Other People Are Not Ours to Control

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Welcome to this fifth and last talk in this series on *When Life Does Not Obey Us*. I don't know why I always smile when I say this title, just because it's a little bit over the top and a little bit poking, but maybe that's why I like it. It's kind of a funny title, *When Life Does Not Obey Us*. But the theme is how we don't control nearly as much as we think we do. And I would even go further and say, we don't control nearly what we want to.

And this turns into impossible projects when we're trying to control things that we can't control. There's a part of us that knows this, but maybe just saying it out loud somehow helps it register differently, this idea of impossible projects. Because we don't want to spend our life energy on things that are impossible. And so many things are impossible because we do not control them. But we're trying. Of course we're trying. We want life to unfold the way that we think it should unfold.

Today is the last in the series, talk five of *When Life Does Not Obey Us*, and I'm titling it, *Other People Are Not Ours to Control*. Those people over there. It's kind of funny. Those people over there, those people. Let alone this person here, right? Those people over there.

Sometimes our wishing to control other people really highlights or reveals the limits of the control we actually do have. In the first talk we did, we explored how comfort just comes and goes even though we're trying to control it. The second was about how the body is not under our command in the way that we would like it to be. The third talk was about thoughts. They are arising and passing. I playfully said thoughts think themselves, but we don't control thoughts, of course not. And then yesterday the fourth talk was about how the present moment keeps moving. It's always changing. It's dynamic, it's not static. It's always changing. But we slap a label on it and then we have a relationship with the concept as opposed to what's actually happening.

And now we come to this other challenging place: those people over there. That's where we so obviously can feel where we can't be in control. And so "those people over there" actually can include this person that's right next to me. Our intimate relationships, our partners, our children, our parents, our friends. But it's not only our intimate or personal relationships; it's the way we want to control co-workers and colleagues, leaders, institutions, people in our communities. Some of those people make choices that affect the wider world, and we want to control them. We want to control the choices that they make.

This most often is coming from a wish for less harm. A wish for less harm to happen in the world, a wish for less harm to happen to us. We have this wish for people to act with kindness, to act with responsibility, to act with honesty, to act with wisdom. And these are not wrong wishes. So, the problem is not that we care.

The problem begins when this care slides into demand. When this care moves into wanting to control. When this concern becomes pressure. When this conviction becomes rigidity, when love becomes a wish to manage. A wish for less suffering can become, *They must change so I can be okay.* This is where dukkha enters. This wish for there to be less suffering becomes, *They must change so that I can be okay.*

It's a little bit heartbreaking. How our recognizing that things could be so much better for ourselves, for the world, if other people could change. There's a subtle way—sometimes it's obvious, but it's so often subtle—we have this idea that we can control others. And this translates into dukkha. Because the mind is tightening, the body is tightening, like, *This shouldn't be this way. They shouldn't do that. I should be able to make this be different, dang it.*

Dukkha often is translated as suffering or stress or unsatisfactoriness. It includes the obvious sufferings, the terrible conflicts and betrayals. Also, the subtler stress of quietly, fervently wishing that reality would conform to our preferences. Dukkha includes this more subtle stress of quietly, fervently wishing that reality—which includes other people—conform to our preferences, to our ideas, to our wishes. Even if our wishes are for there to be less suffering in the world.

As you have noticed, other people do not reliably conform to our wishes. Not through our lack of trying. I speak from personal experience, and I'm sure you have this as well. We know that we have this quiet, fervent wish for people to be different when we have this unspoken sense of *they should*... fill in the blank. They should listen. They should understand. They should apologize. They should be kind. They should be honest. They should see the bigger picture. They should care about people other than just themselves.

And sometimes from a conventional point of view, we may be right. Someone may be acting carelessly. Someone may be causing harm. Someone may be refusing to see something important, but our being right doesn't give us the control that we're wishing for. Sometimes we get lost in that our being right means we should be able to make things be in control.

I think many of us are familiar with the idea of the second arrow[3]. The first arrow is the pain that life brings us. And then the second arrow is what we're adding on top of it. What I'd like to point to in this talk is the dukkha of trying to control other people.

Because caring is different than controlling, right? Controlling says, *You must change so I can be okay. You must understand me so that I can feel better.* Or, *You must become the version of you*

that makes me feel better. It's painful for them. It's annoying when people try to control us. I don't like it. I bet you don't like it, either. And yet sometimes we're doing it, trying to control others. And this is dukkha. This is this pain for us. We suffer in so many different ways when our peace is dependent on their being different.

And of course, we're not trying to just change their behavior. We're trying to change their inner life. We want to change what they feel, the experiences that they're having inside. We want to change their beliefs. We want them to understand things. We want to change how they see us, perhaps. This can be subtle or not so subtle. Because maybe in our close relationships, we want them to see that, *Oh, we mean well. This is just coming from our care.* We want them to see that we're not the problem, actually they are the problem. Maybe we want them to forgive us. Maybe we want them to approve of us.

Whoo. I'm exhausted just thinking about it. Because of course, it's not only in our personal relationships, it's in communal, public, workplaces. Maybe in the wider world, we want people to see that urgency that we see, the harm that we see. We want others to be more responsible.

What this practice shows us is that another person's mind is not ours to control. Another person's behavior is not ours to control. The preceding four talks in this series have pointed to how we don't even control our own mind. We don't even control our own behavior as much as we would like to, in the way that we wish that we could. So, of course we don't control others. Instead, people change when conditions support change.

Everyone, ourselves included, is a confluence of conditions. People are shaped by their history, their habits, their fears, their current capacity. People don't become different or behave differently because we want them to, or because maybe even they want to and they can't do it. People are a confluence of conditions and we are a single condition in their life. They have so many other conditions. Our care, our kindness, our demanding, may be one condition. But we're never the only condition. Other people are shaped and influenced by causes we will never completely know. We will never completely know our own causes and conditions, and this brings a certain humility. It means that we offer whatever it is that we offer into a field much larger than ourselves.

It doesn't mean that we don't do anything. It doesn't mean we stop caring, or we stop speaking, or that all of a sudden we start tolerating harm. But let's take responsibility for our side of the street, so to speak. Instead of demanding another person's reactions, their readiness, can we see this impossible bargain? That we're setting this idea that *I'll be at peace when somebody else behaves differently. I will relax when they understand, and I will soften when they apologize. I'll be okay when they make the right choice.* This is an impossible bargain. Guaranteed dukkha.

So, can we care? Can we be present without claiming ownership? Without trying to control. Can we still be present without claiming that we can control, but thinking that we can control? The Dharma does not promise control. Life doesn't obey us. It's not a personal failure. It's the nature of conditioned reality.

This is the culmination of the series I've been doing of *Life Doesn't Obey Us*. Comfort comes and goes. The body teaches us we're not in charge in the way that we would like. Thoughts arise by themselves. The moment is always moving. Things are always changing. And other people are not ours to control.

There's real freedom when we can realize this. Real freedom when we can open to this. Real freedom when we can let this sink in, and we can let go of these impossible projects. So, with a heart full of appreciation and a wish for all of you to know and experience this real freedom when we let go of these impossible projects of trying to control. May today and every day be a support for your finding more and more and more ease and peace and freedom in your life.

Thank you.

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1. **Dharma:** In Buddhism, this refers to the teachings of the Buddha or the fundamental nature of reality. ↩
2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." ↩
3. **Second Arrow:** A Buddhist teaching (from the Sallatha Sutta) illustrating how humans compound their own suffering. The "first arrow" is the unavoidable pain of life; the "second arrow" is the optional, added suffering we create through our aversion, reaction, or attempts to control the uncontrollable. ↩

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