

Control Redux

How to Let Go and Take Charge

By Dan Ofstedal – November 1, 2025 ¹

Free at last...

Wanna make my own decisions

When it has to do with my life

I wanna be the one in control — Janet Jackson, “Control”

Note: While preparing for a workshop based on my earlier essay, “The Paradox of Control,” I kept revising until the workshop bore little resemblance to the original piece. At some point, I realized it had become something new — more metaphysical, and yet more practical. So a “Control Redux” seemed apt.

The Confusion

Here is the strange predicament of human life: we exhaust ourselves trying to control what was never ours to control — outcomes, other people, the weather, even the past — while the one domain where we actually do have power remains largely untended. We are like someone frantically adjusting the thermostat in a neighbor’s house while our own home is freezing.

This is not mere carelessness. It is conditioned behavior, drummed into us from childhood. We inherit invisible scripts: how to think, what to fear, what to want, how to be accepted. These scripts run automatically, making our choices for us. Meanwhile, we pour energy into controlling circumstances, relationships, and events that should lie entirely outside our sphere of influence.

The irony is brutal: we are controlled by forces we don’t examine, while attempting to control forces we cannot or should not.

The Illusion Deepens

Modern life amplifies this confusion. We can manage our health metrics, monitor our finances, optimize our schedules, and insure against risk. These are genuine advances — they give us real agency. But they also amplify a seductive lie: that if we just plan enough, work enough, worry enough, we can control far more than we actually can.

Control itself is not the problem. Control is inherently neither good nor bad — it depends on the circumstance. Healthy self-control — the kind that attends to what is ours to do — leads to freedom. Unhealthy control leads to exhaustion and conflict. We strain against life — like driving with the emergency brake engaged.

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The Paradox

Freedom begins with a paradox: we become free not by rejecting control, but by discerning what belongs to us and what does not.

The Serenity Prayer names this with precision: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I *should not* change, the courage to change the things I *should*, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

This is the whole teaching. Acceptance and self-mastery are not opposites; they are two facets of freedom. One opens us to the flow of life, the other grounds us in conscious action. Inner freedom arises when both are practiced together: letting go where we have no authority, and fully engaging where we do.

Most of us live the inverse. We grasp at what we cannot or should not change and neglect what we should. The paradox, once seen, becomes a doorway to freedom. What follows are the two practices that unlock this freedom: acceptance of what is not ours, and mastery of what is.

Acceptance: The Art of Letting Go

Acceptance is not passivity. It is not resignation. It is reality seen clearly, without the fog of resistance. It is the end of the inner war with “what is.”

Author/spiritual teacher Byron Katie frames it simply: there is my business, your business, and God’s business. Most suffering comes from being in the wrong business. The more I meddle in yours or God’s — trying to control your choices, or things that I simply can’t control—the less energy and equanimity I have. The more I attend to mine — my thoughts, my words, my actions — the more clarity and agency return.

Another framing is provided by Author David Richo, who names five unavoidable truths: everything changes and ends; things do not always go according to plan; life is not always fair; pain is part of life; people are not always loving or loyal. In sum, acceptance means loosening the grip on our expectations

Here a few other acceptance tools: forgiveness is a form of acceptance — it releases the illusion that we can rewrite history. Nonresistance to what is releases us from what we oppose — because “what you resist persists,” binding you to the very thing you reject. Stop taking things personally, because taking things personally is non-acceptance.

A deeper, more spiritual acceptance tool is to see God/Reality/The Universe as One Benevolent Power, and thus there is Divine Order in all things and circumstances. Life has an intelligence beyond our personal plans. Trusting it more than our own anxious strategizing is not naïveté — it is sanity.

The wisdom traditions converge here. Buddhism teaches freedom through the cessation of resistance, the stillness that sees things as they are. The Stoics speak of *amor fati* — love of fate, radical acceptance of what cannot be changed. Nietzsche called this “the formula for greatness in a human being.” Jesus teaches the same: “Be like the birds of the air... consider the lilies of the

field.” “Thy will be done.” These are not resignations. They are invitations to cooperate with the order of life rather than resist or fight it.

Self-Mastery: Reclaiming True Control

But acceptance alone is incomplete. The other side of the paradox is self-mastery: gaining conscious control over what is actually ours.

This is where most of us fail. We surrender our inner authenticity and authority to our “conditioned self.” The reversal of this is the spiritual task: release the world, reclaim yourself.

Self-mastery begins with a simple question: “Whose voice am I listening to — my conditioning, or my deeper wisdom?”

Most of our reactions are not chosen. They are reflexes inherited from family, culture, religion, and society. These patterns masquerade as our own thoughts. They shape what we say and do without our awareness. To awaken from this, we must observe our inner landscape with clarity and compassion.

Self-awareness is the foundation. Watch your thoughts objectively, as if they belonged to someone else. Notice the moment a reaction arises — the flash of anger, the impulse to defend. In that noticing, choice becomes possible. If you are “triggered,” you aren’t in control.

Ask yourself: How many of my beliefs, opinions, and desires are authentically mine? Which were installed by others? Awareness of this alone begins to loosen the grip of external conditioning.

This is what Socrates was talking about when he famously said “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

Seek to know what you truly want, not what you were taught to want. This can be harder than it sounds. Most of us have spent so long performing for approval that we’ve lost contact with authentic desire. *And I do mean most of us.*

The Stoics knew this, and taught that we *can* control our thoughts and actions, so take right action. Jesus lived in alignment with something deeper than family, tribe, or tradition and found “the kingdom of heaven within.”

Emerson wrote: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” and: “The great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” This means always knowing your authentic self, free from childhood conditioning and societal norms.

Real control is not coercion. It is power within, discovered. This includes freedom in one’s thoughts, words, and deeds.

Author Eric Butterworth captures it: “We can’t always control what happens to us. But we can control what we think about what happens — and what we are thinking is our life at any particular moment.”

Our state of consciousness should be our primary locus of control. From there, right action naturally emerges.

Living the Balance

Self-mastery without acceptance becomes rigidity. Acceptance without self-mastery becomes passivity. Only together do they create freedom.

All spiritual paths point toward the same paradox: surrender and agency, will and trust, letting go and showing up. The art of life is not choosing one over the other, but living both fully.

Acceptance without action becomes apathy. Action without acceptance becomes struggle. The practice lies in knowing when to yield and when to accelerate. And when we do so, we merge with life.

To live this balance, trust the intelligence of life, even when events seem chaotic. Remain self-aware — understanding is the gateway to freedom. Embrace both what you chose and what you did not choose.

Control, rightly understood, becomes creativity. We no longer impose our will on life; we participate in its unfolding. Every thought, word, and act becomes an expression of conscious agency rather than compulsive reaction.

The Paradox Resolved

True control is not dominance over life. It is harmony with it.

Freedom arises when we discern what is ours to do and release all else. We are not the controllers of life; we are its expressions. Yet within this mystery, we are also agents, called to act, to choose, to co-create.

The paradox resolves itself only in practice:

Let go completely — and act decisively.

Surrender the outcome — and do your part from love, not reactivity.

This is real freedom. It is neither rejection of life nor submission to it, a conscious embrace of both what is and our freely chosen response.

Footnotes

1. Note that I have changed the traditional “cannot” to “should not” to include not only what we cannot change, but things we may try to control that are not properly ours to control (for example, other people).
2. See my essay “Jesus and Family and Freedom”