

Relaxing the Over-Controller ~ Part 1

~ a talk by Tara Brach, PhD, presented on April 26, 2017

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Namaste and Welcome.

Some years ago, a friend told me about an interfaith conference where there were quite a diverse group of people. They began the conference with a gathering to decide on some common language, with the particular question being: How do we collectively refer to really the Divine? What is the language for that going to be for that which human hearts most deeply cherish? The first person said, “Well, shall we call it God?” And a female Wiccan said, “Oh no! No way!” And then, “What about Goddess?” And a Baptist minister gave that a thumbs down. Someone else offered, “How about spirit?” and the Atheists kind of shook their head. It went on for a while and finally, it was a Native American who suggested: “How about the great mystery?” And everybody agreed. Each person present sensed the mystery behind any spiritual or religious idea.

And I am wondering how many find that resonant? Just that word *mystery*? I do.

Really, when we start asking the real questions: *What is love?* or *How did this universe get created with these black holes that are everywhere?* Or when we wonder about the new spring leaves that we are beholding or that vacancy when a loved one has gone. How do we talk about that? There is some wisdom in us that bows to what is beyond what our cognitive minds know as a mystery. I think this is in all paths, this realization that it is there; yet, how often do we actually, in the midst of our day, stand in awe?

Einstein said: “Once you can accept the universe as matter expanding into nothing that is something, wearing stripes with plaid comes easy.” And yet, in our daily lives, we are usually rushing around, on our way somewhere, doing something, being somebody, and acting, with a certain kind of certainty, like we know what we are doing. We are the kind of protagonist of our drama and we have these ideas of right and wrong and it actually closes us off to comprehending this mystery that we are living in.

William James described it really well when he said that the beginning of all religions is the cry, “Help!” We mortals perceive the shakiness of our predicament and cry out for help and then religions come in with their views to try to explain everything and they create what Joseph Campbell called a kind of “inoculation” against the mystery.¹

These human minds have a very hard time just hanging out with groundlessness . . . with this impermanent changing world of ours. We want to make meanings. And we really have a hard time with the fact that our existences are temporary. And that is the resistance. We are all really eager to live and not so eager to go. I think it was George Carlin that said: “I went hitchhiking the other day and a hearse stopped and I said, ‘No, thanks, I am not going that far.’” And then, of course, for Patrick Henry, death was his second choice. It’s just not where we want to go.

So basically, rather than living in open acceptance to this changing, living and dying world, we kind of clamp down and are rigged to try to control things with our mind and our behaviors. We try to hold on to what is pleasant and push away what is unpleasant. And what we find is that in moments of controlling, we can’t really experience what is here. I think John O’Donohue said it the best when he wrote: “We are so busy managing our life as to cover over this great mystery we are involved with.”

So, how do we do that? What are some of the ways that we control?

We do it through tightening in our bodies. Chogyam Trungpa talked about how we are a bunch of tense muscles tensing against our existence trying to hold it all together. We also create an illusion of control in our minds with our constant thinking and busyness. It’s like if we stay busy, there is this illusion that we are taking charge of things. And then we worry and obsess and grasp on to things. We try to hold on to our possessions. It gives us more of a sense of ground — even though you can’t take it with you.

I heard a story about a man who wrote to the IRS and said: “I have been unable to sleep knowing that I cheated on my income tax. I understated my taxable income and I

¹ Campbell, J., & Moyers, B. D. (1988). *The Power of Myth* (B. S. Flowers, Ed.). NY, NY: Doubleday.

have enclosed a check for one-hundred-fifty dollars. If I still can't sleep, I will send the rest.”

Ok, so we've covered death and taxes.

This is the first talk in a two-part series called *Relaxing the Over-controller*. You might be beginning to sense that I am talking to you, and truly, it is to all of us. In fact, I wrote this talk during a very stressed period. The day that I was going to give the talk in my weekly class, by the mid-afternoon — just as I was kind of doing the final touches on the talk — I got a back spasm and couldn't make it to class to talk about the over-controller. So that is a bit of confession. But the theme, to me, is a critical one because it is such a fundamental part of our ego-identity.

If we really shine a light on who we are taking ourselves to be, there are so many moments that, in some way, we are the one trying to manage things. We are the one trying to make it through the day, trying to take care of the problem, trying to navigate. You might be thinking: *Don't we have to control some? Don't we have to make a living, and have shelter, and have our children go to school, and take care of ourselves when we get sick, and protect ourselves from threatening people, and so on?* Of course we do. This isn't about not trying to manage things where we can, this is about *over-control*.

In my talks, I often share a metaphor that works for me: We are born and we create this kind of spacesuit to navigate a difficult atmosphere. Our spacesuit is our egoic efforts at presenting a self that will be well received by others, protecting ourselves when we detect danger, and trying to improve our life by having more pleasure and more gratification and so on — by promoting ourselves. And it is part of evolution. We are designed to develop this egoic spacesuit self. It comes out of loving and wanting to protect life.

The suffering comes when our control strategies — our spacesuit activities — are on all of the time or a whole lot of the time, and we forget who is looking through the mask. We forget the tender heart-space that is here, the consciousness. In other words, when we are identified as the human *doing* and not the human *being*, when we identify with the spacesuit — with the controller — then we are always preparing for what is next. We have an agenda and we are not living the life that is here. We need pauses where we are not operating from the spacesuit.

In a novel by author Elmore Leonard, there is a character who has been shot and realizes he might be dying. Leonard writes about the dying man:

“He had finally made it. It had taken him fifty years to learn that *being* was the important thing. Not being *something*. Just *being*. Looking around you knowing you are just *being*, not preparing for anything. That was a long time to learn something. He should have known about it when he was seven, but nobody had told him. The only thing they told him was that he had to be *something*. See, if he had been told then, he would have had all that time to enjoy *being*. Except it doesn't have to do with time, he thought. *Being* is an hour or a minute or a moment.”²

So, we will take a moment now to pause. because maybe the spacesuit self was thinking it was listening to a talk about meditation so it could get through tomorrow better. But what happens if we close our eyes for a moment and just relax out of that spacesuit self? Even with a good intention, we are still doing something, but what if we can relax for a moment and just *be*? When our intention is just to be, to inhabit being, we start noticing how quickly we pull into an idea or a thought. And yet, in the space between the thoughts, when we are not activated in *doing*, in that resting — in that pause — the light of the universe begins to shine through. *Being*. That is really the source of all vitality and creativity, love, wisdom. Our suffering is that we miss out on *being*. When we are caught in the over-controller, we don't get that soul-nourishment.

How do we know when we are caught in the suffering of the over-controller? One thing that we find is that we are exhausted. If we are hooked up in the spacesuit self, we are always on and there is no breathing room. There is nowhere that the light of the universe can shine through and no rest. It is tiring to be always managing.

One of the best descriptions of this is in Kelly McGonigal's *The Will-Power Instinct* — very good book. She describes will-power — self-control, this controlling ego — as kind of a muscle that, when you use it, gets tired. Every moment that you are, in some way, using that muscle, you are tiring it. And you can run into exhaustion. It needs to rest. And of course, when we are over-doing or over-controlling, it is not just

² Leonard, E. (2012). *The Hunted*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

exhaustion. It can spiral into a myriad of somatic illnesses that are serious and can be life-threatening, including stroke and heart-failure.³

So, the over-controller doesn't get nourished by being. It is addicted to doing. I think so often of the myth of Sisyphus. We're pushing that boulder up the hill, just watching it roll down — just doomed to doing it over and over and over again. And even though our doing, controlling self might say: *But I have to do this! I have to do that! This needs to get done!* — the over-controller is way overdoing it. It is pushing boulders it does not need to push.

So one of the sufferings of the over-controller is exhaustion, just always being on. Another is being cut off from creativity. Have you noticed that if you are in controlling mode, it is just not a creative time? I think about the Titans — again from Greek mythology — they are the ones who created the world and they came out of chaos. The Titans came out of chaos, it wasn't a controlled state. They emerged from chaos. Creativity comes from chaos. Keats describes true achievement — real creative achievement — as a *negative capacity*. Rather than living in a controlled, bounded way, we can tolerate groundlessness and uncertainty. Think of your creative moments when, in some way, you felt spontaneous — art, writing, music, including receiving those creativities. Dancing. These moments don't happen when we are busy being somebody.

Exhaustion, non-creativity. When we are in the over-controller, we are cut off from other people because we have an agenda. The over-controller, in some way, when we are with others, feels the need to be doing something in order for them to like or respect us. There is a feeling that, unless you are performing or you are interesting or entertaining, the people you are with won't like you. But it is actually disconnecting. Can you really feel intimate with another if you are in control-mode?

Similarly, when the over-controller is on, we can't be intimate with our own life because when we are in control mode, we are judging. We are trying to manipulate ourselves into being different in some way and we can't feel our own loneliness or our own yearning. We are pushing boulders. The over-controller is not connected to the present moment. When you are filled with worries and plans and you are trying to

³ McGonigal, K. (2012). *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It*. New York, NY: Avery.

manage things, how much can you really be in touch with the life that is right here? I got an email from one person who said: “If I can’t experience the new green of spring in my veins, the song of birds in my heart, what is the purpose?”

Really, the beginning of this reflection is that the over-controller cuts us off. Chogyam Trungpa says:

“As long as we are trying to figure out how we can escape from our present situation, we can’t notice much about it. Only when we feel that this is it, this is how it is right now, without any clutching toward something different, will our intelligence really come alive.”

In other words: To see reality, we have to put down the controlling and just be with what is here.

On a societal level, this over-controlling ego, when it expresses through the collective psyche, wreaks havoc. It is a shadow-side. When the over-controller is in our public domain, what does it do? It destroys the Earth. It dominates versus being in intimate relationship with the Earth. It inflicts violence to the Earth and to the most vulnerable of the Earth’s inhabitants.

The over-controller is driven by fear. It is afraid that something is going to go wrong, it needs to protect. It is driven by greed and grasping because of the fear of losing; therefore, it is cut off from empathy. The over-controller, on a societal level, generates wars and generates walls. You understand. So how do we wake up?

The first thing is to know that in order to wake up from the over-controller, we have to intentionally recognize that the over-controller is in action. We can’t wake up from a part of our persona or ego that we are not aware of. I often talk about, Joseph Campbell’s illustration of the circle of awareness. He describes a line that goes through the circle and anything below the line is what is outside of our consciousness.⁴ If we are moving through the day and we are always trying to manage things — we are

⁴ Campbell, J. (Writer). (1999). *Psyche and Symbol: The Psychological Impulse For and Response to Myth* [Television series episode]. In *Mythos I: The Shaping of Our Mythic Tradition*. PBS.

trying to control other people to get them to cooperate, or we are trying to judge and manage ourselves — if the controller is in action and we don't recognize it, then we are identified with it. We are identified with anything we are not aware of and living below the line. But once we can begin to see it, it comes above the line and then we have choice.

When you run into the over-controller, how are you relating to it? If you judge the over-controller, you are just bringing more controlling to your life. It is another version of the over-controller coming around again. So, the trick is to relate *to* the over-controller not *from* the over-controller. In other words, relate to it from a larger space of compassion and presence.

I'm going to come back to that again because, thus far, I suspect for many of you are thinking "Oh God, this is a bad part of me and I have got to work on it!" You know, it is kind of that sinking feeling of: *Oh I am a controlling person*. I know that more than most people here probably.

If we are going around feeling like *I am a control-freak and it is really ugly and bad* or that this is a pathology — and even the words I am using over-controller makes it sound like it is bad — I want to see if we can step out of that, because that is another controlling reaction, and get that it is universal. We are designed through evolution to have an ego that is going to try to control itself and its environment for its furtherance. That is universal. Every one of us. And the more fear, the more wounding we have experienced in a lifetime or genetically or whatever, the more activated that controller is going to be. It is not our fault. If you have a well-developed over-controller, it is just the result of past conditioning. And if you can behold it, witness it with kindness, then you can loosen the identity.

So let us take a pause here again. I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and sense, even thus far, how you are detecting *Oh, okay. There is some conditioning here towards controlling that plays in my life that actually can cause suffering, there is that conditioning to try to manage, and that this is a universal part of my humanity. And that the people sitting on either side of me also have this conditioning to control.*

And right here from the start of this exploration, sense your aspiration to relate to the over-controller with kindness, with patience, with humor, with appreciation. It is trying to help you. It is just not doing it in the most strategically wise way. To relate to rather

than *from* the over-controller makes it possible. If you imagine that over-controller like Sisyphus rolling the boulder — just really pushing, trying hard — imagine Sisyphus just deciding to let the boulder go. Just imagine the space that opens up and the possibilities of enjoying the view, going home and dipping into a stream and showering off all that sweat and just relaxing and enjoying the life that is here. We don't have to keep pushing so much. That is what is possible when we begin to witness the over-controller without judgment, with kindness.

So, we are going to continue to explore, but I am inviting you to explore from this kind of witnessing perspective. Now you can begin to look more closely at your life, and if you want to find the expressions of the over-controller that are actually causing the most suffering, you look to the places in your life where you are stressed. Because that is where the over-controller jumps out in most vivid form. So you might first consider: *What is a stressful situation where I know I go into intense control-mode?* And as you get one in mind, here are some of the signs that will help you, as you are moving through the day, to recognize: *Here it is! I am doing the Sisyphus thing! I am being the over-controller!*

The over-controller basically has a lot of obsessive thinking. When you notice that, it is a flag. The underlying assumption of the over-controller is: *There is a problem here. We've got a problem.* It's the problem-mentality. The assumption is that things should be different. And *should* is a word that the over-controller loves, lives on. It just surrounds everything. *Should* be different. *I should* be different. *You should* be different. *Life should* be different." You see, whenever there is a *should*, it is an argument with reality? Because reality is reality. And it is just our addition that it should be different. No matter how right we think we are, it is still an argument. And that is what the controller does. The controller generally has some certainty about their opinions about reality. And the more fear, the more there is that fundamentalist kind of certainty.

So these are just some signs to watch out for — if you know you are stressed and find that you kind of lock into the problem mentality, and there are a lot of *shoulds*, and so on. Very little tolerance for uncertainty. Karl Popper writes:

"I believe it is worthwhile trying to discover more about the world. Even if this only teaches us how little we know. It might do us good to remember from time to time that,

while differing widely in the various little bits we know, in our infinite ignorance, we are all equals.”⁵

So that is a sign of the over-controller — this certainty of belief. *I am right. Things should be a certain way.* And generally a need for others to agree.

Okay. Behaviors. When you are stressed, what are the behaviors that are signs? Well, the over-controller is generally trying to control inner affect — inner experience — to make it as tolerable as possible. Often, there is the abuse of substances. It might be medication, recreational drugs, alcohol, etc. Or over-eating food or depriving of food, they are both part of the over-controller. Tight routines and not liking change — wanting things to stay a certain way.

Now, again, you might be starting to get a sinking feeling. So, I want to invite you to come back to that aspiration. This is universal. The more fear we have in our system, the more we are trying to manage things so we can cope. To respond by relating *to* not *from* the over-controller. If there is more judgment, there is more controlling.

How does the over-controller behave with other people? Well, there is the flight way of controlling by pulling away, creating distance, having a lot of boundaries. Then there is the aggressive control way that we think of more often, where we are pretty regularly trying to fix people, judging them, threatening them, having an agenda. With our partners, we might have a lot of rules and expectations. Parents that are over-controlling use a lot of threats and guilt.

I like the story of one young girl who noticed that her mother had some white hair coming through on her brunette head. She looked at her mother and, just curious, she said, “Mom, why are some of your hairs white?” And her mother said, “Well, every time you do something wrong or make me cry or unhappy, one of my hairs turns white.” The little girl thought about this revelation for a while and then she said, “Mama, how come all grandma’s hairs are white?”

Sometimes control strategies don’t work.

⁵ Popper, K. R. (1960). *On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

A lot of our over-controlling is a way to manipulate what other people think of us. That is a big one. You can just sense somebody you were with recently where there was some anxiety and you had some worry about how they were going to perceive you, and just notice how much of the time your behavior was an effort to get a certain response from them. Again, that is when we cut off from our spontaneity and our creativity. Remember how exhausting it is to be with people when you are trying to elicit a certain reaction. Does that resonate? So, we do things and we act in ways that aren't ourselves because we want to look a certain way.

I read about one guy who found that someone had scraped his car in a crowded parking lot. There was a note on the windshield and here is what the note said: "Yo, I hit your car. I am leaving this note because someone is watching. They are still looking. Okay, I am good, my bad, peace out."

I loved it. "They are still looking. Okay, I am good."

So then we look in the domain of our spiritual practice, because the over-controller kind of wriggles its way into everything, it is not just how we are in some situations. And when the over-controller is dominating in our spiritual practice, in our mind we have a lot of rules, expectations and judgments swirling around what is going on. We are really pushing the boulder there. It is like: *Don't just sit, do something!* We are striving for a certain state, and we have an idea about how meditation should be. We are trying to get somewhere. We are evaluating it and if it doesn't meet the idea, we feel like we are falling short. That is where the over-doing comes in. When we are over-controlling, we try to use our ideas about spirituality and they interfere with our direct experience.

One of the classic stories in the Zen tradition is of a young monk who goes to the abbot, or the master, and he says, "So, what happens after we die?" And the abbot said, "I don't know." And the young novice is very, very upset and he says, "What do you mean you don't know? You are a Zen priest." And the abbot nods and says, "I am. But not a dead one."

What I am getting at is that, when we are in over-control mode, we substitute our ideas about what is going to happen for our direct experience. It is very hard to just let go

and be in contact with reality. We cover it over. We inoculate ourselves. It is such a great expression.

So, to wrap this piece up, we are really looking at how we find that character of the over-controller. How does it appear in our own lives? Remember that this is really the survival brain trying to make it. When we are in over-control mode, it is the survival brain trying to make it. And whether we are trying to trick the IRS or trying to outsmart other people and give a certain impression, what we are really trying to outwit is our own mortality. The survival brain is uncomfortable with the fact that we are not going to be around for long. We are trying to outwit death in some way.

Victor Yalom has a wonderful cartoon with the Grim Reaper lying on the couch in a psychiatrist's office and he is saying, "No Doc. I am afraid, it is your time that is up."

There is a really limited domain we can control. This is now down to reality. There is a limited domain. And it is totally appropriate for our ego-spacesuit self to try to control in that way. But we can't control aging and sickness and death, and we can't control the inner weather systems — all the emotions, they just happen. And we definitely can't control each other. We just can't. So how do we get that, if we go beyond the areas we can control and are in constant management mode, we are going to cover over the mystery, cover over that spontaneity and love and capacity to see truth?

Mary Oliver has a very beautiful poem that addresses some of the questions that come up about controlling and, really, some of the misunderstandings. Because when I talk about not over-controlling, I don't mean being inactive or passive. It is our nature to engage and to engage passionately, to take care of ourselves as well as we can and take care of each other. And to be happy and free, we need to know how to let go. Mary Oliver writes:

“...everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation.
whose meaning
None of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.”⁶

To love what is mortal, to hold it to our bones — dear, totally engaged, connected with this life, serving this life — and when it is time to let go, to let go.

Now, when I listen to this...this is talking about in the broad sweeps. It's when we really get it — *Oh, I am dying. I have got to let go of this life* — that there is some possibility of grace. But it is not just in that incarnation; it is also in our moments. That we engage fully. We manage what we can manage. We hold it to our bones. And, in the moments, we learn how to let go to stop being so busy. Stop holding so much.

Our inquiry is: How do we relax the over-controller when the on button is jammed? Because that is the deal for so many of us, especially when we are most activated and stressed. How do we move and shift from being inside that identity of the stressed, controlling, wanting, fearing self into the compassionate witness that can see what is going on and knows how to rest and just *be*? How do we make that shift?

A metaphor that may be helpful for some is to imagine that you are in a row boat and you are rowing desperately and are exhausted against the intensity of the currents and

⁶ Oliver, M. (1978). In Blackwater Woods. In *American Primitive* (pp. 82-83). Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.

winds. You are feeling both like the victim of the winds, and also the controller trying to make it through. Now compare that with putting aside the oars and allowing the sail of presence to unfurl and letting the winds carry you. Ultimately, we can't control the winds, but they carry us.

When we awaken to what really matters — and this is coming back to the beginning of when I shared that essay of the man who realized he was dying — we realize that the gem is resting in being. Resting in this awake, tender, open presence. When we awaken and remember that preciousness of being, when we sense how these lives are fleeting, we rest more in that. I have seen it over and over again. I saw it with my mom as she was dying. When she was younger, she was as neurotic as anybody else. She had her control stuff and her anxiety and this and that, but it was so distinctive as she got older, and particularly when she was dying, how so much dropped away — how much pleasure she got from the moments, and how she was able to create a space where other people enjoyed themselves because there was no demand, expectation or judgment. She was *being*.

Another woman — an executive, very busy and stressed — had a young son and she was often pushing him to hurry up. You know: “Eat your dinner! We have to get you to child care! We've got to shop really quickly and get home!” Well, she was diagnosed with very serious malignancy and had a year to live. And she described the shift being that her mantra became: “I have no time to rush.” I have no time to rush.

It gets very, very clear, when we are honest and face the changing seasons of life and the true mortality of this temporary existence here, that *being* is where all the light of the universe shines through. So it becomes a deep longing to be able to relax the controller. And it is completely possible as long as we are relating *to* the controller not *from* the controller. As long as we don't judge ourselves for it. And I hope that I am bringing this up enough times that as you continue this reflection — and we can do it together over these few weeks — you will bring an interest and a curiosity and a humor to say: *Oh, there it is! There is that grasping! There is that agenda!* If you can bring that without adding the judgment, then you will have some choice.

So, it is in that spirit I would like to do a closing meditation with you, so that you can get a little bit of a taste of witnessing.

As you allow yourself to come into stillness — and I have asked you to already to maybe consider where there is stress, where you are aware of going into over-control mode, where you are aware of the suffering around it, maybe — you might hone in a little. Sense a situation, perhaps, when you are involved with other people. Just notice and kind of tag that situation so that you can come back to it, both in this meditation and also during your daily life. But before you spend too much time focusing on it, take a moment to establish what we call the witness.

You might sense this witness, the vantage point of this witness, as your future self — who you are when you are really most awake and open-hearted. You are really calling on your highest self, the self you are evolving into, to be the witness. You are going to look through the eyes of your future self, the one who is more relaxed and open and clear and awake.

And sensing yourself looking, through the eyes of that more awake being and with the heart, at yourself during a stressed time. And just pick a time recently when you were stressed and you were aware you went into that over-controller mode. See if you can witness it through the eyes of your future self. And just see that doing-self character, that over-controlling self, as if you are watching a movie of yourself kind of pushing the boulder in some way — whether it is obsessive thinking, having *shoulds* going on in your mind about how you *should* be or how others *should* be, the agenda that you might have with other people, the ways of trying to either impress or get others to do things your way. And behind the lines, sensing how that over-controlling self has a sense of: *There is a problem here.*

So you are looking at the over-controlling self through the eyes of this witness — this compassionate future self — and sensing how that controlling self is operating from the idea there is a problem here, and there is fear that is kind of driving this part of your egoic self. And sense the suffering of it. Sense how that part of you is suffering. How squeezed it is. Anxious. Living in a small world. Disconnected. Probably tired, frustrated. Closed off. You might just sense what your heart wishes — from that future self, from that witness — what your heart wishes for the part of you that is caught. If there was a message you could send to that part of you, what might it be?

What might happen if that over-controlling part put down the oars a bit? Just allowed the sail of presence to unfurl, to guide, let the winds guide in some way? To be open to the intelligence that is larger than the ego's intelligence, to rest a little? To listen?

And just bringing it right into the present moment, inviting that over-controlling self into the stillness that is right here, as if your future self could say: *Just be right now. Just be.* To sense the stillness that is aware of aliveness. To sense the silence that is listening to sound. To sense: *If there is no problem, what is here?* Just being. Full with tenderness. At home.

As we close right now, you can sense your aspiration, in the days and weeks to come, to notice that over-controller, through the eyes of compassion. Just witnessing. Maybe sending a reminder to that place in you, inviting your being into *beingness*. Into the stillness, the silence and aliveness, the openheartedness that is always here.

Namaste and thank you for your presence.