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Our Real Identity by Eknath Easwaran

One of the first lessons I learned in geography was that the earth is round. Our little village in South India had been left out of the march of modern civilization, and most of us hadn't heard this terrible news. Even my teacher was a little diffident in presenting it to us. "You may not believe this," he began, "and if you don't, I sympathize completely. But this is what they gave me to understand when I did my teacher's training in Madras."

When I went home that afternoon, my granny was waiting for me as always by the front gate, ready with her usual greeting: "Well, Little Lamp, what did you learn in school today?"

"Brace yourself, Granny," I said. "You may not believe this, and if you don't, I sympathize completely. But today my teacher told us that the earth is really round." Shattering the illusions of a granny's lifetime.

Not a hair fell out of place. "What does it matter?" she asked. "You can be selfless whether the earth is round or square or triangular."

That took some wind out of my sails. But there was still my mother; she was much easier to surprise. I marched over and said, "Guess what we learned today."

"I can't," she said. "You tell me."

"The earth is round!"

She fell into a paroxysm of laughter which still rings in my ears. She never let me forget that moment, and I don't think she ever believed me either.

I used to try to reason with her. "This isn't just some theory, Mother," I'd say. "It has been proved over and over again." Her point was inarguable: for her, a flat earth worked. "When I go to the temple," she'd say, "I don't roll off. When you go to school, you don't slide down the sides. It looks flat; why should I change my mind?"

Once I saw the practicality of this point of view, I ceased trying to convince her. As long as you keep within a certain sphere of activity, believing that the earth is flat is a harmless superstition that interferes very little with daily living.



A more pervasive kind of ignorance

Virtually all of us, however, are subject to a much more pervasive kind of ignorance that affects every detail of our lives: we believe that we are wholly physical creatures, who can be satisfied in wholly physical ways. This belief has profound practical implications. On the individual level, it means we believe that if we can give a person the capacity to satisfy physical needs and desires, he or she will be happy. Technology will be able to solve our health problems and provide material comfort for everyone. It will also be able to solve our mental problems, since personality and behavior are determined by our chemistry.

Progress is measured in terms of material growth, value in terms of material assets. Even a person's work is evaluated as a commodity. Finally, there is nothing like a moral order, only the principles of natural selection; so our only rational guide for action is self-interest.

Believing we are the body means we are going to commit a lot of mistakes — likely to do all sorts of absurd things to satisfy emotional or spiritual needs in physical ways that only make us more body conscious, making the problem worse.

To begin with, identifying with something that is constantly changing is a perfect recipe for insecurity. Everyone wants to keep the body healthy and attractive, but when we start thinking that is who we are, we are fighting a battle with change that no human being has ever won, constantly losing ground in the inevitable decline from those golden years around age eighteen.

Second, as long as we believe we are the body, we can't help believing that everyone else is a body too, each separate from us and from each other. Then it seems natural, even right, to treat our personal interests as separate from theirs, even if getting what we want comes at their expense.

Third, when we identify ourselves with the body, we cannot help believing that we can change ourselves by changing the way we look. So much time and attention goes into playing games with physical appearances! It's like spending our lives fixing up a house we never get around to living in. We design it, build it, plaster it, paint it, furnish it, decorate it and redecorate it over and over, but before we take up residence, we go into the grave.

A hole in consciousness

But the main problem with identifying ourselves with the body is that we spend our lives trying to satisfy nonphysical needs in physical ways. It is as if there is a hole in our consciousness that has no bottom, and day after day we pour into this fathomless pit all the things we think will fill it: bank checks, stock certificates, material possessions, tokens of power and prestige, every fleeting satisfaction of



the day. We find a little pleasure or profit and toss it in; we never even hear it hit the bottom, so we try again. This goes on and on and on; we just don't know what else to try.

The discovery of who we are

The great religions of the world have always taught that there is more to the human being than the body: an essential core of personality that is not physical but spirit, divine. Every one of us is born to make the discovery of who we are, where we come from, and what our responsibilities in living are.

Like everybody else, I grew up believing that I was purely physical, a collection of biochemical constituents. What has changed for me since then? Everything. Not two or three things but everything. Through meditation, with the help of the demanding disciplines I followed every day in the midst of a busy life, that belief in myself as a purely physical creature has fallen away completely. Today I do not look upon myself or anyone else as physical. I identify with the Self, pure spirit, the same in all.

The forces of life

“Like a ball batted back and forth,” says an ancient text called the Yogabindu Upanishad, “a human being is batted by two forces within”: one, the upward drive to evolve into spiritual beings; the other, the fierce downward thrust of our past conditioning as separate, self-oriented, physical creatures.

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit here is “like a ball hit by a stick held in the hand.” I don't have any idea what game the sages of ancient India had been watching, but I think tennis fits the verse perfectly. Millions of people have taken to this sport in the past few years, so it seems a natural one to use to bring this image to life.

Imagine a match between two gentlemen players from the past who are probably among the best the game has ever seen: Bjorn Borg on the one side and Ivan Lendl on the other. Now imagine being a tennis ball played by these two strong champions — Lendl, whose shots used to travel at more than a hundred miles per hour, and Borg, who would string his racquets so taut that at night he was sometimes awakened by the *ping!* as the strings snapped spontaneously under the strain. Every one of us, this ancient text says, is being played like this twenty-four hours a day back and forth between two opposing inner forces. Here are Ivan on one side of the court and Bjorn on the other, enjoying themselves immensely, yelling to each other, “Hit him for all you're worth; I'll slam the poor fellow back!”

This inner tension is our evolutionary heritage. It reflects our divided nature as human beings: partly physical, essentially spiritual, constantly pulled in two

conflicting directions. If this sounds bad, it is actually quite positive. For if one of these players will not let us alone, neither will the other.

A persistent upward drive

Built into our very nature is an inner drive that will not let us be satisfied with living at our lowest level, governed only by biological laws. Some inner evolutionary imperative is constantly exhorting us to grow, to reach for the highest that we can conceive, as if nature itself will not let us rest with anything less than spiritual fulfillment.

Toward the end of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita there is a statement so direct, so penetrating, that it should move us to question all external attempts at self-improvement: those who are always trying to satisfy their personal desires will never find peace in this life. Such people are doomed to live in turmoil and isolation. Why? Because if we cannot make changes where we really want to — in our own personality — it does not matter what else we may have achieved; we won't be able to live with ourselves.

Often, I think, this is why active people are so active, why adventurers adventure and globetrotters trot: we do not want to stop and listen to that quiet heckler in the depths of our hearts, reminding us of our real job. This is ultimately what insecurity means; that is where a sense of inadequacy really comes from.

But we can change. No one need ever feel resigned and say, "There is nothing I can do." There is everything we can do. That is the purpose and the power of that persistent upward force within us: if we turn inward we can remake ourselves completely, modeling ourselves in the image of the loftiest spiritual ideal we can conceive.

A deep motive for sense restraint

To a surprising extent, we live to please our body instead of having it help and serve us. Whatever increases physical consciousness cannot be an aid to the spiritual life. Body consciousness is the obstacle to divine awareness, and every day we must ask ourselves what is likely to decrease our identification with the body.

This gives us a deep motive for exercising discriminating restraint over the senses. If we want to discover our real identity, to realize that all life is one and live in harmony with this unity, we must have a body that is healthy and strong, one which will never fail in the selfless service of others.

For example, we should not eat things simply because they look or taste good. Every time we are tempted to eat something because of an advertisement or an old

samskara, or conditioned habit, we should ask ourselves if the body needs it or if it will merely stimulate the palate. When you are hungry, eat what is best for your body. Eating at any other time shows very slight regard for health, and the mind becomes obese and tyrannical when it gets its way like this at the expense of our better judgment.

A toll on the mind

Advertisers, by contrast, seem to want us to think about eating twenty-four hours a day. Under their influence it is very easy to get into the habit of bringing home this little treat and that little tidbit to munch on. Even if you don't have an eating problem, this habit of automatic buying and snacking takes a real toll on the mind. It weakens the will, divides attention, and keeps thoughts turned outward toward the sense-world — just the opposite of what we need to enter the world within.

If you love your children, I would say, don't get them into the "sweets" habit at all — and if you love adults, don't encourage them in it. On a special occasion, I do sometimes treat my teenage friends to a gooey chocolate confection. They can take it. But it's not a special occasion every time we can find a convenient excuse. If every event is celebrated with chocolate or candy, a lot of calories are going to find a home around somebody's waist.

It is not good to dwell on food, either. The gourmet who is constantly looking for new ways to stimulate the palate will become more and more trapped on the physical level. After we have taken reasonable care to see that we get the right food, served with love, we should then forget about it and leave it to the digestive system to do the rest. There is no need to talk about it; there is no need to ask, "When are we going to have another meal like this?"

A reasonable perspective

Once we start retraining our sense of taste, which is in the mind, we can enjoy green salad and fruits as the greatest of delicacies. Skipping a meal, especially when we have eaten a little more than is necessary at the previous meal, is another way of lessening body consciousness.

If I may say so, as spiritual teachers go, I am really very lenient in these matters. The important thing is to remain clear about your goal; then it is easy to keep a reasonable perspective.

Other aids for lessening physical consciousness are giving up harmful habits such as smoking, drinking, the use of drugs, and overindulgence of any kind. This is not for puritanical reasons: if you want to rise above physical consciousness, these are the things you have to throw away. In recalling our desires from the wasteful

sensory channels into which they are now flowing, we unify our capacity to desire. Then we can direct this unified love and energy towards the supreme goal.

Once this obsessive physical identification has been broken through, you feel so good all the time that you cannot imagine using any artificial aid to be a few inches high when you are now almost the height of the cosmos.

What it means to be beautiful

Because of body identification, we can also feel that if our appearance is something less than perfect, there is something wrong with *us*.

That beauty is limited to a certain age range — say, eighteen to thirty-nine — is another of the monstrous superstitions of our times. This is not being beautiful; it is being silly.

Some people today get offended if they can't fool people into thinking that they fit this golden category. If they are forty, they want to look thirty; if their face shows the lines of experience, they may pay thousands of dollars to get the lines erased.

There is a beauty appropriate to every age, and to try to imitate the kind of beauty that belongs to a different age is not only unattractive but foolish. If you are forty and have learned something from experience, you are a much greater asset to life than you were when you were a teenager. Your face should show what you have learned; that is what it means to be beautiful at forty.

Nothing you can put on your skin can be as alluring as a loving heart and an unselfish mind; these are qualities that entrance everyone.

By its very nature, mere physical beauty excites us at first and then soon cloy; it beckons but quickly satiates. Inner beauty — of kindness, of goodness, of patience, of selfless love — may not thrill at the outset; but when you live with someone with these qualities, year after year you will fall more deeply in love.

The inner beauty which shows itself in the capacity to give and to cherish grows with the passage of time. It transcends the senses, transcends even mind and intellect. We can grow in beauty until the last day of our life, and the desire to look on everyone as kith and kin will draw people to us for the beauty of our lives.

Beyond the physical

When you no longer identify others with their bodies, you will be able to see them as people instead. It lifts an immense burden from your close personal relationships. No matter what the media try to tell us, I don't think anything is

more certain to disrupt a relationship than treating the other person as a physical object.

On the physical level, all of us are separate, and it is the very nature of physical attraction to change with the passage of time. On the other hand, nothing is more certain to deepen a relationship than concern for the other person's real welfare, which we can see clearly only when we cease identifying people with the body-jackets they wear.

When the senses defy us

In spite of our best efforts, however, there will be times in meditation when we find ourselves in a difficult predicament — times when the senses defy us. Even though we are trying our best to lead the spiritual life, the senses are so fiercely turbulent that if we yield to them for a little while, and a little while more, we will be swept away. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna tells us that even of someone very wise, the senses can become so powerful that they can just pick us up and throw us from the path. This is a warning given to all of us, particularly on the level of sex.

We do not have to belong to the monastic order to lead the spiritual life, and sex has a beautiful place in a completely loving, loyal relationship, though even there with discrimination. But for people who indulge in sex in the wrong context, even though at the outset there may be some satisfaction, ultimately the relationship will be disrupted.

If we ask any two people who have built their relationship on the physical level, they will say that in just a few months they could not bear each other. The tragedy is that after a short time they are again in the same relationship with someone else. If you ask them the same question again, they will say their new relationship also could not last even a few months.

The senses are getting stronger and stronger, resistance is getting weaker and weaker, and one day such people will find that even if they want to, they will not be able to lead the spiritual life because of the turbulence of the mind.

Sex is sacred; it has beauty and tenderness in the married relationship, where it brings two people closer and closer to become one. But on no account is it going to help us physically, psychologically, or spiritually to indulge this impulse as the mass media are trying to make us do.

The problems of a divided mind

We shall find that we give our best to each other when we put each other first; and when we do not put each other first, sex can breed jealousy. The fiercer our

physical conditioning is, the more separate we will feel, and the more we will be prey to all the problems of a divided mind: vacillation, depression, jealousy, and alienation. These problems can be solved, but not on the physical level where they arise. We need access to much deeper levels of consciousness.

Take, for example, a Don Juan who is in a “meaningful relationship” with a young lady named Dulcinea. Juan is a very passionate fellow and intensely jealous. Unfortunately, since Dulcinea is attractive, Juan’s life is an agony of suspicion. The minute she is out of his sight he can’t stop worrying about what she is doing.

According to one school of thought, if Don Juan can exchange his Dulcinea for a Juanita, as loyal as she is lovely, this uncertainty can be dispelled. “Change the environment, change the response” — isn’t it axiomatic? But unfortunately, as most of us know from experience, this simply doesn’t work.

The problem is not with Dulcinea or Juanita or anything else in the outside world; the problem is the uncertainty in the mind of Don Juan. As long as he is living on the physical level, he cannot help being possessive.

But it is possible for Juan to overcome his jealousy: not by reasoning with it, not by suppressing it, but by learning to be master of his mind. When that is done, all insecurity goes — not only insecurity over Dulcinea, but insecurity over anything. Then he can take Dulcinea out to the Alhambra café, where her former boyfriend plays flamenco, and not be apprehensive at all.

Jealousy comes in only when we try to possess something for ourselves. It is good to admire beauty, but it is neither beautiful nor good if we want to take it home, put it on the mantle, and say, “You just stay there.” When we see something beautiful, we begin to want it for ourselves. It may be a beautiful house, it may be a beautiful flower, it may be a beautiful dancer — we just want it. But by trying to possess it, we lose it.

The secret of all relationships

It is a very difficult secret to understand that when we do not want to possess another selfishly, when we do not make demand after demand, that the relationship is much more likely to last.

Sri Krishna is giving us the secret of all relationships, not only between husband and wife, between boyfriend and girlfriend, but between friend and friend, parents and children. Instead of trying to exact and demand, just give, and give more, and give still more. This is the way to keep love and respect; and it is something we have to learn the hard, hard way.

As we absorb this higher image of who we are, many important consequences follow. When you know that you are essentially spiritual, you no longer relate to yourself as a creature to be satisfied with physical pleasures. You do not relate to others in terms of their physical appearance. You know that your worth derives from the eternal Self within you — and because this same Self lives in the hearts of all, you find it easy to relate to everyone with respect and love.

A different idea of love

Our real desire in life, as the Bible puts it, is to love the Lord with all our heart, all our mind, all our spirit, and all our strength. The human being's infinite capacity to desire can never be fulfilled by anything less.

Unfortunately, it is equally part of the human condition to believe that we can fulfill our need to love and to be loved by grasping at things and people. When we search outside like this for fulfillment, we misuse our power to love. When we clutch at or cling to anything other than God, we are denying the very possibility of love.

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine gives a very different idea of love. This is the same Augustine who in his early life explored the entire gamut of pleasure. He speaks from his own life when he compares spiritual fulfillment to the ordinary pleasures he had enjoyed before:

Not the beauty of any bodily thing, nor the order of the seasons, nor the brightness of light that rejoices the eye, nor the sweet melodies of all songs, nor the sweet fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices: not manna nor honey, not the limbs that carnal love embraces. None of these things do I love in loving my God.

Yet in a sense I do love light and melody and fragrance and food and embrace when I love my God — the light and the voice and the fragrance and the food and embrace in the soul, when that light shines upon my soul which no place can contain, and that voice sounds which no time can take from me; when I breathe that fragrance which no wind scatters, and eat the food which is not lessened by eating, and lie in the embrace which satiety never comes to sunder.

This it is that I love when I love my God.

Our ordinary conception of joy is limited to a few bits of sensory pleasure, which we hold on to with a fierce tenacity that enslaves us. But the suspicion that joy comes from within us brings a new sense of freedom. No longer compulsively driven by personal desire — for money or possessions, prestige or pleasure or power — we begin to exercise choices where we never dreamed choices could be made.

A transformation in thought-style

It is from our obsessive identification with the body, I believe, that many physical and emotional problems arise. In meditation, as we learn at deeper and deeper levels that the basis of our personality is not physical but spiritual, such problems fall away.

Often we do not even have to confront them. We simply go deeper, move away from the tenements of consciousness where they arise. 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.” 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. Instead of trying to fix problems one by one, we go to the root: the mind. 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.

This approach is very different from the conventional wisdom of the modern world. It cannot work without meditation. For it is much more than a change in lifestyle; it is a transformation of thought-style.