





WHAT CAN WE CONTROL

Drawing on insights from yoga and philosophy, Nancy Jackson (Swami Dayananda) discusses what you can't control and what you can.

Let's admit it. We all enjoy when things go our way. Whether we've created a plan or been open to spontaneity, trouble-free outcomes are pleasing and put us at ease.

When things don't go our way, perhaps we take action and push in a direction towards what we want. We try to control.

Control is a force. Invisible yet potent. It can be gentle, guiding, strident, or all-consuming. It can flow or it can struggle against situations, sometimes creating conflicts and sometimes finding resolutions.

Control is essential in today's world. To be responsible you have to organise and manage time, work commitments, money, relationships, and activities. For some people, control is an issue, such as trying to control, being controlled, needing precise order, or crumbling when feeling out of

control. You may not be particularly aware of control. Once you look at it, however, you may find that control plays a big part in your life.

Aspects of Control

Life's achievements are usually attained because of purpose, determination, and holding on. Many require discipline, such as getting a diploma or learning to play the violin. You have to accept situations you may not like, from intense training for sport to shopping for groceries.

At a basic level, let's say you're at a yoga session and you're in a posture you find difficult. Perhaps your mind tells you how much you dislike this posture. It stretches your capabilities. Time goes ever-so-slowly. A thought flutters to release or leave the class or any number of urges. Yet you apply control, continue the posture and most

likely then feel good about yourself. You might say that you are in control.

Or you come home from a long day to a mess and are compelled to clear your kitchen. What was out of control is now in control. Everyday challenges constantly test the range of your comfort zone. To be in control is to feel that you can cope or feel on top or ahead. You are ready.

Yet, countless things are beyond control. The orbiting of the Earth, world and local events, losing a job, and how much dirt gets tracked into the house, even when you tell everyone to wipe their feet. Our contemporary culture is steeped in cause and effect. Two people at work had a big fight and you're still shaking from it. Something costs less than you thought and you're elated. You see this bad thing on the news and are upset. Lunch was delicious and you had a pleasant afternoon. Dozens of large and small incidents – many beyond your control – directly affect your state of mind and your emotions.

For the most part you can ride these ups and downs. But priorities can intervene and work piles up or stuff overflows in the garage. You can readily get overwhelmed. And what about when residue builds up? Over time you realise you've become more anxious, you worry more or overreact.

On an emotional level, control is often about relationships. No matter how much personal wisdom you carry, it's nearly impossible to not want people to act in certain ways. Tensions arise when control

issues are in conflict. Anger can be a clash of will. Withdrawal might be avoiding the risk of trusting. Self-consolation or sulking may be an attempt to rebuild appropriate self-esteem.

With too little control you may be irresponsible. If you don't control some aspects of life, serious consequences can occur. Pushing for too much control manifests as compulsive or aggressive. It accelerates stress or fear. You can't control when you may have an accident or contract a virus, but you can worry about it. You can't control a co-worker's surliness, but you can complain about it. You can't control the length of your commute, but you can be frustrated by it. In excess, control can come as constant advice, rigid routines, demands that things

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are placed in a certain way or done at a certain time. Toddlers use tantrums for control – so do adults.

All of these responses accumulate and begin to manifest. Too much stress, crises, and random events lead to physical ailments such as chronic stomach-aches. Emotionally you can feel panicky and have a sense of losing what you have. You feel that you or the situations in your life are out of control.

Ancient Wisdom

“Some things are in our control and others not,” said the Roman philosopher Epictetus. Born a slave about two thousand years ago, he was given his freedom in his teens. From an early age he studied philosophy and lectured in Rome and then in Greece. Teaching the principles of Stoicism, he said we are responsible for what we feel and think. As he would know, the mind can remain free even when the body is enslaved.

Although the word Stoic also can mean to be not-feeling, it implies being measured in your reactions and to consider the bigger picture of how you live your life. Epictetus said, “Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, whatever are our own actions. Things not in

our control are whatever are not our own actions.”

It's normal to confuse the internal world of the mind, which you have the potential to control, with the external world, which you may be able to influence but not control. And it's all too easy to mistake external circumstances as the cause of happiness or unhappiness.

Epictetus recommends accepting

what you can't control and working on what you can. Advocating what is now known as mindful awareness, or simply paying attention, Epictetus endorsed noticing your own thoughts. In his discourses he said that sometimes the thought of what will happen is worse than what does happen. As a Stoic, he told his students not to let outside events have the power to create internal disturbance; not to take on another's distress as your own; and not to fall victim to another's harsh remarks. He said, "And do you feel no shame in handing over your own mind to be confused and mystified by anyone who happens to verbally attack you?"

Someone else's behaviour or words don't necessarily hurl you out of control. The mind however, too readily responds with its own judgments or defensive thoughts.

Question Your Thinking

Why want control? Fundamentally for ease. In today's world it's essential to take charge or be accountable. Control sometimes requires reining in spending or not spreading your energies in too many directions. Perhaps the urge to control is the mind's intervention in trying to solve a problem. Control can be believing that your point of view is the correct one or you need to protect something. It might be following through on getting something done your way. Or preventing something from happening, such as sandbagging before a predicted flood.

You cannot control which of your "wants" will be fulfilled. But you have the capacity to choose how you

apply effort and when to let go. You can work with your natural traits by becoming increasingly more aware of how fickle the mind can be. What happens in your thinking? Perhaps you have a slight elation at the potential of getting what you want. Depending on the wish, it could even change the direction of your life. And if you become disappointed? Notice your internal reactions when you don't get what you desire. Do you blame the situation or blame yourself? What part does control play? How quickly can you let go and move on?

When you feel emotional distress, ask yourself, "What am I thinking?" As best you can, focus on the exact words your mind is saying. Then consider questions like the following. Look for feelings of contraction where the question hits a nerve, or relief of knowing you don't have to hold something together any more

- What (or who) do I try to control in my life?
- In what ways am I in a battle of my control versus a situation or other person?
- Which efforts towards control create physical and emotional tension?
- Do I have a favourite pattern of response, such as anger, worry, or feeling victimized?
- Is there a solution such as better communication that could ease the tension?
- Is it time to push harder, admit I will do everything to attain my goal?



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TIPS ON MAINTAINING BALANCE FROM EPICTETUS

It's natural to have reactions to life's challenges. The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus was keen on keeping steady in mind and in feeling, genuinely investigating your responses and being ready to let go. Here are a few excerpts from his discourses, the *Enchiridion*.

HOLD STEADY.

"I keep my mind in a state comfortable to nature; I will not keep it if I am bothered at things that happen."

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.

"When anyone provokes you, be assured that it is your own opinion which provokes you."

ACCEPT WHAT IS.

"Don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well."

WHEN APPROPRIATE, SHIFT TO THE POSITIVE.

"If you are in pain, you will find fortitude. If you hear unpleasant language, you will find patience."

STAY BALANCED THROUGH ILLNESS OR INJURY.

"Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to your ability to choose, unless that is your choice."

CONSIDER YOURSELF ON STAGE.

"Remember that you are an actor in a drama; see that you act it naturally. For this is your business, to act well the character assigned you."

KEEP YOUR SENSE OF HUMOUR.

"If anyone tells you that such a person speaks ill of you, don't make excuses about what is said of you, but answer: 'He does not know my other faults, else he would not have mentioned only these.'"

- Will I find relief if I let go?

Freedom From Suffering

The Sanskrit term for control is *nirodha*. Patanjali's second sutra of the Yoga Sutras is "Yogas chitta-vritti nirodha: The practice of yoga is to control the thought-waves of the mind." Buddhism defines *nirodha* as controlling the tendency towards the suffering created by the mind. What Epictetus and the yogis address is that troublesome thinking clouds emotion.

you can determine if control is involved, you may be able to instantly relieve yourself by acknowledging, "This is beyond my control. I let it go." You can still wish for a certain outcome but relief comes when you're ready to accept what happens.

Meditation practices help refocus the mind from the stimulations of the world to a relaxed state. Rather than letting the mind go wild, gently guide yourself to awareness of the present moment. Right here and now. How you are seated, the texture

the body, helps you concentrate, vitalises your outlook, and focuses on being in the present moment. You may not be able to control a situation but you can control taking a moment for yourself.

The world-famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma has performed for thousands of audiences. "I get really anxious when I play sometimes," he said. He will take slow, deep breaths for a minute. "Your breath is one thing you can control. One minute is something you can control."

Forging Ahead

In today's world, levels of control are appropriate to feel safe, have continuity, freedom, and a healthy environment. At the same time there's plenty of room for opening to the unexpected, to other people and to variety. Ultimately control is a process of trial and error, what works for you and can bring satisfaction. Life itself is filled with surprises; some annoying, some enlivening. When you realise you can influence but not control a desired outcome, you can still have peace of mind. To stay centred amidst change is a great accomplishment. The practice of yoga is to access the deepest sense of being, where you can accept equanimity between what you can and can't control. The more you know about yourself, the less you need to control.



Whenever you are thinking thoughts that create distress and unease within you, yoga asks you to be aware. Let disturbing thoughts go or to find a deeper experience of your life force itself.

One application is to become increasingly aware of what you are thinking and if it disturbs you. The mind naturally settles into a state of quiet when it is not agitated. When it is fuelled by strong reactions, it becomes emmeshed in turmoil.

Here's where you can apply a little control. As simple as it sounds, an effective approach is to ask your mind to stop being preoccupied about a problem. Try a few phrases such as "Don't go there." "Wait until you have more information." "Now's not the time." When the mind returns to the problem, lightly move it away.

Another direct method is to investigate the issue of control. Trying to control something that is beyond your scope leads to internal tension. As soon as

of your clothing, sound, and the general environment. Taking a moment allows you to regroup your energies and gain a wider perspective.

Without disturbing thoughts, the mind will naturally settle into the deep stillness that is also called *nirodha*. Although it can seem that inner stillness is deeply hidden behind the thoughts and external world, it is actually your most prevalent state of being. Whenever you are thinking thoughts that create distress and unease within you, yoga asks you to be aware. Let disturbing thoughts go or to find a deeper experience of your life force itself.

Breathe

Another effective technique is to take time out and breathe. Breathwork brings energy into

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