



From *The Compassionate Universe*
Excerpts from Chapter Two: *Knowledge Without Character*

Eknath Easwaran

By transcending feelings of victimization, individuals find a deeper strength in the center of their beings that underlies their own human emotion and feeling. Through this deliberate strengthening of character, one learns poise and endurance. Through weathering the experiences of life, [the leader] gains increasing inner composure and calm.

Horse and the Mystical Path: The Celtic Way of Expanding The Human Soul

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This is the first in a series of articles where we are following some of the teaching stories of Eknath Easwaran that help us all glimpse more deeply into the unity of life and the value of developing our leadership to better help the lives of everyone, including the animals and their stewards.

In this article we are showcasing Eknath Easwaran, founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation. While Eknath Easwaran is an honored and celebrated spiritual teacher, he, in his humility, shows us all how everyone can look to the modeling of others to follow after. The stewards we know want to help the animals, the environment and our world. Often they wonder how and if they have enough of what it takes in their ordinariness and humanness. Eknath Easwaran, by

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example, teaches us that stewards wanting to make a big difference in the world both look first to others to contribute to their own leadership growth and development. They seek out others who are intentionally modeling core leadership practices to bring into their own.

Eknath Easwaran teaches further that by changing ourselves from conditioned ways that are not full of the leadership traits needed we can move toward our goal and succeed. He gives us hope and a roadmap for our success. Eknath Easwaran is fearless in showing us how to face our problems in our world directly and see into them honestly so that we can then look within for the resources that we can call on to make a difference. As leaders in development, he shows that part of the way to transform the animal steward community and our environment lies in a bold inquiry into the values we have been conditioned by in our society and our willingness to change the values aligned with our vision for a changed world and act on them in a timely manner.

Karla Boyd

“I believe that if one man gains spiritually the whole world gains with him.”

Mahatma Gandhi

I got off the train at Wardha, walked a few miles along a dusty country road, and reached Sevagram about five o'clock in the afternoon. There I found a small crowd of young men and women waiting in front of Gandhiji's cottage. They told me Gandhi had been at work since early morning, with only a short lunch break. As we waited, I tried to picture him to myself. He would be gaunt, I imagined, from hard work and an austere diet; perhaps he would stoop a little, bearing the weight of a subcontinent on his shoulders; and after a long day of meetings, he would be tired and irritable. He probably would want nothing to do with us. The bamboo door opened. With the springy step of a teenager and with a vivacious twinkle in his eyes, Gandhi emerged and strode off for his evening walk, beckoning—to me particularly, it seemed, although there were several others—for us to walk with him. I was a pretty good walker, and less than half his age, but I could hardly keep up with him. It was like trying to keep pace with a sandpiper.

I was entranced. How was it possible? Gandhi seemed profoundly relaxed. Everything about him radiated vigor, peace, and boundless energy. How could anyone withstand that kind of pressure with so much grace? How could anyone witness as much suffering as he did, care so deeply about it, and work fifteen hours a day to relieve it, yet still be filled with such infectious good humor?

At Sevagram I found myself among young people from around the world—Americans, Japanese, Africans, Europeans, even Britons—who had come to see Gandhi and to help in his work. Whether a person's skin was white, brown, or black, whether he or she supported or opposed him, seemed to make no difference to Gandhi: he related to all with ease and respect.

Almost immediately, he made us feel we were part of his own family.

Indeed, I think that, in a private corner of our hearts, we all saw ourselves in him. I did. It was as if a precious element common to all of us had been extracted and purified to shine forth brightly as the Mahatma, the Great Soul. That very commonness was what moved us most—the feeling that in spite of all our fears and resentments and petty faults we too were made of such stuff. The Great Soul was our soul.

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At that time, of course, there were many observers who said Gandhi was extraordinary, an exception to the limitations that hold back the rest of the human race. Others dismissed him—some with great respect, others with less—as just another great man who was leaving his mark on history. Yet, according to him, there was no one more ordinary. “I claim to be an average man of less than average ability,” he often repeated. “I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.” The fact is, while most people think of ordinariness as a fault or limitation, Gandhi had discovered in it the very meaning of life—and of history. For him, it was not the famous or the rich or the powerful who would change the course of history. If the future is to differ from the past, he taught, if we are to leave a peaceful and healthy earth for our children, it will be the ordinary man and woman who will do it: not by becoming extraordinary, but by discovering that our greatest strength lies not in how much we differ from each other but in how much—how very much—we are the same.

This faith in the power of the individual formed the foundation for Gandhi’s extremely compassionate view of the industrial era’s large-scale problems, as well as of the smaller but no less urgent troubles we found in our own lives. Our problems, he would say, are not inevitable; they are not, as some historians and biologists have suggested, a necessary side effect of civilization. On the contrary, war, economic injustice, and pollution arise because we have not yet learned to make use of our most civilizing capacities: the creativity and wisdom we all have as our birthright. When even one person comes into full possession of these capacities, our problems are shown in their true light: they are simply the results of avoidable—though deadly—errors of judgment.

Gandhi formulated a series of diagnoses of the twentieth century’s seemingly perpetual state of crisis, which he called “the seven social sins.” I prefer to think of them as seven social ailments, since the problems they address are not crimes calling for punishment but crippling diseases that are punishment enough in themselves. These seven diagnoses cover every area of modern life, and volumes could be written about each of them. Here, though, I will be paying particular attention to the way they affect our relationship with the environment.

Perhaps the most compassionate of all seven is the one I will treat first, knowledge without character, which traces all our difficulties to a simple lack of connection between what we know is good for us and our ability to act on that knowledge. Then there is science without humanity—referring to the experiment we are conducting on ourselves and our planet, based on the absurd hypothesis that production, consumption, and national boundaries are more important than people or the earth.

Wealth without work points out the greatest failing of our society: it offers our young people no ideal or goal worthy of their ambition. Without a focus for their tremendous energy and talent, more and more of our brightest, most promising young people are turning to drugs or a life of sterile moneymaking, just at the time when the world needs their idealism most. Then there is commerce without morality, the business equivalent of science without humanity: a frenzy of economic activity based not on human need or the needs of the environment, but on an unexamined addiction to profit.

The last three diagnoses thrust us directly into the most challenging problems of the coming decades. Politics without principles refers to politics, from the governmental to the personal level, based on an almost total lack of faith in human nature, while pleasure without conscience concerns the destructive life-style based on that lack of faith. Finally, worship without self-sacrifice suggests that we have overlooked our most precious evolutionary resources: our idealism, our sensitivity to the suffering of others, and our sense of unity with the life around us.

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I [am not] suggesting that there is anything wrong in a business person making enough profit to support his or her family in comfort – everyone should have this opportunity. But in the industrial era we have exaggerated the importance of profit out of all proportion to its natural place in business. We have become addicted to it, and that is a very dangerous situation.

Most addictions begin innocently enough. “Just one more helping, one more bowl of ice cream, one more cigarette, one more drink for the road.” That is how it starts—just one more: “Let’s sell just one more new car, make one more dollar, pump one more gallon of gas.” When we give in to that desire repeatedly, with a second helping, a second smoke, a second drink, or a second sniff, it becomes a habit—not just one more but one every day: “The stockholders want to see this quarter’s profits rising above last quarter’s. Get the general manager on the phone and tell him to increase production, bolster demand, and heat up consumption. And do it yesterday.” With a habit we still have a choice whether to give in or not, but when a habit continues long enough, we lose our power to choose.

Our feeling of security becomes so closely attached to the thing we crave that we must have it, whatever the cost. The habit has become a compulsion, and we have become its servant. We will do anything for a profit, even if it means sacrificing our children’s precious seas, air, and earth. “Round-the-clock cleanup crews for oil tankers? No, we can save a few thousand dollars. Air pollution controls? No, that would cut into our profits.” This is what Gandhi means by knowledge without character—a lack of connection between what we know to be in everyone’s long-range best interest and our ability to act on that knowledge. It has become the cornerstone of much of our lives.

In Gandhi’s perspective, it is up to individuals like you and me to reverse this situation. Environmental abuse and exploitation are not “necessary evils”—no evil is necessary. In fact, Gandhi went so far as to say that evil in itself is not even real; it exists only as long as we support it. The moment we withdraw our support—the moment we make the connection between what we know and how we behave—it begins to collapse. As the eighteenth-century British statesman Edmund Burke put it, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Nevertheless, in our current situation, good men and women have little time to lose. At a breakneck pace, knowledge without character is making drastic changes in our atmosphere, our agricultural resources, our forests, and our seas. The cost in life is immeasurable, though it is the sad task of many of today’s scientists and naturalists to bear witness to it. They draw up lists of the eight hundred species of higher animals now threatened—the elephant, the whale, the snow leopard, the polar bear, the jaguar, and the cheetah among them. They describe the rate of disappearance of many lesser known species, and estimate the devastation still to come. Within the next two to three decades, they say, if present rates of destruction of the world’s rainforests continue, as many as half the world’s species of animals, plants and insects will become extinct. This is comparable to the last great extinction of the ice ages, in which the dinosaurs and 60% to 80% of the rest of the world’s species disappeared.

On March 12, 1930, when the British still had a firm grip on India, Mahatma Gandhi and seventy-eight of his disciples strode out of Sabarmati ashram toward the sea. In the twenty-four days that followed, they walked two hundred miles, picking up more and more companions as village after village turned out to cheer the Mahatma and raise the new Indian flag. By the time they reached their destination, the seashore at Dandi, the group numbered several thousand. With his inspiration and guidance, millions of ordinary individuals changed their lives in a small but powerful way: they stopped

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buying salt from the British and began making it themselves. Almost immediately, Indians along the coast and across the country were making, buying, and using homemade salt. Afterward India knew she was free, and nothing the British did could halt her march toward freedom.

Today, in a modern industrial society like the United States, our most pressing need is not for salt or clothing or shelter. For most of us, as that advertising executive said, all our basic needs have been met. But there remains a hunger for something more. We want to be somebody. We want to feel secure. We want to love. Without any better way to satisfy these inner needs, we end up depending on possessions and profit—not just for our physical well-being but as a substitute for the dignity, fulfillment, and security we want so much.

Let's start in little ways, by trying to make the connection between what we know to be healthy for our planet and what we do in our daily lives. As many environmentalists have suggested, we could walk instead of taking the car, or carpool or use mass transit instead of driving alone—that would be a small salt march in itself, with the added benefit that the commute would not be so lonely or expensive or long. We could start buying organic vegetables; if possible, we might even grow them in our own backyards, using no pesticides or other harmful chemicals. That would be the modern equivalent of making salt. We would be healthier, and so would the topsoil.

Today, even small changes like these seem very difficult. We all have so little time to spare; and we ask ourselves, what good would it do anyway? This is understandable. Without Gandhi's example, I think few Indians could have been persuaded that the British would be ushered out of India peacefully and gently and that a new independent nation of India would be founded—all by the power of salt.

How could one man have accomplished so much? From what hidden source did he draw his inspiration, his perseverance, his creativity? My visit to Mahatma Gandhi had only deepened my curiosity about this man who called himself an ordinary individual but who, by changing himself, had sparked such courage in a nation discouraged and frustrated for more than four hundred years. I could see now that it would take more time and work than I had expected to even begin to grasp his full significance. "My life is my message," Gandhi once wrote, and to all of us who wanted to share his work and ideals, that message was a resounding challenge: The only way to understand me, he was saying, is to go this way yourself.

Gandhi's life and achievements had exploded all my conceptions of what a human being could and could not do. The old limits no longer seemed to apply. As I cast about for a new understanding of who I was and where the world was going, I discovered two guides very near at hand. The first, of course, was the experience of growing up with my grandmother. I began to realize just how comprehensive her vision of the universe had been, and how patiently and lovingly she had introduced me to it.

The other was the guide Gandhi himself had followed. In the hundreds of letters he received each week, Gandhi was often asked how he had been able to change himself so completely, and his answer was always the same. He owed everything, he would say, to the Bhagavad Gita, his "spiritual reference book." The Bhagavad Gita is a short Sanskrit work of seven hundred verses that has fascinated and inspired mystics, physicists, psychologists, and philosophers of many countries for three thousand years. Set on a battlefield on the morning before a fierce battle, the Gita uses warfare as a

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metaphor for our personal battles with the challenges of life. The Gita's message is simple but profound: our native state is freedom. What we want most from life is to be free of all the mental compulsions that keep us from living in peace with ourselves, with others, and with the environment. This desire for freedom is at the core of our personality, says the Gita, and our failings—whether they be insensitivity to the suffering of others, or greed, or anger, or fear, or any of the seven ailments Gandhi diagnosed—only hide our real nature like dust obscuring the face of a mirror.

I had read the Gita before, but it was not until I saw Gandhi that I understood its magnificent practicality. The Gita, I began to understand, was not just philosophy or poetry but a blueprint for the remaking of the human personality. I felt I had exhausted all the options life had to offer. Yet, as I reread the Gita, I realized there was one direction in which I had not searched. With the energy and desire I had formerly spent on the thousand and one things of life, I began to turn inward. You could call it a gamble. Or, to put it in the language of science, you could say I adopted a new hypothesis. For the purpose of delving deeper into the meaning of my life, I placed my faith—all the faith I had formerly placed in literature and the achievements of the industrial era—in the Gita's hypothesis that what I was seeking rested not outside me but within, in the depths of my own heart and consciousness. "Hypothesis is the most important mental technique of the investigator," writes the Cambridge professor W. I. B. Beveridge in his book *The Art of Scientific Investigation*, "and its main function is to suggest new experiments or new observations. Indeed, most experiments and many observations are carried out with the deliberate object of testing an hypothesis."

"Testing an hypothesis." That is exactly what I began to do, following in Gandhi's footsteps. Gandhi himself was a relentless experimenter who would not rest until he had found a beneficial purpose for every detail of his life. In fact, he subtitled his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The Gita's hypothesis is that it is possible, by mastering the thinking process, to leave behind every unwanted habit and negative thought. To accomplish this, the Gita outlines a daily course of training in which we acquire conscious control of our attention, strengthening our will at such a deep level of the unconscious that no compulsive desire or addiction can sweep us away. What is the predicted result? When your will is linked to your intellect at the very depths of your personality, you discover yourself as you really are—secure, wise, compassionate, and intimately connected with all of life.

Nevertheless, through diligent practice I began to bring a measure of control to my thinking process. More and more frequently there came times when, instead of being told by my conditioning what to think and how to act, I was the one who told my mind what to think. I found that I could maintain my peace of mind, even under trying circumstances. Once I had gained a little control over my thinking process, though, I learned how to detach myself from my opinions. Before long I began to enlarge the scope of my experimentation. I was surprised at how malleable my life became, as habits and patterns of behavior that had seemed permanent came under my conscious control. Gradually, all my energy began to flow into this process. The results changed the way I lived—and the way I saw the universe. Beveridge goes on to say: "Another function [of an hypothesis] is to help one see the significance of an object or event that otherwise would mean nothing." My experiments were doing just that. My own life; the lives of others around me; the earth; the universe itself, which had seemed a mere "concatenation of atoms"—all now began to reveal a cohesiveness, compassionate wisdom, and purpose that until then I had seen only in my grandmother's life.

From *The Compassionate Universe, Chapter Two: Knowledge Without Character, The Power of Salt* by Eknath Easwaran, founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, www.easwaran.org.

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