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Our Real Identity by Eknath Easwaran

One of the first lessons I learned in geography was that the earth is round. Our little village in South India had been left out of the march of modern civilization, and most of us hadn't heard this terrible news. Even my teacher was a little diffident in presenting it to us. "You may not believe this," he began, "and if you don't, I sympathize completely. But this is what they gave me to understand when I did my teacher's training in Madras."

When I went home that afternoon, my granny was waiting for me as always by the front gate, ready with her usual greeting: "Well, Little Lamp, what did you learn in school today?"

"Brace yourself, Granny," I said. "You may not believe this, and if you don't, I sympathize completely. But today my teacher told us that the earth is really round." Shattering the illusions of a granny's lifetime.

Not a hair fell out of place. "What does it matter?" she asked. "You can be selfless whether the earth is round or square or triangular."

That took some wind out of my sails. But there was still my mother; she was much easier to surprise. I marched over and said, "Guess what we learned today."

"I can't," she said. "You tell me."

"The earth is round!"

She fell into a paroxysm of laughter which still rings in my ears. She never let me forget that moment, and I don't think she ever believed me either.

I used to try to reason with her. "This isn't just some theory, Mother," I'd say. "It has been proved over and over again." Her point was inarguable: for her, a flat earth worked. "When I go to the temple," she'd say, "I don't roll off. When you go to school, you don't slide down the sides. It looks flat; why should I change my mind?"

Once I saw the practicality of this point of view, I ceased trying to convince her. As long as you keep within a certain sphere of activity, believing that the earth is flat is a harmless superstition that interferes very little with daily living.



A more pervasive kind of ignorance

Virtually all of us, however, are subject to a much more pervasive kind of ignorance that affects every detail of our lives: we believe that we are wholly physical creatures, who can be satisfied in wholly physical ways. This belief has profound practical implications. On the individual level, it means we believe that if we can give a person the capacity to satisfy physical needs and desires, he or she will be happy. Technology will be able to solve our health problems and provide material comfort for everyone. It will also be able to solve our mental problems, since personality and behavior are determined by our chemistry.

Progress is measured in terms of material growth, value in terms of material assets. Even a person's work is evaluated as a commodity. Finally, there is nothing like a moral order, only the principles of natural selection; so our only rational guide for action is self-interest.

Believing we are the body means we are going to commit a lot of mistakes — likely to do all sorts of absurd things to satisfy emotional or spiritual needs in physical ways that only make us more body conscious, making the problem worse.

To begin with, identifying with something that is constantly changing is a perfect recipe for insecurity. Everyone wants to keep the body healthy and attractive, but when we start thinking that is who we are, we are fighting a battle with change that no human being has ever won, constantly losing ground in the inevitable decline from those golden years around age eighteen.

Second, as long as we believe we are the body, we can't help believing that everyone else is a body too, each separate from us and from each other. Then it seems natural, even right, to treat our personal interests as separate from theirs, even if getting what we want comes at their expense.

Third, when we identify ourselves with the body, we cannot help believing that we can change ourselves by changing the way we look. So much time and attention goes into playing games with physical appearances! It's like spending our lives fixing up a house we never get around to living in. We design it, build it, plaster it, paint it, furnish it, decorate it and redecorate it over and over, but before we take up residence, we go into the grave.

A hole in consciousness

But the main problem with identifying ourselves with the body is that we spend our lives trying to satisfy nonphysical needs in physical ways. It is as if there is a hole in our consciousness that has no bottom, and day after day we pour into this fathomless pit all the things we think will fill it: bank checks, stock certificates, material possessions, tokens of power and prestige, every fleeting satisfaction of



the day. We find a little pleasure or profit and toss it in; we never even hear it hit the bottom, so we try again. This goes on and on and on; we just don't know what else to try.

The discovery of who we are

The great religions of the world have always taught that there is more to the human being than the body: an essential core of personality that is not physical but spirit, divine. Every one of us is born to make the discovery of who we are, where we come from, and what our responsibilities in living are.

Like everybody else, I grew up believing that I was purely physical, a collection of biochemical constituents. What has changed for me since then? Everything. Not two or three things but everything. Through meditation, with the help of the demanding disciplines I followed every day in the midst of a busy life, that belief in myself as a purely physical creature has fallen away completely. Today I do not look upon myself or anyone else as physical. I identify with the Self, pure spirit, the same in all.

The forces of life

“Like a ball batted back and forth,” says an ancient text called the Yogabindu Upanishad, “a human being is batted by two forces within”: one, the upward drive to evolve into spiritual beings; the other, the fierce downward thrust of our past conditioning as separate, self-oriented, physical creatures.

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit here is “like a ball hit by a stick held in the hand.” I don't have any idea what game the sages of ancient India had been watching, but I think tennis fits the verse perfectly. Millions of people have taken to this sport in the past few years, so it seems a natural one to use to bring this image to life.

Imagine a match between two gentlemen players from the past who are probably among the best the game has ever seen: Bjorn Borg on the one side and Ivan Lendl on the other. Now imagine being a tennis ball played by these two strong champions — Lendl, whose shots used to travel at more than a hundred miles per hour, and Borg, who would string his racquets so taut that at night he was sometimes awakened by the *ping!* as the strings snapped spontaneously under the strain. Every one of us, this ancient text says, is being played like this twenty-four hours a day back and forth between two opposing inner forces. Here are Ivan on one side of the court and Bjorn on the other, enjoying themselves immensely, yelling to each other, “Hit him for all you're worth; I'll slam the poor fellow back!”

This inner tension is our evolutionary heritage. It reflects our divided nature as human beings: partly physical, essentially spiritual, constantly pulled in two

conflicting directions. If this sounds bad, it is actually quite positive. For if one of these players will not let us alone, neither will the other.

A persistent upward drive

Built into our very nature is an inner drive that will not let us be satisfied with living at our lowest level, governed only by biological laws. Some inner evolutionary imperative is constantly exhorting us to grow, to reach for the highest that we can conceive, as if nature itself will not let us rest with anything less than spiritual fulfillment.

Toward the end of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita there is a statement so direct, so penetrating, that it should move us to question all external attempts at self-improvement: those who are always trying to satisfy their personal desires will never find peace in this life. Such people are doomed to live in turmoil and isolation. Why? Because if we cannot make changes where we really want to — in our own personality — it does not matter what else we may have achieved; we won't be able to live with ourselves.

Often, I think, this is why active people are so active, why adventurers adventure and globetrotters trot: we do not want to stop and listen to that quiet heckler in the depths of our hearts, reminding us of our real job. This is ultimately what insecurity means; that is where a sense of inadequacy really comes from.

But we can change. No one need ever feel resigned and say, "There is nothing I can do." There is everything we can do. That is the purpose and the power of that persistent upward force within us: if we turn inward we can remake ourselves completely, modeling ourselves in the image of the loftiest spiritual ideal we can conceive.