

THE BIG IDEAS

Crafting Virtuous Lives

Like wise woodworkers.

IQ vs. WQ

Will Quotient for the (2x!) win!

Three Gatekeepers

Of the Lips

Why Aren't You...

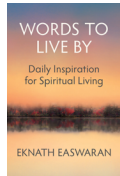
More like you?

Your Life As a Trust

The fine print.

Life Strings

Making music.



Words to Live By

Daily Inspiration for Spiritual Living

BY EKNATH EASWARAN · NILGIRI PRESS © 2010 · 408 PAGES

“To live at our best, each day we must renew our faith, find strength to meet challenges, and draw inspiration from a living source. This book of daily readings is meant to help us face the challenges and opportunities of every day with courage and wisdom.

Some days we are offered a gentle reminder to slow down the hectic pace of our lives, to discover the richness of being mindful and patient. Other days give inspiration to change habits, or advice about a troubled relationship. At times, we read the words of a sympathetic friend who can help us through a dark day with timeless wisdom about the nature of life. And on some special days we have a glimpse of what it might be like to live on those peaks of spirituality that the teachers of all religions point to in every age. ...

As we go through the year with Easwaran, we take a new step on the path every day. Some days will be blessed with happiness and some will be marked by hardship, but each day can further the journey.

One day at a time is enough.”

~ The Editors of *Words to Live By*

This is our ninth (!) Note on one of Eknath Easwaran's books.

That, my friends, is a all-time record. (We've got a bunch on books by [Cal Newport](#) along with [Steven Pressfield](#) and [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) and... :)

As I've said in nearly all the other introductions, I absolutely love Easwaran and his wisdom—which, of course, is why we've featured nearly all of his books ranging from [Conquest of Mind](#) and [Passage Meditation](#) to [Take Your Time](#) and [Gandhi the Man](#). (And, if you haven't read his translations of the [Bhagavad Gita](#) and [The Dhammapada](#), I think you'll love them.)

This book is a 365-day collection of wisdom from Easwaran featuring inspiring quotes from some of the world's leading spiritual teachers followed by Easwaran's inspirational take on that wisdom. It follows the same basic style of the other daily wisdom books we've covered like Ryan Holiday's [The Daily Stoic](#) (another top recommendation), Alan Cohen's [A Daily Dose of Sanity](#) and Sri Swami Satchidananda's [The Golden Present](#).

If you haven't studied Easwaran yet, this might be the perfect introduction. And, if you've already enjoyed soaking your consciousness in his wisdom, I think you might enjoy this one as much as I have. Get a copy [here](#).

We love it so much it usually occupies some prime real estate on the kitchen table. :)

It's extraordinarily (!) packed with grounding, soul-expanding wisdom. I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas we can apply to our lives Today so let's jump straight in!

“The saints and mystics tell us that life has one overriding purpose: to discover the source of infinite love and then to express this love in daily living.”

~ Eknath Easwaran

CRAFTING VIRTUOUS LIVES

"Of all that is wonderful in the human being, our most glorious asset is the capacity to change ourselves."

~ Eknath Easwaran

As an irrigator guides water to the fields, as an archer aims an arrow, as a carpenter carves wood, the wise shape their lives. - The Buddha

"The glory of the human being is our ability to remake ourselves. The Buddha is very rightly called the Compassionate One because he holds out hope for everybody. He doesn't say our past has been dark, therefore our chances are dim. He says whatever our past, whatever our present, the sky is bright for us because we can remake ourselves.

The Buddha says, be a good woodworker. Consciousness is the wood, and you can make it take any shape you like. Just as a carpenter works the wood to build a house or a fine piece of furniture, similarly we can fashion the responses and attitudes we desire: love, wisdom, security, patience, loyalty, enthusiasm, cheerfulness."

Welcome to the passage for the very first day of the year.

We start with the recognition that ALL of us have the power to shape our lives. Then we get to work like good woodworkers (/irrigators/archers/carpenters) as we create a virtuous life.

btw: As I typed that out, I thought to myself, "I wonder what was discussed January 1st in those other 365-books I referenced in the Introduction..." I was pretty sure I captured those Day 1 wisdom nuggets as well, figuring that must be at least among the most powerful wisdom from the whole book, eh? So... Here's what I found.

In *The Daily Stoic*, January 1st featured this: *"The single most important practice in Stoic philosophy is differentiating between what we can change and what we can't. What we have influence over and what we do not. A flight is delayed because of weather—no amount of yelling at an airline representative will end a storm. No amount of wishing will make you taller or shorter or born in a different country. No matter how hard you try, you can't make someone like you. And on top of that, time spent hurling yourself at these immovable objects is time not spent on the things we can change.*

The recovery community practices something called the Serenity Prayer: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' Addicts cannot change the abuse suffered in childhood. They cannot undo the choices they have made or the hurt they have caused. But they can change the future—through the power they have in the present moment. As Epictetus said, they can control the choices they make right now.

The same is true for us today. If we can focus on making clear what parts of our day are within our control and what parts are not, we will not only be happier, we will have a distinct advantage over other people who fail to realize they are fighting an unwinnable battle."

"If thou shouldst say, 'It is enough, I have reached perfection,' all is lost. For it is the function of perfection to make one know one's imperfection."

~ Saint Augustine

In *The Golden Present*, we start with this: *"Life must be a challenge. Only then is it exciting. In an obstacle race, you are forced to surmount all the obstacles: to jump over the hurdles, go through the barrels, crawl under the rugs, climb over walls. What would happen if, to avoid all that, you went around all the obstacles and asked for the winner's cup? Would they give it to you? No. They would say, 'You must go back and face all the obstacles.'*

... Make your life as exciting as possible, but always think of it as fun. The adversities as well as the harmony should be enjoyable. Don't become sober and morose and have a castor oil face in the name of spirituality. Just be happy. Jump with joy. Even if you make a mistake, say, "Hey, I did this? Great! What a wonderful lesson I learned!" If you really want to, you can make everything fun."

btw: Easwaran nearly perfectly echoes that same wisdom later in the book when he says:

"The goal ever recedes from us. The greater the progress, the greater the recognition of our unworthiness. Satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory."

~ Gandhi

"To grow to our full height, we need to be challenged with tasks that draw out our deeper resources, the talents and capacities we did not know we had. We need to be faced with obstacles that cannot be surmounted unless we summon up our daring and creativity. This kind of challenge is familiar to any great athlete or scientist or artist. No worthwhile accomplishment comes easily."

IQ VS. WQ

Strength does not come from physical capacity.

It comes from an indomitable will.

- Mahatma Gandhi

"What counts most in life is not IQ but WQ, 'Will Quotient.' No one can plead that he or she lacks will. There is will in every desire. Every desire carries with it the will to bring that desire to fruition. When it comes to something we like, we have all the will we need. Someone says, 'Hey, come on, we're going skiing!' and that is enough. We will get out of bed at three in the morning, drive for hours, stand cheerfully in the snow waiting for the ski lift, and in general suffer all kinds of discomfort with a will of iron. Yet as small a challenge as a letter to Aunt Gertrude will find the will against us.

To control our destiny, we need to harness our will, to do not what we like, but what is in our long-term best interest. If the will is strong enough, great things can be accomplished; if the will is weak, very little. In every endeavor, it is the man or woman with a firm will who excels."

"Will Quotient." <- Easwaran tells us THAT's what counts most in life.

Science agrees. As we've discussed many times, Martin Seligman puts it this way in [Flourish](#): **"Self-discipline outpredicts IQ for academic success by a factor of 2."**

As I say every time I share that wisdom-quote: That's worth a re-read. One more time: Self-discipline (aka willpower) (aka WQ) outpredicts IQ for academic success by a factor of TWO?! Really? It's TWICE as predictive? Wow.

And... What makes that stat so powerful is that WQ is teachable. (See our wisdom packs (featuring Notes + 101's) on [Habits](#) + [Willpower](#) + [Algorithms](#) for more on the subject.)

Couple more quick things.

I laughed as I read that description of being willing to endure all kinds of torture to hit the ski slopes. I thought of [Seneca](#) (and making our PM and AM Bookends as exciting as that ski trip): **"How much better to pursue a straight course and eventually reach that destination where the things that are pleasant and the things that are honorable finally become, for you, the same."**

Easwaran said our ski buddy had "a will of iron." Which made me think of one of our Notes on [An Iron Will](#) by Orison Swett Marden. That whole Note is one soul-expanding choir of angels singing moment after another. Especially this one: **"The man without self-reliance and an iron will is the plaything of chance, the puppet of his environment, the slave of circumstances. Are not doubts the greatest of enemies? If you would succeed up to the limit of your possibilities, must you not constantly hold to the belief that you are success-organized, and that you will be successful, no matter what opposes? You are never to allow a shadow of doubt to enter your mind that the Creator intended you to win in life's battle. Regard every suggestion that your life may be a failure, that you are not made like those who succeed, and that success is not for you, as a traitor, and expel it from your mind as you would a thief from your house."**

Back to Easwaran. Remember: **"To control our destiny, we need to harness our will, to do not what we like, but what is in our long-term best interest. If the will is strong enough, great things can be accomplished; if the will is weak, very little. In every endeavor, it is the man or woman with a firm will who excels."**

"A seeker once asked Bayazid: 'Who is the true Prince?' 'The man who cannot choose,' said Bayazid: 'the man for whom God's choice is the only possible choice.'"

~ Bayazid Al-Bistami

"To see life as it is, the mind must be made pure: everything that distorts it must be quieted or removed. When the mind is completely still, unstirred even in its depths, we see straight through to the ground of our being, which is divine."

~ Eknath Easwaran

How's YOUR will?

Let's Optimize our WQ. And control our destinies.

THE THREE GATEKEEPERS OF THE LIPS

The words of the tongue should have three gatekeepers.

- Arab Proverb

"Before words get past the lips, the first gatekeeper asks, 'Is this true?' That stops a lot of traffic immediately. But if the words get past the first gatekeeper, there is a second who asks, 'Is it kind?' And for those words that qualify here too, the last gatekeeper asks, 'Is it necessary?'"

With these three on guard, most of us would find very little to say. Here I think it is necessary to make exceptions in the interests of good company and let the third gatekeeper look the other way now and then. After all, a certain amount of pleasant conversation is part of the artistry of living. But the first two gatekeepers should always be on duty.

It is so easy to say something at the expense of another for the purpose of enhancing our own image. But such remarks—irresistible as they may be—serve only to fatten our egos and agitate others. We should be so fearful of hurting people that even if a clever remark is rushing off our tongue, we can barricade the gate. We should be able to swallow our cleverness rather than hurt someone. Better to say something banal but harmless than to be clever at someone else's expense."

The three gatekeepers.

Standing guard right there at your lips.

* SALUTE * | * SALUTE * | * SALUTE *

The first gatekeeper asks: "Is it true?"

If the words pass his test, the second gatekeeper asks: "Is it kind?"

Then we get to third gatekeeper who asks: "Is it necessary?"

One more time: Is what you're about to say true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?

Let's run our words through those three gatekeepers the next time we have some thing to say!!!

P.S. That passage makes me think of the Eleanor Roosevelt quote we have stenciled on the wall in our garage. I see it every time we drive in...

"Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people."

<- What do YOU discuss?

P.P.S. When I think of those three gatekeepers, I think of Will Bowen's [Complaint Free World](#). He tells us: *"Complaining should happen infrequently; criticism and gossip, never... Most of the complaining we do is just a lot of 'ear pollution' detrimental to our happiness and well-being."*

WHY AREN'T YOU MORE LIKE YOU?

I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear.

But those who worship me with love live in me, and I come to life in them.

- Bhagavad Gita

"There is no need to compare ourselves with others or to feel our contribution is less important than someone else's. Yesterday I read a story that makes this point very well. It was about a Hasidic rabbi named Susya, who said, 'When I die, I will not be asked, 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' I will be asked, 'Why weren't you more like Susya?'"

*"Luck is not chance —
It's toil —
Fortune's expensive smile
Is earned."*

~ Emily Dickinson

*"When we simplify our lives,
we can give our time and
attention to what matters
most."*

~ Eknath Easwaran

Similarly, the Self is not going to say, 'You could have been a doctor! Why were you just a nurse's aide?' He is going to ask, 'Were you the best nurse's aide you knew how to be? Did you help your patients not just by your labor, but by your genuine concern for their welfare?' Each of us has a special gift, some special capacity by which we can contribute to the welfare of those around us. What is important is that we use that gift or skill to the very best of our ability."

Leo Buscaglia's wisdom from [Love](#) immediately comes to mind.

He tells us: "You are the best you. You will always be the second best anyone else."

Alan Stein, Jr. puts it well in [Raise Your Game](#) where he tells us: "My friend Paul Bioncardi of ESPN loves to say, 'You will always lose the Comparison Game.' Why is that? Because it's rigged. It has no function besides enlarging self-doubt. I'm typing this chapter on board a flight to South Dakota. Among the 250 passengers on this plane, I can quickly find someone better looking, funnier, more successful, taller, more muscular, smarter. It won't take long to find someone who scores higher than me on almost any metric. If I use these people as my measuring stick—to determine my self-worth and value—I will always lose."

Let's not wait till we die.

Quick q: Why aren't you being more like you?!

YOUR LIFE AS A TRUST

The first wealth is health.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

"When you regard your life as a trust, you realize that the first resource you have to take care of is your own body. This can be startling. Even your body is not really your own. It belongs to life, and it is your responsibility to take care of it. You cannot afford to do anything that injures your body, because the body is the instrument you need for selfless action. That is the fine print of the trust agreement: when we smoke, when we overeat, when we don't get enough exercise, we are violating the terms of the trust.

If you want to live life at its fullest, you will want to do everything possible to keep your body in vibrant health in order to give back to life a little of what it has given you."

Recall that this is a book featuring wisdom from some of history's brightest spiritual lights Meister Eckhart. Ramana Maharshi. Saint Teresa of Avila. Rumi. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Not the kind of place where you'd expect to find encouragement to Optimize our Energy.

But... There it is: "If you want to live life at its fullest, you will want to do everything possible to keep your body in vibrant health in order to give back to life a little of what it has given you."

Are you? (What's one little thing you could do TODAY?)

STRINGS: TOO TIGHT? TOO LOOSE?

Those who eat too much or eat too little, who sleep too much or sleep too little, will not succeed in meditation. But those who are temperate in eating and sleeping, work and recreation, will come to the end of sorrow through meditation. - Bhagavad Gita

"Once, when the Buddha was told that one of his disciples was having trouble, he went to the young man's room to see what the problem was. This young man had been born in a rich family, and he had been trained in music, so he still kept his *vina*—an instrument something like a guitar—in the corner of his room. When the Buddha entered, he saw the *vina* and said, 'Let me see if I can play your *vina*.'

"When all hostility, fear, and insecurity are erased from your mind, the state that remains is pure joy."

~ Eknath Easwaran

The disciple reluctantly brought it forward. He didn't know that the Buddha had been an expert musician.

The Buddha tightened the strings of the vina until they were about to break. The disciple protested, 'You are not supposed to tighten the strings like that, Blessed One; they will break!'

So the Buddha, with tender cunning said, 'Oh, yes! then should I make them loose?' And he loosened all the strings until they couldn't be played at all. 'Here, let me do it for you, Blessed One,' said the disciple, and he adjusted them. 'They are now just right, neither too tight nor too loose.'

The Buddha smiled, 'Yes, you see, that is what my path is: just right, neither too tight nor too loose. Moderation in everything. Temperance in everything.'

I love it when great wisdom is echoed by great teachers.

Here's how Aristotle puts it in his *Ethics*: "First, then, we must consider this fact: that it is in the nature of moral qualities that they are destroyed by deficiency and excess, just as we can see (since we have to use the evidence of visible facts to throw light on those that are invisible) in the case of health and strength. For both excessive and insufficient exercise destroy one's strength, and both eating and drinking too much or too little destroy health, whereas the right quantity produces, increases and preserves it. So it is the same with temperance, courage and the other virtues. The man who shuns and fears everything and stands up to nothing becomes a coward; the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger, becomes foolhardy. Similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none becomes licentious; but if a man behaves like a boor and turns his back on every pleasure, he is a case of insensibility. Thus temperance and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency and preserved by the mean."

So... How are YOUR strings?

Let's make 'em just right—neither too tight nor too loose—as we go have fun making beautiful music in the symphony of life.

B

Brian Johnson,
Philosopher in Residence

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[Conquest of Mind](#)

[The Dhammapada](#)

[Bhagavad Gita](#)

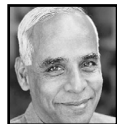
[Gandhi, the Man](#)

[Passage Meditation](#)

[Take Your Time](#)

About the Author of "Words to Live By"

EKNATH EASWARAN



Easwaran brings to this volume a rare combination of literary skill, scholarship, and spiritual wisdom. His Sanskrit comes from one of the purest traditions in India, where for twenty years he followed a successful career as a writer, lecturer, and teacher of English literature.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.