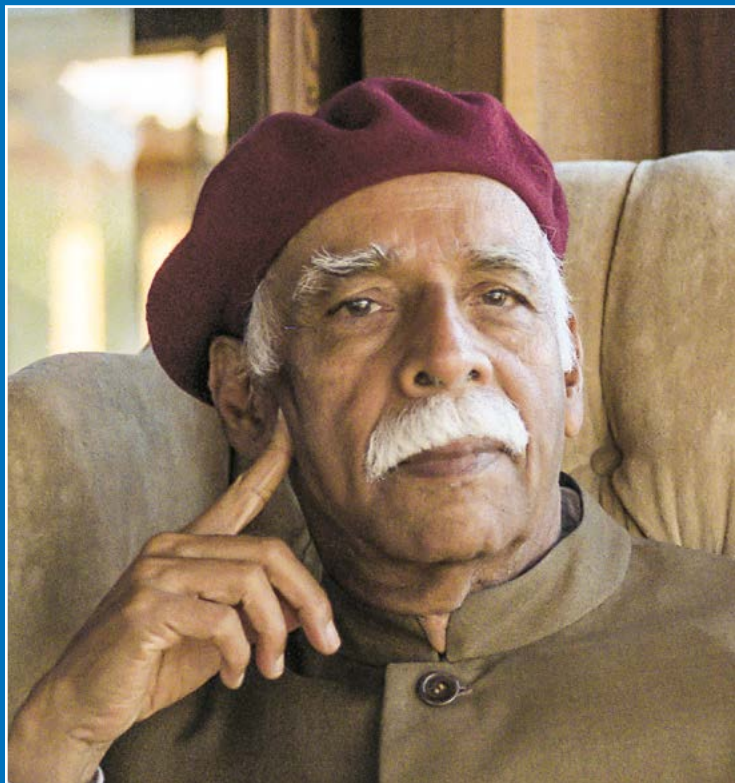


Ekknath Easwaran on Meditation & Spiritual Living

# Blue Mountain Journal

SPRING 2019



The Purpose  
of Work

## In This Issue



On the wall of our BMCM office hangs a plaque. It's been there for decades, and it's a set of aphorisms from Easwaran titled "Work as Sadhana:"

"You learn to work cheerfully and harmoniously, even with those who have differences with you. You learn to work under unfavorable circumstances cheerfully. You learn to work not only at what you like, but you learn to like what you do."

When we come into the office to pick up our mail, this plaque reminds us that how we work is as important as what we do. In our first article, "Work: A Chance to Grow," Easwaran shows how the work context offers many opportunities to grow spiritually and to contribute to life.

Ultimately, we can reach the state in which our work is entirely selfless, without thought of reward or recognition. This is a huge challenge, which Easwaran explores in "The Secret of Selfless Action." For the true purpose of work, as he has explained elsewhere, is loftier than anything we might imagine:

Spring 2019, Volume 30, No. 1

© 2019 by The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation

P.O. Box 256, Tomales, CA 94971, [info@bmcm.org](mailto:info@bmcm.org), [www.bmcm.org](http://www.bmcm.org), 707.878.2369

The *Blue Mountain Journal* is a publication of The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, a California 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1961 by Eknath Easwaran to carry on his work.

“The purpose of work is the attainment of wisdom. Modern civilization hasn’t caught up with this idea, which turns economics upside down.

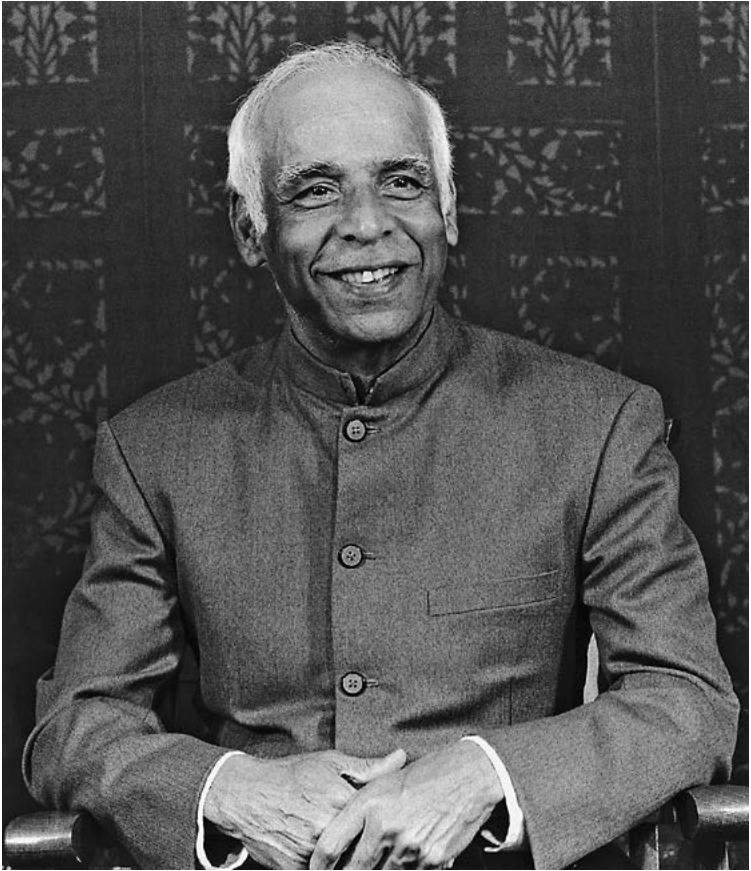
“I understand the need to support ourselves and our families, to have a sense of personal fulfillment, and even to provide the goods and services that society needs. But there is a higher purpose for work, and that is self-purification: to expand our consciousness to include the whole of life by removing the obstacles to Self-realization.

“And there is no way to do this except in our relationships at work and at home: by being patient, being kind, working in harmony, never failing to respect others, and never seeking personal aggrandizement. Our work then becomes part of our path to the complete integration of character, conduct, and consciousness.

“If we give ourselves wholeheartedly to selfless work without any desire for recognition or praise, power or remuneration, then our actions cannot help bearing good fruit — not only in the world but in our own lives, in our spiritual growth.”

We hope that Easwaran’s teachings will inspire you to look at your own work in a new light, and to continue helping the world wherever you are.

— Sue Craig and the BMCM Editorial Team



Easwaran giving class in Ramagiri Ashram, 1970s.

---

# Work: A Chance to Grow

Eknath Easwaran

Our capacity to give, to think of others' needs before our own, to love: as my grandmother saw it, these inner resources are our greatest wealth. Those who derive their security from external things like money or possessions or power are the only really poor people in this world.

Granny rarely taught with words, though. More often she helped me discover these things for myself, as she did during the summer of my freshman year in college. My ambition at the time was to become a writer. Everybody said that if you want to write, you have to have experience, so I got the idea of wandering off to explore our corner of South India and observing life first hand. I got Granny's permission – actually, the idea was hers, but she made me think it was mine – and set out.

## A bright idea

Soon I came across a rather small, hard-working village. Exploring on foot was the kind of thing an Englishman or American might do, but for a fresh-faced Indian boy it was unusual: when I showed up suddenly in this isolated village, people must have thought I had dropped from Mars. Naturally they asked all sorts of questions, and when they found out I was a writer they were really impressed. No one among them had ever had a chance to learn to read or write.

Then someone got a bright idea: wouldn't I like to teach them? I felt lost. I had no teacher's training and not the faintest notion of how to begin. I had come out to observe life, and I was already in over my head.

---

But they had a strong desire to learn. They asked me to stay and be their teacher, not only of the children but of the adults too. What would I charge? They had never had a teacher in the village before, they explained, and they had no money with which to pay. But they could provide me with food, each family taking turns, and I could stay with one of the better-off households as if I were their own son.

All this moved me deeply. I was only a freshman, after all; most of these villagers were old enough to be my parents. And I had only three months of vacation. How much can you teach in three months to people who had scarcely had a day's schooling in their lives, who knew nothing but crops and soils?

"What do you want to learn?" I asked.

"We'd like to know arithmetic," they said, "for buying and selling. We'd like to learn how to read, so we could read the stories in the scriptures. And we'd like to know how to write, so we could write letters to our relatives and friends."

"That's a lot," I said.

They smiled. "We have all summer. Of course, we can't come during the day; we have to work in the fields. But we can come at night."

That kind of desire really impressed me. "Do you have a building where we could meet?"

"No," someone said. "But we can make one."

In my mind the three months began to shrink into two. "How long would it take?" I asked.

They grinned enthusiastically. "We can do it tonight."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Sure," they said. "It's a full moon. We'll start after dinner. You have your meal and then come and select the site; we'll do the rest."

---

That was my first glimpse of the real strength of India's villagers. I selected a pleasant site on a gentle hill, from which you could see the river running close by. And after dinner, probably about eight o'clock in the evening, a man turned up from every hut in the village. These were men who had been up before dawn, worked hard in the hot fields with just a couple of hours rest when the sun was at its zenith.

I was so profoundly impressed that I insisted on working alongside them, though I probably only slowed them down; they had to teach me everything. But by the time the sun came up the next morning, we had a one-room school – mud walls, thatched roof, sand from the riverbank for a floor, even a slate to write on and a piece of railing for a bell. As far as we were concerned, it was perfect.

### **The joy of the work itself**

I taught throughout that summer, and though attendance was a little irregular, by and large someone from every household was there faithfully every evening at eight when class began.

None of us had a watch, so we used to end the lesson when we heard the whistle and clatter of the Blue Mountain Express chugging its way up the hills. Sometimes I would get so absorbed that when I heard a train and stopped, they would laugh and say, "The Blue Mountain Express went by an hour ago. That's the Malabar Express; it must be eleven o'clock." By the end of the summer we didn't go home till we heard the Cochin Express go by at midnight.

They would bring me fruits and vegetables, sandals they made with their own hands, pieces of cloth that they wove right in their homes. I spent all my time with them; we worked hard in school, shared all our meals, and went swimming and



Easwaran working with Christine Easwaran, 1960s.

climbing together on our days off.

By the end of the summer, they had learned the basics of reading, writing, and reckoning, which must have felt like the greatest achievement of their lives. Yet I felt I had learned much more. From those simple villagers, who had just the bare minimum of material possessions, I had learned that the reward of work is not financial but the joy of the work itself, and the satisfaction of being deeply connected with the lives of those around you.



---

## Giving our very best

Real work contributes to life rather than taking from it. It gives us the chance to discover and hone our skills, to see how we fit into life, and to lose our sense of isolation by sharing a common goal with our fellow human beings.

For those who are on the spiritual path, it is not enough if we make progress in meditation. We have also to make sure that we share the fruits of our efforts with everyone around us, and the very best way to do this is through our personal example.

Here the Bhagavad Gita offers some very practical advice: whoever we are, we can improve our contribution to the world simply by giving complete attention to the job at hand in a spirit of detachment. We don't have to compare our lives or work with others'. All that is expected of us is that we give our very best to whatever responsibilities come our way. As our capacity to contribute increases, greater responsibilities will come to us. That is the way spiritual growth has always taken place down the centuries.

## Gandhi's example

I like to illustrate this from the life of Mahatma Gandhi. We are so used to thinking of Gandhi on a world stage that it is easy to forget how he got there. Even when he goes to South Africa at the age of twenty-four, an unknown failure, what we remember is that dramatic incident when he is thrown off the train because of the color of his skin. It took years after that for Gandhi to find his direction. Yet, looking back, we can see that he began to remake himself quite unconsciously, simply by giving full attention to the responsibilities at hand.

His tasks were mundane, far below his training as a barrister. He learned from them to focus his attention and keep the

---

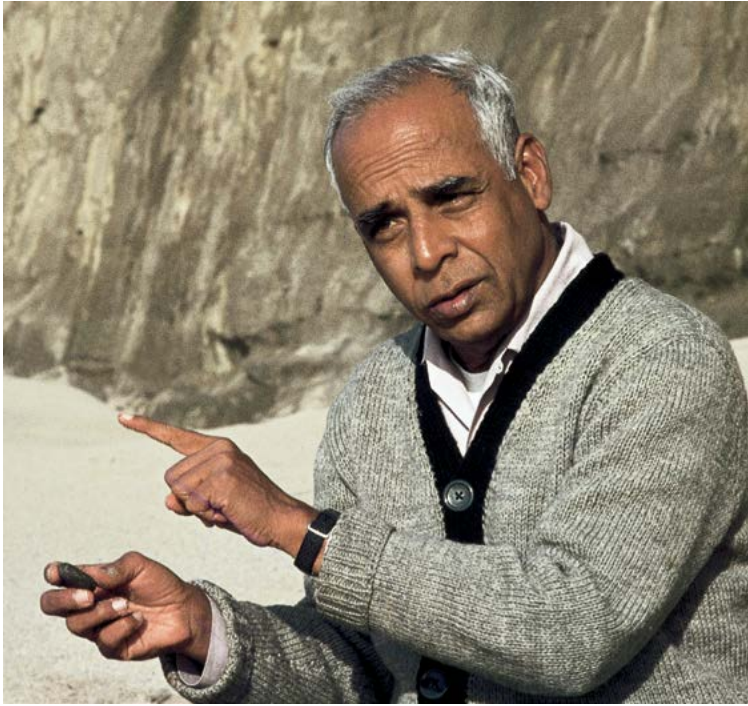
welfare of the whole in mind instead of personal gain. Gradually, that quiet example attracted people to him. People of all races and religions learned that they could trust him. By the time the separatist challenge to Indian immigrants came, a full thirteen years later, both Gandhi and his community were ready for the great experiment of nonviolent resistance.

Even in my own small example, this is the pattern that emerged. When I began to meditate, I don't think it ever occurred to me to change jobs or to try to make a "spiritual" contribution with my writing. I simply gave more and more attention to my teaching – to my colleagues and especially to my students. I was meditating every day on the words of the Bhagavad Gita, where Sri Krishna counsels: "Do your best; then leave the results to me."

## **Making ourselves whole**

It is helpful to keep each of these three aspects in mind – attention, detachment, and the job at hand. But before I comment on them, I want to emphasize that they are really not separate. They are three elements of a single skill. When you dedicate yourself to the task at hand with complete concentration and without any trace of egotistic involvement, you are learning to live completely in the present. You are making yourself whole, undivided, which is the goal of the spiritual life and the meaning of that much-misunderstood word *yoga*.

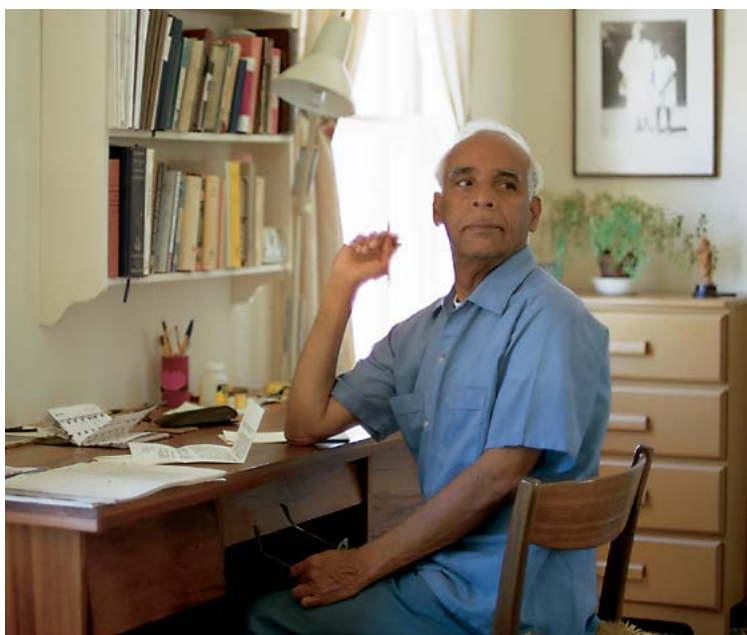
In reality, all these three amount to unifying our attention. We don't usually think in these terms, but when we ignore responsibilities, we are actually dividing our attention. When we postpone or neglect a task that needs doing, we are dividing attention. When we do a job halfheartedly, we are dividing attention. Even when we get personally entangled in



Easwaran teaching on the beach, 1960s.

our activities, we are dividing our attention. And if “dividing attention” sounds abstract, let me assure you it is utterly practical. When we divide our attention, we split ourselves, which weakens everything we do. In this sense, perhaps the simplest expression of our goal in meditation is that we are trying to make ourselves whole.

With this in mind, let me offer a few practical suggestions from my own experience.



Easwaran in his office, 1970s.

## **Our context is our chance to grow**

First, when the Gita talks about doing our best with the job at hand, it is talking about responsibilities – duties. “Duty” is not a very popular word today, so it is important to understand what it means for a spiritual aspirant. From the perspective of meditation, everything life sets before us can be seen as an educational opportunity – a chance to grow.

Every station in life – partner, parent, student, professional, retired person – has its characteristic responsibilities, which the Gita calls our own personal dharma. Other people’s lives may appear more attractive, more creative, even more

---

“spiritual,” but we can never grow spiritually, the Gita says, until we attend to our own duties first.

If we accept that responsibility, we grow spiritually; if we shun it or ignore it, the lesson will go unlearned, and we will have to face the same kind of responsibility again – often when the burden is greater.

So don't ever compare yourself with others, saying things like “If only I had that person's job.” Jealousy can be terrible anywhere, but it is especially terrible in work. It not only separates people; it actually sets you back in your spiritual growth.

We are where we are, doing what we are doing, because we have something to learn from that particular context. What and who we are – all that we have thought, done, and desired, our upbringing and our education – has brought us to that job and to those co-workers, and that makes it just the situation we need to grow.

With growth will come a new context to work in, new people, new challenges, greater opportunities for service. What is the right occupation now may not be right later on, but as long as it is not at the expense of others, our job or profession can be made part of our contribution to life.

### **Give more attention**

Second, over time, every job becomes routine. For a year or two everything seems new; every task presents an interesting challenge. But after a few years, it's “Oh, another patient, another client, another performance, another report.” New things have a way of becoming old; new hats become old hat; everything becomes passé. That's the way life is: as Ecclesiastes observed thousands of years ago, there is nothing new under the sun.

---

Most of us are good at doing the jobs we like, but a necessary part of the spiritual life is to be able to do the things we do not like. Life has a subtle way of ferreting out what we do not like and sticking it right under our nose, where we cannot ignore or escape it. One of the laws of life is that when you do not dislike anything, only the things you like come your way, whereas if you dislike a job and quit, the next job will be even worse.

The answer is not to change jobs, drop out, or walk away, but to give more attention and do the very best we can. Interest does not lie in the job; it is a function of the attention we give. With complete attention, everything in life becomes fresh.

There is no job without some drudgery, conflicts, unpleasantness, and a certain amount of plain slogging to get the work done. Therefore, the Gita says, don't ask, "Is this interesting? Is this exciting?" If a job is exciting today, it's going to be depressing later. Ask if you are part of work that benefits people. If you are, give it your best.

Doing a routine job well, with concentration, is the greatest challenge I can imagine. You're not just doing a job but learning a skill: the skill of improving concentration, which pays rich dividends in every aspect of life.

## **Work as service to others**

Finally, in attending to the task at hand, the Gita urges us never to get attached to personal pleasure or profit. Whatever the job, do it as a service to others. Don't do it to gain credit or prestige or to win attention.

To give in this spirit, we must develop the capacity not to get caught in any of our actions. When we get caught in our own job, our own interests, we lose our discrimination and forget the real purpose of life.

---

One of the ways we get caught in our actions is by bringing our work home, from our job, our campus, or our factory. We do not have to put it in a briefcase to bring it home; we carefully store it in our minds where we can dwell on it all the time. We get stuck in a particular groove, and that handicaps our performance; eventually we can't do the job well, we can't see that we aren't doing it well, and we can't let go of it. We get so entangled in one particular aspect that we forget all other aspects – forget, for example, that people are waiting, or that bills are piling up.

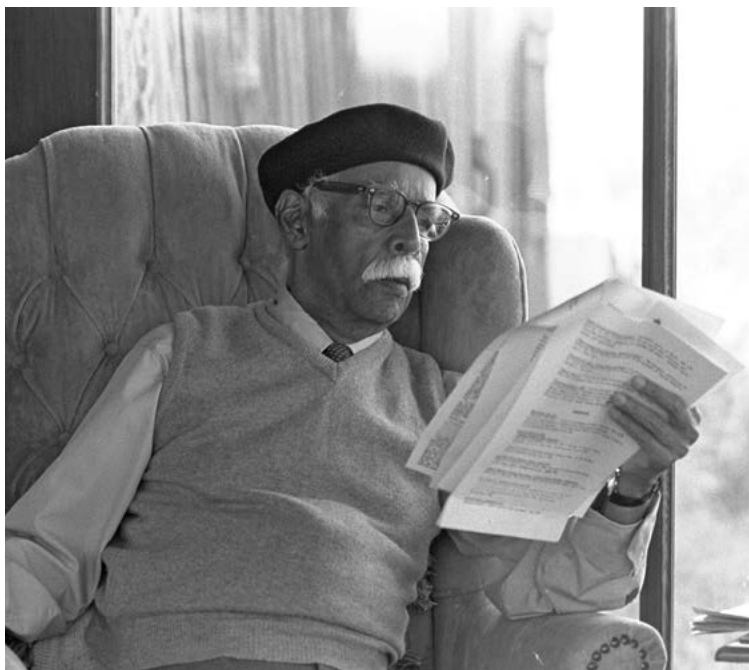
When you leave your office, leave your work there. Another good exercise is to learn to drop what you are doing and shift your attention to something else when the situation demands. This capacity comes after a long time of striving to concentrate on the job at hand.

## **Train the mind to be detached**

Through many, many years of unremitting effort based on the practice of meditation, we can train the mind to be detached from every attempt to cling for security to anything outside. That's what detachment means: you need nothing from anything or anyone outside you; you are complete.

This advice applies also to personal ambition. To most of us today, excellence without personal ambition seems a contradiction. From the Gita's perspective, however, you can't have one and keep the other.

The key word here is "personal." I am terribly ambitious where the world is concerned, but I would suggest that none of us try to be ambitious where our own small self is concerned. If we can forget ourselves and give full attention to the job at hand, we cannot help but excel.



Easwaran in his office, Ramagiri Ashram, 1980s.

## Work always in harmony

How we work, therefore, is as important as what we do. Your job may be nothing more glamorous than a janitor in a hospital, but if you are following right occupation and doing your best to put the welfare of those around you first, you will be contributing to other people's lives, even though you may not see it happening. These are spiritual laws.

In the language of the Gita, work done in this spirit is an offering to the Lord who pervades the universe, who is in my heart and yours. If we grasp this great truth – that the Lord lives in each and every one of us, regardless of who we are – we



---

will never be discourteous to others, we will never be unkind, we will never try to avoid people, we will always be glad to work in harmony with those around us. Then it becomes impossible to quarrel, to be angry, to hurt others, to move away.

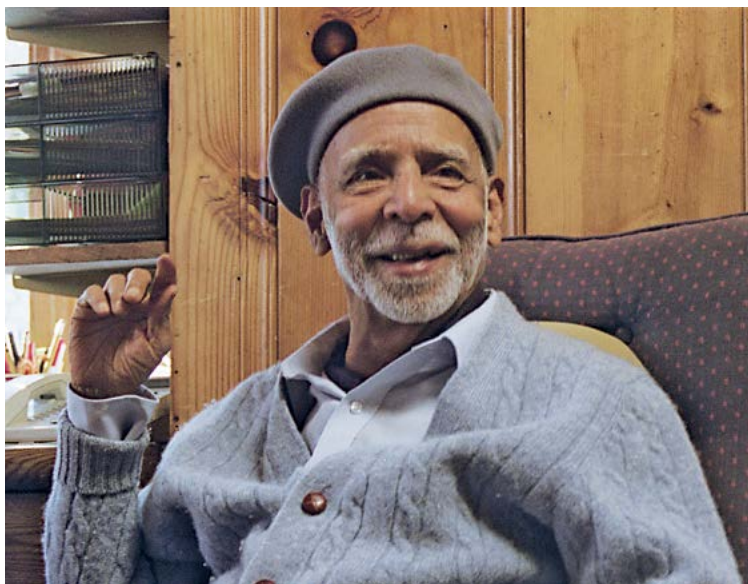
This doesn't mean weakening your convictions or diluting your principles. Disagreeing without being disagreeable is one of the arts of civilized living. This is what Gandhi means by nonviolence, and he calls it the most active force in the world. You don't retaliate, you don't retire; you just stand where you are, firmly rooted – rooted in wisdom, rooted in love, unshakably kind in the face of criticism, opposition, calumny, or slander.

I feel very deeply, but I never use an unkind word. I have very strong convictions, but I never express them in language that would be harmful. I think it is Gandhi who pointed out that those who get angry when opposed or contradicted have no faith in themselves. When you have faith in your convictions, you won't get angry. I can listen to opposition with sympathy, and yet I will stand by my own convictions whatever the opposition is.

## **Our real job is to be kind**

This is the most demanding way of life that can be presented to any human being – and in terms of giving our best to the job at hand, the Gita would maintain that everyone's real job is to be kind. Nothing we do could have a more beneficial influence on those around us than remaining calm and considerate in the midst of ups and downs.

When people are impolite to you, that's the time to be exceptionally polite. When people are discourteous to you, that's the time to be more courteous. By your continuing courtesy and



Easwaran in the BMCM office, 1990s.

kindness, you are educating that person.

Character is a continuing process; personality is being formed continuously. Therefore, it can be changed. It can be improved. It can be ennobled. And almost all of life, at home, at work, or even at play, provides opportunities for us not only to improve our own character, but – by our example – to encourage others to improve too.

That is why I say, be patient with your partner, your co-workers, and your friends. It is love that is more important – the harmony of the home, the harmony of the workplace, the harmony of your life.

This gives us a challenging career that lasts a lifetime, with opportunities for spiritual growth every single day. 🌸

---

## **United in Heart**

*The Rig Veda*

May we be united in heart.

May we be united in speech.

May we be united in mind.

May we perform our duties

As did the wise of old.

May we be united in our prayer.

May we be united in our goal.

May we be united in our resolve.

May we be united in our understanding.

May we be united in our offering.

May we be united in our feelings.

May we be united in our hearts.

May we be united in our thoughts.

May there be perfect unity amongst us.

---

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS with Easwaran

### Could you explain what is meant by “Right Occupation”?

The very first criterion for a good job is that it not be at the expense of others. The Buddha considered this so important that he made Right Occupation part of his Eightfold Noble Path. It reminds me of the physician’s oath: “First, do no harm.”

I think that is a very good oath for all of us to swear by. If we want to improve the quality of our lives, the very first step is to be sure that our livelihood is not gained at the expense of life. Any job that brings injury or suffering to any other creature should be shunned as unworthy of a human being. Even if we only lend support to activities that bring harm to other people or other creatures, we are violating the most basic law of life.

When we begin to look at life this way, we may well find that we have got ourselves involved unwittingly in work that the Buddha would call “wrong occupation.” This can be a distressing discovery with very awkward consequences. Yet once we

---

realize this, it is incumbent on each of us to withdraw from such activities, even if that entails a cut in pay or a turbulent period of looking for work where we can use our skills in more beneficial ways. Once we have disentangled ourselves from work that takes from life, we can begin to give.

If followed sincerely, this one simple principle – “first, do no harm” – could transform our society. Imagine what would happen if all the talent, time, and resources that now go into military research, violent or sensate entertainment, and the production and marketing of products that are harmful to health were diverted to solving the problems of unemployment, homelessness, abuse, and violence that plague this country, the richest on the earth.

## What if I need the money from my job to support my family, but that job is not fully in line with my spiritual values?

Even if our paying job does not make much of a contribution, there are many opportunities for selfless service where we can offer our time, energy, skills, and enthusiasm to a cause bigger than ourselves.

I know earnest meditators who will give their best at work for eight hours, then come home and give their time and skills and energy to their family, or their neighbors, or their meditation center, or the local hospital, or any of a hundred and one other worthy causes. When you do, you will be able to say, “My real work starts when business hours are over.”

---

## What advice can you give to someone who's about to retire?

Retirement is a great opportunity, and not for twenty-four hours of relaxation a day either. Often I have heard an executive or a teacher confess, "I've just retired – now what do I do with my time?" All that they have been told is, "Fill it up" – with golf, or trips around the world, or courses in wine making and conversational Chinese.

It is a tragic situation, because often these are people with enthusiasm and vitality and a rich background of skills and experience, all of which is crying out to be used. It is as if they have done their apprenticeship and now, when they have the time and expertise to make a real contribution to life, they are told to close the door and think only of themselves.

But those with some degree of spiritual wisdom do not retire from life when they retire from their job. They say, "Now is my chance! I don't have to go to just one office any more; I can go wherever I'm needed. I don't have to punch a time clock; I am free to give of my time and experience all day long."

It is only after we have dehypnotized ourselves from the enticements of money and the blandishments of pleasure that we find how good it is to work when there is no paycheck coming. It is so soothing to work hard for the welfare of those around us without a mercenary motive that we forget all our tensions and frustrations. Some of us may contribute our time; for others it may be energy or skills. For still others it may be material possessions or expert advice. But it is incumbent upon everyone to devote part of his or her resources to the welfare of others without any thought of personal profit or prestige.



BMCM staff take a walk at Ramagiri Ashram.

In other words, to live in wisdom is to live to the fullest, right into the twilight of life. If you look at someone who has attained this stature, you will find that they are always growing – giving more, doing more, every day that they are alive. The longer they live, the more they can give; and the more they give, the more meaningful their life becomes and the richer their personality. 🌸

---

## Community Story

# My meditation practice and my career

If someone were to ask me what Easwaran's teachings have meant in my life I would hardly know where to start. The practice of meditation and the allied disciplines have had such a deep impact on me, on nearly every aspect of my life, that reflecting on it brings a deep sense of thankfulness to my heart. Although most of the effects of my spiritual practice are subtle, some have become quite apparent, even life changing. One of the most obvious effects my practice has had is on the course of my career.

I used to work as a health care professional in a fast-paced environment, being trained as a cardiologist in a highly specialized medical center. Throughout my medical training I practiced passage meditation. For a long time I felt it helped me to cope with the demands that were being made, as well as staying slowed down in a tremendously demanding work environment.

Besides daily meditation I would spend time visiting Ramagiri Ashram, attend meditation retreats, and volunteer at the BMCM. I was also introduced to the BMCM Setu program. *Setu* means bridge, and this is a special program for people in what Easwaran calls "the second half of life," after retirement.

## Reconsidering my choices

While deepening my practice I noticed that the fast-paced life of a cardiologist started to disagree with me. I felt a deep desire



---

to spend more time with my patients, truly connect with them, learn about their lives, priorities and worries, and to help make a patient-oriented and caring plan for treatment. In a way the practice of meditation had slowly transformed me and the way I worked. Letting go of an old dream was hard. A year before finishing my residencies in cardiology I decided to take time off to reconsider my choices. I had to learn to follow my own heart.

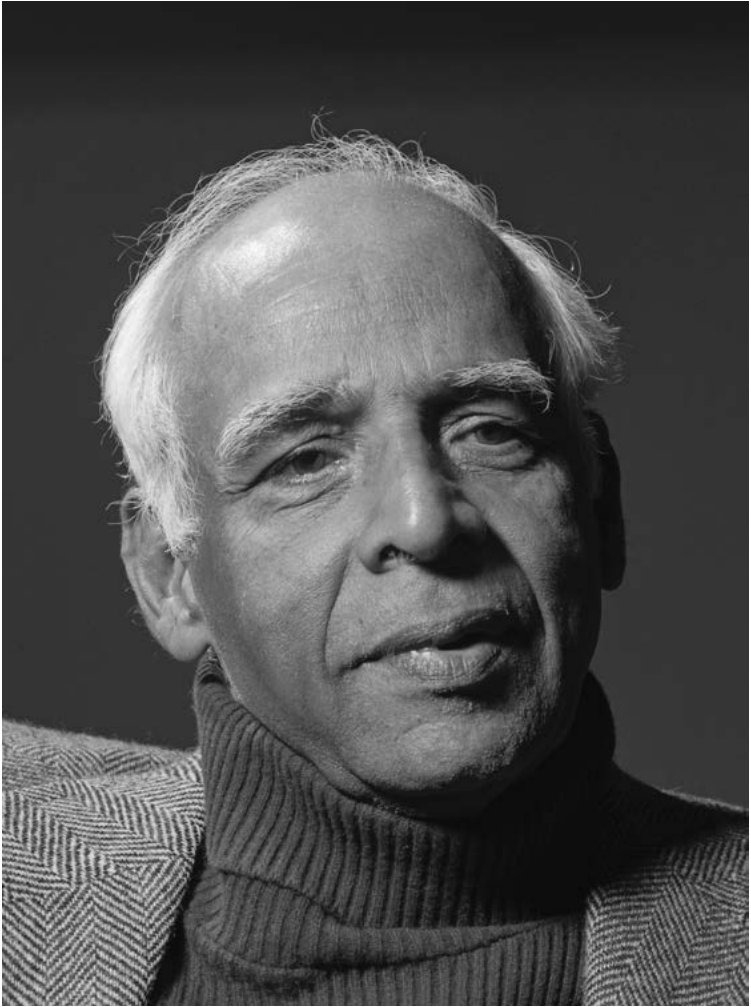
Through the Setu program I learned about the importance of practicing spiritual disciplines in the second half of life. Never before had I received such an elevated vision of life, aging, and the promise of practicing spiritual disciplines during senior years. It is when people age or fall ill, when the body or memory may start to fail, that it becomes even more important to realize that we are not our body and not our mind. It is especially during this part of life, Easwaran teaches us, that spiritual practice holds great promise.

### **All doors opened**

Turning within for wisdom through my spiritual practice, I searched for answers on how to proceed in my career. Soon I learned about a residency program for Geriatric Medicine in my area, which taught a holistic and patient-oriented approach for health and vitality in senior years. Before I knew it, all doors had opened to continue training in the field of elderly-care.

Now, several years later, I feel very fortunate to be working as a geriatrician in a community hospital. Besides medical advice, I now have time, compassion, and a quiet sense of a higher vision to share with my patients.

— A friend of the BMCM



Easwaran, early 1980s.

---

# The Secret of Selfless Action

Eknath Easwaran

Recently a friend asked me a good question: “How can work help to slow down the mind?” On the one hand, Sri Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad Gita that the very purpose of work is to undo karma and still the mind. But on the other hand, as everyone with some self-knowledge knows, the usual effect of work is to get us speeded up and personally entangled in how the work turns out.

The key is simple to understand but difficult to practice: Sri Krishna is talking about *selfless* work. In this sense, the purpose of work is to learn to work hard without any ego involvement at all. Stilling the mind is simply another way of expressing this, for nothing stirs up the mind except the ego.

“Stilling the mind” is a very abstract concept, and “renouncing the ego” is worse. It may be impossible to understand these things until a person has some way of practicing them. That is one function of work in sadhana: to bring abstract ideals down to earth.

Many of the disciplines in my eight-point program are ways to still the mind through work. When you are working with one-pointed attention, for example, that in itself helps to slow the mind. When you do not gauge what you do by what you like or dislike, you are turning your back on the ego, which will make it easier to steady your mind.

When people tell me they would like a job that is more interesting or more intellectually challenging, they sometimes mean only that they want more personal recognition, perhaps

---

even a little more power: not much, you know; just one step higher on the ladder, two or three more employees to supervise, a position a little closer to the boss's ear.

These are very human foibles, but indulging them is the opposite of work's real purpose. Instead of weakening the ego, this strengthens it. Whatever you are doing, don't think in terms of prestige or personal power or profit, all of which can be terribly insidious. Working only for ourselves tightens the ties of our conditioning, but learning to work without selfish attachment gradually elevates our consciousness and purifies it of selfish motives.

### **The best work is prompted by love**

For almost half a century I have had people tell me, "You don't know human nature. Without a personal motive, human beings will never give their best."

That debases human nature. Everywhere, the best work is prompted not by the profit motive but by love. We have only to consider the lives of people like Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa to see that they offer us a vision of human nature vastly higher than what the world expects. They show us our real human stature, which reaches beyond biological conditioning to a level that approaches the divine. This is our glory as human beings.

In fact, the world's mystics would say, learning to live for others is the very purpose of our existence. Life is a trust, and each of us is a trustee whose job is to use the assets entrusted to us for the greatest benefit to all. We are sent into life for one task: to enrich the lives of others, and anybody who takes from life without giving, the Bhagavad Gita says baldly, is a thief: stolen time, stolen energy, stolen education, stolen talent.

---

This goes against conventional thinking, but it is an orientation that can be learned. We can gradually teach ourselves to think first of what contributes to the welfare of all – by regularly giving part of our time, energy, and resources for supporting selfless causes without any thought of remuneration, reward, or recognition. There are so many opportunities: neighbors, schools, clinics, and shelters for the hungry and homeless are just a few.

I think children should also be trained from their early days to give some of their time and talents to selfless work.

### **Give without thought of return**

Wherever work is done for a higher good, there will always be good, thoughtful, selfless people to support it. This is true in every country on the face of the earth.

But we ourselves set the example. Selfless service attracts selfless help. If I may illustrate from my small example, I work three hundred and sixty-five days of the year all the day through. I never take a vacation because I am always on vacation. That was my grandmother's example, which I caught from Gandhi too – and it is highly infectious. Many of the young people meditating with me when we were building our ashram worked seven days a week: five days at a paying job or at the university and then two days more for the Blue Mountain Center. Even during the evening, they often found time to make some contribution.

That example is standing refutation of the claim that people will not give their best without self-interest. Selfless service brings out what is best in all of us. Below all the conditioned strata of the desire for profit and pleasure flows a deep river of love, a deep desire to give without thought of return.

---

## Balance the books

This kind of hard, conscientious, selfless work is a valuable aid to meditation.

On the one hand, the discipline it requires helps in mastering the mind. On the other hand, it helps to work out the debt to life we have accumulated by living for ourselves.

This debt is not a figure of speech. If, as all the world's religions teach, the purpose of life is to give, it follows that when we're not giving, we're borrowing – running up bills, which have to be paid sooner or later. As I said earlier, the Gita actually calls this theft. I use more temperate language, but the meaning is the same.

Every one of us has a lot of red ink in our life's ledger, and to make progress on the spiritual path, it's necessary to start balancing the books. In other words, all of us have committed mistakes – including myself – and one of the ways of counteracting these mistakes is by giving more and more time to selfless service.

Spiritual awareness cannot come to us in any great measure until we have wiped out our backlog of these debts. That is why the Buddha, in very matter-of-fact language, urges us to keep on doing good if for no other reason than to get our accounts clear.

## The secret of selfless action

But it's not enough just to give generously. We also have to work selflessly, trying to give without a trace of egoism or personal motives. We have to work together harmoniously without trying to see who is going to be the leader or get the attention or to bend others to our will and ways.

To imagine that we are going to learn the secret of selfless



Easwaran with Christine in the BMCM office, 1990s.

action in a few months, or even years, is being a little optimistic. Even sincere philanthropists, who do a lot of good for the world, are sometimes motivated by personal drives.

I, for one, do not think it possible for anyone to become completely selfless in action without the practice of meditation. It is rather easy to think that we are living for others and contributing to their welfare, but very often we may not even know what the needs of others are.

In order to become aware of the needs of those around us, to become sensitive to the difficulties they face, we must minimize our obsession with ourselves. This requires the discipline of meditation, which enables us gradually to reduce self-will and preoccupation with our private needs.

We all begin the spiritual life with action that is partly egoistic, partly egoless, and none of us need be discouraged

---

when we find in the early days that there is some motive of enlightened self-interest driving us on to action. Without this motive in the beginning, action may be difficult. It is good to accept this from the first. It takes quite a while for most of us to become fully aware that our welfare is included in the welfare of all and to realize that when we are working for everybody, we are also ensuring our own wellbeing.

What matters is the effort – the mental state behind our action. I, too, started my teaching work with some private motives. Although I was devoted to my students, there was a measure of personal motivation also.

But I went on giving my very best to my meditation and my students, and gradually, through a lot of effort, I found that my personal motives were dissolving in the overwhelming desire to be of service.

## **Spiritual dynamics**

I can try to explain the dynamics of this in two ways. The more selfless work you do without thought of profit or pleasure, without even a thank you, the smaller the ego becomes. The more profit-seeking, pleasure-oriented work you do, the bigger the ego becomes. So selfless work itself is an attempt to reduce the size of our ego – which is, practically speaking, the only barrier between us and the unity of life, between us and the Lord within.

Second, when you work like this, instead of continuing to overdraw your account with self-centered activity, you have a certain positive balance at the end of the day, which you can deposit in your security bank inside. Every day you save, say, two units, and at the end of the year you get a very welcome statement from the internal auditor: not only is your





Easwaran with Christine, 1990s.

debt no longer compounding, you have managed to reduce it dramatically.

In practical terms, this means that regrets begin to fall away. Instead of dwelling upon the debit side, you will be dwelling on the credit side. Eventually the great day will come when the account is balanced completely. After that, whatever you do goes as a bonus to those around you.

### **Work without worry**

Karma yoga, the way of selfless action, is praised throughout the Gita. But you can see why a true karma yogi is so rare. The best example I can point to in our own times who embodies this path is Mahatma Gandhi, and he is quite candid about how difficult he found it to work tirelessly for others without getting attached to things turning out his way.



Volunteering in the garden at Ramagiri Ashram.

The key to this is given in some of the most famous verses in the Gita:

You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. For yoga is perfect evenness of mind. (2:47–48)

This sounds prescriptive, but Sri Krishna is just pointing out something we all know but can't easily accept: we have really no control over the results of what we do. Even with something that seems completely within our domain, a million things can go wrong; a million events can change the outcome in an instant. We can't control the universe; we are doing well if we manage to control ourselves.

---

## Do your best; then leave the results to God

Therefore, Sri Krishna says, it is within our power to act wisely, but wise not to be anxious about getting what we want. Gandhi summarized this in a memorable aphorism: “Do your best; then leave the results to God.”

Krishna goes on to explain the value of this kind of detachment:

Those who are motivated only by desire for the fruits of action are miserable, for they are constantly anxious about the results of what they do. When consciousness is unified, however, all vain anxiety is left behind. There is no cause for worry, whether things go well or ill. Therefore, devote yourself to the disciplines of yoga, for yoga is skill in action. (2:49–50)

In practical terms, he is reminding us that worry, vacillation, and other divisions in consciousness only weaken our resolve and disturb our focus.

When Mahatma Gandhi had to make a decision, he would put his attention on the problem completely, work out the pros and cons, and listen to trusted advice before deciding what to do. Then, once he had made his decision, he didn't pay the slightest attention to praise or blame or even threats. It's not that he ignored the outcome; when he decided he had miscalculated, he could reverse himself spectacularly. But he was always in the driver's seat, not pushed and pulled about by what other people thought.

The result of this is just marvelous: you don't lose your nerve when things go wrong. The main reason why we get afraid of obstacles and anxious about problems, the Gita says, is that we become entangled in getting the results we want.



Christine Easwaran with BCMM staff and volunteers.

The secret of selfless action lies in using right means to achieve a right end, and then not getting anxious over the outcome. When we have learned to drop attachment to getting what we want while working hard and selflessly for a great cause, we can work without anxiety, with confidence and peace of mind. Reverses will come, but they will only drive us deeper into our consciousness.

### **In the midst of people**

Without personal relationships, we cannot learn to work selflessly. That's a very important point. If you retreat to the forest, you cannot work out your debts with bears and trees. You have to be in the midst of people, rubbing off the angles and corners of your personality in the give and take of every day.

In other words, as far as spiritual living is concerned, the purpose of selfless service is not only to benefit others; it is also to remove the obstacles to love in our own consciousness. And there is no way to do this except in our relationships



At a recent retreat.

at work and at home: by being patient, being kind, working in harmony, never failing to respect others, never shirking responsibilities, never insisting on our own way.

I have tried to follow this prescription for decades, and as a result I don't feel any tension or fatigue because I don't compete with anybody. I try to complete everybody; I try to help everybody around me to complete each other.

In this way none of us is unemployed. All of us are born to be servants of God. We are all born on earth to make life a little better than we found it. And until we understand this and begin to carry out our job, a feeling of frustration will always haunt us.

In whatever capacity – teacher, parent, student, doctor, computer programmer, or retired person – we become fulfilled when we use our talent, our training, our time and energy, for the benefit of all, without questioning what we'll get in return. 🌸

---

# The Coconut Tree

Eknath Easwaran

When I took up the practice of meditation, I was fortunate in having already developed a certain one-pointedness in my desires. Most of my energy and attention went into my teaching and literary activities. But as my meditation deepened, I gradually developed the desire to turn every aspect of my life into an instrument of service. I began to remember something my granny had often told me: “In your life, try to be like the coconut tree.”

Indeed, the coconut tree is a perfect symbol for the aspirations of a trustee. Every part of the tree is useful and beneficial. Coconut palms grow tall all over my native state of Kerala, and in the years of my childhood they provided us with everything from shelter to food: the branches were used for building roofs, the trunk for pillars, the roots for medicines, the water inside for drinking, the oil for cooking, the fruit for eating, the shell to make ladles and bowls, and the fiber for rope.

## Life as a trust

So, when I began to look upon my own life as a trust, I found that my passion for literature and teaching could become a very useful tool for serving life – as long as I did not use it for my own personal advancement but for sharing spiritual understanding with others. Curiously, it was when I stopped looking for a personal reward in teaching that I enjoyed it most, and taught better as well.

Everyone has some special passion or talent – often several – which can be enhanced and transformed through the

---

practice of meditation. Scientists, gardeners, journalists, carpenters, teachers, cooks, mothers, fathers: we can all learn to harness the desires that have led us to our specialties, and turn those talents into a source of healing for those around us.

### A joyous climb

Meditation gradually gives us the ability to harness the selfish urges and impulses hiding in the subterranean depths of our hearts. If you feel greedy, you can learn to be greedy not just for yourself but for everyone, wanting all to be happy. If you feel the lust to possess or control another person, you can turn that lust into the desire to understand, help, and support those around you – a kind of lust for their needs instead of what you imagine to be your own. By training your mind to be detached from self-interest, you can turn sorrow and self-pity into a protective umbrella of compassion for all of life. And you can use the tremendous power locked up in anger to oppose corruption and injustice – not by destroying others, but by winning them over in love.

It is this transformation of desire that Gandhi is referring to when he speaks of self-sacrifice, and the life it leads to is just the opposite of dreary mortification. A trustee's life is a joyous, invigorating climb up the staircase of love, each step bringing new friendships and unearthing new talents, improving life not only for himself or herself, but for everyone around. 🌸

---

## Community Story

# Changes in my work life: subtle, yet profound

Like many, I began meditating to manage stress and anxiety. My wife and I were juggling busy careers while parenting three young children. Despite my best intentions, my work troubles tended to follow me home, often leaving me distracted and irritable. Thankfully, passage meditation quickly eased my work-related stress, making me more productive at work and more present at home.



Over the years, as I continued to meditate and began weaving the allied disciplines into daily life, I experienced other subtle, yet profound, changes in my work life. I still worked hard but became less concerned about personal advancement and prestige. I also learned that being kind, even to difficult co-workers, often yielded unexpected benefits.

### A warm working relationship

In one situation, for example, an ambitious co-worker took credit that I felt I had deserved. Despite another co-worker's urging to "stand up for yourself," I said nothing. Instead, I put the first co-worker's name on the top of a page and wrote my mantram for him. After several minutes, my irritation subsided. I realized that



---

this perceived slight was probably unintentional and, in any case, had no impact on my standing in the company. More importantly, I sensed that challenging him over this trivial issue would poison our relationship. I let it go. Since then, we have developed a warm working relationship and my co-worker has repeatedly helped me solve problems that I never could have tackled on my own.

### **A new context for growth**

Recently, I have faced bigger challenges in the workplace — a new context for growth, as Easwaran would say. Due to a corporate reorganization, I now work frequently with an intimidating, results-oriented executive, just the type of person I had, for the most part, successfully avoided. Initially, I found myself stammering in meetings and even losing sleep.

Fortunately, I knew what to do. I put my now familiar tools to work: meditating on passages related to overcoming fear, increasing use of the mantram and spiritual reading, attending a retreat, and even asking Easwaran for help.

These practices enabled me to channel my energy from useless worrying to now anticipating and addressing the executive's likely concerns. I began interacting with him a little more calmly and confidently, even in tense circumstances.

In a recent one-on-one meeting, I had to deliver unwelcome news. The executive became visibly agitated, seemingly looking for someone to blame. I quietly waited for his anger to recede and then redirected the discussion on to how to make the best

---

of the situation. Miraculously, my anxiety had dissipated, having given way to compassion for my co-worker's agitation.

### Unlocking new resources

In that moment, I also had the glimmering awareness that my repetition of passages about overcoming fear had not just been about making myself feel better, but also about unlocking additional resources to serve those around me, and that without the challenges that work sometimes presents, this personal growth would be impossible.

— A member of the BMCM Affiliate Program



Our retreat house garden.

---

## Evening Prayer for the Sabbath

### *Jewish Liturgy*

In this moment of silent communion with Thee,  
O Lord, a still small voice speaks in the depth of  
my spirit.

It speaks to me of the things I must do to attain holy  
kinship with Thee and to grow in the likeness of Thee.

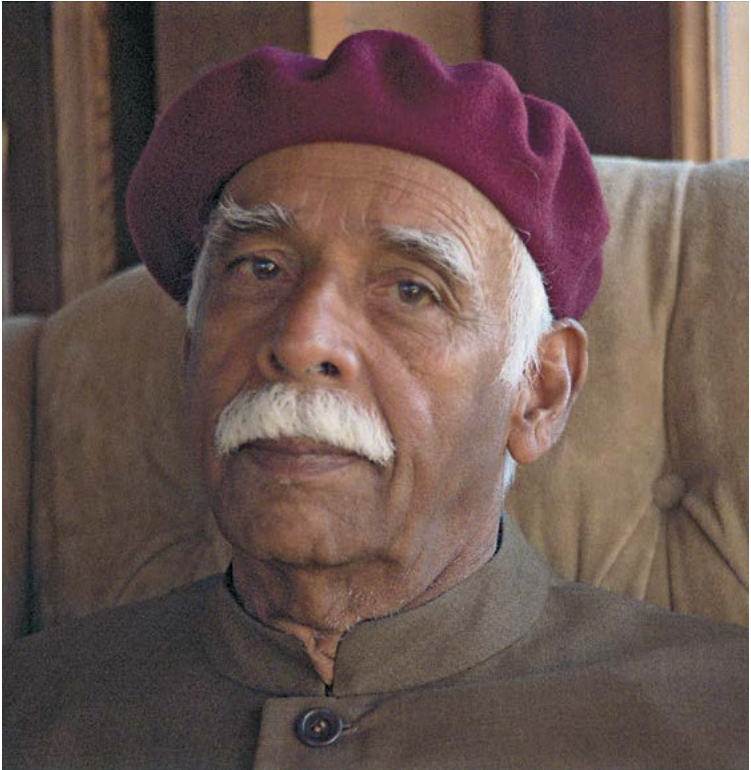
I must do my allotted task with unflagging faithfulness  
even though the eye of no taskmaster is on me.

I must be gentle in the face of ingratitude or when  
slander distorts my noblest motives.

I must come to the end of each day with a feeling  
that I have used its gifts gratefully and faced its  
trials bravely.

O Lord, help me to be ever more like Thee, holy for  
Thou art holy, loving for Thou art love.

Speak to me, then, Lord, as I seek Thee again and  
again in the stillness of meditation, until Thy bidding  
shall at last become for me a hallowed discipline, a  
familiar way of life.



Easwaran, 1980s.

---

# A Lasting Contribution

Eknath Easwaran

In the long view, each of us has only one essential obligation: to realize the unity of life. Until we do this, whatever else we may accomplish, we haven't done what we came here to do.

This is what attaining wisdom means, and rightly understood, it can free us from all kinds of worries. Whatever our day job is – and whatever our boss might think! – it consists essentially not in making things or providing services, but in training the mind and reducing self-will: the purification of consciousness.

I know of no other way to transform consciousness than the sustained, systematic practice of meditation and its ancillary disciplines. Until we make this commitment, the Gita says, the decisions of life “are many branched and endless”; but once we do make this commitment, everything begins to fall into place. When we practice meditation regularly and follow the allied disciplines to the very best of our ability, we have only to do our best; the opportunities we need for spiritual growth cannot help but come when the time is right.

Whatever our occupation, we can make our whole life a work of art, so that everybody who comes in contact with us benefits from our patience, our understanding, our love and wisdom. In this way, everyone who is practicing meditation is making a lasting contribution to the rest of life.



---

# Meditation Retreats

In these troubled times, many of us yearn to create a bright and hopeful future for our children and our children's children. But is it possible? Eknath Easwaran assures us, Yes. When we go deep into meditation we tap into the source of love and wisdom within us. We become over time a positive force in the world.

Our immersive BMCM retreats in Tomales, California, help you absorb Easwaran's wise teachings, learn and practice the meditation method that he developed, and experience the transformative lifestyle that unfolds from the practice of passage meditation.

## **Introductory Weekend Retreats:**

June 7-9, October 4-6

## **Young Adult Weekend Retreats: (20s & 30s)**

November 1-3

## **Returnee Weekend Retreats:**

August 16-18, November 8-10

## **Weeklong Retreats:**

April 6-12, May 4-10, July 6-12 (Affiliates & Cohorts),  
August 3-9, October 12-18

## **Family Weekend:**

July 27-28

## **Senior Retreats:**

May 31-June 4, September 13-17

---

# Online Programs

If you'd like to connect from home, join us for an online program. We strive to live out Easwaran's teachings with a slowed-down and one-pointed atmosphere.

## Introductory Webinar:

May 18

## Returnee Online Workshop:

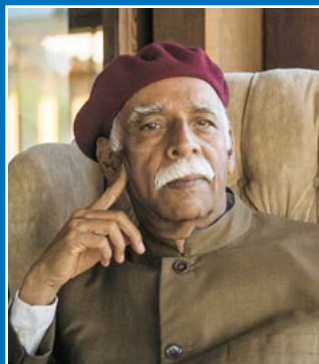
November 16

## Learn Passage Meditation – Online Course: (six weeks)

October 25–December 6

We offer a sliding scale and scholarships for all our programs. Some online programs are free of charge.  
[www.bmcm.org/programs](http://www.bmcm.org/programs) • 800.475.2369





To live in wisdom is to live to the fullest, right into the twilight of life. If you look at someone who has attained this stature, you will find that they are always growing — giving more, doing more, every day that they are alive.

The longer they live, the more they can give; and the more they give, the more meaningful their life becomes and the richer their personality.

— *Eknath Easwaran*



**Blue Mountain  
Center of Meditation**

P. O. Box 256  
Tomales, CA 94971  
[www.bmcm.org](http://www.bmcm.org)