

Ekknath Easwaran on Meditation & Spiritual Living

Blue Mountain Journal

SPRING 2022



A Love That Lasts Lessons from Shakespeare and the Gita

In This Issue

The skill of building lasting relationships was a favorite theme of Easwaran's. He often revisited it around St. Valentine's Day, commenting on Shakespeare's sonnet on love and drawing on teachings from the Gita. This issue presents two main articles based on those talks: the first focuses on loyalty and unity, and the second on deepening our love as we face aging, sickness, and death.

Easwaran sets a high bar for us, and his teachings, though deeply inspiring, can be supremely hard in practice. We're very grateful to two readers who have shared the stories of their struggles in the face of considerable challenges. Their spiritual practice and devotion to Easwaran has guided them to impressive heights of love.

Easwaran also recognized that relationships can be complicated. In *The End of Sorrow* he writes: "With selfish people if we yield an inch, they will ask for a yard. In such cases, it is necessary quietly to say no. This is the great art of nonviolent resistance, where you love and respect everyone, but you will not allow anyone to exploit you, because it is bad for that person just as it is bad for you."

With Easwaran's teachings to guide us, we can all do our best to love.

– The BMCM Editorial Team

2022, Volume 33, No. 1

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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.

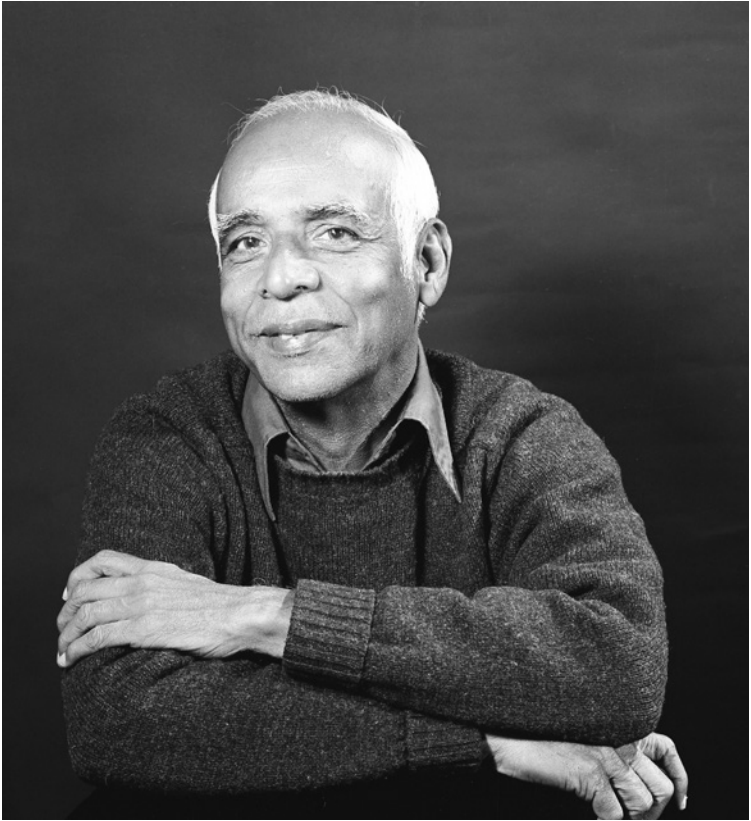
Loving Comes First

“He who knoweth not love, knoweth not God,” says John the Apostle, “for God is love.” The words sound so ethereal that most of us cannot connect them with daily life. What, we ask, do personal relationships have to do with the divine? I would reply, it is by discovering the unity between ourselves and others – all others – that we find our unity with God.

That is why training the mind is the nuts and bolts of religion. We don’t first get to know God and then, by some miracle of grace, come to love our fellow human beings. Loving comes first: learning to love others is how we move closer to the Lord. In this sense, learning to love is practicing religion. Those who can put the welfare of others before their own small personal interests are religious, even if they would deny it.

In one of my favorite sonnets, William Shakespeare calls love “the marriage of true minds.” We are so used to thinking of love as involving bodies that hearing “marriage” together with “minds” can startle us. But this is no mere turn of phrase; it holds a kernel of subtle psychology. In any relationship in which two people can hold their minds true – to each other, to compassion, to a willingness to share in sorrow as well as joy – love cannot help blossoming. And what we need in order to nurture love is spiritual disciplines that we can use to train our minds to be true.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cassian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial letter 'C'.



Easwaran, 1970s

Shakespeare and the Spiritual Life

Eknath Easwaran

When I was at my university in India as professor of English literature, nothing gave me more delight than to introduce my students to the treasure house of Shakespeare. Already at that time I was meditating, trying to lead the spiritual life.

When I came across insights into human nature from the great tragedies of Shakespeare, I would naturally also draw upon the Bhagavad Gita, to show my students how this great playwright will say what the Gita also says in different words. In *King Lear*, for instance, Shakespeare shows what happens when we ask for love from others instead of loving them. I always remember the king's tragic question to his daughters: "How much do you love me? How much do you love me?" Cordelia, who loved him truly, could not adorn her answer with flowery phrases, and her father flew into a rage that turned to hatred. Such acute self-will and self-pity cannot help leading to tragedy, and toward the end of the play we see Lear standing on a desolate moor, abandoned by all but those he has himself abandoned, raising his arms to the stars in despair and crying, "Look upon a man as full of grief as he is of age!"

It was a very dear uncle of mine who introduced me to the plays of Shakespeare in my high school. For us, English was an entirely foreign language and Elizabethan England was not at all within our comprehension, but he was able to give us the background and read a few select scenes from Shakespeare

in our class. Some years ago, just before he passed on, I sent him a program of *Romeo and Juliet* presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in San Francisco. I wrote that when I was watching this great play, I felt he was by my side guiding my appreciation.

When I went to college, the Catholic president of the college was a splendid teacher of English, and particularly of Shakespeare. He carried his scholarship so lightly and could enter into each role so easily that I used to sit in front in the huge auditorium, dazed with admiration. I owe a great deal to him also for my love of Shakespeare.

At the same time, as part of my education, my grandmother persuaded me to learn Sanskrit, and it is because of her insistence that I am as much at home in the world of Indian wisdom as I am in the world of Western literature.

An interest in the mind

Later, when I had to teach my students the plays of Shakespeare, I became interested in them not only from the literary point of view but also in the way he was able to throw light on the vagaries of human nature. It shows that I was already getting interested in the mind.

I tried to understand the mind of Brutus, for instance, in *Julius Caesar*. He is such a complicated figure, and I used to find it a very fascinating task. One night my granny was lying by my chair while I was reading. She asked me, “Why don’t you come to sleep?” so I told her what I was doing. She gave me to understand that no amount of Shakespearian scholarship

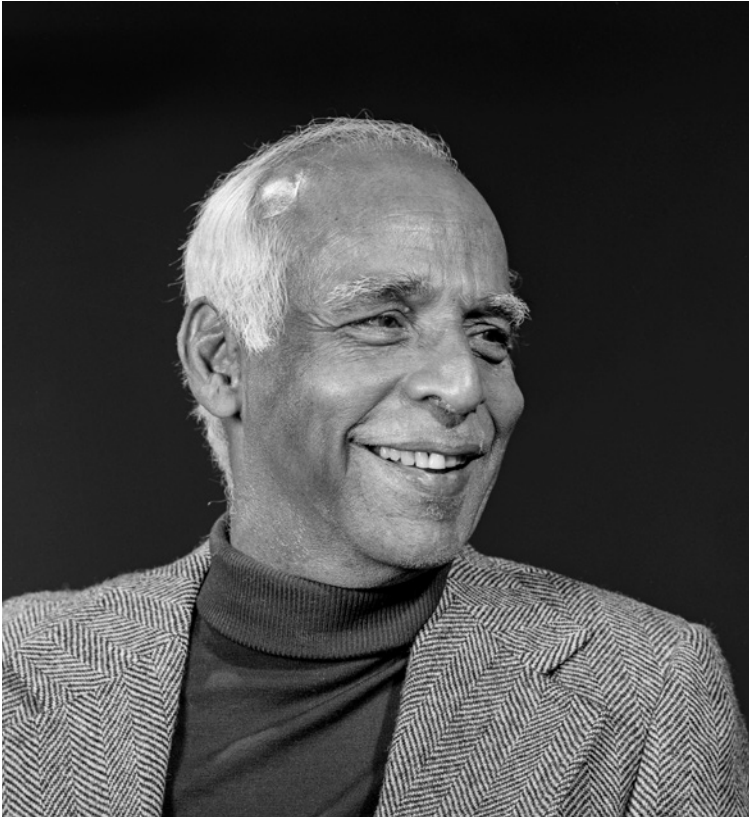
would help me. For that, she said in very simple words, you must go to the Gita, to the Upanishads.

This is in no way to minimize the tremendous insights that Shakespeare can give us into some of the *samskaras*, or conditioned ways of thinking, of human beings. If we want to know what the thirst for personal profit and prestige can do, for instance, we have only to understand the mental state of Macbeth. When our own mistakes from the past come back to haunt us, or we remember the disrupted relationships in which, through our ignorance, we played a part, I think every sensitive person echoes in their own manner these agonized lines from *Macbeth*: “Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, rase out the written troubles of the brain?”

The scriptures give the answers

When I used to read these lines, I would ask myself where we could find an antidote to this poison that corrupts our goodness and banishes our love. It was only after I took to the practice of meditation that I realized that the answer lies in the mantram. In the tenth chapter of the Gita, Sri Krishna says that when the turmoil from the past comes to us, instead of dwelling on these thoughts we should just keep repeating his name, and we'll find that this is the antidote that will cleanse our consciousness. This is the eraser that will “rase out the written troubles of the brain.”

So when Shakespeare asks these urgent human questions about life through the characters in his plays, we can find

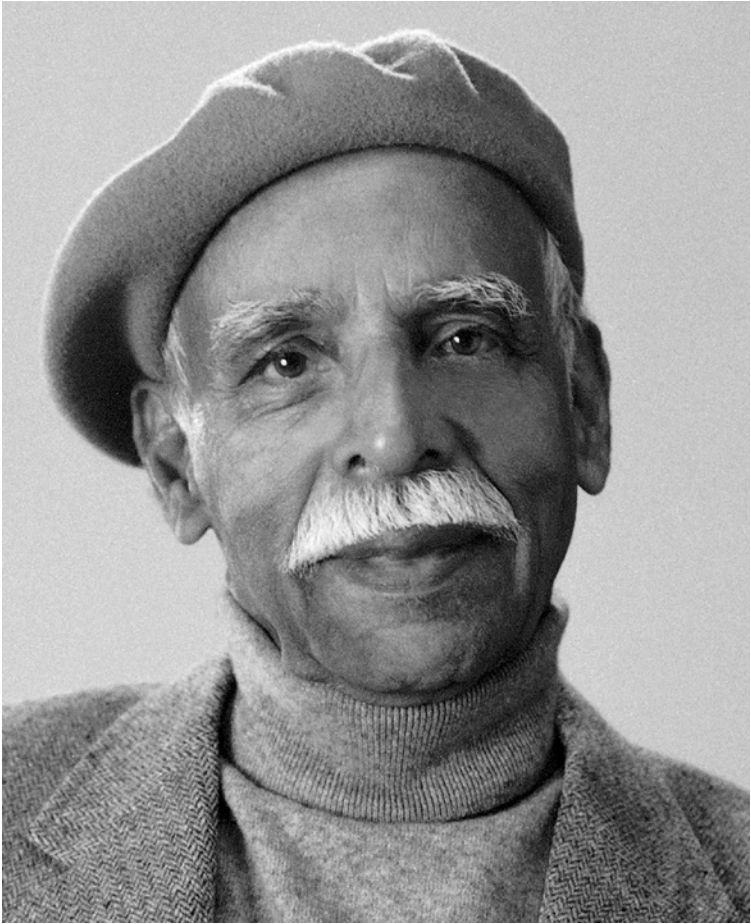


Easwaran, 1970s

practical, direct answers in the Gita, the Upanishads, the Dhammapada, and other great scriptures.

My presentation of Shakespeare is not from the literary point of view at all today. All my passion for literature and the fine arts has been harnessed for one single purpose: to convey the glory of the Lord of Love who is ever enshrined in our hearts. I want to inspire all of us to unite all our desires, so that we can discover the Lord of Love in ourselves and in everyone around us.

I am no longer an English professor, and my whole life is devoted to teaching meditation. But if I could make a sally back into the world of letters, I could write a very different version of *King Lear*. I would have Lear tell his daughters, “I don’t care whether you love me; I will never ask. Love is not a contract. Love me or hate me, my life will be devoted to you always.” The end of the play would be magnificent: Lear standing as majestic as a real king should and saying to the heavens, “Look upon a man as full of joy as he is of love.” 🌸



Easwaran, 1980s

Shakespeare's Sonnet on Love, Part 1

Eknath Easwaran

Shakespeare was a great sonneteer, and he has given us one of the most practical, elevating definitions of love in a very beautiful sonnet. It is a perfect description of what love means according to the Gita and the Buddha. Anybody who bases their loving relationships on these lines will find life deeply fulfilling.

This sonnet also throws light on some of the deep-rooted emotional problems which can prevent us from building lasting, loving relationships. Love has to grow, year by year, almost day by day, and if it isn't growing, there is something lacking in it. Through the practice of meditation and the mantram we can learn to be steadfast and loyal in our love, whatever happens. Here is the first part of the sonnet:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh no! It is an ever-fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

“The marriage of true minds”

In the opening line Shakespeare points out that love is a “marriage of true minds.” These are words which could be taken straight from the scriptures of any major religious tradition, but which contradict all our modern conditioning. Look in any book, any magazine, watch any movie, any television show – almost all of them convey, not very subtly, that love is the marriage of bodies.

The Bhagavad Gita has a different approach. It doesn’t deprecate the body or negate its legitimate needs, but it reminds us that the body is only the house in which we live. In a marriage, the Gita would say, the real relationship is between the residents, not between the residences. If it weren’t so tragic it would be a Gilbert and Sullivan comedy. All these attempts to establish romantic relationships between houses! That is why all the world’s great spiritual teachers will say, Don’t ever try to build your house of happiness on a physical foundation.

The reason is not moral, not even religious – it’s that physical attraction doesn’t last. Sex is only a fleeting sensation, whereas love is a continued state of consciousness. I am not against physical attraction or making the best of our physical appearance, but when we build our relationship on a fleeting sensation, we are building our house on sand.

Back in Berkeley in the sixties, when I was teaching one of the first courses on the theory and practice of meditation to be offered at any Western university, one fellow came to me confidentially and said, “I have decided to get married, but

I have a choice.” I asked, “What is the choice?”

“I can marry for money or I can marry for sex.” He thought he had put me on the horns of a dilemma, and he was enjoying it thoroughly. “I want your advice,” he said.

“Well,” I replied, “if that is your choice, I would advise you to marry for money. It will last longer.”

Another student in those days used to mention his romantic adventures in the journal they all kept for our meditation class. In his comments he would explain, “I’m just getting it out of my system.” I wrote in the margin, “You are just getting it *into* your system.”

Learning to love

To learn to love takes many years, and even in our twenties it doesn’t come easily. But by that time we have at least weathered the most stressful period of emotional and physiological change, and we are ready to start learning. Experience – with luck, not too bitter – has made vividly clear to us certain truths that as teenagers we could only dimly suspect. We have come to realize, probably, that our deepest desire is for permanent, loving relationships. And we may well have watched ourselves trying in vain to build those relationships on a physical, sexual basis.

What draws us again and again into sexual involvement is that for just a moment it releases us from the deep sense of separateness that haunts every human being. In a completely loving and loyal relationship, sex can have a beautiful place, but lasting love is not based on sex.

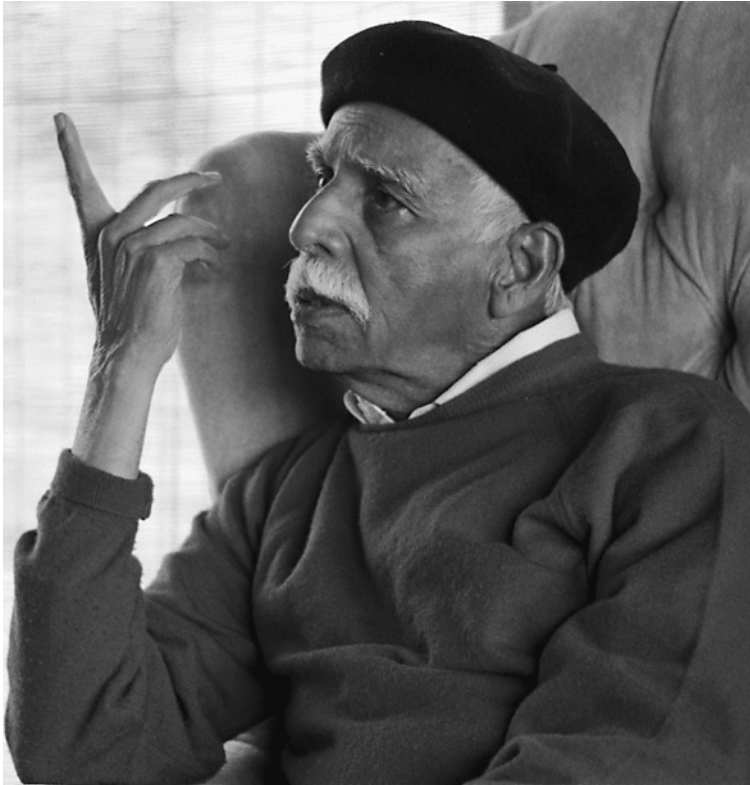
Relationships which are based on physical, sensory, personal considerations are unlikely to be true marriages. They are temporary relationships, which come and go. Deep cultural interests – a shared love of literature, music, or art – all these will make a relationship last a little longer.

But lasting romance has two precious components: increasing respect, and tenderness that grows every day. This is a continuing state of consciousness, and it is what all of us want in a relationship. It calls for great effort and unremitting enthusiasm, and that is why I consider loving a skill, a great skill that can be learned.

“Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds”

Shakespeare is taking into account here the frailties of human nature. This line is the real test of love, and meditation and repetition of the mantram can enable us to pass with flying colors.

When your attention is wandering away to someone who may seem more attractive, or more intelligent, or more prestigious, the practice of meditation as I teach it – as the training of attention – can be enormously helpful. When you are meditating on the Prayer of Francis of Assisi or the second chapter of the Gita, keep bringing your mind back to the passage whenever it wanders away. If you practice this systematically, you will find that when your attention is wandering away from Juliet or when your loyalties are slowly moving away from Romeo, you are able to bring your attention back and keep it trained on the one you love.



Easwaran, 1980s

The Gita tells us: put your permanent relationship first. Don't let yourself be swayed by the fever of the moment. If you feel a strong physical attraction to someone else, repeat the mantram and remember that physical attraction, by being physical, cannot last. The practice of meditation and the mantram lifts the veil and enables you to see where this new relationship would be after a short time.

Kama or prema?

In Sanskrit, physical attraction is called *kama* – selfish desire, in which I ask only what pleasure I will receive. It is a tremendous force, as we can see from the lives of those with strong passions who are hurled in and out of relationships even against their will. But *kama* can be transformed – not negated or repressed, but made a matter of free choice, by gradually changing the focus from *me, me, me* to *you, you, you*. Then *kama* becomes *prema*: pure love, where my attention is not on my own pleasure but on the happiness and welfare of those around me.

Look at our travel ads – “Experience the Bahamas.” How gullible we can be! They show us a couple of swaying palms, some azure waters lapping at white sands, and then they ask innocently, “Wouldn't you like to sit beneath these coconut palms and fall in love?” I come from Kerala, the “land of the coconut palm,” and you can take it from me: never try to pursue your dreams beneath a coconut tree. Coconuts have a way of falling on romantic heads, and even the smallest nut,

if it drops from a height of fifty feet, can put an end to your romance before it starts.

What do swaying palms and azure waters have to do with love? Love doesn't need an exotic setting; it can flourish in the kitchen, in the garden, wherever two people are putting each other first.

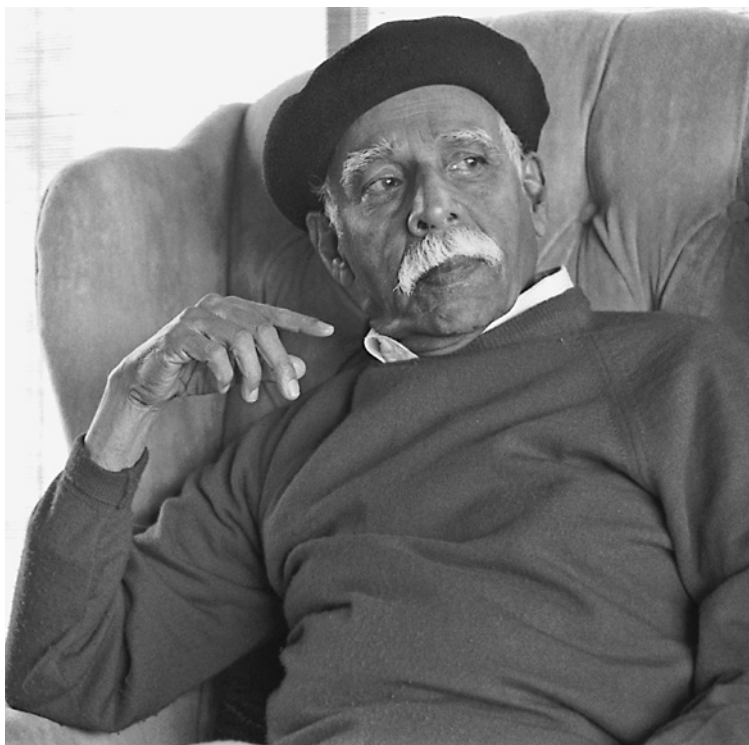
If you want to know what love is, look at a woman who knows how to be patient when her partner is irritated. Instead of fanning his mood, she strengthens him by bearing with him until his mind quiets down. In my book, that woman is a great lover. Or look at the person who comes home and plays with his children even though he's tired and talks with his wife while they do the dishes, instead of flopping down in front of the TV. He is a great lover, even if you never see his name on the Hollywood marquees.

Moving closer

Particularly in the early days of our spiritual life, when our mind and senses are untrained, it is only natural for every human being to have quarrels and difficulties in personal relationships. During such times, as the Gita says and as Shakespeare is echoing here, we should not move away from our partner – we should move closer.

This is how “love alters not when it alteration finds.” In our contemporary culture, love *has* to alter when it alteration finds, or alters even when it does not find alteration.

When I first came to this country, everybody was talking



Easwaran, 1980s

about freedom. The idea was that if you came together freely, you were always free to walk out; this was supposed to be a complete safeguard against unhappy relationships. When my friends would talk this way I used to answer, “Oh, yes, you are free to walk out of such a relationship. There is no obligation; there are no bonds; there are not even any ties. But what happens if you go on doing this is that you never acquire the capacity to love.”

Loyalty and forgiveness

Loyalty is the quintessence of love. When two people tell each other, “As long as you do what I like, I’ll stay with you, but as soon as you start doing things I don’t like, I’m packing my bags” – to me that is not love; that’s indifference. Loving somebody means that even when they upset you, you don’t let yourself be shaken; even when they are harsh to you, you don’t move away; even when they make a mistake that hurts you, you don’t go off and make the same kind of mistake to hurt them.

All of us are so liable to human error that unless we have some capacity to bear with the errors of others, we will not be able to maintain a lasting relationship with anybody, which is the tragic situation that many people find themselves in today.

Forgiveness is important in every relationship, but it is essential in love. When two people love each other deeply, if one makes a mistake, that is the time to stand by the person you love and offer support: not conniving at the mistake but helping that person to overcome it and grow. This is a great art. It cannot be done in judgment or condescension, which means we have to get the ego very much out of the way.

Loving a little more each day

Most of us are not able to draw on a deeper will and a higher wisdom to do all this, so our relationships go wrong. There is no reason to bemoan this. I have made many mistakes in my ignorance, and so has everybody else I know. But from now onwards, by building our lives on meditation, we can learn to stand firm in situations where we used to crumble and be

loving and respectful when we used to get resentful, hostile, or vindictive.

Learning to love is like swimming against the current of a powerful river; most of our conditioning is in the other direction. When the river by my village used to flood with the advent of the monsoon rains, we boys liked to try to swim across without being swept downstream by the current. To tell you the truth, I never succeeded. The only time I came close was the time someone told me there was a crocodile after me. But a few of my cousins were such powerful swimmers that they could fight the current and reach the other side exactly opposite from where they had set out. It is simply a question of developing your muscles: the more you use them, the stronger they get.

Similarly, when you put the other person's welfare first every day, no matter how strong the opposing tide inside, you discover after a while that you can love a little more today than you did yesterday. Tomorrow you will be able to love a little more again.

Free to give, free to love

In lighter moments, I have thought I might try my hand at a sequel to *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead of dying, the two lovers would get married and settle down together – long enough to become the noisiest couple in Verona. Once Juliet thrilled to the touch of Romeo's hand; now the same fingers feel clammy. Her lips seemed as unsullied as a rosebud in the morning dew; now he notices they are often in a pout. She was so innocent;

how is it that she now seems immature? He used to be so witty; how could she have forgotten she detests puns? And their quarrels are all “Why didn’t I stick with Rosaline?” and “I wish I’d never gone to that wretched ball!”

I am not a writer of tragedies. In my sequel, Juliet goes to her nurse and pleads – just as I have heard so many young people plead – “What happened to us? Is he different now? Am I different? Have I lost the capacity to love?” And the nurse tells her tenderly, “Not at all, my dear.” When selfish desire is removed from a relationship, there is no hankering to get anything from the other person. We are free to give, which means we are free to love. Then we can give and support and strengthen without reservation.

Only then can we really see each other clearly. It is infatuation that is blind; love sees. The infatuated mind cannot help caricaturing. It sees only what it wants; then, when the desire passes, it sees only what it does not want. When two people are really in love, they do see each other’s weaknesses, but they support each other in overcoming those weaknesses so that each helps the other to grow.

“Call it not love that changes,” Juliet says. Very wise for a fourteen-year-old. Selfish attachment waxes and wanes; selfless love only increases. When you live like this, the time will come when you find it impossible to think a harsh thought about each other. You may not completely understand each other, you may not always see eye to eye, but each of you knows without a doubt that the other’s loyalty will never waver.

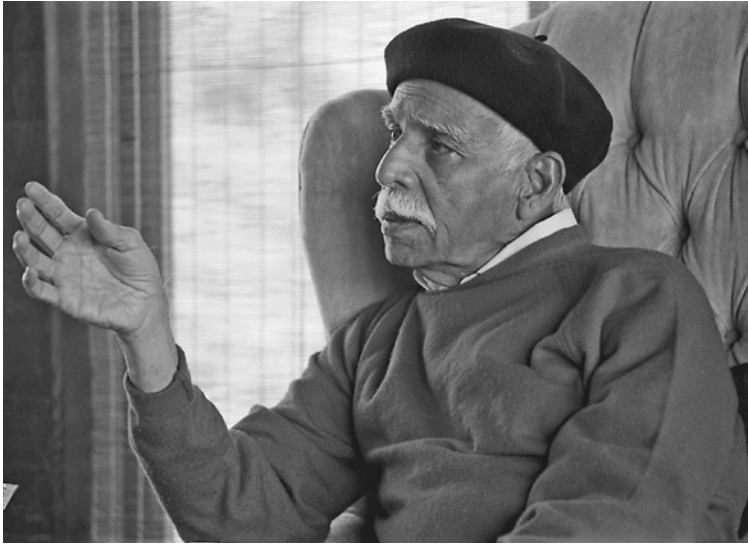
“And bends with the remover to remove”

The remover here is the ego, always trying to put up obstacles on the path of love by inflating our self-will. In most disagreements, it is not ideological differences that divide people. It is self-will, lack of respect, putting ourselves first instead of the other person.

Sometimes all that is required is listening with respect and attention to the other person’s point of view. Instead, most of us carry around a pair of earplugs, and the minute somebody says something we don’t like, we stuff our ears until we can start talking again. Watch yourself the next time you find you are quarreling with someone you love. It won’t look like a melodrama. It will be more like a situation comedy on television: two people trying to reach an understanding by not listening to each other.

One person is saying, “What did you do the other day when I asked you to wash the dishes?” And the other replies, “What about you?” Can you imagine anything more ridiculous? They are not trying to settle their differences; they are trying to make sure that neither of them will forget.

To stop this quarrel, simply listen calmly with complete attention, even if you don’t like what the other person is saying. Try it and see. Often the action will be like that of a play. For a while there is the “rising action”: his temper keeps going higher, her language becomes more heated; everything is heading for a climax. But often enough, the ending is a surprise. The other person begins to quiet down. His voice becomes gentler, her



Easwaran, 1980s

language kinder – all because you have not retaliated or lost your respect.

Whatever happens, you walk away feeling better about yourself. You have stayed kind, and not given in to anger. The taste of freedom that brings is worth any amount of practice.

Shakespeare is not idealizing loving relationships in this sonnet – I am sure he had quite a few problems in his own marriage. But quarrels and conflicts are hidden opportunities for showing that you care for your partner, even if she or he is angry with you. It is possible for each person to learn from the other, to respect each other's views, and at the same time to be loyal to one's own ideals.

“It is an ever-fixed mark, that looks on tempests and is never shaken”

Just as a ship is not tested in a quiet harbor but when the waves are rising high in a storm, similarly, when difficulties come, they test how loving you are and help you to learn to love more. If there were no tests, love would stagnate. When somebody has lost their job or has a health problem, these are not threats to love – they are opportunities to grow richer in love. It’s an entirely different perspective. When your boyfriend is sick or your girlfriend has been involved in an automobile accident, you forget about your own pleasures and stay at their side.

I was born and grew up in Mahatma Gandhi’s India, and as many of you know, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi married a very beautiful girl, Kasturbai, who had a will of her own. They had many clashes in the early days, some of which were really tragic. But Gandhi would say later that it was from Kasturbai that he learned nonviolence – through her patience, forgiveness, generosity, and high ideals.

Kasturbai had been raised in a protected home and had never been exposed to any kind of ill treatment, but when Gandhiji went to prison in South Africa, she considered it an expression of her great love to go to prison with him, and to lead other women to prison as well.

After they had come back to India, although the British government imprisoned Gandhi many times and even sent Mrs. Gandhi and their sons to prison, their romance flourished.

Every time they were thrown into prison Gandhi and Kasturbai would come back more deeply in love. Every time their property was confiscated, they would come back richer.

The pinnacle of love

Our modern idea of romance is in desperate need of such elevation. It's not that I begrudge romantic couples an occasional cruise or a candlelight dinner, but these are all playing games. It is when two people face opposition together courageously, prepared to lay down their lives for each other, that love blazes forth.

I saw Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturbai Gandhi in their seventies, and to me they were so luminously in love that compared to them, Romeo and Juliet were just a school flirtation. This is what we can all aim at.

Two people like this are no longer two; they are one. When things are sunny, you may not notice how their relationship shines. But wait until the storms begin to blow outside, when everything is going wrong: you will see unfailing support between them, unfaltering loyalty, tenderness that never ends. This is the pinnacle of love, and nothing less can ever satisfy us.

"It is the star to every wand'ring bark"

When you stand steadfast in your relationship even in tragedy and turmoil, when you don't get afraid and go your separate ways but instead strengthen your love, you're helping the whole of society. This is how romance is taught, through personal example, and particularly by parents to their children.

Most of the examples we see today are of disrupted relationships, but when two people are putting each other first – in any friendship, any relationship – even your neighbors will benefit. Neighbors can have sharp eyes, and just as you may share tomatoes from your backyard, you can also share the example of your love.

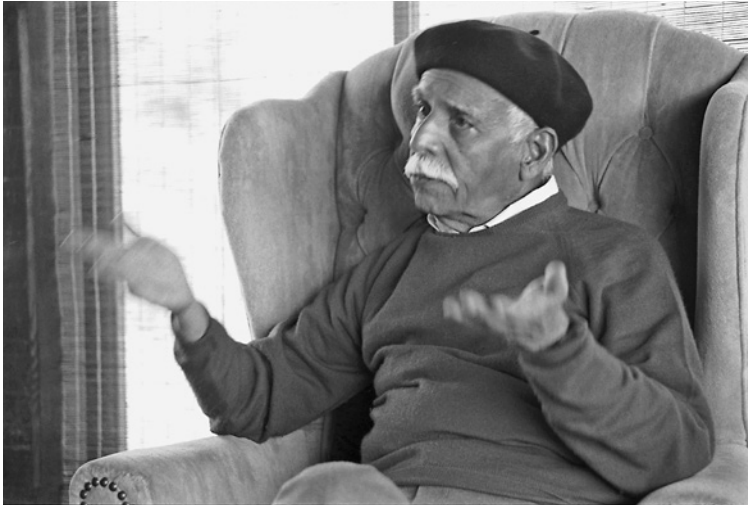
“The star to every wand’ring bark”: This line also reminds me of a story I used to hear from my grandmother. In our immemorial Indian tradition, we have celebrations of love for God not only from adults but also from children. There was a little boy called Dhruva who meditated on God, and the Lord was deeply moved by the child’s devotion. When Dhruva finally shed his body the Lord turned him into the pole star, which bears Dhruva’s name. It’s a great symbol because we know that when sailors used to lose their way at sea, they would look to the pole star to correct their sense of direction.

Similarly, in moments of friction, when our self-will is inflated, we can keep our eyes on the pole star, the Lord within. When we go astray, the practice of meditation and the mantram can remind us of the way to health, happiness, and wisdom.

“Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken”

We all think that we are doing our best to love. But the Gita says you’re not using even one millionth of the immense capacity to love which is in you.

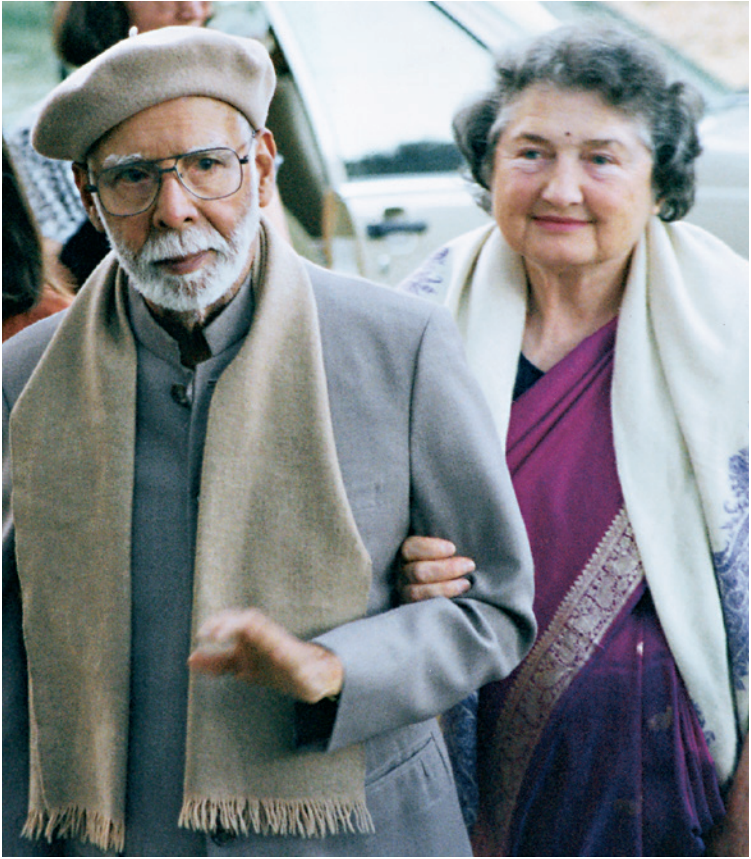
I read a lot these days about the decline in literacy. But when



Easwaran, 1980s

it comes to love, virtually all of us are illiterates. It is not a condemnation. When you were two, did you know how to read? And even when you began to learn, wasn't it mostly things like "See Spot run"? There is no need to be embarrassed about it; that is how all of us began. To read a writer like Shakespeare with real understanding takes most of us twenty years – and even then we may not be able to follow the simple words of Saint John of the Cross when he soars into realms where we have never been.

It is the same with love. At the outset, it is wise to admit freely that this is an art that we do not know. But we can put ourselves to school; and if we are willing to put in at least the time it takes to understand Shakespeare, all of us can become perfect in love.



Easwaran and Christine Easwaran, 1990s

A single, beneficial force

When two people really love each other there is one sure sign: they will want to be together always. It doesn't mean becoming dependent on each other or sitting together on a love seat writing sonnets. It means working together in a selfless cause, merging two lives into a single, beneficial force. This is the secret of permanent romance.

High ideals bring two people closer and closer in love, forgetting themselves in making the world a little greener, a little safer for our children. And there can be no grander basis for a loving relationship than for two people to walk on the spiritual path together, hand in hand, heart with heart.

But a great purpose doesn't just bring two people together – it draws them into a loving relationship with many, many others, who come in time to think together as with one mind, to feel together as with one heart, to work together as with a single pair of hands.

In the final stage of romantic love, you come to have a loving relationship with every creature, expressed in whatever way is perfectly suited to each. Your love for your partner has not diminished in the least; it has simply expanded to include all of life. Now you are relating to the Self, who is One in all.

And indeed, this final stage is what you've wanted from the first. From there you can look back and see that sexual desire was really the yearning for unity – unity with one person to begin with, but ultimately with all of life. 🌸

The Way of Love

That one I love who is incapable of ill will,
And returns love for hatred.
Living beyond the reach of *I* and *mine*
And of pleasure and pain, full of mercy,
Contented, self-controlled, firm in faith,
With all their heart and all their mind given to me –
With such as these I am in love.

Not agitating the world or by it agitated,
They stand above the sway of elation,
Competition, and fear, accepting life
Good and bad as it comes. They are pure,
Efficient, detached, ready to meet every demand
I make on them as a humble instrument of my work.

They are dear to me who run not after the pleasant
Or away from the painful, grieve not
Over the past, lust not today,
But let things come and go as they happen.

Who serve both friend and foe with equal love,
Not buoyed up by praise or cast down by blame,



Daffodils in front of Shanti, the meditation hall at Ramagiri Ashram

Alike in heat and cold, pleasure and pain,
Free from selfish attachments and self-will,
Ever full, in harmony everywhere,
Firm in faith – such as these are dear to me.

But dearest to me are those who seek me
In faith and love as life's eternal goal.
They go beyond death to immortality.

*From Chapter 12 of the Bhagavad Gita,
translated by Eknath Easwaran*

COMMUNITY STORY

Moving Closer in Love

Trying to follow Easwaran's path, committing to meditation and the allied disciplines, has never been easy. I have felt the deep benefits over the last decades, but also the challenges. Along the way, friendships based on superficial interests have faded, exotic vacations have become fewer and farther between, "eye candy" novels have dropped off the reading list, desserts have become rarer. And my relationship with my non-meditating partner has seemed, well, complicated, at times.

Tender compromises

There have been delicate discussions about how much vacation time and money was to be spent on retreats. More back and forth about the fact that meat (and fish!) was disappearing from my meals. Tender compromises have been made over movie choices, earlier bedtimes, restaurants that had at least one vegetarian option, how often to have the radio on in the car.

Then, "What? You are going to meditate *twice* a day? *Another* half hour I need to be quiet?" Followed by more respectful discussions on the easiest times to be quiet, and ideas like the white noise machine. The eternal quest: how to maintain dedication to my practice in a way that put my loved ones first.

And tiny miracles

Yet, over the years, tiny miracles. I have become more patient, more flexible, more able to see my role in conflicts that were brewing. The mantram has rescued me from many an angry/selfish word or deed – sometimes even selfish thoughts!

Slowing down has helped give me time to discover ways to bring us closer – like finding and cooking vegetarian meals he would enjoy. One-pointed attention has been useful when I had been insensitive, helping me listen carefully and find ways to make amends. Meditation has made all of this a little easier, somehow, giving me energy to keep on going, to get back up when I had fallen.

I learned early on that the eight-point program was about making changes in myself, not in anyone else. As meditation has helped me to become a bit less selfish, a bit less judgmental, a bit slower to anger, our home has become more harmonious. My dear partner has come to have deep respect for Easwaran and my practice. Earlier this year, I told him I had fallen away from doing spiritual reading at night, and asked him to remind me about it each evening.

He said, “Why don’t we read Easwaran’s books aloud to each other at night?”

And we do.

— Passage meditator, US



Easwaran, 1990s

Shakespeare's Sonnet on Love, Part 2

Eknath Easwaran

We are continuing our commentary on Shakespeare's marvelous sonnet, which describes the very quintessence of love. Here are the remaining lines:

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

"Love's not Time's fool"

These are precisely chiseled words. Those who build their relationships on physical attraction, Shakespeare is saying, are time's fool, because it's only a matter of time before the body changes.

Christine has a photo of me from the heyday of my physical existence. I look at that picture with a great deal of detachment and amusement. Every one of my physical features has changed, and some might say for the worse, but I don't want that heyday back. 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 is what spiritual awareness brings.

When we cling to anything that is continually changing, we will become more and more insecure with the passage of time. When we identify ourselves obsessively with the body, every morning begins to pose a threat as we move into the latter half of life. Every morning we look in the mirror to see if there are new wrinkles on the face, bags under the eyes, or grey showing in our hair. Even if the wrinkles can be removed, after ten or twenty years the same fate will come to us.

Nothing stops the work of time

I have friends who are plastic surgeons, and I appreciate the services they perform in reconstructive surgery, but I get quite taken aback when I read about developments in cosmetic surgery. People seem to be very partial, for instance, to nose jobs, but to think that a nose job will make you more beautiful is an expensive superstition. That's what Shakespeare is implying. If you have an understanding, sympathetic, compassionate, tender mind, people won't be looking at your nose.

And no amount of cosmetic surgery or makeup can stop the work of time. To me there is nothing sadder than to see somebody who is older pretending to be much younger. Children have a particular kind of beauty, youth has a particular kind of beauty, middle age has a particular kind of beauty, and old age has a particular kind of beauty. My grandmother, even in her seventies, took our breath away by the glow of her skin, the gentleness of her eyes, and the

resolute set of her mouth which said, “Self-willed people, be careful when you come near me.”

That beauty is limited to a certain age range is one of the most monstrous superstitions of our times. It is only a very physically oriented time’s fool, as Shakespeare puts it, who will confuse beauty with stages in time and with phases in the development and decay of the body.

The paradox of life

When I hear about magic drugs that will remove wrinkles, I have to say I like my wrinkles. They tell my story. They tell of the struggles I have waged with all that is selfish in my mind, and for me to see an older face without wrinkles is like looking at a clock without hands.

When you begin to understand the nature of the face, you will see that it records certain improvements in the mind – more thoughtfulness, more sensitivity to others, more capacity to contribute to life. What does it matter, then, if your forehead is furrowed with wrinkles? What matters is how much you have helped other people, and how much closer you have been able to draw to them.

This is the paradox of life: when we cling to the body, it loses its beauty, but when we do not cling to it, and use the body as an instrument given to us to serve others, even on the physical level it glows with health and beauty. When there is peace in our mind, there is beauty in our eyes. When there is love in our heart, there is a glow about the whole personality.



Easwaran, 1990s

Identify with the Self

As a practical, modern person, I appreciate everyone's appearance, and I would not rule out an artistic use of cosmetic aids – it's the inartistic use that I object to. But you'll seldom hear me paying a compliment physically. It would be like paying a compliment to your house. I like your house to be well kept and attractive. And I like a modern house, but I enjoy looking at Victorian houses too.

So don't get self-conscious about these physical changes. We should make the best of our appearance, but we should never depend on it for our security. Identify yourself with the Self, which does not change, and you will become more and more secure with the passage of time.

“Though rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickle's compass come”

Rosy lips and cheeks are beautiful in the young, but they will pass. Robert Burns tells us that permanency is the hallmark of love, in words so sweet: “My love is like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June. My love's like the melody that's sweetly played in tune. As fair art thou, my bonnie lass, so deep in love am I, and I will love thee still, my dear, till a' the seas gang dry.”

The last phrase is the fulcrum of these sweet, simple lines. Mature love means that when you love, the other person becomes more and more beautiful in your eyes. I wish Shakespeare had written another play with an elderly Romeo and Juliet having a wonderful romance in Verona. He was quite capable of that, but it clearly never struck him at the time.

In physically oriented people, boredom sets in very early. Mere sexual passion cloys after a while. But where two people put each other first, though the ravages of age may show on the body, their love only grows with the passage of time. A love that is based on respect, tenderness, and a common goal that transcends personal pleasure and profit – this is a love that can defy time.

Love is then not time's fool: it is time's master. And familiarity does not breed contempt: familiarity breeds tenderness, appreciation, and understanding.

“Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks . . .”

Even as you are reading this, your body is changing a little with age. In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord says,

I am come as time, the waster of the peoples,
Ready for that hour that ripens to their ruin.

It's a terrible verse, but it is meant to remind all of us, young or old, that there isn't much time allotted to us. We should remember this always. When we see life's supreme goal clearly, we become acutely aware how urgent it is to learn to live. We should not delay deepening our meditation, even for a day. We cannot afford to waste even a minute of our lives – for as Thoreau says, we cannot kill time without injuring eternity.

This sense of urgency itself is one of the greatest benefits of meditation, perhaps even greater than physical health or emotional security. It brings all our activities into focus. Every moment is an opportunity to move closer to the goal of life.

Every day becomes precious, with not a day to waste in selfish pursuits, or in quarreling with your husband or wife or son or daughter. This sense of urgency is a great help on the spiritual path.

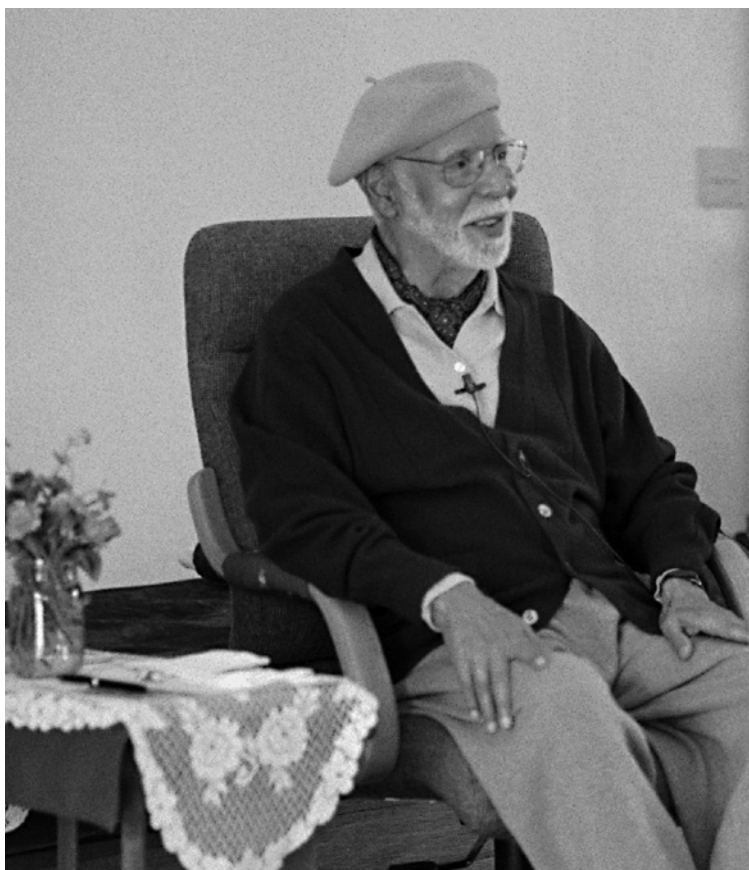
We value every day to make a real contribution, and in the second half of life there are richer qualities that come into play. As Robert Browning said, “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be.” The second half of life can be much more a gift to others, and we can make much more of a contribution to our community and the world than we did during our youth.

“. . . but bears it out even to the edge of doom”

This is the greatest line in the whole sonnet. Shakespeare is speaking right to our times. When you love someone deeply, you want to share everything with that person. And when you find satisfaction even in enduring the same hardships because you would rather be together in hardship than comfortably apart, you begin to escape from the narrow prison of separateness that is the human condition.

I am quite willing to concede that we experience great moments of romantic satisfaction in the early days of life, but we can see the real wellsprings of romantic joy when, for example, the one you love is seriously ill. It is in tending for our loved ones and looking after them, sitting up during sleepless nights, comforting them and reading to them – that is when love blossoms.

You don't do it as a chore, or even as service. You do it out of sheer joy. And the very knowledge that somebody is attending



Easwaran, 1990s

upon you out of love is a powerful prescription. It's a healing force. This is what Shakespeare means by "love alters not with his brief hours and weeks."

None of us looks at our best when we are sick. When we are

in pain, we throw tantrums and make impossible demands; that's the nature of illness. And that is when the real lover acts with great kindness, never utters a cross word, never even thinks a cross thought, and "bears it out even to the edge of doom."

And still the true lover will love

For a long, long time everybody finds this very difficult. And it is not particularly helpful to do this with a feeling of martyrdom, either – we need to bear with people cheerfully, in sickness or in health. But when you go to bed after a day of practicing this kind of love, you know that you have grown. You can stand against the wall and see that you have grown a full inch in spiritual stature. Inch by inch, day by day, you can grow until your head is crowned with the stars. That is our human destiny, the destiny for which all of us have been born.

If we cannot cultivate this kind of patience, we need not bother to say we love; time will prove otherwise. We should simply use the word "like." The law of liking is: Like me and I will like you; dislike me and I will dislike you. Love is not a business contract or a trade agreement. Love is a full-time occupation, a continuous state of mind.

Those whose responses always spring from love, in Meister Eckhart's phrase, "carry God with them in all things." The true lover knows it is the nature of most people to modify their affections in rhythm with the ebb and flow of circumstances – and still the true lover will love. This kind of love is divine.



Easwaran and Christine, 1990s

Death has no power

Love in this sense is not subject to mutability or to mortality. And the ultimate truth is that even death has no power to affect true love. I've always enjoyed going to weddings. In India, I loved to watch the bride and groom walk together around the sacred fire. In this country, I've been deeply moved by the beautiful exchange of vows and rings. But whenever I hear the words "till death do us part," I feel tempted to stand up and shout to the bride and groom, "No, no, no! Don't accept that!" Love that is physical, death will destroy. But love that is spiritual, death can never destroy.

The Gita reassures us that we are not physical creatures – we are spiritual beings, and the core of our personality is divine. As Sri Krishna will say, just as I was a child, then became a teenager, then a young man, then middle-aged, and now I am an older person, when this body is not able to carry on this work I will joyfully shed it – because I will be granted a new body, young, strong, and beautiful, to carry on this work with those who have been devoted to me in this cause during this life.

In the supreme climax of meditation called *samadhi*, you realize that your real Self can only grow in beauty, love, and wisdom – it cannot be touched by death. If you understand this, your attitude to death will change. You will know that death is a doorway to a greater life and a more beautiful destiny together.

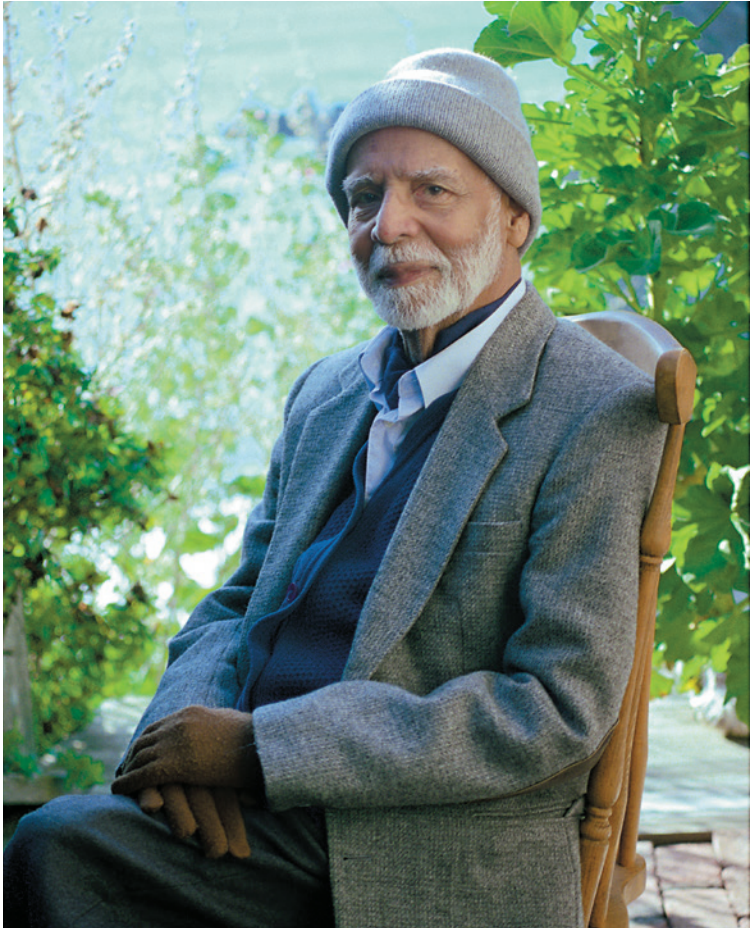
**“If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ,
nor no man ever loved”**

Shakespeare seals his sonnet on love with words stamped with personal experience. If he were with us today, he would tell us not to listen to the media: listen to him, Will Shakespeare – and, I would say, to the great mystics and Sri Krishna.

By cultivating a relationship at the deepest level, by putting each other first, and – in my words – meditating regularly, deepening our devotion to the Lord, and working together in a great cause to help the world, we can give a shining ideal for all our children to grow up with. Wherever we may live, we will be able to love everybody and serve everybody. And wherever we may go, we will live in the land of love. 🌸

Shakespeare's Sonnet on Love

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh no! It is an ever-fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.



Easwaran, 1990s



Ramagiri Ashram



Christine and friends at Ramagiri Ashram

COMMUNITY STORY

Dig Deeper, Climb Higher

We recently commemorated the ninth anniversary of my husband's ruptured brain aneurysm, an event (followed a week later by a stroke brought on by efforts to repair the aneurysm) which altered our lives irrevocably and in some ways, catastrophically. First Joel's life hung in the balance; then his quality of life hung in the balance. My life too, and our relationship as a couple changed dramatically. Our love and marriage were put to the test. And so was the eight-point program I had been following devotedly for decades. This catastrophe provided an unprecedented (albeit unwelcome) opportunity to dive deep in sadhana.

Easwaran's teachings became a guiding light that helped me through many moments of despair, moments that came regularly and unexpectedly as I became a caregiver to my previously fiercely independent and superbly capable husband, who had been an acclaimed physician and an accomplished athlete before the bleed in his brain erupted. Neither of us was prepared for this sudden shift of everything.

Neurological healing is the slowest kind of healing, and as Joel's progress unfolded at a glacial pace (and sometimes went backwards), my spiritual progress often felt like Gandhi's description of emptying the sea with a teacup.

Old, unhealed places in both of us manifested: buried resentments roared to the surface, frustrations shook their fists, unrealized hopes and dreams lay in ruins among the remnants of our prior lifetime. This was new and dangerous territory, almost like being catapulted into deeper realms of the unconscious in meditation. Without Easwaran, I would have been utterly lost in this unfamiliar, frightening landscape. I believe I would have died.

A refuge and a balm

My sadhana provided a protective refuge during the worst of times and a healing balm during the best of times. The meditation passages (which I have always loved) and twice-daily meditation sessions were ports of relative calm in the storm. I fell upon “The Wonderful Effect of Divine Love” and “Lord That Giveth Strength” (passages I had not been drawn to in my earlier years of practice) as a miser falls upon gold.

When I was too agitated to meditate (more at the beginning of the crisis), I used the half hours to read or listen to or write out passages. The mantram was my life raft: “calling God collect” was an essential daily and nightly activity. Sometimes in desperation I screamed the mantram.

Practicing patience and kindness while in the throes of almost unbearable urges to the contrary became a

daily battle, and I was often on the losing side. Being a caregiver was more like being a mother than a wife, and I had already raised two sons. Taking on a third at age sixty-five felt overwhelming, especially when Joel would chafe at my ministrations. I feared for his safety; he longed to be in charge of his life, even if it meant falling down (which happened frequently). Control issues and self-will would rear their ugly heads alongside blind fury. Shame was an unwelcome but familiar visitor. Forgiveness and self-forgiveness took on a major role as I struggled with root *samskaras* and what felt like demonic forces, so at odds with my saintly aspirations. This was love *in extremis* as I felt shaken to the core.

A way through the darkness

Alongside the motherlode of meditation and the mantram, weekly satsang and nightly spiritual reading were islands of inspiration and support during the battle. The weeklong retreats I attended in Tomales provided enormous relief: time away from caregiving in an atmosphere saturated with exquisite spiritual (and physical) nourishment gave respite to my weary soul.

Easwaran's uplifting, sustaining presence was a great comfort when I could access it. I would literally call out to Easwaran and to Granny (his spiritual teacher, who promised to come to the aid of those who loved her boy) for help. And help came in many guises, so that slowly but steadily I found my way through the darkness.



Shanti, the meditation hall at Ramagiri Ashram

Having just reviewed the past year during the family commemoration (where we chart progress), I am acutely aware of how far we have come. To say that we have borne it out “even to the edge of doom” is no exaggeration. Our marriage has undergone an alteration to be sure, and sadness is part of the landscape, but our love has deepened and matured. Mutual respect and tenderness have grown stronger, as the weeds of anger, self-pity and fear have gradually diminished.

Kindness, patience, and forgiveness

The passage that has been a most prominent companion in recent months is Psalm 119 from *Timeless Wisdom* (“I Am the One Who Will Never Forget You”). I was inspired to memorize this lengthy marvel after hearing several Affiliate Program sadhaks recite verses from it at our online wrap-up session in spring 2021. The psalm’s oscillation between light and darkness, between the exhilaration of God’s presence and the anguish of Her absence, resonates deeply with my own experience. It is a passionate exposition of both the promise and peril of our spiritual path. It has been a godsend to me.

This psalm reinforces my efforts to strengthen several key qualities as I strive to love better. Simple kindness is perhaps the most central ingredient. Lines like “May your love and kindness find shelter in the depths of my heart” and “let my life be a testimony of your kindness” are powerful reminders of the goal. Patience is another foundational quality which is slowly ripening and which the psalm subtly encourages through its emphasis on perseverance and acceptance of pain on the path: “O Lord, I know that every hardship along the way is for me to grow in your love.” And forgiveness is implicit throughout the passage as the psalmist repeatedly begs to be led out of the darkness of despair and emerges again and again into the light of truth: “You are so near, my Lord; you are the eternal support; you are the Supreme goal . . .”

I have discovered in my husband an unexpected helpmeet on the path. A self-professed atheist, he is nonetheless this spiritual seeker's other half. I admire his tenacity, his fierce striving for a meaningful life in an inhospitable body, his new joys in the form of nature photography, birds and beloved grandchildren. After fifty-one years, our love has ripened into edible fruit. We both relish our long walks together, the books I read aloud to him, the meals I prepare for him (for which he now provides a blessing).

Joel's disability has disarmed me and challenged me to dig deeper and climb higher. My ardent desire to put him first come hell or high water is gaining ground over self-will's desire to kick and scream or throw in the towel. I have discovered that taking good care of him is crucial to taking good care of me. I feel tremendous compassion for both of us, and that extends out to others and to our precious, wounded world. This challenge, desire and discovery of unity is the mountain I climb every day.

I am unutterably grateful to Easwaran, to my family and to my fellow climbers without whom this journey would be impossible.

— Laura, California

I Am the One Who Will Never Forget You

May your love and kindness find shelter
in the depths of my heart.

May your word be my salvation.

O Lord, do not take the truth from my lips,

keep it with me

so I may sing your glory forever.

O Lord, I know that every hardship along the way
is for me to grow in your love.

May I find delight in all you give me,

May I comfort all those who turn in my direction,

May my joy be complete

and your Name forever on my lips.

O Lord, you are a lamp to my feet, a light on my path.

Wherever you go, there I have sworn to follow.

I know the way may be steep

and the journey filled with pain,

but every step of the way

you will give me strength.

Psalm 119

The Wonderful Effect of Divine Love

Love is a great thing, yea, a great and thorough good; by itself it makes every thing that is heavy, light; and it bears evenly all that is uneven. For it carries a burden which is no burden, and makes every thing that is bitter, sweet and tasteful.

The noble love of Jesus impels one to do great things, and stirs one up to be always longing for what is more perfect.

Love desires to be aloft, and will not be kept back by any thing low and mean.

Love desires to be free, and estranged from all worldly affections, that so its inward sight may not be hindered; that it may not be entangled by any temporal prosperity, or by any adversity subdued.

Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing more courageous, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller nor better in heaven and earth; because love is born of God, and cannot rest but in God, above all created things.

Thomas à Kempis

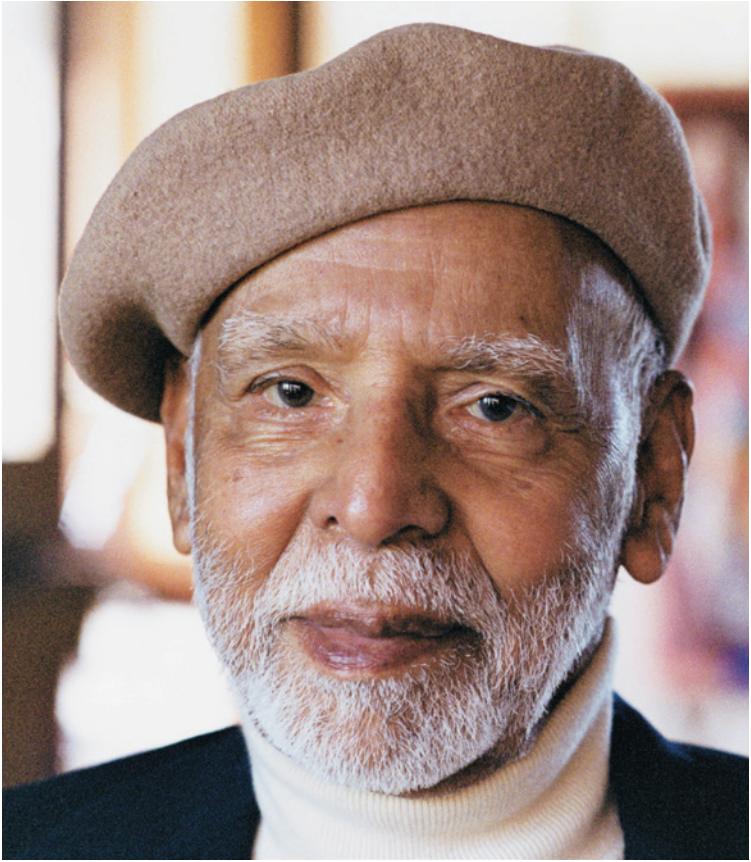
You can find complete versions of all the *Blue Mountain Journal* passages at www.bmcm.org/passages.



Christine at the rock in the Memorial Garden



Christine at Ramagiri Ashram



Easwaran, 1990s

To Become Love Itself

Eknath Easwaran

It takes a lifetime to learn to love. Love does not burst forth one morning with a display of fireworks. It grows little by little every day, by bearing with people, as Shakespeare's sonnet says, "even to the edge of doom." That is what love requires. But if we make it our first priority, no matter what difficulties come our way, our love cannot help but grow.

And there is no limit to our capacity to love. We may start with a one-to-one relationship, but we can never be satisfied by loving just one person here, another there. Our need is to love completely, universally, without any reservations – in other words, to become love itself. Dostoevsky describes this beautifully in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Love all that has been created by God, both the whole and every grain of sand. Love every leaf and every ray of light. Love the beasts and the birds, love the plants, love every separate fragment. If you love each separate fragment, you will understand the mystery of the whole resting in God. When you perceive this, your understanding of this mystery will grow from day to day until you come to love the whole world with a love that includes everything and excludes nothing.

This is what it means to realize the unity of life, and in these troubled times, when turmoil has invaded our society, our homes, and even our hearts, I don't think there is any more precious attainment.



Further Resources for Learning to Meditate and Deepening Your Practice

From the BMCM Programs team

Introductory Online Webinars

A chance to try out passage meditation.

www.bmcm.org/programs/introductory-webinar/

Introductory Online Weekend Retreats

Everything you need to get your passage meditation practice started.

www.bmcm.org/programs/introductory-weekend-online/

Passage Meditation – A Complete Spiritual Practice

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



Attendees at an online retreat

BMCM Satsang Live

Our twice-weekly online satsang takes place on Tuesdays from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Pacific Time and is repeated on Sundays from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Pacific Time.

Find more at www.bmcm.org/community/bmcm-satsang-live/.

Online Retreats, Webinars, & Workshops for 2022

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

Introductory Webinars:

May 14, August 6, October 8

Introductory Weekend Online Retreats:

August 26–28, September 30–October 2

Returnee Weekend Online Retreats:

May 20–22, September 23–25, November 4–6

Weeklong Online Retreats:

April 22–26, August 19–23, October 14–18

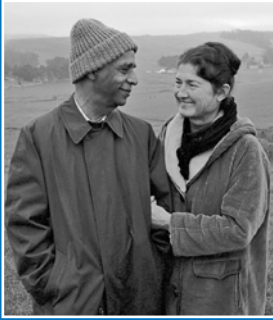
Setu Half-Week Online Retreats:

June 3–7, September 16–20

Returnee Online Workshops:

June 18, November 12

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



Lasting romance has two precious components: increasing respect, and tenderness that grows every day. This is a continuing state of consciousness, and it is what all of us want in a relationship.

It calls for great effort and unremitting enthusiasm, and that is why I consider loving a skill, a great skill that can be learned.

– Eknath Easwaran

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