

Controlling

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Sometimes you get people coming to meditate saying that they want to learn how to be less controlling. But if you look at how the Buddha taught meditation, a lot of it is about control. It's simply a question of what's possible to control, what's worth controlling, and how to go about doing it in a wise way.

For example, when the Dhamma talks about things depending on causes and conditions, a lot of people think that it means waiting for the causes and conditions outside to be okay on their own, and then falling in line with them. But when the Buddha outlines causes and conditions, say, in dependent co-arising, the primary causes are all in the mind. They're things that you can change. So if you want to control things in a skillful way, this is where you focus.

Develop some skill here. This will affect your sense of who you are, because your sense of who you are and what belongs to you is very closely connected to control. If there's something you can't control at all, you realize right away, "This is not me. This is not mine." The things to which we tend to lay claim are things over which we have some measure of control. You do have some control over your body, over your feelings, over your perceptions, your thought constructs, and your consciousness. It's not absolute, but you can learn how to control these things in a way that can take you to the end of suffering. And that's quite a lot.

There may be plenty of events in the world outside that you can't control. But if you learn how to control your mind, you can accomplish a lot more than could be accomplished by trying to straighten out the world. As the Buddha said, you should experience the world simply as contact at the six senses. A lot of that contact is composed of things over which you have no control. You're experiencing the results of old kamma, and you can't go back in time—that's one thing that's impossible—to change your actions of the past.

But the present moment is largely composed of the activity of the mind right now, and you can exert some control here. It's simply a matter of learning how to do it wisely, which requires having a clear sense of how causality works. Otherwise, it's like trying to grow a tree without understanding how trees grow. You want a tree that's a certain shape, so you get a little seedling and you start pulling on it to make it the shape you want. What's going to happen? You're

going to end up killing the tree. But if you realize that all you have to do is to water the roots, give it some fertilizer, look after it, and make sure the bugs don't get it, then it's going to grow on its own. You have some control over how it's going to grow by the amount of water and fertilizer you give it. It may send out some branches in places you didn't expect. But if you plant a seed for a maple tree, you'll get a maple tree. You plant an acorn, you're going to get an oak. So you focus on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

One of the reasons the Buddha taught dependent co-arising is to give you an idea of where you do have some control. All the factors prior to sensory contact are areas where you can exert some control. For instance, you've got fabrication, the very first factor after ignorance. This includes bodily fabrication, the breath; verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings.

You have some control over all those things. You can change the way you breathe. You can change the way you talk to yourself, which is what directed thought and evaluation are all about. You can change your perceptions, and even your feelings. Remember the two main kinds of feelings: the feelings of the flesh and the feelings not of the flesh. The feelings not of the flesh are feelings you intentionally create. A pain not of the flesh is when you think the painful thought that it is possible to put an end to suffering, but you're not there yet. There's a little bit of pain in that thought, but there's also some hope. It's the driving or motivating factor for practice. As for pleasures not of the flesh, those are the pleasures of getting the mind into right concentration. These are all things over which you have some measure of control. So learn how to do it wisely. You learn some of the theory, and then as you apply the theory, you learn from your experience.

Remember the Buddha's statement that you learn the Dhamma by committing yourself to doing it and then reflecting. The more you commit to doing your best, and the more you reflect appropriately on what you've done when you've done your best, the more you see.

For example, when working with the breath, you want to fabricate the breath in a way that it first gives you energy and then calms you down. How do you do that? How do you work with the breath? You commit yourself to trying. You'll learn after a while that certain ways of trying to force the breath don't work. But you also learn how to chalk that up to experience. There are other ways that

involve a minimum amount of force, and the breath responds. It feels really good just sitting here breathing in, breathing out.

A lot of that, of course, will depend on the perceptions you hold in mind. What's happening as you breathe in? Where does the breath come in? Where does it go out? Where did it start? To what extent should you jump-start it? How do you picture these things to yourself? Which perceptions are most helpful? You find yourself changing your perceptions as you go along. You get more and more focused on the sensation of the breath, not as the air coming in from outside or even energy coming in from outside. After a while, the energy in the body gets full, and you're more taken with the fact that you can sense the energy originating inside. So you hold that perception in mind. That allows the breath to calm down. The mind calms down.

Another factor is consciousness. You can choose to be aware of all kinds of things, so what do you want to choose to be aware of? Name and form: How are the elements going in the body? You find that if you think of them—you focus say on the solidity of earth, the warmth of fire, the coolness of water, or the energy of the breath—you can emphasize one property over another. That way, you can learn how to bring things in the body into balance.

As for name, it's basically the five aggregates, or the four aggregates aside from consciousness, with fabrication divided up into contact—contact among various things going in the mind—attention, and intention. These are all things you can shape right here in the present moment as you're meditating. What are you paying attention to? *How* are you are paying attention? As the Buddha said, there's such a thing as appropriate attention and inappropriate attention. Appropriate attention is when you look at things in terms of the four noble truths or in terms of the question of how to develop what's skillful and how to abandon what's not. These are all attitudes you want to bring to your contact at the senses. They come down to what you're paying attention to, how you're paying attention, and what you want to do with it.

Then what are your intentions? When sensory contact comes, notice that it's contact with things over which you may not have some control, but you can choose how you're going to focus on those contacts, and what you're going to want to do with what's made available to you.

So there's this huge area where you do have the potential for exerting control. With experience and practice, you can learn how to do it skillfully. This means that, instead of becoming less controlling as you develop as a meditator, you're

becoming more wisely controlling: putting together the raft that will take you across the river, making it out of the branches and twigs and leaves that are on this shore, tying it together as best you can, all the while knowing that the raft may fall apart at some time, so you want to be quick to get across the river.

That's another thing over which you have no control: how much time you have to practice. Use that fact to remind yourself, "I've got to do as much as I can," so that before the raft falls apart, you can get to the other side.

In dependent co-arising, the Buddha's basically giving you instructions on how to put the raft together and how to make it solid so that you can escape all the dangers on this side of the river. When you have that much control or potential for control in your life, it gives you quite a wide range.

As you master these skills, your sense of your self is going to change. Areas over which you had no control before you suddenly find that you *do* have control. As for other areas over which you wanted to gain control in the past, or that you wanted to lay claim to, you begin to realize you can't go there—and there's no reason to.

When you get to the other side, issues of control then get put aside. There's no control over nibbana, and of course there's no need for it. It's not going to go anywhere. It's not going to do anything bad. It's not going to misbehave. It's everything you could possibly want—*better* than things you could possibly want.

So, instead of learning to be less controlling, you want to be more wisely controlling, taking advantage of this huge opportunity provided by the potentials that the Buddha discovered. He wanted to see if it was possible to find a happiness that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die. That's a pretty audacious desire. He wanted to know if human skills could take you there. He found that they could. There is such a thing as a deathless experience.

That thought right there should act as a challenge. And even though learning wise control takes time because you're experimenting and learning, going through trial and error, still the possibility of genuine happiness should give you enough nourishment to keep you going until you reach trial and success.