

Control and Surrender

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

May 4, 2026 at the Insight Meditation Center, Redwood City, CA

I'd like to start us off with this little vignette. We might have an idea of ourselves, a notion of ourselves, an image of ourselves as somebody who has a certain amount of capabilities. We feel that we can do certain things. Maybe we think that we're reliable or energetic, or maybe we feel like we're not so reliable or not so energetic, but we have these ideas about what our capabilities are.

And then, consider the body. The body sometimes doesn't show up in the way we would like or the way that we expect that's consistent with this notion we have about our capabilities. Maybe we're sick. Maybe we have an injury. Maybe it's just aging, and our capabilities are diminishing.

There's this way in which the mind at first wants to negotiate. The mind wants to say, "Oh, no, no, no, body, you have to show up. I have to do this. I have all these things that I need to do and I'll disappoint these other people. I'll disappoint myself. I mean, who would I be if I am not able to do these things I'm accustomed to doing?"

But there's no negotiating with the body. It is how it is. I mean, we try. We use exogenous compounds, caffeine, whatever else we think might help. So, whatever our physical experience is at the moment, it is just saying, "This is how it is right now." It doesn't matter what ideas we have. This is how it is right now.

This is an obvious place where we start to see that we do not control nearly what we would like to control. Right? We wish we could just say, "Come on, let's get to it," and have the body show up in a way that allows us to show up in the way that we want to show up. But we can't. We don't control it in the way that we would like.

We could say that so much of ordinary life is organized around this whole idea of trying to keep things under control. We want to control how others see us. We want to control our emotions. We want to control the future. We want to control whether we feel okay or not.

Of course, we do. We're vulnerable. This wanting to control is very understandable. Human beings are vulnerable, and so we want safety. We want happiness. We don't want to feel vulnerable. We want to feel like we can be the masters of our universe.

So, this wish for control is not foolish. It comes from a wish to care. We care about how we are showing up. We want to show up for other people. We want to show up for ourselves. We care

about doing a good job in whatever it is we're doing. We care about not wanting to feel overwhelmed. So, of course we want to create the conditions and control things as best we can.

But there's this way in which care kind of slides into or hardens into control. It becomes trying to manipulate and make things happen in exactly the way that we want. And when this control becomes the condition for peace—when we feel like, "Okay, only when I have everything under control will I be happy. Then I'll have some ease. Then there'll be some peace"—when we have this idea, we're going to suffer, because we don't control nearly as much as we want to.

Of course. When I say this out loud, all of us are going, "Yeah, of course. I know that." But we keep on showing up trying to make things different.

So, I'd like to introduce a different idea, something a bit different than control. It's a word that we don't use very often in this tradition. We don't find this exact word in the Pali Canon^[1]. We find some pointing towards this, but not this exact word. And when you hear this word, there might be a part of you that's like, "Yeah, no thank you. I'll change the channel, go on to the next thing."

This is the idea of *surrender*.

Can we surrender to what's actually happening right now, instead of always trying to change it? We're always trying to make it be better somehow, as if we could change what's already here, what's already happening. But this word "surrender," it can sound dangerous or it can sound passive. Like, "Oh, well, am I just going to be a blob all the time?" I'd like to talk a little bit this evening about this idea of surrender as part of practice, what it means, and what it doesn't mean.

In this tradition, instead of this word surrender, we often use the word *allow*. Can we just allow what's already here to be here? I appreciate this word allow. I've given talks on this, and some of you know the acronym R.A.F.T.^[2] where the 'A' stands for allow. I've spoken about this a lot. But there's a way in which the word surrender feels a little bit stronger to me, because it is the relinquishing of this trying to control.

Allowing can sometimes be a way of trying to control. "I'm going to allow this so that it changes. I'm going to allow this so that something better can arise soon." So, we're allowing, but only in order to have some other type of experience. I'm pointing to: can we let go? Can we abandon this idea of having a different experience?

The way that I want to talk about surrender is letting down, or putting down. We might even say all of us humans have this—I don't think there are exceptions except for awakened people—this compulsive effort to dominate experience. We want things to be the way we think they should be. Of course we do.

So, with surrender, can we release that demand that this moment be other than it is? This quiet demand. Sometimes it's really subtle, and we don't notice it. But there are so many ways in which we are saying to this moment's experience, "No, thank you. I want the next moment. It's going to be better. I'll be happy then. I'll finally get what I want then."

But can we trust that this moment, even if it doesn't match our preferences, has something to teach us? This moment has something that we can learn from. This moment has something to offer us if we allow it. If we allow ourselves to be touched by this moment, to actually be present for it. Can we permit the heart and the mind to be shaped by reality? When we put down trying to make it different, we are instead allowing whatever is there to be there.

This idea of surrender does not mean giving up discernment or wisdom. It doesn't mean submitting to harm, of course not. It doesn't mean being submissive or passive, nor does it mean abandoning wise effort, and it doesn't mean collapsing into helplessness. That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about putting down the way in which we want things to be different. Sometimes it's so subtle—even when I see this in myself I am surprised by how subtle it can be. And it's frightening. It's frightening how often we want things to be different, and it's frightening to think, "Oh, to just be with this moment. Surely not this one. Not this one that right now is boring or mundane or uncomfortable." There's this frightening thought of, "Wait, if I'm with this moment, that means I have to give up all my dreams and ideas of how things can be better."

This is really powerful if we just pay attention to the resistance and why we don't really want to be with this moment.

To be sure, there are many times in which it's wise to bring forth effort, and it's appropriate. We take medicine. We leave harmful situations. We take care of ourselves and others. So I'm not saying that surrendering is just doing nothing. Instead, I am saying, can we make this shift from trying to control each moment, to instead allowing each moment to touch us, change us, and teach us something?

The question is, can we act wisely without being driven by the demand for control? And a question for our practice is: can we respond wisely without making our well-being, without making our peace dependent on the outcome? Can we care deeply? Care deeply about ourselves, about others, about what's happening in the world, and still let this moment be real, be what it is, meeting it fully and completely as best we can?

Much, if not most, of our suffering comes from the way in which we are saying no, from the pushing and pulling that we're doing with our experience. Pushing things away: "I don't want this." Pulling things close: "I need more of this."

Maybe, for example, some anxiety arises. Somebody I know who's an MD—she is a general practitioner in internal medicine—was just commenting on this. She was saying, "Wow, how many people have anxiety now?" She observed that decades ago it was about depression, and now it's about anxiety, and she's just seeing this in so many of her patients. I hadn't appreciated that. Anxiety just underlies so much restlessness and being ill at ease.

But when the anxiety arises—you could substitute whatever your favorite uncomfortable experience is, I'm just using anxiety as an example—there's this way that the mind says, "Oh, no, no, no. I shouldn't be anxious. What's wrong with me? How do I get rid of this? I want to have a different experience." But now there's anxiety about the anxiety, and it just gets compounded.

Some of you will be familiar with the teaching of the second arrow^[3], where the first arrow is just what's arising, and then the second arrow is the insistence that it be different that we are putting onto this moment's experience.

Or maybe if it's not anxiety, maybe it's uncertainty. Instead of feeling that discomfort of not knowing, we want to control the future. Of course we do. We want to feel more comfortable. We want to know what's going to happen so we can be prepared and continue feeling comfortable in the future, or avoid feeling uncomfortable now.

So we make plans, and then we make backup plans. I'm often doing this. I'm making plans: "Okay, I'm going to do this, and then if that doesn't work, I'm going to have that, and make sure I put this in the car just in case..." It's quite funny to see all this planning that happens. Sometimes it's helpful, but most often I'm over-planned.

This is often how suffering multiplies: this inability to be with the anxiety or the not knowing. And the cost of this is a disconnection from ourselves, from our lives. Instead, we are pushing away experiences or pulling experiences. Disconnected from our hearts. Disconnected from our minds, from our bodies, from other people. Instead, we're lost in the mind trying to make things be different.

I'd like to offer that surrender ends this disconnection and this extra suffering. Because if resistance causes disconnection, then surrender is not resignation, but maybe a recognition. It's a recognition about what's actually here, what's actually happening.

If resistance is this disconnection from the body, then surrendering is to just actually be with what's happening here and now. And so it begins maybe when we just notice the disconnection or notice the sense of resistance to what's happening. Mindfulness is an integral part of this idea of surrendering, first of all to recognize when we're not fully present with this moment.

But mindfulness also has a receptive side to it. Often it has a more active side, like "I'm going to place my attention on the breath," for example, but there can be a way in which it is also receptive and allows this moment to show itself, to reveal itself to us. It doesn't mean that what gets revealed is what we want or what makes us happy necessarily.

[Laughter]

So I would say that surrender is not doing nothing, but it's letting the moment show us something. It's letting reality soften, humble, and educate the heart and mind.

I'd like to read a poem about surrendering by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer^[4], of course. It's called "The Medicine of Surrender". This poem doesn't sentimentalize surrender, and it doesn't make surrender sound... well, let's make it sound like medicine.

The medicine of surrender comes with no spoonful of sugar. No promises, no backup plans, no returns, no insurance. The medicine of surrender never tastes the way you expect, never tastes the same next time, and seldom has the hoped-for effect. And if there were some part of you that thought it might not be affected, that thought it might hold back, that part is most likely the first part to be flooded with the relentless truth of what is. Oh, surrender. The surest medicine that exists. There are infinite side effects. Wonder. Freedom. Rawness. It's like opening the dictionary to the word heaven or obliteration and knowing it's the same thing. It's like playing spin the bottle with life and you French kiss whatever you get. It's the only remedy that can help you to be whole. The only real medicine there is.

She has this playful and strong language in there, too. "There's no spoonful of sugar." Because if we have the sense of, "Okay, I'm going to surrender in order that XYZ happens," that's not really surrendering. Maybe that's allowing or close to allowing. Surrendering is just letting go. Letting go of this sense of wanting some particular outcome. So, this is why she's saying that it's no spoonful of sugar. It's medicine, but it's not always comfortable. It's medicine, but maybe it's not something that we want or wish for.

And it doesn't come with guarantees, right? Because that would be holding onto a particular outcome. Surrender is to let go of having a particular outcome.

She also writes, "surrender seldom has the hoped-for effect." Because we might say, "Okay, well, I'm going to do the surrendering thing," but we want a result. We want calm, relief, certainty, for something to be different, or spiritual improvement. Surrender might not give us the *hoped-for* effect. It may, however, give us the *needed* effect. The needed effect of putting down our insistence that the world go our way, and putting down our insistence that we can control things that we simply don't control.

This is a deep lesson. It doesn't matter what somebody sitting up here says. This is something that you have to experience again and again. How many times do we try to control other people? And that's just annoying.

[Laughter]

It doesn't work. It's annoying for the person trying to control, and it's annoying for the person who's being controlled.

She also writes, "The only remedy that can help you be whole." Help you be whole. Instead of that part of us that's saying, "Yeah, this is okay, except for this—whatever this is." Even if we are doing a certain amount of being with this experience, there's a part of us saying, "Well, no, this needs to be different." But to surrender means to have wholeness: all aspects of ourselves, all aspects of this moment. Can we not splinter the moment? Can we not splinter or try to excise parts of ourselves?

So, surrender, we could say, is this shift from trying to change the moment to allowing the moment to change us.

Sometimes when we hear this word "surrender," we think it's weak and it means defeat, helplessness, passivity, resignation, or something like this. But I'm pointing to something that is not weak. I am pointing to something that is really powerful. This apparent control—the apparent power of trying to control—is really limited. Maybe it can help us do some practical things, but it doesn't lead to liberation. It doesn't lead to the greatest freedom.

But this power of surrender does lead to awakening, freedom, peace, ease, and well-being. It gives access to a different kind of strength. A strength to be present, to feel what's happening, the strength to not know, the strength to allow ourselves to be changed, the strength to allow ourselves to be touched, the strength to let go.

But this kind of surrender depends on trust. Not blind trust, not naive trust, but a trust that comes out of our practice. A trust that mindfulness can hold experience. Trust that just this breath is all that we need to be with this moment. This breath can support us. I trust that the Dharma^[5] can touch, hold, and meet everything. Everything can get folded in.

And this trust grows gradually. It's not like we surrender once and we're done. Boom. It's with practice. We more and more start to see where we can just allow, and it allows for more and more of this surrendering. Maybe just one wrestling match with reality gets softened, and we realize, "Oh, okay. This is a way forward." Whereas all these arguments with reality, they're just arguments with reality. They turn out to be a cul-de-sac. They're not a way forward to greater peace, ease, and freedom.

So maybe we could say this is the dignity of surrender. It is not giving up on life, not giving up on practice, not giving up on freedom. But giving up this exhausting project of having to be in control. This exhausting project of thinking that we need to be in control, that everything needs to be manageable before we can feel some peace and ease, spending the rest of our lives trying to make things manageable.

We still act. We still care. We still have wise effort. We still respond wisely. But it's about no longer waiting for life to be manageable. It's about no longer waiting for life to be the way we think it should be, or for this moment to be the way we think it should be. And we could say that this moment—this imperfect moment right here—is the place to begin, right now.

I would say that surrender is this shift from trying to control the moment, trying to change the moment, to allowing the moment to change us.

I'll close with reading this poem again. "The Medicine of Surrender" by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

The medicine of surrender comes with no spoonful of sugar. No promises, no backup plans, no returns, no insurance. The medicine of surrender never tastes the way you expect, never tastes the same next time, and seldom has the hoped-for effect. And if there were some part of you that thought it might not be affected, that thought it might hold back, that part is most likely the first part to be flooded with the relentless truth of what is. Oh, surrender. The surest medicine that exists. There are infinite side effects. Wonder, freedom, rawness. It's like opening the dictionary to the word heaven or obliteration. And knowing it's the same thing. It's like playing spin the bottle with life and you French kiss whatever you get. It's the only remedy that can help you be whole. The only real medicine there is.

And I'll stop there and open it up to see if there are some comments or questions.

Q&A

And you know what? There's a microphone here. Can somebody help... We don't have a manager tonight. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Do you know how to turn it on? There's a little round button on the side. Oh, maybe it's on. Hello. Yeah.

Questioner: Okay, I have a question. So, talking about control, the way I interpret that is almost like inauthenticity. When I show up to something with control, I am almost wanting to manipulate a situation. And it's not with intention. It's just a reaction, right? So, in the moment when the anxiety is there, it's this knee-jerk reaction to try to impress or to control the situation where I'm looking for a certain reaction. And that's sort of the manipulation, and I use that loosely because I'm not trying to actually harm anybody, but it's only in the retreat when I step away from that in the moment, in the game, right? In the trenches, I don't really have a choice

until I step away, and then I evaluate and I say, "Oh, I was inauthentic. I was trying to control. Surrender would have been great in that moment." Can you talk about meditation practice and almost preparing to be more receptive to surrender in the moment when you're in the trenches navigating life?

Diana Clark: Yeah. So, there are a few things I can say. One I would say is that meditation practice or mindfulness helps us to notice when this inauthenticity, this trying to manipulate, shows up because it's a little bit of a tightness. Just having some sensitivity to our body or to our mind, we recognize, "Oh, yeah, okay, there's this feeling here. I'm feeling a little bit tight or closed." And just noticing that sometimes can help bring a little bit more ease, and maybe it's not all the way to surrender, but it's on the spectrum there. Let's say that we have this control-to-surrender spectrum. So, it's a shift. It's a movement in that direction.

But, if we really want to be able to surrender to the moment, how meditation practice, mindfulness, or spiritual practice in general helps create the conditions for that, is asking what if... What if it's okay if we show up anxious? And we're with a group and we're just anxious. It's okay if people see that we're anxious. It's okay if people see that we can't put our sentences together in the most dazzling way.

What's underneath all this is a sense of self. I want people to see me a certain way. I want to be viewed a certain way. I want to feel comfortable all the time. I want to hide the way in which sometimes I feel uncomfortable. And so, with meditation practice, that need to be seen a particular way starts to diminish. And we can just show up how we are. Is this helpful?

Questioner: Yeah. And by meditation practice, you mean sitting, focusing on breath, or whatever the focus is, mantra, or something?

Diana Clark: So, in this tradition, we would say focus on the breath or just being present for what's arising. If you do the introduction to meditation here, it would be often we choose an anchor, which can be the breath, and when the mind wanders, we come back to the breath. Or if something else compelling is happening—a sound, bodily experience—then we just make that the anchor, and then we're just with the bodily pain or we're just with the sound. And when that's no longer compelling, we come back to the breath. So, it's not just breath, breath, breath excluding everything else. It's a way in which everything is included. Is that helpful?

Questioner: Yeah, thank you.

Diana Clark: Can we move the microphone here?

Questioner: So, is it possible to strive really hard in some field like athletics or writing or science and still surrender?

Diana Clark: Yes. Absolutely. Part of what the surrender here is about is giving up having a particular outcome. But you're working really hard because that's what you're doing. You're applying yourself and you care about what you're doing, and surrendering to what the outcome is. Does that make sense?

Questioner: Say, all the best athletes I've been around wanting that gold medal, they wanted that MVP, they wanted that championship. I wonder if they didn't want that, how would that have affected how good they were at the sport they played?

Diana Clark: Well, the athletes that I know are the ones that are on TV, so I have a very limited insight, I don't live with them or know people like this, but I do know there are times in which they fail. And what helps them put their cleats back on after failing? Right, it's just guaranteed. That is part of athletics. So, there's a way in which it's clear they're not going to get to the MVP or the gold medal or whatever it is. And then do they just stop their sport? No, often they are striving because maybe they're inspired...

Questioner: I wonder if they didn't have the drive to be the best, would they still be able to be the best?

Diana Clark: Maybe not. And they'd be okay with it if they had a meditation practice. Like, "Yeah, I'm not the best, but I'm giving my heart to this. I'm giving my life energy to this. I love this." And then it's being done out of love as opposed to trying to make themselves look better or feel better. I think often that's what it is. They want to get the accolades to make themselves feel better. But we all know this: whether it's athletes or movie stars or something like this, they get whatever it is, the gold medal, and then what? Right? They either have to get another gold medal or they have this big depression or something like this, right? Yeah.

Thank you, Matt. Anybody else have a comment or question? Okay. Well, thank you. And I wish you a wonderful rest of your evening and safe travels home. Thank you.

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1. **Pali Canon:** The standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, as preserved in the Pali language. [↵](#)
 2. **R.A.F.T.:** An acronym used in mindfulness practice, standing for Recognize, Allow, Feel, and Trust, guiding practitioners through a process of being with difficult experiences. [↵](#)
 3. **Second Arrow:** A Buddhist parable from the Sallatha Sutta. The first arrow represents the unavoidable physical or emotional pain of life. The "second arrow" is our reaction to it—the suffering we add through resistance, anger, or despair. [↵](#)

4. **Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer:** A contemporary poet known for her daily poetry practice and themes of mindfulness and surrender. [↵](#)
5. **Dharma:** A key concept with multiple meanings in Buddhism, including the cosmic law and order, the teachings of the Buddha, and the phenomena of reality. [↵](#)

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