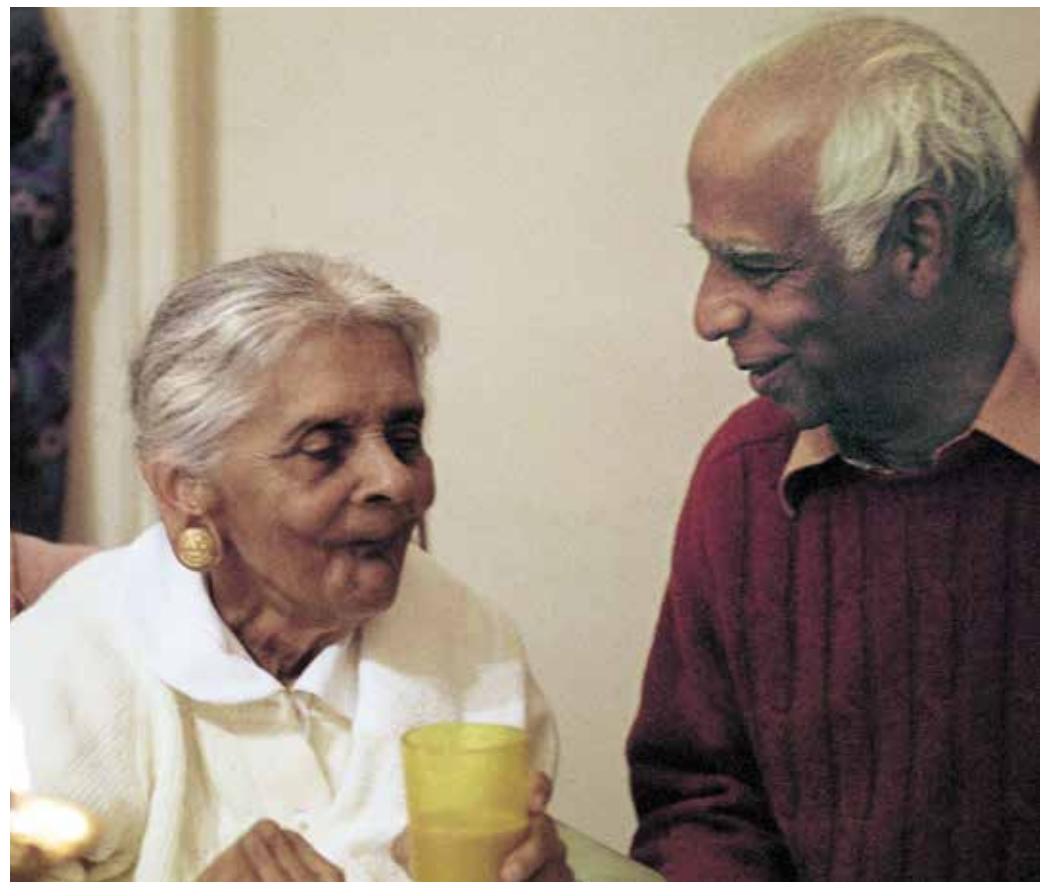
In this connection, let me stress again the supreme importance of

being kind in all our thoughts and relationships. Everything we do, say, and think leaves a residue in consciousness, adding to the luggage that will burden us in this last stage of life. It is very important not to injure others with unkind words or actions, but it is equally important to be kind in the mind. Every time an unkind thought comes, cut it off with the mantram! All these little things go a long, long way towards lightening the boat for this journey.

A Precious Time

After we reach the age of sixty, according to India’s ancient tradition, we should begin to detach ourselves from all the worldly attachments we have developed so far. The implication is that the sixtieth birthday is only halfway. It is to make us understand that if we can extricate ourselves from personal and physical attachments, there is still a second half of life for intense spiritual development. This is the ultimate promise of the final stage of life. ⇨

Easwaran with his mother at breakfast at Ramagiri: our last photo of them together



The Mantram at the Time of Death

By Eknath Easwaran

OFTEN I hear people say they want to face death with courage. It is good to face death with courage and with dignity, but that is not enough. It is necessary to face death with understanding – not at an intellectual level, but with the deep understanding that transforms our outlook on death.

After the age of sixty, according to India's age-old tradition, it is time to consider death as a fast-approaching friend that one should prepare to meet. I used to be terribly afraid of death as a child. Today all that fear is gone. It has not been replaced by courage; it has simply disappeared. Today I look upon death not with fear but as a friend that will conduct me to a much higher future. When we grasp this in the deepest levels of our consciousness, the fear of death goes and the dawn of immortality comes.

The Bhagavad Gita explains this in verses that are written on the very seabed of my consciousness:

As the same person inhabits a body through childhood, youth, and old age, so too at the time of death he attains another body. The wise are not deluded by these changes.

You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies.

As a person abandons worn-out clothes and puts on new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.

These are marvelous verses which can open our eyes. A baby is born, and we marvel at the appearance of a new life. We continue to marvel at how swiftly the little one changes – different in appearance sometimes even from day to day, but always the same person too. Childhood passes to youth with equally dramatic changes. Then comes adulthood, then middle age, and finally old age as the body declines.

Just look at your old photo albums; you will see how different you once appeared. And yet, as the Buddha says, though you are different, you are still the same. These are changes to the body, not to what the Gita calls “the

dweller in the body.” The house has aged; the resident is the same. So the Gita adds, the wise are not deceived by all this, any more than you or I are deceived when we see a child grow up or a friend grow old. We see through these changes, see that underneath it's the same person always.

What Happens When We Die?

But then comes the last great change called death, and the Gita wants us to see that this too is simply another phase in the cycle of living and dying.

To grasp this, we need to understand what takes place at the time of death, which has never been described so accurately as by the Upanishads. As the body begins to die, the Upanishads say, the vital energy that throbs in the senses is withdrawn. The eyes cannot see, the ears cannot hear, the skin cannot feel; vitality is withdrawn into the mind, so the body can no longer move or respond to external stimuli. Yet even though the eyes cannot see nor the ears hear, there is still the agony of deprivation and bereavement in the mind. All the fierce attachments that we have cultivated throughout life now tie us down in the mind, so completely that we cannot break free and death has to tear us away.

My grandmother, who was not intellectually oriented, had a vivid way of getting this point across. I remember

Daily Meditation at Ninety Plus

“I started this program at the age of 91, when I came to a retreat. I have not missed a day of meditation since.

I see the effects primarily in patience, calmness, and acceptance of whatever happens. Also, I think there has been an actual physical health benefit. I seem to feel better. And the use of the mantram is very helpful when I visit the doctor and he is doing painful things. And my family relationships have improved.

Another really marvelous benefit is inspirational reading. I've always been an avid reader of inspira-

tional things, ever since high school, but it's different now, much more meaningful. After the retreat I went whole hog and ordered everything: *Passage Meditation*, *Take Your Time*, *Words to Live By*, and the three volumes of Christian Classics. I've been reveling in them. They are marvelous books for inspiration.

I've changed my routine. I've been trying to incorporate into every evening some reading that is inspirational. One night, I awakened in the middle of the night and there was the mantram singing to me.”

asking her why death should involve so much suffering. She didn't answer directly; she just told me to go sit in a big wooden chair there in our ancestral home. "You hold on to this chair as hard as you can," she said. "I'm going to try to pull you out." I held on to the chair with all my might, and she began to pull. She was a strong woman, and when she started to pull I thought my arms were going to come off, but I held on for all I was worth. Finally, despite all my resistance, she wrenched me out of the chair. "That hurt, Granny," I said. "Let's try it again," she replied, "but this time don't hold on." I didn't, and there was no struggle, no pain; she raised me effortlessly and gracefully into her arms.

It was an eloquent answer. Death is going to take our body anyway, no matter what we do, and the more we try to hang on to the body with all its desires and fears, the more we are going to suffer when death wrenches these things away. On the other hand, when we overcome identification with the body and ego through meditation and the repetition of the mantram, we know from direct spiritual experience that the body is not us, but only a jacket which we have been wearing all these years. Then, when the jacket has become worn and can no longer serve us, we do not cry because it has gone the way of all jackets; we simply take it off, hang it up carefully, and go home.

The Role of the Mantram

I am all for alleviating pain at the time of death, but there is nothing physical we can do to relieve the suffering in consciousness. That is where the mantram has to reach – and that is where the mantram *can* reach, if we start from now on to repeat it at every opportunity and do our best to fill the mind with the love of God.

Even when the dying person has lost awareness of the external world, because consciousness has been consolidated at this deeper level, we can still be receptive to the mantram. Similarly, even when there is confusion in the mind of the dying person, it is possible for a God-conscious man or woman to dispel that confusion and enter with a clear ray of light. That is why devotion to a spiritual teacher plays an invaluable role at the time of death. Then our teacher stands like a

At the time of death our teacher stands like a lighthouse at the entry to this most mysterious of worlds, protecting us as we make the crossing.

lighthouse at the entry to this most mysterious of worlds, directing us towards the bridge that is the Lord and protecting us as we make the crossing.

Interestingly enough, we all have experience of this withdrawal of consciousness. The Upanishads tell us penetratingly that there is some similarity between this state and the state of dreamless sleep between two periods of waking. This can be a source of great consolation to those who are facing death. In dreamless sleep, the Upanishads add, our problems all disappear for the time being; we are not conscious of either the body or the mind. But when it comes time to wake up, don't we still wake up the same person, with our consciousness very much the same? Similarly, the Upanishads and the Gita say, even when we are completely unconscious externally, in the deepest recesses of our consciousness there is still some vital content, and it is this vital content at the core of our being that continues after the body dies.

When the mind withdraws into this level, it is not possible to think about God. If you have been thinking about

money and physical pleasures for eighty years, when you see death coming you want to tell your mind, "Now you quit thinking about money and pleasure and think about the Lord." The mind at that deep level will say, "Sorry, boss, I just can't."

This is one of the secrets that comes out in the Gita. When vitality has been withdrawn from the mind into the core of personality like this, we have actually gone beyond the stream of consciousness that we call the mind.

All that activity has ceased, which means that there is not much we can draw on at the conscious level. There isn't even much memory. It's a terribly practical problem because to

remember the mantram consciously at this time, you need a powerful memory and the capacity to follow the sequence of thought, and at this level all of that is gone. This is where the mantram will come of its own accord if you have become established in it. Then you don't need memory, you don't need connection, you don't need coherence; the mantram will go on by itself.

That is why I say keep using the mantram at every possible opportunity. Even if it takes twenty or thirty years to become established, at life's last ebb the immense power of all our desires pours into the mantram, which becomes a lifeline we can hold on to while the body and the mind are shed. This lifeline can stretch deep below the conscious level, enabling us to hold on to the Lord long after awareness of the outside world is gone. Then all the panic of loss and self-dissolution is gone, together with the fear of the unknown that so fills the human heart with anguish. We know that our story is not ended, and that the next chapter will be richer and more fulfilling than the last.

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Reincarnation

According to the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, when consciousness is consolidated at the time of death, our last thought will encompass our entire life. At that time all the desires of our lifetime are consolidated in one deep, driving desire which determines our destiny. It is this desire that impels us to take a body again, so that our desires may be satisfied.

In this way of looking at things, none of us is lost. We are all working towards the discovery of the unity of life, however long it may take. This is a very practical, positive conclusion, and in fact reincarnation does such a good job of explaining the human condition that it is very difficult to question it, even intellectually.

But I always emphasize that when it comes to making wise choices in life, it makes not the slightest difference whether we believe in reincarnation or not. It is possible to believe in a thousand lifetimes and still lead a selfish life, and it is possible to believe in only one lifetime and still learn to become established in the mantram and realize for ourselves the supreme goal of life. ⇨

The Promise of Immortality

By Eknath Easwaran

IN THE *Mahabharata*, one of India's two great epics, five brothers go one by one to a lake for water. As each man bends to drink, he hears a voice:

"Wait, my child. First answer my questions; then you may drink." But the men are parched with thirst. The first four who go each ignore the voice, raise water to their lips, and fall lifeless to the ground. Only the fifth and eldest, Yudhishthira, stops to grieve over his brothers and answer the questions; and in the end, the others are returned to life.

One of these questions has haunted me ever since I first heard this story from my grandmother's lips: "Of all things in life, what is the most amazing?" Yudhishthira answers, "That although we see others dying all around us, we never think that *we* will die."

In the modern world, this may not be so surprising. We have developed

all sorts of ways to shield ourselves from death and old age. But in the little village where I grew up, death and dying are woven into the texture of life. People know each other, work together, see each other regularly at school or the temple or the bazaar, and it is not uncommon to hear that someone you had played with or whose mango tree you used to rob has suddenly passed from this life. It used to trouble me greatly. I would ask my granny, "Where is my playmate now? Yesterday he was alive like us; today there is nothing but a body. Has he gone somewhere else, or has he just vanished, like smoke after a fire?"

Questions like these became more and more oppressive, and my granny did nothing to quieten them. What she did was immensely more valuable. She showed me a window opening beyond everyday existence and told me, "Look. You have good eyes. If you look far, far off, you'll see death waiting for you, just as he is waiting for us all."

This was not done in words. Granny seldom tried to explain herself; she taught me about death in ways that were much more vivid. In those days my ancestral family numbered more than a hundred, so death was a not

"The Spiritual Journey Is the Important Journey"

"This year can be divided into two parts – my old life and my new life.

In May I entered the hospital as a patient for the first time in my life, and after three hospitals and a nursing home I returned to my home in November. Extreme weakness made it impossible for me to function. In all probability it will take another six months to get back to "normal" (whatever that is).

Going through an experience like this has taught me significant and important things. I am going

to die physically one day. All my life I have been so active and physically healthy that I was lulled into feeling I was immune to significant health issues. Now I know that is not so, and I do not know from day to day what may happen. The spiritual journey, shared with fellow travelers, is the important journey, as the spirit will continue after death even as the body dies. I have believed this all my life but never realized it experientially as I do now."

infrequent visitor. And when someone in the family died, the body was laid in a special room called the Dark Room, used for no other purpose. Not even the men in my family would walk past that room at night; as far as most of us were concerned, death actually lived there. It was my granny who kept vigil with the body in the Dark Room overnight, tending the flickering little oil lamp so that it would not go out. Her example seemed to say, "What's there to fear? This is not the person we loved; it's no more than an old coat."

No one else in the family understood this, least of all me. Only after I took to meditation did I realize that my teacher loved me so much that she wanted me to focus all my life around one driving desire: not to make a million dollars or travel to the moon or win the Nobel Prize, but to cut the nexus of identification with the body and overcome death in this very life.

Everyone else seemed to be able to forget those scenes. I could not forget; I can never forget. Even today, the sight of a little bird lying dead on the road opens up for me a kind of theater, in which all of us are on the stage. Life is a magic show, over so soon. Merely from the fact that there is a first act, you know there will be a last. Fortunes will rise and fall, people will laugh, quarrel, love, and weep, but in the end, the curtain has to fall. It is not a pleasant picture, but it throws everything into sharp perspective. There is not time enough in life to spend on quarreling. There is no time to waste on hostility or misunderstanding. At this very moment the messengers of Death are on their way with a letter for each of us, posted the instant we were conceived. This letter is not sent by some outside power. We have posted it ourselves, simply by coming into this life. And we never know when it will arrive. For some it takes a long time to reach its destination; for others it comes by special delivery at midnight. But the letter is on its way, and every

gray hair is a postcard to remind us.

There is nothing tragic about this. Youth is passing, and with it the pleasures of youth; these messages come to remind us that it is time to move on to another stage of life. What is tragic is trying to stay behind. To me, there is no stronger comment on the physical orientation of our times than men and women in the afternoon of their lives still thinking of life in terms of pleasure, clinging to youth once youth has gone: talking like teenagers, dressing as if they were still twenty-two, taking advantage of all the ways in which chemistry and surgery can disguise the marks of age, going in for hobbies and entertainments and diversions whose only purpose is to kill time. The phrase is deadly. The mystics would say, "You have finished with all this. Why go through it again and again? The experiments are over; it is time to reflect and learn."

As long as we identify with the body we are fragments, occupying a limited portion of space and perhaps eighty years in time. But there is a much vaster "I," the Self, compared with which this tiny ego-corner is no more nor less than a prison. Our whole modern way of life is based on the belief that we can enjoy ourselves in this prison, find fulfillment in this prison, leave our mark on posterity in this prison, all because we have leave to walk about for a while in the prison yard and perhaps play a little volleyball. If we could only see how narrow this life is, how petty, how quickly ended, we would concentrate all our effort on escaping from it once and for all.

During the second part of life we learn to defy all the selfish desires that human existence is prey to, hundreds of them, through the practice of meditation and the allied disciplines. This is not negating desires; it is unifying them – transforming them from selfish to selfless, from individual to universal. This unification of desires leads to the integration of personality in its

full glory. Instead of living just for one person, we live for the welfare of all, for the happiness of all. The partitions of the ego are down. We live in all creatures, which means we live a thousandfold more. Everything is magnified: our sympathy, our sensitivity, our strength, our love, our capacity to give and help and serve.

When all desires are right desires, says the *Theologica Germanica*, "all things are lawful, save one tree and the fruits thereof . . . that is, self-will." Saint Augustine puts it even more simply: "Love; then do as you will." This word *love* is used so commonly today that we have all but forgotten what it means. Because of our physical orientation, we think in terms of one-to-one relationships over candlelight and wine, "dancing cheek to cheek," or sitting together under a swaying palm tree admiring a Caribbean moon. All this is just the shadow of love. We are not made to love only one or two individuals. We have the immense capacity to be in love with everyone, with every creature – not in some abstract way, but as the Buddha says, as a mother loves her only child.

A person who has attained this state has really ceased to be an individual. He or she is a lasting beneficial force, whose power to improve the lives of others is in no way diminished when the physical body is shed at the time of death. Saint Francis, to take just one example, cannot be described in the terms of a police report: five foot four, one hundred and twenty pounds, living for forty-three years. That is the container; Francis is a force, affecting our lives today exactly as it did when it was embodied in Assisi. I feel sure that Francis's guidance is as real to some people today as it was to Brother Giles and Brother Leo – and perhaps more real than some of the realities of everyday life that we take for granted.

In the Hindu tradition, it is said that the Lord is extending this gift of immortality to each of us.

*Continued on
next page*

But we are holding a few pennies in our hands. I don't know if you have seen infants in this dilemma; it happens at a particular stage of development, when they have learned to grasp but not mastered letting go. They have a rattle in one hand, you offer them a toothbrush, and for a while they just look back and forth at the toothbrush, then the rattle, then the toothbrush again. You can almost see the gray matter working: "I want that toothbrush, but how can I take it? My hand is already full."

Similarly, I think, all of us ask for a long while, "How do I know this gift is real? Give it to me first; then I'll let the pennies go." The Lord only smiles and waits. He can offer the gift, but for us to take it, we have to open our hands. And there comes a time when we want something more than pennies so passionately that we no longer care what it costs. Then we open our hands, and discover that for the pennies we have dropped, we have received an incomparable treasure.

This is never easy. Everyone finds it difficult to let go. The whole question is, how much do we want something more, something that time cannot take away? I can testify that I too once took a good deal of pleasure in certain private pastimes, which after all caused no one any harm. When I began to see that to unify my desires I would have to detach myself from these pastimes, for a long time I did not think I would be able to do it. My intellect kept asking, "Is this really necessary? Even if you succeed, won't it be a woeful loss?" I began to let go in earnest the day I realized that no matter what satisfactions I attained, death was waiting down the road, ready to take them away. After that, the conquest of death came first, last, and in between; everything else was a distraction. Today nothing is a distraction. I enjoy everything much more than before, for now every facet of my life serves one overriding goal. I have not lost anything; I have only gained. ☺

The Last Great Change

Blue Mountain retreats exclusively for seniors – "Setu" retreats, named from the Sanskrit word for bridge – began only toward the end of Sri Easwaran's life, so most of the participants never met him in person. The transformations in their lives are a testament to the enduring power of his teachings, nowhere more evident than at the end of life.

Recently, several of this first generation of Setu students have crossed this bridge from this life to the next. The two stories that follow – told by their daughters, also longtime meditators – give a glimpse of how the Setu Program helped them make that crossing. One dear friend's description of her mother's years of preparation for this last great change can speak for all the courageous men and women in this program, who are following much the same practices and seeing similar changes in their lives:

"My mother began meditating around her 73rd birthday and came to her first Setu retreat 12 years ago.

Over those years Mom leaned heavily on Easwaran's teachings. She read from his books every day and worked steadily to incorporate his teachings into her daily life. She did not make a show of it at all, but the changes in her were evident.

Mom was committed to her daily meditation. Many times we would sit together and listen to the recordings of Easwaran reciting passages. This became increasingly important to her as her body became more frail.

Often she would watch the DVDs of Easwaran's talks. She really loved this. There were several she wanted to watch over and over, as though Easwaran was preparing her for the changes soon to

come. As her vision and hearing declined, she enjoyed using little 'ear buds' to listen to Easwaran's talks.

I know she repeated her mantram diligently. At particularly trying times at doctors' visits or medical procedures I would whisper into her ear a reminder to repeat her mantram; every time she would gently smile and whisper back, "I am." She came to rely more and more on her mantram until I believe it was a steady companion for her – as Easwaran says, the staff of her life.

During the last years of her life she was required to radically change her diet. At first the changes were very hard for her to make (I can't tell you what a big deal good cooking is in our family!) but many times I would see her happily make a dish for family gatherings that she couldn't eat and thoroughly enjoy others' enjoyment of it. This did not go unnoticed in our family either and made quite an impression on us all.

Over time the continued adjustments in her diet became seemingly effortless for her. It helped her tremendously in deepening her understanding of what we would hear Easwaran say, particularly at Setu retreats, "We are not our bodies." It was fascinating to watch her combine this continued letting go of likes and dislikes with deliberately turning her attention to others' needs.

One of the hardest transitions for Mom was in her last few months, when her body and mind grew so frail she could no longer 'do' for herself or others. Her ability to remain kind and patient at this time was a completely different kind of strength than the physical ability to 'do' – a much greater strength.

It was at this stage that we truly witnessed the fruits of all those little efforts Mom made in the last years of her life to practice Easwaran's teachings. This was the spiritual strength and faith that enabled her to let go of all she held dear in this world and cling to her mantram, to the Lord, and cross that bridge from this life to the next. She blessed us all with her grace and courage." ☺



We're living the teachings now as never before. The passages – "Living on Love," "The Wonderful Effect of Divine Love," "One with God" – are coming alive for us. This is a timeless world. Twenty-four hours a day of meditating, repeating the mantram, or reading passages to her. All the kids are reading passages to her. The grace of her essence is shining through. The room feels holy. All generations are living in a Setu house – cooking, cleaning, taking care of Mom, babysitting children. The young people will never forget this. Mom has changed their lives forever. She worked through huge inner struggles and truly grew in the way she related to others. This had a transformational effect on our whole family, even healing decades-long estrangements she'd had.



The veil between worlds has dropped. Mom is very quiet now. She is very peaceful with gentle breathing. She seems very comfortable, very at ease. Her feet and hands are cold to the touch now and her breathing is steady. She has surprised her hospice team more than once, and it has taken her a while to descend through the process; we are all deeply grateful for her peace now. Her body has held up

remarkably well considering she too hasn't eaten and had very little to drink for nearly a month now. There is a luminosity about her which everyone recognizes and comments on. Her face seems to get younger.

Easwaran has used Mom and this process as a profound teaching tool of the importance of the mantram and to not postpone a minute the practice of his Eight Points and to give our all to it and him. I cannot convey how humbling this experience has been. Elizabeth of the Trinity's prayer has been a polestar. The Sabbath Prayer from the Jewish Liturgy has also been very important for Mom, and for us. And the 23rd Psalm. And of course, Easwaran's Setu Prayer:

Dear Lord, please fill my heart with love and devotion for you and burn out all seeds of selfish desire and sense-craving in my mind.

Grant that I may be carried by you from this life to the next without suffering and be born in a holy family with my heart overflowing with love and devotion for you from earliest childhood onwards.



My mom is still in the hospital. She has been a model patient, a model eight-point practitioner! Her spirit is very high . . . she's all smiles, just joyous! She usually strongly dislikes being in the hospital, but to see her now you would never know it.

The young nurse who attended her today commented how calm she was. My mom told her it was because she meditates and that the body aging is a natural progression so she accepts it. The nurse was quite impressed and told her how helpful it would be if more people understood this.

Mom shares the room with a 92-year-old stroke patient who's a bit feisty! She's quite verbal and yells out quite a bit. They ask Mom, "Does that noise bother you?" and my mom says no. She has been showing more concern for the other patient. It is just so Sri Easwaran! Making sure that others are given one-pointed (loving) attention and being put first!

Ever since I left the last retreat, I kept thinking about one of the videos we watched where Sri Easwaran shared the questions that came from deep

within him: "Who am I, what's the purpose/meaning of life, what are we here for," etc. I was thinking how Setu is the RICHEST of Sri Easwaran's teachings and how blessed we are to have them – and that it does not matter at what age we find his teaching; whether you are 30 as I was or 65 as my mother was, his love and blessing is for all generations.



I want to share with you that my mom's body was officially pronounced deceased as of 8:00 tonight. I have such peace in my heart and mind because I believe that my mother was tired and ready to go. I humbly and proudly say that my mom was an A+ Setu student and was not in the least bit attached to her body in the end.

We kept the mantram CD playing throughout the evening. Everyone else left, but my sister and I stayed in the room with my mother's body until 10:00 p.m. The mantram was playing the whole time. In the end, it was very beautiful and peaceful. ↪

Are you interested in learning passage meditation and seeing the benefits of the practice in your own life? Explore these resources to get you started . . .



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“I recently attended a beginning weekend retreat at Tomales. It is not like me to say things like this, but I believe it was life-changing for me. There are many forms of meditation, but this one really resonates for me. And I particularly appreciate that there are so many practical ways that Easwaran addresses issues of daily living. I very much look forward to continuing the practice and making it a part of my life.” (Judy P., from a 2012 introductory weekend retreat.)

BLUE MOUNTAIN



A JOURNAL FOR
SPIRITUAL LIVING
BASED ON
EKNATH EASWARAN'S
EIGHT-POINT PROGRAM
OF PASSAGE MEDITATION

Blue Mountain Center of Meditation
Nilgiri Press
Box 256, Tomales, California 94971

Nonprofit
U.S. Postage
PAID
Santa Rosa, CA
Permit #191

To receive an electronic edition of this journal, please visit www.easwaran.org/bluemountain
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February 15–17: *Young Adult Weekend*
March 8–10: *Introductory Weekend*
March 22–24: *Returnee Weekend*
April 5–9: *Senior Half-Week*
April 20–26: *In-Depth Weeklong*
May 17–19: *Introductory Weekend*
June 7–9: *Returnee Weekend*
July 6–12: *In-Depth Weeklong + Young Adults*
August 3–9: *In-Depth Weeklong*
August 16–18: *Introductory Weekend*
August 23–27: *Senior Half-Week*
September 21–27: *In-Depth Weeklong*
October 4–6: *Returnee Weekend*
October 12–18: *In-Depth Weeklong*
November 8–10: *Young Adult Weekend*
November 15–17: *Introductory Weekend*
December 6–8: *Returnee Weekend*

Across the US

January 19: *Petaluma One-Day*
February 1–3: *Dallas Weekend*
February 2: *Dallas One-Day*
February 9: *Los Angeles (Encino) One-Day*
April 12–14: *Oregon (Mt. Angel) Weekend*
April 13: *Oregon (Mt. Angel) One-Day*
June 21–23: *New York (Ossining) Weekend*
June 22: *New York (Ossining) One-Day*
August 2–4: *Colorado Weekend*
August 3: *Colorado One-Day*
September 7: *San Diego One-Day*
September 27–29: *Chicago Weekend*
September 28: *Chicago One-Day*