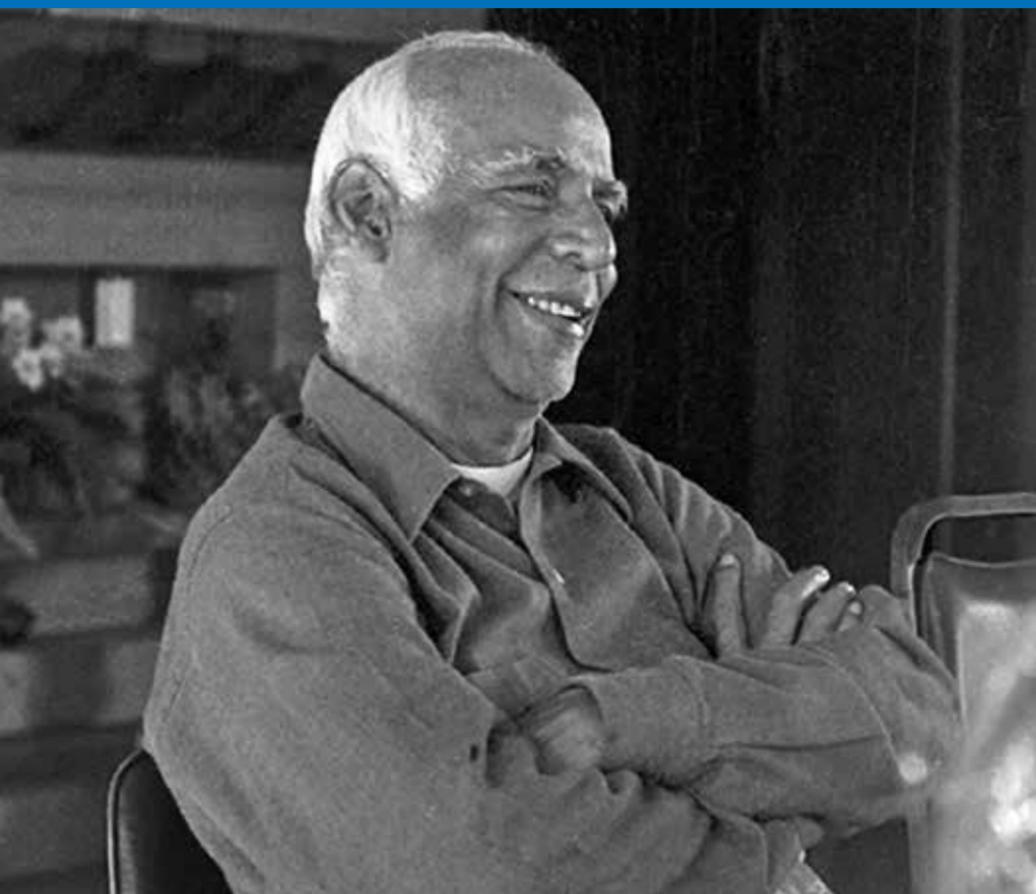


Ekknath Easwaran's

Blue Mountain Journal

Meditation and Spiritual Living



Summer 2015

Eating in Freedom, Training the Mind

In This Issue

By Christine Easwaran



Toward the end of his life Sri Easwaran was asked, “If you had to begin teaching meditation today instead of in the sixties, would your message be any different?”

“No,” he replied, “my message has always been the same. ‘Train your mind’ is my message for the whole world. Unless you train your mind, you cannot live in peace. Unless you train your mind, you cannot live in harmony. All the points in my eight-point program are meant for training the mind.”

In this issue we take a look at the fifth point of this program, Training the Senses. “When I try to apply this today,” Easwaran explains in *Conquest of Mind*, “I usually begin with the compulsive urge to eat when it is not necessary. When you are hungry, eat what is best for your body. Eating at any other time shows very slight regard for health, and the mind becomes obese and tyrannical when it gets its way like this at the expense of your better judgment. That is why Gandhi says that control of the palate is a valuable aid to control of the mind.”

You’ll find more practical advice from Easwaran on training the palate in this journal. And if you would like to tell us how you are applying his tips, please share your success stories in our new journal discussion group. To join, email us at 20Tips@easwaran.org.



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Faithful Allies on Our Journey

During the early stages of the spiritual journey, we can feel a certain deprivation when we have to keep saying no to the senses as they clamor for things that will only add to the burden of the journey later on. “Don’t eat this. Don’t drink that. Don’t smoke this. Don’t watch that.” This is what you hear from your spiritual teacher. There is no rapture, there is no ecstasy, only “keep plugging along.”

This discriminating restraint of the senses is not asceticism. Its purpose is not to subjugate the body. We need to train the senses to be faithful allies on our journey for two compelling reasons.

First, the body is our vehicle, and we need to keep it healthy, strong, and resilient so that it can carry us steadily and safely to the summit of consciousness.

Second, training the senses strengthens the will day by day, enabling us gradually to gain control over the fierce passions that rage beneath the surface of consciousness.

Without a trained will it is not possible to move up out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death which is our physical world. Untrained, the will becomes self-will, our worst enemy; but trained, the will can become our most powerful ally.





Easwaran at breakfast,
Ramagiri Ashram, 1970.

Eating and the Mind

Frequently Asked Questions
answered by Eknath Easwaran

Why should we train the senses?

I had a friend in the olden days who used to ask that. He would say, “I understand meditation, but why bring in all these other points? Isn’t meditation enough?”

In particular, he simply detested any reference to sense training. Meditation yes, even mantram yes, but for heaven’s sake, don’t talk about sense training.

So I said, these all help each other. Sense training is not only necessary for health; sense training helps the mind be one-pointed, just as a one-pointed mind helps train the senses. Both help govern negative passions, and transforming passions helps to still the mind, which is the goal of meditation.

So where do we start?

Attacking the mind directly is extremely hard, but there is something you *can* attack directly to deepen your meditation, and that is eating. Through your eating habits—especially likes and dislikes in eating—you can get at the mind indirectly.

You can begin simply by ceasing to choose foods that don’t benefit your health and instead choosing foods that do. With this simple resolution, you’ll strengthen your will and deepen your meditation—and please your physician, too.

I first became interested in changing my diet for the better under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi,

when he was writing weekly articles for his paper *Young India*. Diet was an important topic for him, and he experimented all his life to discover the very best. Indians can be quite traditional about food; they always want the dishes that mother used to make. But Gandhi put tradition aside in favor of health, and his example appealed to me deeply.

I too, of course, had been brought up on Indian cuisine. And I had enjoyed it all thoroughly. It never occurred to me to ask what the purpose of food is. Gandhi's example prompted me to ask; and I concluded, to my great surprise, that food is meant to strengthen the body.

So I started changing. I began to eat fruits and vegetables that wouldn't have appealed to me in earlier days at all. As I began to focus more

Easwaran
and Christine
at breakfast,
Ramagiri, 1972.



on health, I found that I enjoyed salads, and that highly spiced curries no longer seemed palatable. I was prepared now to agree with Gandhi's dictum that taste lies in the mind.

I was prepared now to agree with Gandhi that taste lies in the mind.

Today, if I were to eat junk food, my body and palate would protest.

I work every day from morning till night, every day of the year, and the energy for this kind of work comes partly from food. Eating what gives you energy for selfless service, keeping your body healthy and light, is a matter of teaching your taste buds what to enjoy.

As always, the purpose here is training the mind. With training, your senses begin to listen to you, and when your senses begin to listen to you, your mind becomes calm and clear. Then you always have freedom of choice.

On the other hand, far-reaching though these changes were, I don't think I really understood what Gandhi was getting at until much later, when I began to meditate. It was then that I made what was for me a remarkable discovery.

Can you say more about that?

When I needed a lot of drive to go deeper in meditation—for example, if I had a problem to solve that required more energy and creativity than usual—I found that I had only to pick a strong sensory urge and defy it. When you suddenly need cash, don't you go and shake the piggy bank? It was a little like that. I would look around intently to see what kind of cravings I had, and then I would walk up to a really big one and say, "Come on, because I am really broke." The desire would come on strong, and I would push it back and come out with both my pockets loaded.

A strong desire, when it is defied, generates power.

My whole outlook on desire changed. Formerly, when a strong urge would come, I used to do what everybody does: yield to it, and not reluctantly either. Now I began to rub my hands with joy at the prospect of doing just the opposite. “Here’s another desire! It’s strong, so I’ll gain even more by defying it.” I began to understand that any strong desire, when it is defied, generates a lot of power.

That sounds very hard!

Not every desire, I should say, is to be rejected out of hand. I distinguish very carefully between harmless desires and desires that are harmful to the body or mind—or, of course, to those around you. If the desire is for food that is wholesome, you may well be able to yield with full appreciation. But if it is a desire for something sweet that you don’t need, you will find you can get equal satisfaction out of refusing it. It’s a deceptively simple change in perspective. Your attitude toward the body becomes very different: you see it no longer as an instrument of pleasure, but as an instrument of loving service.

Isn’t it all a bit grim?

You don’t have to give up all desires to be strong; you just have to give up all selfish desires. For example, when you have food that strengthens the body, especially when it is cooked and served with love and eaten in the company of family or friends, you don’t need to pass it up just because you like the taste of it. The Lord would say, “Dig in; I am in that desire too.”

I am very much like my grandmother in this respect. When there was a feast coming I don’t

You don’t have to defy all desires—only selfish ones.



think she ever thought about the food before or after; but while she was eating I have never seen anyone enjoy a meal more. At our ashram, whenever there is a special occasion, whether it be Jewish or Christian, Hindu or Muslim, we really have a feast. And when someone comes in and puts a steaming platter of blintzes on the table, we don't turn our eyes away and say, "We can't eat blintzes; they're not mentioned in the scriptures." We sit down, repeat the mantram, and polish them off.

On the other hand, you can't expect Sri Krishna to be present in, say, Puerto Rican rum, which you drink when you can't solve a problem. There the way to celebrate is to ignore the rum and solve the problem; then, if you still want to celebrate, ask for another problem and solve that one too.

The question in all these matters is, are you doing this for yourself or for others? In other

Easwaran and
Christine at dinner,
Ramagiri, 1989.

Vegetarianism affirms the unity of life.

words, we don't need to turn our backs on the innocent delights of life to be spiritual. We can participate fully in life as long as we are trying our best to put those around us first.

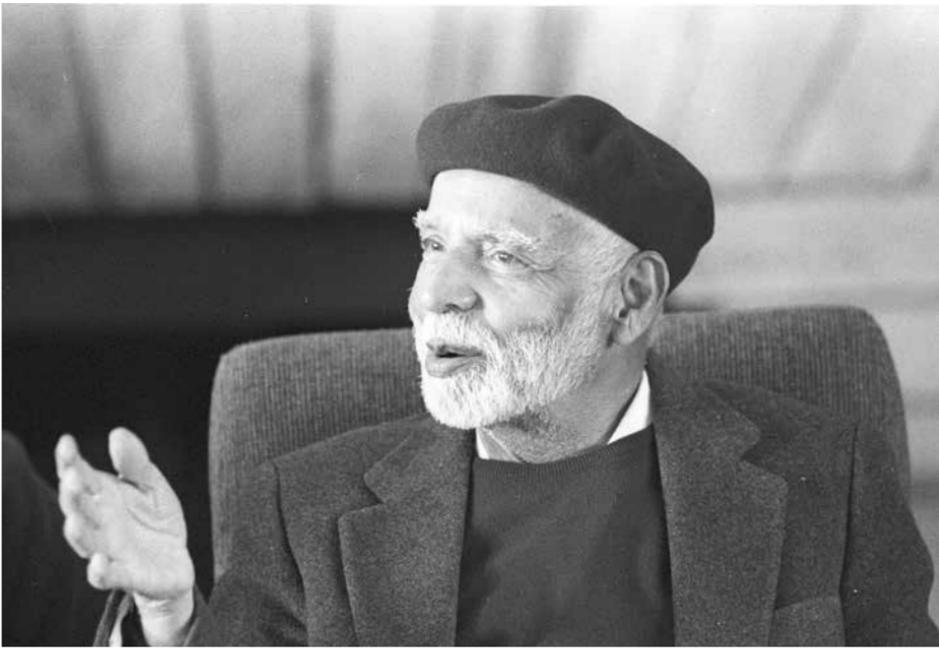
Why do you advocate a vegetarian diet?

Vegetarianism not only helps us to maintain our health on the optimum level but also has the spiritual purpose of deepening our awareness of the unity of life. I am fortunate in being born in a Hindu family that has been vegetarian probably for over a thousand years, but I am not a vegetarian because my ancestors were; I am a vegetarian because I have come to know that I form one unity with everything around me. As our spiritual awareness deepens, we will come to have great compassion for animals and will never want to be a party to their ill-treatment. Vegetarianism affirms the unity of all life.

One of the remarkable developments in meditation is that even if we take to meditation without any desire to practice these related disciplines, after a while we will be drawn to them. The changeover, for example, from nonvegetarian to vegetarian food can be made gradually.

Why do you say there is a link between training the palate and improving relationships?

I can give you an example. In Kerala we have a particular kind of mango that is eaten green, when it is acutely sour. There is nothing inherently pleasant about this sensation; in fact, a detached physiologist would probably call it painful. But everybody around you likes it, everybody does it, so you learn to like it too. And in the end, you



cannot do without it. It is a complete perversion of taste: what is nourishing tastes bad, what burns tastes good.

Not only that, to add to the tanginess, South Indians combine such mangoes with hot red pepper and salt. There is a particular enjoyment in the way the combination sets your teeth on edge. In addition, we children had a special sauce of our own: we usually removed the mangoes by stealth from someone else's tree.

After I had been meditating for some time, I began to see that this was not a habit from which my body benefited. I stopped eating those mangoes; and of course my taste buds immediately brought out their little protest signs and went on strike: "Unfair!" My family was not much help. Some of my girl cousins would bring out mango, red pepper, and salt, sit down in front of me, and say, "What a shame you've stopped eating green mangoes!"

It took some time for me to realize the full

Answering questions after a tea break, 1992.

**I was undoing
the whole habit
of disliking.**

significance of what I was doing. Not only had I freed myself from a compulsive liking for hot peppers, I soon found that by loosening compulsive likes and dislikes about food, I was undoing the whole habit of disliking.

It paid immediate dividends in personal relationships. I didn't have to dislike someone just because I disagreed with his opinion or because she disliked me. This kind of realization disarms people, and I soon found that all my relationships had improved.

This discovery gave me the motivation for juggling with likes and dislikes everywhere—in the food I ate, the jobs I did, even the books I read. I wouldn't do something simply because I did not like it; some things are not only disagreeable but pointless. But whenever I found something beneficial that I did not like, I learned to do it with gusto. Over the years, it gave me quite a reputation. Once a friend at the university asked, "How did you ever learn to get along with Professor So-and-so?" I answered mysteriously, "By giving up sour mangoes!"

**Could you say more about the purpose of
juggling likes and dislikes?**

Juggling with likes and dislikes is much more than learning to be flexible about the relative merits of foods or jobs or people. The real issue is freedom.

Our habitual responses in small matters reflect the way we respond to life itself. The person with rigid tastes in food is likely to have rigid tastes in other fields as well.

All of these hold him hostage. He is happy so long as he gets everything the way he likes it.

Otherwise—which may be ninety-nine percent of the time—he is unhappy over something. He might as well be bound hand and foot.

My grandmother used to tell me, “Don’t ever beg from life.” Life has only contempt for people who say, “Please give me two things I like today: one in the morning, preferably just before lunch, and another about midway through the afternoon, when I start to get irritable. Oh, and please remember to keep everything I dislike at a convenient distance.” This is panhandling, and we usually get what we deserve: Disappointment, with a capital D.

We are not beggars, Granny would say; we are princes and princesses. We can learn to say to life, “It doesn’t matter what you bring today. If you bring something pleasant, I will flourish; if you bring something unpleasant, I will still flourish.”

Once we have tasted the freedom of juggling at will with our personal preferences, we can face whatever comes to us calmly and courageously, knowing we have the flexibility to weather any storm gracefully. This is living in freedom, the ultimate goal of training the mind.

**We can face
whatever
comes to us,
calmly and
courageously.**

Eating in Freedom

In my native state of Kerala, where cashews thrive, most of us are quite partial to them. I too shared this fondness. But when I left Kerala to teach at a university in central India, cashews more or less dropped out of my life.

Then, when I came to America, someone gave me a big can of cashews as a present. I opened it and was amazed at the response of my mind. All the old attraction came pouring in, and I could hear my mind say, “Ahh ... at last! Cashews!”

But by this time I understood the ways of the mind, and I was training my senses. So I said, “Oh, you remember how good cashews taste, do you?”

The mind said, “Don’t waste time talking ... let’s get to them!”

I replied, “I think you’ve forgotten again who’s the boss around here. But I know you have a great fondness for these little nuts, and I’m a fair man, so I’ll make a bargain with you. As soon as you stop clamoring for cashews in that insistent way of yours, I’ll give you some.”

Then I placed the open can of cashews on the table beside me and turned to my academic work. For some time, the battle went on. I would be reading an incisive passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson,



and suddenly I would feel something small and smooth touching my fingertips. Part of my mind—utterly unbeknown to me—had sent my hand over to the cashew can. “What’s going on?” I asked gravely.

Talking with friends after dinner, 1992.

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” the mind said. “We weren’t going to eat any of them. We just wanted to see how they felt.”

I didn’t have to say anything more. My hand came back, and my mind scurried back to the *American Scholar* where it belonged.

At last, the mind gave up its tricks and subsided. I looked at the can of cashews and saw them for what they were—nuts, grown on trees in India where I used to live—and my mind did not move.

“Good show,” I said. “Now you may enjoy some.” Those were the best cashews I have ever eaten in my life, because I ate them in freedom.



Mealttime at a Young Adult retreat.

Twenty Tips from Easwaran for Training the Palate

1 Be firm but gentle

We are trying to make our senses faithful servants, not abject slaves. We need to understand them and be firm but gentle: expect a little more from them than they have been used to, but not make unreasonable demands. We need to know when to issue strict orders, when to persuade and negotiate, and when to let them frisk a bit.

2 Develop a taste for nutritious food

Just as we have developed a taste for wrong food, so with a little effort we can develop a taste for food that is nutritious. We may not be mad about whole-grain bread or green salads, but by cultivating a taste for food that is healthy and learning to prepare it with a creative flair, we can soon become as enthusiastic about fresh garden vegetables as we are about chocolate éclairs.

3 Don't snack

To train our sense of taste, we need to stop eating mechanically and become aware of what we eat. Eating only at mealtime helps, because we can focus our attention on the food more fully when we sit at the table.

4 Eat only when hungry

When we misinterpret a sense craving as a hunger signal, we often overload a stomach that is already full. To control such cravings, eat only when hungry and eat temperately.

5 Eat only what you need ...

Most of us do not need as much food as we may think we do. One of the finer points of the art of eating is to stop just when you are about to ask for another helping: when your hand is outstretched, you should be able to get up and turn your back on the table.

6 ... but don't go to extremes

Fasting may not be as easy as feasting, but after a while it is not too different. Both are extremes. It is not hard to go the extreme way, but what is really difficult is neither to fast nor to feast, but to be moderate in everything we do. It requires great artistry and vigilance.

The special buffet lunch

I met a friend a few days back and she suggested a restaurant that had a special buffet lunch. I was aware this time of the temptations of a buffet, the many dishes on offer, and the mentality that one is paying so much for it, so try to get value for money. I took care to take very little on my plate—few dishes and little in quantity, and while I tasted several dishes, I found myself feeling comfortable in the tummy at the end of the meal. Thanks to spiritual practice I did not give importance to the value-for-money aspect but stayed vigilant about listening to my friend, and not allowing desire for any food treat to poke out its horns.

From a journal reader



During a break at a Young Adult retreat.

7 Strengthen the will

In order to strengthen the will, start early morning when you want a third piece of toast. Just push it away, and you have increased your willpower. From breakfast onwards this goes on, and every time you can say no to the craving of the palate you have added to the will just a little.

8 Plan how to cope with feasts

If I know an elaborate meal is on the way, I go lightly on or even skip the meal that comes before. Then, at the feast, I participate in everything without overdoing it.

9 Eaten too much? Skip the next meal

If you do find that you have eaten more than you should at a particular meal—which is likely to happen to most of us occasionally—I have a simple suggestion for restoring the balance: skip the next meal. Instead of going about saying, “Why did I do it? Why did I do it?” and working yourself up to such a state that you head back to the refrigerator, just resolve to sail past the meal coming up.

10 With cravings, try substituting ...

If you crave candy, for example, you can offer your taste buds some nutritious substitute like raisins or fresh fruit. They will probably accept.

11 ... or wait an hour

When a sensory desire arises, you might try saying, “Well, if you still want that in an hour, I’ll give it to you.” Very likely the desire will have subsided by that time, since it is the nature of desires to come and go.

A personal triumph

For the past two years I've been dealing with the challenge of a disabled husband. The intense frustrations of these last two years have stimulated cravings I thought were under control—for sweets, for coffee, for comfort food.

While I've given myself more leeway than before in this area, coffee has been a particular problem because of the tension, impatience and irritability it produces (not to mention speeding me up).

For this reason, saying no to coffee is not only a sense training issue; it's a putting others first issue (namely, my husband). Yet I crave it more than before, and my husband is positively addicted to it, and feels he needs it for stamina and to combat post-stroke fatigue. I'm surrounded by strong, aromatic, delicious coffee every day. It's like an alcoholic working in a bar.

So I consider it a personal triumph when I manage some of the time to have tea or hot chocolate or decaf instead of the coffee I crave. The other day I went into a neighborhood coffee and tea house for some much-needed relaxation, and found myself ordering a pot of jasmine pearls green tea instead of the coffee I had intended to imbibe. Okay, I also had a lemon ginger scone with devonshire cream, but the tea was a triumph (and not bad, either). I felt Easwaran was smiling at me.

From a retreatant

12 Use the mantram

The mantram can also be a ready ally in training the senses, especially when some negative emotion gets the better of us and we feel obliged to take it out on the refrigerator. When we go out for a brisk walk repeating the mantram, we not only give our body a healthy workout, we transform negative emotions into their positive counterparts.

13 Meditate sincerely ...

Meditation, of course, is our most powerful tool for rechanneling our mind, for reconditioning ourselves. Sincere and regular practice can lead to complete transformation of the contents of consciousness.

14 ...and make wise choices during the day

But even if we sit for meditation in the morning and then again in the evening, that will not of itself change our eating habits. We have to make wise choices during the day.

15 Help children train their tastes

I don't object to children having sweets within reason now and then, so long as they get plenty of good-tasting, nutritious food at meals and so long as taste is not presented as an end in itself. As far as I can remember, I enjoyed my food as a child primarily because it was prepared by people I loved deeply. Tastes are learned, and there is no motivation like love.

16 Make time to eat together

Eating together with those we love, eating nutritious food that has been prepared with love—this can nourish our inner needs as well as our



Chocolate pie was a little challenging for her.

Temptation

I recently read up on the foods that use hydrogenated vegetable fat, which is horrible for the body, and found that many biscuits and snacks in the market use this. Worse, it looked highly probable that the new bakery I had been favoring used it, too. I thought I'd find it difficult to stop frequenting the bakery, and that my daughter wouldn't be able to give up her favorite chocolate pie, but we were both pleasantly surprised to find that we could. When I smelled the aromas as I passed the bakery, I could only think of the cloying fat; and my daughter doesn't ask to eat fast food any more. Chocolate pie was a little challenging for her, but thanks to her spiritual efforts, she refused the treat when she was offered it last weekend at a relative's home, even though she was tempted. Proud of her!

From a journal reader

bodies. Taking time at meals to talk to each other and enjoy the meal as a shared sacrament is rare today. We need to slow down, take the time to prepare nutritious meals, and rearrange our schedules so that we can be together.

17 Enjoy others' enjoyment

My mother was an excellent cook. She used to prepare delicacies for me and then sit by my side in the Indian manner while I ate them, and I could never understand why she didn't feel any desire for them at all. What she enjoyed was my enjoyment.

Today, after long years of practice in detachment, I don't have any palate cravings, which means I can enjoy good food much more than any gourmet. Even when I take teenage friends out for ice cream or chocolate cake, I enjoy it more than they do; my enjoyment is multiplied by theirs, which I literally share.

18 Don't dwell on food

It is not good to dwell on food. The gourmet who is constantly looking for new ways to stimulate the palate will become more and more trapped on the physical level. After we have taken reasonable care to see that we get the right food, served with love, we should then forget about it and leave it to the digestive system to do the rest.

19 Skip a meal to control the mind

Occasionally, when there is a first-rate conflict—when you see a wave of resentment, anxiety, or frustration welling up—it is helpful to skip a meal. When this is done with discrimination, taking particular care that the body is not deprived

Mealtime at a Young Adult retreat.



of its energy, you will find that not only is the mind easier to control, the body benefits too.

20 Live for others and then don't worry

Merely remembering that the body is the house of the Lord should help us to refrain from addictions, get regular exercise, eat good food in moderate quantities, and do everything we can to keep the body at its best.

Even here, however, we cannot forget the mind. It too is part of the temple, and if it is not kept calm and kind, no amount of physical care will keep the body free from disease. Take care of yourself, live for others, and then do not worry. Your security and resistance will be high.

Editor's Note: If you would like to share your successes in applying Easwaran's tips, email us at 20Tips@easwaran.org to join our journal discussion group.

Time for the middle path

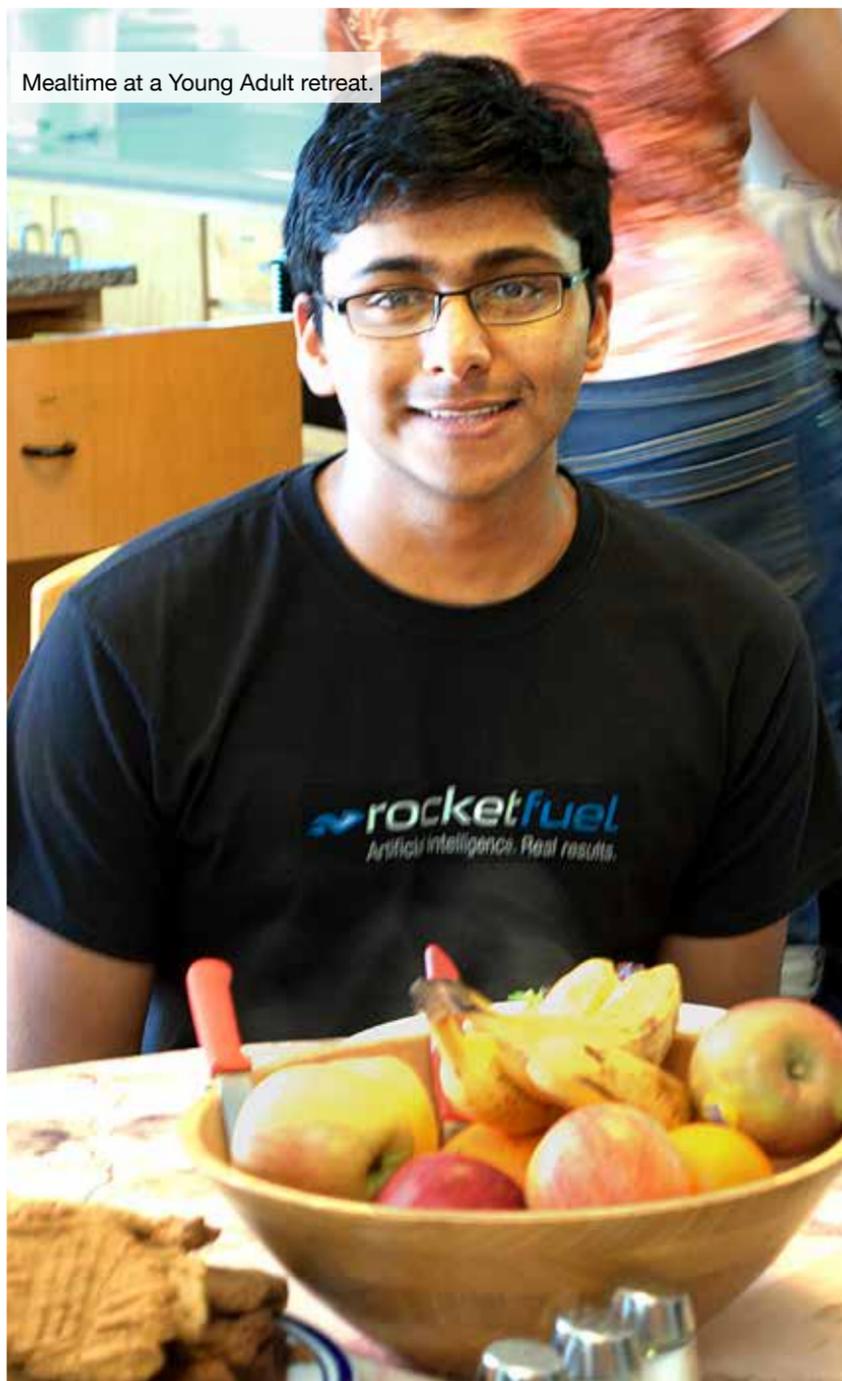
Training the senses is my favorite challenge. I try to make it a game by picking small battles to win.

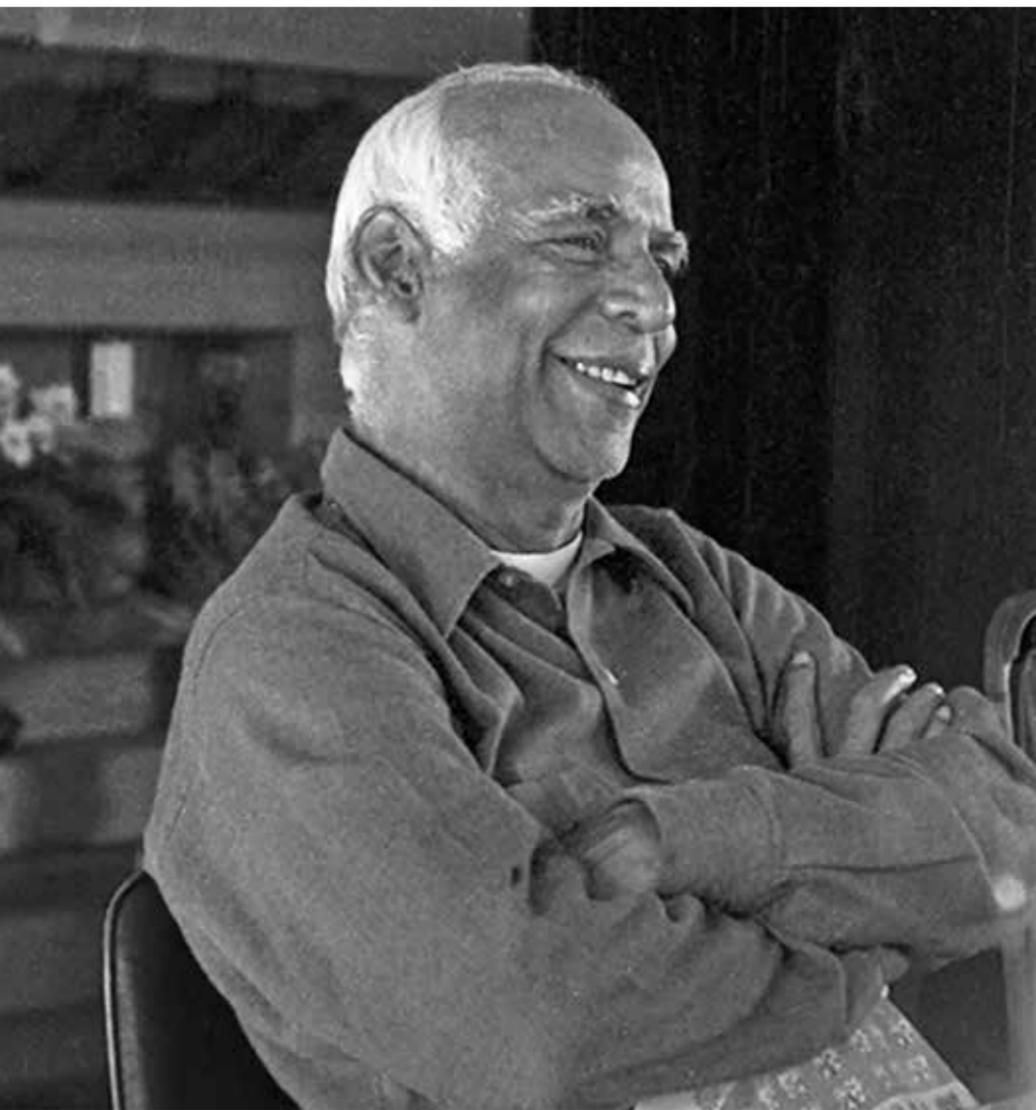
Father's Day weekend was a great challenge with food. My challenge was to enjoy the company of my family while reining in my senses amongst all the special food/drink treats offered.

There was also a little putting others first thrown in. When someone went out of their way to prepare something for my enjoyment, that was the time for the middle path, not the extremes.

From a member of our eSatsang

Mealtime at a Young Adult retreat.





After dinner, Ramagiri, 1983.

Hold Out, Resist, and Be Free

In one of the great scriptural stories of Hinduism, the ferocity of the senses is brought out with terrible humor. A man who is very body-conscious, as we all are, was being pursued by a tiger. The man, panic-stricken, ran as fast as he could until he reached the brink of a precipice.

There, just when he thought the tiger was about to pounce upon him, he saw a mango tree below him and leaped down onto it, finding shelter on one of the middle branches. The tiger was standing on top of the precipice looking down with its tongue hanging out. The man breathed a sigh of great relief and started to climb down the trunk of the tree. He looked down and there was another tiger looking up at him.

In this most precarious position—death above, death below—the man sees a mango. “Ha!” he says. “Just what I’ve been looking for.” At that moment tigers, life, death, all disappear, just for the few moments’ satisfaction of a sense craving. It is a terrible story because this is what sense craving can do to us.

At the particular moment when there is a fierce sensory craving, even though we are being submerged under it, it is good to remember that the nature of the mind, the nature of desire, is to change. If we can hold out and resist the temptation, we are free.



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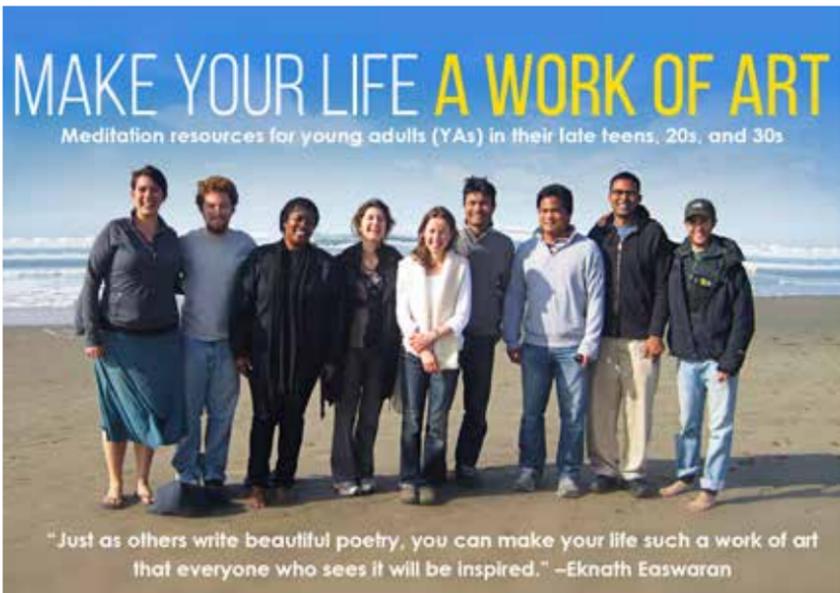
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Masters of Our Lives

**If we want to live in freedom,
we must train our senses.
We learn when to welcome
an experience and when to
withdraw for our own safety.
We become masters of our lives.**

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