

Break Away

By letting go of control, you allow yourself to enter new realms of freedom.

By Sally Kempton



On the second day of a workshop I'm teaching, called *The Art of Letting Go*, I've planned a discussion of the yogic practice of releasing our tendency to overcontrol situations. My intention is that people will recognize how much pain they create when they try to control every little thing in their lives.

I write two phrases on the whiteboard—*In control* and *Out of control*—and ask the participants to hold both phrases in mind, one after the other. I ask them to notice the feeling state that arises around each one.

It's no surprise when two-thirds of the people in the room report that they prefer feeling in control rather than out of control. But then, a woman stands up and describes an evening when her husband answered the phone, talked for a few minutes, then hung up and said to her, "That was D. He says the two of you are having an affair."

"Of course, it was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid," she said. "But instead of being upset, I realized it was a total relief that I didn't have to try and control things anymore."

I have a moment of doubt—are we opening a Pandora's box here? Should I point out that the yoga texts do not really support extramarital affairs? Before I have time to respond, five or six hands shoot up. It seems the confession has opened a door into a new level of mutual intimacy, and they all want to talk about their positive experiences of having life go out of control.

A man speaks about being out in a sailboat during a storm, when the sails came loose from their tack, and the boat was driven by the gale-force wind. Another guy talks about losing a big chunk

of change on the stock market and how, after the initial shock wore off, his first thought was "I'm free!"

By now, I've stopped trying to guide the conversation, having entered the zone familiar to workshop leaders whose plan has been superseded by the spirit moving through a group. It feels as though a volcanic recognition—something Dionysian and ecstatic—is pushing its way into the room. Finally, someone says, "So, it's scary to feel out of control, but scary as it is, it's going to happen. So sometimes, can't it be a way we break through into a deeper level of experience?" And everyone, in unison, nods.

Afterward, when a friend who is attending the workshop whispers in my ear, "I'd still rather be in control," it occurs to me that we have tapped into one of the central dichotomies of human life. Put simply, it looks like this: You do your best to control reality, to make your life function smoothly and efficiently. You also strive to keep your mind and emotions under control. At the same time, part of you longs for flow. Somewhere deep down, you know that a crisis or a meltdown can serve to push you past the psychic barriers you erect against the unpredictable and lead you back to the roller-coaster-like sense of freedom that can arise when your plans are suddenly overturned. You've probably also felt how resisting life's flow nearly always seems to create suffering.

Meet Your Control Freak

Whether consciously or unconsciously, we all are engaged in a *pas de deux* between our desire to keep things under control and our longing to ride with the unpredictable. On one hand, control is essential. Without it, we would never mature, never accomplish our goals, and never transform bad habits. Our safety and productivity—indeed, the social contract itself—depends on our collective ability to control our impulses, check our tempers, make plans, and keep our commitments. When we say that someone is out of control (unless we're talking about a rock star going into fourth gear onstage), we usually mean that the person is dangerous to herself and others.

At the heart of any control issue is the desire for personal power. Essentially, we measure our empowerment by how well we control our inner and outer environment. Externally, we express our power by how well we're able to control and manage our time, work, reputation, finances, and—admit it!—the other people in our lives. Internally, we take power by controlling our bodies—think of how good it feels when you hold a Headstand a minute longer than usual or resist eating the extra cookie—as well as our thoughts and emotions. We try to think positively or take deep breaths, instead of lashing out at a family member. We get down to work when we secretly feel like watching a movie. In so many ways, control is good, necessary, and admirable.

But then there's the other side of the story. That useful, necessary control mechanism has a tendency to turn tyrannical. Too much control deadens the life force in you. And the line between too much and too little can be hairline fine.

The shadow side of the mature and sensible inner controller is the control freak—the one who frets endlessly about her to-do list, cuts off any relationship that threatens to turn unpredictable, and tightens up when the inner music gets wild. The control-freak part of you is convinced that

she holds the reins to your sanity, and she is sure that, without her constant intervention, you'd be living in chaos, eating junk food, neglecting asana practice, and possibly risking death. (After all, at her primal core, the inner controller equates control with survival.)

She might be like my friend Sarah, who dreads family parties because she knows that her brother will drink too much and spill things on the clean linen tablecloth. Or he might be like my neighbor Frank, who knocks on my door every week or so to tell me that my rear fender is intruding into his parking space.

But your inner control freak can just as easily manifest as a refusal to be tied down by plans, commitments, or anyone else's agendas. I recently heard a husband accuse his wife of trying to control him because she insisted that he tell her what time he would be home. She countered by saying that his refusal to specify when he was coming home was his way of controlling her. He was trying to protect his freedom, and she was attempting to protect her security. Both of them were convinced that they were right, and both of them were speaking from their inner control freaks.

When Thunder is in Charge

However you slice it, the control freak has two big problems. The first is that, when you let her dominate, she'll try to eliminate everything unpredictable from your life and everyone else's. The second, more serious problem is that, since life is basically out of control, your attempts to control outcomes will often end in frustration. If you can't let go of your need to control when necessary, you'll be at the mercy of your stress hormones.

As I write this article, I'm sitting in a retreat center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, very happy to have a free hour to do some quiet work. A thunderstorm is raging outside. Just moments ago I was enjoying the sound of the pounding rain, when I looked up to see a growing stream of muddy water pouring under my door.

As I scrambled for towels and moved the power cords away from what quickly became a small flood, I realized that, instead of spending a quiet afternoon at the computer, I would be spending the afternoon mopping up floodwater. I've noticed that when I'm racing for a deadline, something beyond my control will often arise to interrupt me. If I let myself give in and get frustrated, I'll only make the situation worse.

It's not only weather patterns and other people who are beyond our control: Our own bodies operate largely in the no-control zone. Yogic lore notwithstanding, few of us can control our heartbeat or the rate of our blood circulation, much less avoid picking up a virus on a plane or suffering the crazed mutation of a set of cancer cells.

When you're in your controller self—that is, when you're in denial about these simple facts of life—it's no wonder that you're often irritated, scared, or tense. Yes, it's important to have a measure of control over life, but the deeper truth is that much of the time control is simply impossible, so the only way to avoid suffering is to give up your need to control.

It's no accident, then, that all yogic and mystical traditions are, basically, methodologies for entering that subtle internal zone in which the ability to take control and the ability to let go can operate in a fine balance.

The Dance of Yoga

What marks a truly accomplished yogi? In part, it's knowing how to dance gracefully in the space between control and letting go. On one hand, control lies at the very heart of yoga, as it does in all transformational practices.

"Yoga is controlling the movements of the mind," says the definitional sutra of the definitional text of classical yoga, the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. No matter how many ways the sutra is interpreted, that's basically what the man said. And at least four of the eight limbs of classical yoga focus specifically on teaching restraint and control.

Yogis have long practiced control of speech, discipline in eating, even total celibacy, not to mention the infinitely more difficult process of restraining anger and jealousy. We do this because without discipline there is no internal container—no energy—or space for transformation.

Pickled in Ecstasy

In the tradition I studied, we heard countless tales of yoga masters who could sit unmoving, legs crossed in Lotus Pose, for weeks on end, eating nothing, their minds poised in contemplation. Of course, we—children of the indulgent modern West—weren't expected to take things to that extreme. But we certainly imbibed the basic message: Without control, you can't even get in the game.

However, side by side with the ideal of yogic control, we were taught the equally significant ideal of yogic ecstasy, exemplified by an advanced practitioner who has moved beyond control and into nondual awareness, where we see the individual self and the Divine as one and the same. My teachers offered us the paradigm of the *siddha*, the perfected yogi, so deeply pickled in ecstasy that he might spend his life lying on a street corner, or, in the case of one of my teacher's mentors, sitting on a heap of trash.

Such a *siddha* would have long ago given up yogic discipline, instead existing in a state of boundless joy. He would be, as my teacher once said, "laughing with joy one moment and, in the next moment, feeling a new throb of ecstasy and laughing again."

By that definition, yogic attainment is all about losing yourself—in essence, losing control — whether you do that by giving yourself up to meditation, by hurling your body through 100 Sun Salutations while your muscles begin to fail, or by surrendering to the great wash of devotional love that rises up when you chant the names of God. "Get out of control!" one teacher of mantra used to call out to his students. "Get ecstatic!" Perhaps you've experienced it—when you're in the depths of intense practice, these two states flow into one.

Open to the Unknown

This is why yogic restraints are basically means, not goals. You shut the doors of the senses not because you're antifun; you do it so that an inner door will open, so that you'll gather the energy to enter the vastness that lies beyond the senses. The paradox is that more often than not, the opening occurs when you let go of discipline and take a chance on the unknown—in other words, when you're willing to be out of control.

There's a little-known piece of the Buddha's enlightenment story that describes this paradox. The Buddha left his wife and family and practiced years of intense austerity: fasting, living outdoors, and performing complex and painful physical and spiritual exercises.

He became the master of yogic self-control, yet he was no closer to freedom and enlightenment than when he started. One day, realizing that he had hit the wall, he asked himself if there had ever been a time when he had known perfect joy.

He remembered an afternoon in his 10th year, when he had sat for hours under a rose-apple tree while his father supervised the harvest of their crops. He had gazed across the rice paddies for hours—perfectly quiet and perfectly content. That was when he discovered his famous resolve: to sit still under a tree, perfectly relaxed, and not get up until enlightenment dawned.

This story mirrors my own experience. For years, my true entrances into meditation often came at the end of a long period of sitting, when I'd give up concentrating. I would relax any attempt to control my body or mind, draw my knees up close to my chest, and just sit. So often, that would be the moment when my heart would soften, my mind would expand, and I'd open to the universe, caught in the heart of the big love.

Of course, here's that paradox again: Yes, the truth emerged in the moment that I let go, but the quality of mind that allowed me to let go, and eventually to stay in the opening, came from the discipline that I had practiced and the control I had exercised up to that point.

Yoga as Observation

So how can you balance between the two poles of the control/out-of-control dichotomy? Start by observing yourself in the yoga room. One of the most worthwhile things that yoga practice teaches is how to tell the difference between appropriate control and the control freak's fear of letting go. Once, in a class I participated in with Anusara Yoga teacher Desiree Rumbaugh, Desiree gave us an exercise for discovering core stability in Tree Pose. As we started balancing, she asked us to make circles with our upper body, letting it sway in and out of balance.

As soon as I began to lose my balance, I noticed a surge of fear and an impulse to counteract a fall by controlling my body. I firmed my thigh muscles and, above all else, brought my upper body back to stillness. My inner control freak would not allow me to perform the experiment—she was too afraid of risking a fall.

When to Let Go

I solved my problem by finding a handy wall to support me. But more important, I learned something about my way of exercising control. My attempts to control were rooted in fear, and for that reason, my techniques tended to become rigid.

Now, I can recognize the feeling state that comes up when the inner control freak has taken over. I can coach myself into remembering that, for example, it won't be the end of the world if I miss a plane connection, so there's no need to elbow people out of my way as I dash through the airport. I can remind myself that it won't kill me if someone doesn't get into deep meditation during one of my classes, or enjoy themselves at my party.

Each time I can observe and release my inner control freak, it becomes a little bit easier to let life flow, just as it is. Each time I let go, I become a little more forgiving, a bit more present.

By dancing with the koan of control/out of control in meditation and yoga, you learn how to do it in life. You learn when to work through lunch and when taking a walk is more important. You sense when to surrender to a passionate feeling for a lover or a friend and when it is better to exercise restraint. You discover how to maintain appropriate boundaries with your difficult relatives, yet give them permission to be who they are.

After a while, your skills become so finely honed that you can confidently relinquish control, knowing that whatever happens you will be able to find your way back to center. Those are moments when you'll recognize, "Ah, I've mastered this aspect of life!"

Out of Control

The relationship between control and letting go is beautifully taught in martial arts. Until the form is embedded in your muscles and neurons, you play by the rules. Only when you've achieved some degree of mastery can you let go. That's why the classic test of skill is built around the question: Are you skilled enough to let yourself be out of control?

An American aikido master relates his experience of taking the test that would determine whether he deserved a black belt. Five senior students "attacked" him, and, as they sparred, he gave his all. Many minutes passed, and he felt his strength beginning to wane.

There came a moment when he had no choice but to give up using his muscles and his will, and let his body do what it could do on its own. Moving without thought, he bested four of the "attackers," before finally being put to the floor by the fifth.

He was sure that he had flunked the test—until he heard the other students cheering. He'd passed with flying colors.

The point of the exercise was to give him the chance, when faced with unbeatable odds, to recognize that his personal strength was insufficient and to let go, trusting the power that he'd accumulated through practice to uphold him. It did. His body, moving on its own, had executed

the forms with perfect, spontaneous flow. He had surrendered to the control of no control and found the perfect balance.

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