

Karma Yoga or Born to Control?

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Roger: Why does it seem to be such a natural human inclination to want to have control over our future experiences?

Sundari: It should be obvious that trying to control the outcome is about as nonsensical as wanting to have control over the weather. Why not just let the future unfold as it will and experience it as it does? Knowledge is power, and the main reason why our brains insist on simulating the future even when we'd rather be here now enjoying a goldfish moment is that our brains find it gratifying to exercise control – not just for the future it (seems to) buy us, but for the exercise itself. Being effective – changing things, influencing things, making things happen – is one of the fundamental needs with which human brains seem to be naturally endowed. Much of our behaviour from infancy onwards is simply an expression of this penchant for control. Take a cursory look at any baby and you will see who has everyone dancing to meet their every need. If we have been properly looked after and loved as babies, we never have it so good again!

We are born wired to control in a world that is beyond our control. This fact is not obvious to us however, and “civilization” is our species' attempt to rein in the intractable forces of nature. While we can argue that we have come a long way since caveman days, we could also argue the opposite – as much as things change for better or worse, they stay the same. For most of us, no matter how much the evidence to the contrary presents itself, we steadfastly believe our desires will prevail and fortune will favour us. Those who subsidize fortune-telling industries do not want to know what is likely to happen just for the joy of anticipating it but to do something about it to ensure we get what we want or avoid what we don't want.

But not to think about the future requires that we convince our frontal lobe, the part of our brain wired to plan and control, not to do what it's designed to do. Just like we cannot tell our heart not to beat, it naturally resists this suggestion. Mental simulations of the future arrive in our consciousness regularly and unbidden, occupying every corner of our mental lives. Unfortunately for us, our brains are programmed this way. Studies show that most people think about the future more than the past or present and are part-time residents of tomorrow. How come we can't do something even goldfish find so simple, such as be here now? Why do our brains stubbornly insist on projecting us into the future when there is so much stuff to think about right here, right now? Apart from prospecting and emotion – hope, fear and desire – the most obvious answer is that thinking about the future can be more pleasurable than acutely living it. We like to fantasize about the future because reality seldom matches our expectations.

As nothing in the Field stays the same, and nothing is really what it appears to be, our desire to control is so powerful, and the feeling of being in control so rewarding, people often act as though they can control the uncontrollable. Perhaps the strangest thing about this illusion of control is not that it happens but that it seems to confer many of the psychological benefits of genuine control. A strange fact is that the one group of people who seem generally and genuinely immune to the illusion of control are the clinically depressed. They are less inclined to overestimate

the degree to which they can control events in most situations, which is probably why they are depressed in the first place! These and other findings have led some researchers to conclude that the feeling of control – whether real or illusory – is one of the wellsprings of mental health.

The fact is that as human beings we come into the world with a passion for control, and most of us go out of the world the same way. Research suggests that if we lose our ability to control things, we become unhappy, helpless, hopeless and depressed, and occasionally, dead. Many suicides are the result of this feeling of utter hopelessness, as are many illnesses. Some philosophers have stated that over and beyond any other human need is the need for order and control.

Impact is rewarding. And when we get what we want, it makes us feel successful, safe, that we matter. Mattering makes us happy. The act of steering one's boat down the river of time is a source of pleasure, regardless of one's port of call. And success is possible in this world with timely and appropriate action. But there is one small problem with this kind of happiness. Ultimately, we don't have control. Life is a zero-sum game, we lose as much as we win, and sooner or later this is what brings everyone down. If we have not developed some equanimity or found a way to live with the vicissitudes of life, we are most likely to land up sad and depressed.

The only solution to this conundrum is *karma yoga* – even if it goes against how the brain is made and how society is programmed, the need to win at all costs, not only to make a difference but to survive. *Karma yoga*, the understanding that we can act to gain what we want but are never in control of the results, is not good news for the ego. It sees no benefit to this practice and resists it tenaciously, as though its existence depends on it. And it does. Giving up control is tantamount to giving up identification with the small, limited self, the one who acts for results and own things. It is totally counter-intuitive, which is why it is so important and the only way to negate the doer.

~ Sundari