

Relaxing the Over-Controller ~ Part 2

~ a talk by Tara Brach, PhD, presented on May 3, 2017

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I would like to begin with a story I love as told by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi about his five-year old daughter Shalvi. One morning she wakes up and she says, “Abba,” which is father, “you know how when you are asleep and dreaming, it seems so real and then you wake up and realize it was just a dream? Well, when you are awake, can you wake up that much more and realize that *this* is just a dream?”¹

And I wonder how many of you have been sensing more and more how many swaths of moments we are inside that kind of a bubble or a dream?

When we are in a dream, we are the central character. It is like we are the protagonist moving through life. And we are usually talking to ourselves about really about getting what we want. Here at retreat, it might be: *Can I get that hot shower or that nap or be in front in the lunch-line?* It is the self that wants the bell to ring. And when we are in that dream, we are also avoiding what is unpleasant, whether it is about being late or being too hot or too cold or falling asleep. We are just in that narrative. I sometimes think of it like a colony of ants all scurrying around with these thoughts about themselves and what they are supposed to do next and who is going to be the one to drag the dead companion away, you know. That is part of what they do. We all have these stories going on about *moi*. And when there is stress, those stories become organized around a sense that there is a problem. *Something is wrong, something is missing, and I need to do something to solve it.*

So, when we are stressed, the protagonist in the story becomes the controlling self that needs to navigate and deal with something — the self that is trying to manage the pain or rehearsing for a meeting – the self that is judging and trying to make things different. The controller is often a harsh critic, judging other people for mistakes while it is trying very hard to achieve, avoid failure, make people change, and make impressions. The driving assumption of the controlling self is: *There is a*

¹ Roth, J. (2009). *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life: Awakening Your Heart, Connecting with God*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

problem here and I need to fix it. What is so interesting to me is, if you investigate daily life, there are just so many moments where we are in that dream — where we are the self, dealing with a problem. Waking up from the dream means remembering who we are beyond the controlling self. It means remembering who we are beyond the one that is fearing that something is going to go wrong and wanting something to go a different way.

So that is what we are going to explore tonight. I am calling it *Relaxing the Over-Controller*. And I am just curious about how many, as you listen, have a sense that this could involve something that you are dealing with?

The theme of the “over-controller” feels so powerful to me because so many of our moments are organized around that identity. And anything that we are organized around that is not in our consciousness controls us. It keeps us stuck. What is the controlling-self trying to do? Avoid mortality, avoid loss, avoid the changes that it doesn’t want to happen. The “controller” is really the set of strategies that we all have to try to resist impermanence and to control and organize our lives so that we don’t suffer from it.

One of the stories that I feel really illustrates the dimensions of this well was told by Tom Wolfe in his book *The Right Stuff*. He describes that period during the fifties when they were testing rocket planes at altitudes that had never been explored before where the ordinary laws of aerodynamics didn’t hold true. When the rockets got that high, they would skid into a flat spin and then tumble and nobody knew how to deal with it. So it happened a bunch of times and the pilots were recorded as they were going into their final dive and would be screaming, “I have tried A, I have tried B, I have tried C, I have tried D! What do I do?!” The solution is interesting and was discovered by Chuck Yeager. In one test flight at this very high altitude, he was knocked unconscious so he couldn’t do anything. And then when the rocket fell to a lower altitude and back into the normal dense atmosphere around the earth, he was then able to use the controls to navigate and land — and he didn’t die. This defied every bit of training, but was the only thing that worked: *take your hands off the controls*. It was the only solution possible. ²

² Wolfe, T. (1979). *The Right Stuff*. New York, NY: Picador.

What I like about this story is that it doesn't mean we should never be managing things. It is not saying we should never try to control this or that. In the denser atmosphere — that very thin skin around the earth — in some little domains, we can manage some things. But in the big stuff — aging, illness, death, the loss of others, controlling the way others behave, that kind of thing — we try to manage and we create more suffering.

The challenge with the over-controller is that, even when there is not a lot of stress or just small stressors, it is a very deeply conditioned reflex to tighten our grip and try to control and manage things. We are addicted to maneuvering the controls.

There one story — a short, dumb story — of these two guys hunting somewhere in New Jersey and one of them falls down, gripped by a heart attack. He is lying completely still and the other one is totally freaked out and calls 911 yelling and screaming, “I don't know what to do! What am I supposed to do? What should I do?” And the woman on the other end of the line says, “Calm down. It is okay. I can help you.” She says, “First, make sure he is dead.” So then she hears the sound of a shot and when he comes back on the line, he says, “Okay, what is next?”

So... I warned you, right? It is really bad.

But the point of it is that there are two basic assumptions that the controller is going along with. And one is that it should be able to control and manage what is happening – this includes all sorts of things that we encounter. *I should be able to handle this.* The second is: *I have to do something.* The last thing the controller wants is to not do anything. It is trying to get away from the vulnerability that is right here and doing anything is better than not doing, which is why I think that silly story is actually quite a useful dharma teaching.

Alan Watts said that it is like winding your watch on the way to the gallows. Again, there is a domain of what we might call appropriate control, and we are very much designed to try to manage our life. I often use that metaphor of coming into this world and taking on a kind of spacesuit, which is all the different strategies of navigating through difficulty and encountering people and knowing how to respond and protect ourselves and get what we need. It is that whole constellation of ego-strategies that is just part of our evolving being — how we operate on planet earth.

And very key part of it is figuring things out and using our mind and, when we experience danger or whatever, coming up with strategies to deal with it. So it is not to say that this is not appropriate.

Another story, again this is in New Jersey. I don't know why, except that I was born there, I am going back to New Jersey, but anyway:

An elderly man wanted to plant his annual tomato garden but the ground was really hard and, as he was getting older, he didn't have the strength to do it. He really was feeling a sadness that Vincent, his only son, was in prison and wasn't there to help him. So he wrote to his son in prison: "Dear Vincent, I am feeling pretty sad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my tomato garden this year. And it has given me so much pleasure. I am just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. I know if you were here, my troubles would be over. I know you would be happy to dig the plot for me, like in the old days. Love, Papa." A few days later he received a letter from his son: "Dear Pop, don't dig up that garden! That is where the bodies are buried! Love, Vinny." At four AM the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived and dug up the entire area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left. That same day, he received another letter from Vinny: "Dear Pop, go ahead and plant the tomatoes now. That was the best I could do under the circumstances."

So we do what we can. Ideally we do it mindfully, trying to manage our way through the day. But the challenge, and again the suffering, is that there is a kind of chronic hum of the limbic system in the background, a fear. And rather than just doing what is appropriate, we overdo and we get very identified with it. You can see it up close with the formal practice of meditation. What happens when we encounter something unpleasant? What happens when there are sounds in the room that are really bothering us? What happens when we have thoughts about a conflicted relationship or we get physical discomfort? We can see how easy it is to get hooked into fixating on it, obsessing about it, trying to figure it out. How we can change it? Either judging ourselves for what is going on or judging what is happening or judging another person? Everything is about getting rid of it, resisting it, or controlling our meditation — *OK, I'll just focus on the breath* — really trying to strong-arm ourselves. Anything but simply being. That is the last choice.

Even when there is no strong stress in our meditation practice, because it is so much our habit to control things, there is some underlying sense that there is something vulnerable and difficult here — *I just need to keep controlling things, I need to make my meditation better, I need to be doing something to be really doing it right, I need to make something happen.* There is a background sense that what is here is not enough or something more is needed. So we stay identified with the self that is trying to dial the controls — trying to manage things from behind the curtain.

This brings up a very central inquiry on the spiritual path: When is what we are doing wise effort? And when is it not? And I've found that this question is incredibly relevant no matter how long we have practiced, because that identification with a self very quickly becomes an identification with a *doing* self, a *managing* self. So if we are not able to shine a light on it, the effort that we are making in meditation keeps us linked and hitched to a sense of a self behind the curtain.

I like the way one yoga teacher described it, she says her message is: “You strivers, relax a little! And you slackers, sit up a little taller!” It is the balance. Not too loose not too tight. But then as we get into more refined states of attention, we begin to notice that, even then, there is a sense in the background that somebody is there controlling the meditation. How many of you have noticed that? The ghost self behind the curtain? There's always the sense that somebody's there doing something.

I think one of the wisest stories, and one that puts a very helpful container around this inquiry about wise effort, is about Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and most devoted disciple. After the Buddha's death, there was this great council of *arhats* — or enlightened ones — that was planned. An *arhat* is an awakened yogi or practitioner. Ananda wasn't entitled to attend because, even though he had worked strenuously at it for years, he wasn't considered enlightened. So on the eve of the council meeting, he was determined to practice vigorously all night and he wasn't going to stop until he attained his goal. So he just went at it, but all he succeeded in doing was becoming incredibly exhausted and discouraged and dispirited. No progress, despite all his efforts. Right before dawn, he finally said, “Okay, I am just going to give up the striving, I am going to give up the efforts and just rest.” And it

is said that, just as his head fell into the pillow, he became enlightened. That is the story.

The interesting question in this story is: *What is it that freed him?* On one level you could say that he finally let go. When we let go, we are letting go, really, of the *selfing* — there was a letting go of self. But then, don't we need some effort? The reality is that Ananda had been making an effort to collect his mind, quiet his mind, and had experienced the different beautiful states of Samadhi over decades. He had already trained the muscles of attention and done what I consider *undoing*. He was *undoing*, over those years, some of the conditioning that keeps us from freedom. Wise effort is an *undoing* of conditioning; it creates the atmosphere for letting go of all effort.

The key is to remember that it can be kind of a hook to keep on doing the wise efforts of undoing. We get habituated to it and it takes a real willingness to let go of that and just stop — stop controlling or doing or directing anything. This is why, as you might have noticed, in meditation instructions when it gets quiet enough, you are invited to just stop doing anything. Just rest. Just be. It is only in the moments when we truly take our hands off the controls that we can see the nature of reality. Any controlling creates some obscuration. It is only in those moments of full letting go that the space opens up and light of the universe can shine through us.

In meditation and in life, the understanding is that when there is controlling and the more that it is chronic and is not in conscious awareness, there is going to be an identification with a controlling self — a limited self — and a story of a self that is separate from others and dealing with a life where something is missing or something is wrong. And that cuts us off from a larger sense of *beingness*. In fact, as many of you are discovering or have been working with for many years, when we start opening to the vulnerability, there is a kind of grieving that we touch into because we start sensing how cut off we have been and how the controller has actually deprived us of moments of living. We have been cut off from life.

This is a story that really touches me is how a woman described time with her dying father:

He was an architect and, in her growing up years, he was very achievement-focused and was very driven and very conscious of his status. He was somewhat self-absorbed and unavailable and they had a really distant relationship. His work was the center of his life. This was a real cause for pain and she had to do a lot of inner work on it. But in the last couple of years before his death, he was very old and had retired some years earlier and they had an increasing amount of time together. A few weeks before he passed away, she was talking with him about his life and his past and she asked him: “Which of your achievements did you feel most proud about?” There was a long pause and he had tears in his eyes and he looked at her and said, “Why you, of course.” And what hit her was that it was true, and yet, he didn’t even know it in the earlier years because he was so cut off — he was living in that smaller, striving, achieving self.

One palliative care-giver that has accompanied tens of thousands of people describes the greatest regret at the end of many people’s lives is that they didn’t live true to themselves. They were living inside the controlling self. And I don’t think it is just the dying that have some deep sense of disappointment, because many of us can feel the difference between the self that we live in many hours of the day, that is in some way being driven by fear and wanting, and who we intuit that we really are.

So we now enter the next phase of this reflection together, which is: *What wakes us up from the dream? What allows us to relax the over-controller?* Awareness wakes up when it experiences the *suffering* of the over-controller — the futility of it — and how the over-controller is trying to help us, yet, really is keeping us from a larger sense of wholeness.

It is very easy for me to share personal stories in this talk. I know this over-controller business inside out. For me, the first waking up to it was very poignant. I was a college sophomore and I was experiencing a lot of depression and doing psychoanalysis — and the only reason I ended up in psychoanalysis was because a friend said, “Hey, I am seeing a good therapist! Do you want to go see him?” And then I found myself on a couch. Who would have known?

So, I was sharing this dream that I had of struggling to get somewhere and feeling exhausted, which I think is a common dream, a lot of us have it. And then as I started talking, an image came up. I was taking Greek mythology at the time, and I

had an image of Sisyphus and the boulder — pushing that boulder over and over and over again. And then I had an insight which was: *I am always trying hard*. I was always trying hard whether it was in conversations with other people, or in work, or fixing myself, proving myself. I was very politically active and always trying to make sure something happened, always trying to be as good as I could be, better than others. Just really trying hard.

On its heels came the next insight: fear of other people's judgments, fear that I would lose or not get love and approval if I didn't try hard. In other words, I couldn't be with somebody and not be trying and assume that I would be accepted and loved. More insights followed, not only in therapy but just over time, about how much I was afraid of other people's judgment and how that kept me trying hard. And that the more I tried, the worse things felt, because I felt more and more insecure the harder I was trying.

And then, as I was getting familiar with my controller, there was a second arrow, which was that I couldn't stand my controlling self, the one that was trying so hard. We sometimes call it *selfing*. I was becoming more and more aware of that "self" trying to be good and trying to prove herself and trying to get approval, and I just couldn't stand it. There was a lot of aversion.

The first major shift that I remember happened about eight years later. I had moved into an ashram. We had a women's group that would meet periodically and so I went to the group and got up my nerve and exposed my shadow. I exposed the controlling self and how much I felt like a fake and how I was always trying to present myself a certain way but deep down I was like this. I don't remember what happened at the group afterward, except for that I went back to my room feeling utterly raw and vulnerable and kind of broken apart and I just remember being with that. At first I even wanted to control that and I thought I would do some yoga just to try to feel better, but then I realized: *No, this is more of the same, I am still trying to fix something, do something*. So I agreed to do nothing and I just sat with it and went down to that deepest place of self-aversion and then to the grief of how many moments in my life had been stolen because of that self-aversion, how many moments I had missed. And self-aversion seemed to be right at the root of the controller, it was the controller's deepest way of trying to change me.

The grieving loosened it so that there was some space and tenderness and I could start just observing this striving self — this character that had emerged . . . this spacesuit character, this ego-self, whatever you want to call it — and see from a more awake, kind place. She just wanted to be loved. She wanted to be accepted. She wanted to know she belonged. And that was the moment when my relationship to the controller became conscious and forgiving. I share this because over the years, I have become more and more familiar with that kind of ego cluster I am calling the over-controller, but any more familiarity has only been possible because I deeply forgave the presence of that ego.

Reflection:

So I want to pause here and invite you to reflect on where this might be relevant to you:

As you let the intention go inward, you might scan for some stressful situation that involves another person and where you know you go into over-controller mode in some way — getting either defensive or aggressive or, in some way, wanting to change that person. Or maybe wanting to change yourself. Whether it is judgment of yourself or the other or both, just take some moments to let yourself connect with where you might go into that over-controller mode to protect yourself or to make something happen. And include, as you reflect, how you feel about your controlling self, the self that is wanting or fearing and reacting.

For a moment, you might imagine that you can move ahead in time and view this controlling self from your most awake and loving being. You might consider this your *future self* — the awareness that is really fully manifested maybe five or ten years down the road, so that you could look through the eyes of your most awake self at what we are calling the “controlling” self, that self that gets stuck in the reactivity, and just witness it with compassion and interest. What do you see?

And look, if you can, for what is most driving your controlling self. What is really behind the controlling that you are observing? What is the longing? What is the fear? And sense the possibility of, when the controller appears in this way, being able to regard the controlling self with compassion. With forgiveness. Letting go of the second arrow. Sense, right this moment, what it is like to send some message of

forgiveness or kindness to the controlling self. For some it is simply: *I see you*. Or: *It is okay, it is not your fault*. Or: *forgiven, forgiven*.

Because the controlling self is such a deep identity, it is often under the line, so to speak. It is not in consciousness. We are doing the controlling, but there is not a recognition of how caught inside that limited sense of self we are. And so I would like to look a little more closely at the process of recognizing and relaxing the controller. It happens primarily when we register that it isn't working and how much suffering it is causing that, in some way, we are resisting vulnerability. That is always what the controller is doing — running away from impermanence, vulnerability, groundlessness.

So again, an example, from my life, of running from vulnerability. In parenting, I took my habit of thinking it is good to strive for things and that we should go after things and so on, and planted that on my son Narayan — like: *You, too, should be a “go for it” type of person!* And Narayan's temperament is really different from my temperament. In that yoga teacher's language, I would be the one being told to relax and he would be the one told to sit up a little straighter. Narayan is just really laid back and was not academically very ambitious and so on. So, during high school — and I told a version of this story in “Radical Acceptance” — his capacity to party and to endlessly be with friends and not to be too concerned about work was always, for me, this pesky thing I could never let go of. I was in a chronic judging state, upset and angry. And often it would be focused on his video gaming, because that is what he would do, he would be behind the screen. I texted him recently to find out what game he was playing, and it was *Diablo 2* — that is like *Devil 2*, you know. And when we were texting back and forth just recently, he said, “Those were my heavy dopamine years.”

So, I would be really enraged by it and I realized that, more and more, we were locked into this dance where the angrier and more controlling I got, the more he was pushing me away — he is not an angry, push-away type, but he'd just kind of disregard. It wasn't working and I was feeling worse and worse.

So I started practicing pausing and feeling what was under all that controlling, judging energy. And what I would find is that, underneath the judge — that really raging judge that wanted to take a boulder and throw it against the screen of the

computer that he was on — was fear. I was afraid he wouldn't have a happy life — that, according to my ideas of how things worked, if he didn't apply himself, he just wouldn't be gratified in life. And then, underneath that fear, there was this powerlessness. And when I opened to that really deeply, the powerlessness and fear, there was care. I just care about him. And then there was grief — the grief of how my way of tightening around that care and becoming a controller was creating a really big distance. You know, here he was a sophomore — it's a blink of an eye, as parents know, and they are gone, they are out of the house — and we were locked in. Many moments, I was in resentment and blame mode.

So, the more I opened to that vulnerability that I was running from, the more I would get in touch with that caring place. I still had to draw boundaries, but I could do it with a lot more intelligence and respect and care than anger. And then, of course, he didn't have to defend himself so much. So now he is thirty-one and that that old controlling part of me still peeks its head out little from time to time. In fact, just when we were texting back and forth and he told me the name of the game was *Diablo 2*, he said, "And hey, mom, now I am playing with the spiritual successor of *Diablo 2*, there is another version." He called it a "spiritual successor"! So I said, "Say what?" And then he said, "Mom, I can still feel the judgment leaking through!"

The controller releases when we fully open to vulnerability. It releases. The sense of who we are shifts. The deepest vulnerability, as I have mentioned, is the loss of what we most deeply cherish. And to be able to open to that is what brings us to the *openness* that is truly beyond that egoic over-controller. Really, on the spiritual path, it is not until we have totally faced and opened to and touched the depth of the realness that it is all going away, that we can open to the reality of the space, the awareness, the love that is here. They go together completely.

Many of us know Cheri Maples, who is a really wonderful Dharma teacher. She got into a bike accident about eight months ago and she may be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. She nearly died and was in hospitals and institutions for seven months. A number of us that love her have traveled out to visit her. And Cheri is in good spirits. She is open-hearted. She is more patient than she has ever been before. She is very clear and very in touch with what matters in life.

While I was visiting, I asked her: “How is it possible that you are holding this?” I mean, her life, is was just going one way and now she is in a wheelchair. Her response was: “I had already faced the worst death, so I can live with this.” And she is living with this, not fighting it, but it is not a resignation — she is really living. What she meant by “faced a death” is that, two years earlier, she went through a breakup of a nine-year relationship and it was utterly devastating. She went into a major, deep depression. And, underneath the depression, what she had to open to was a kind of a death of what she had — the loss of a relationship that felt like a loss of her life. And her way of facing all of this, as we have been exploring over and over again using the acronym RAIN, is to keep bringing those wings of care and investigation and presence to what is here.

Right here, I want to emphasize that the nurturing is at the beginning, the middle, and the end of this process. Right from the beginning, with the recognizing and the allowing, there is, as much gentleness as possible. *It is okay, this is part of life.* The nurturing goes deeper as you start investigating everything that arises. Tender, gentle. As much as possible, *this too.* And then, there is this alchemy that, the more vulnerability you touch into, the more tenderness is available. Nurturing, although it is the culmination at the end of this full embrace, it is also a stream throughout. We can’t even begin to investigate if there is not some softness and kindness in our hearts.

Cheri went through this process and opened to the grief, which is what we all open to if we go deep enough. This life is fleeting. Naturally we want to hold on. Naturally, as we begin to face that reality, there is that tenderness. And that is this portal. If we really have the courage to let go of the controller and open to the tenderness, we discover a timeless kind of love and presence that is who we are beyond the controller.

My husband Jonathan recently shared a story of a yogini in a cave that entertained some demons and he mentioned there are a number of versions of that story. In one version, Milarepa — a Tibetan yogi – is in a cave welcoming the demons for tea, just as we are learning to do, telling them: You’re going come and go again, so enjoy. Eventually, they all left except for one. And this is often how it is for us, that there is one place that we really keep resisting — this one place we don’t want to go, where it just feels like too much. And so then, with just the one demon still hanging

around, Milarepa pulled the most brilliant move: he put his head inside the demon's mouth. And the demon vanished. Because when the resistance is gone, the demons are gone. The controller keeps the problem there, so to speak. When there is a profound surrender, it dissolves.

The beginning of recognizing and releasing this over-controller is, right from the get-go, really understanding that it is being driven by a deep sense of wanting love, wanting to protect and nurture these lives and then to forgive it, to hold with tenderness. It is not our fault. It is just part of our egoic development.

One man I worked with, who was hooked on cocaine and hooked on manipulating others, had very deep fear as he started contacting what was underneath that. As controllers often do, he thought that he should be able to manage it be able to continue to live as he was living. But between his wife threatening divorce and his boss telling him he had to go to a twelve-step group, he had kind of hit a wall. So in therapy, he started to contact the vulnerability, which is this fear of being dominated and some shame. When he really contacted that, it brought up the kind of self-compassion that we are talking about and he found that the more he was kind towards himself, the more he actually felt empowered. He felt a sense of connection he had never felt before. And when he would feel himself being drawn back into his old habits, his wise-effort strategy was to say to himself: *Not my will but my heart's will.*

We find our ways of releasing the over-controller as we begin to sense belonging to something larger, belonging to our awakened heart. Some people sense this as handing over to God or handing over to the divine or to the sacred.

I want to, in these last few minutes, just share what some of the gifts are that we notice in the moments of releasing control. Many of you have already noticed, here, the moments of just being outside and being available to take in beauty — that quality of *beingness* that is so receptive. And moments of stillness where there is not a sense of trying to get somewhere. A silence that is not so caught in the thoughts. A sense of tender presence. These are the gifts. I think one of the most precious gifts is that as we let go of the controller, we don't need to fix or change others and a huge space of presence for loving emerges in our relationships.

Richard Selzer, a surgeon, describes a bit of this in a story. He writes:

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted in palsy. Clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, have been severed. She will be thus from now on. This surgeon had followed, with religious fervor, the curve of her flesh, I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her husband, her young husband, is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamp light, isolated from me. Private.

“Who are they?” I ask myself, “he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze and touch each other so generously.” The young woman speaks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says, “it is kind of cute.” And all at once I know who he is. I understand and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a God. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers to show her that their kiss still works.”³

So when we let go, there is a lot of space for our natural tenderness to emerge. We can really love without holding back. And there is also a space that does make us available to joy. Often, if we are honest with ourselves, we get that we might have our ups and downs, but it is not so common that there is that openness that just lets everything move through. There is not a sense of joy. We are too busy in some way preparing or figuring out to make room for that.

A brief and beautiful poem from Saint Teresa of Avila:

“Just these two words He spoke
changed my life:
‘Enjoy me.’
What a burden I thought I was to carry -
a crucifix, as did he.

³ Selzer, R. (1974). *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

...After a night of prayer,
He changed my life when
he sang
'enjoy me.'"⁴

"What a burden I thought I was to carry. After a night of prayer, he changed my life when he sang: '*enjoy me.*'"

So the gifts. This capacity to love when we are not holding on tight, to receive and appreciate. And then there is the gift of a fearless heart — the power when we are actually willing to go right to where the vulnerability is — there is nothing to defend against anymore, our heart is wide open.

One dharma teacher wrote this when she was dying:

"My days are short. And as I grow weaker, I experience so much gratitude for my meditation. Not only the joy and ease it brought, but the hard parts: for every bored and restless sitting, and every fantasy, and every pain and itch I sat through, and every itch I didn't scratch. It was a training for kindness. A training for the muscle for bearing witness, for the trusting spirit that carries me now as I face my death."

Many of you know Ajahn Chah taught that if you let go a little, you will find a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will find a lot of peace. If you let go absolutely, you will find absolute peace and tranquility.

The last gift of letting go of the controller is reality. Truth. Realizing truth. Chogyam Trungpa says that as long as we are trying to figure out how we can escape from our present situation, we can't notice much about it. Doesn't that seem really true? Only when we feel that *this is it, this is how it is right now*, without clutching towards something different, without resisting anything, can we directly realize and become that truth — that radiant, vast light-filled awareness that is not in any way pushing or holding. Just open. Openness.

⁴ St. Teresa of Avila. (2002). Laughter Came from Every Brick. In D. Ladinski (Trans.), *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (p. 276). New York: Penguin Compass.

So, in tonight's talk, we are really exploring awakening from the dream. One of the main ways that we stay in the dream is this identity of a self that has a difficulty or a problem and is trying to find their way. And we have explored how a movement from that identity to this *beingness* that allows the universal light of wisdom and love to flow through us.

Reflection:

And in that spirit, I would like to do a final reflection with you:

Just take a moment to find a way of sitting comfortably. And begin by scanning and choosing some place in your life where you know you are getting caught in over-controlling. Where, like Sisyphus, you are pushing a boulder. Where you are caught in a lot of judging or striving or defending, trying to become something different, trying to make somebody else different.

And gently feeling, underneath the controlling activity, the human-ness that is there, the wanting, the fearing. With kindness. With gentleness. You might imagine, just like Sisyphus, if you let the boulder just fall away, what it would be like to just to let go of all ideas of *something is wrong* — just to let it go, to hand it over, to sense for yourself: *If there is no problem, what is here?* And again, just feeling this moment. *If there is no problem, if there is truly no problem, right this moment, what is here? Who am I? What is the experience?*

And then just, with that gentle intention to let go of any doing, letting everything be as it is. And sometimes we have to let go again. I often use the word *stop*, a very soft *stop, stop*. Or *drop*. There is nothing to do. Relaxing back again.

These are the words of poet, Danna Faulds:

“Settle in the here and now.
Reach down into the center
where the world is not spinning
and drink this holy peace.

Feel relief flood into every
cell. Nothing to do. Nothing
to be but what you are already.
Nothing to receive but what
flows effortlessly from the
mystery into form.

Nothing to run from or run
toward. Just this breath,
Awareness knowing itself as
embodiment. Just this breath,
awareness waking up to truth.⁵

Namaste and blessings,

And thank you for your attention.

⁵ Faulds, D. (2006). Awareness Knowing Itself. In *From Root to Bloom: Yoga Poems and Other Writings*(p. 17).
Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing.