



The Sacred Art of Pausing, by Tara Brach

In our lives we often find ourselves in situations we can't control, circumstances in which none of our strategies work. Helpless and distraught, we frantically try to manage what is happening. Our child takes a downward turn in academics and we issue one threat after another to get him in line. Someone says something hurtful to us and we strike back quickly or retreat. We make a mistake at work and we scramble to cover it up or go out of our way to make up for it. We head into emotionally charged confrontations nervously rehearsing and strategizing.

The more we fear failure the more frenetically our bodies and minds work. We fill our days with continual movement: mental planning and worrying, habitual talking, fixing, scratching, adjusting, phoning, snacking, discarding, buying, looking in the mirror.

What would it be like if, right in the midst of this busyness, we were to consciously take our hands off the controls? What if we were to intentionally stop our mental computations and our rushing around and, for a minute or two, simply pause and notice our inner experience?

Learning to pause is the first step in the practice of Radical Acceptance. A pause is a suspension of activity, a time of temporary disengagement when we are no longer moving towards any goal. The pause can occur in the midst of almost any activity and can last for an instant, for hours or for seasons of our life.

We may take a pause from our ongoing responsibilities by sitting down to meditate. We may pause in the midst of meditation to let go of thoughts and reawaken our attention to the breath. We may pause by stepping out of daily life to go on a retreat or to spend time in nature or to take a sabbatical. We may pause in a conversation, letting go of what we're about to say, in order to genuinely listen and be with the other person. We may pause when we feel suddenly moved or delighted or saddened, allowing the feelings to play through our heart. In a pause we simply discontinue whatever we are doing—thinking, talking, walking, writing, planning, worrying, eating—and become wholeheartedly present, attentive and, often, physically still.

A pause is, by nature, time limited. We resume our activities, but we do so with increased presence and more ability to make choices. In the pause before sinking our teeth into a chocolate bar, for instance, we might recognize the excited tingle of anticipation, and perhaps a

background cloud of guilt and self-judgment. We may then choose to eat the chocolate, fully savoring the taste sensations, or we might decide to skip the chocolate and instead go out for a run. When we pause, we don't know what will happen next. But by disrupting our habitual behaviors, we open to the possibility of new and creative ways of responding to our wants and fears.

Of course there are times when it is not appropriate to pause. If our child is running towards a busy street, we don't pause. If someone is about to strike us, we don't just stand there, resting in the moment—rather, we quickly find a way to defend ourselves. If we are about to miss a flight, we race toward the gate. But much of our driven pace and habitual controlling in daily life does not serve surviving, and certainly not thriving. It arises from a free-floating anxiety about something being wrong or not enough. Even when our fear arises in the face of actual failure, loss or even death, our instinctive tensing and striving are often ineffectual and unwise.

Taking our hands off the controls and pausing is an opportunity to clearly see the wants and fears that are driving us. During the moments of a pause, we become conscious of how the feeling that something is missing or wrong keeps us leaning into the future, on our way somewhere else. This gives us a fundamental choice in how we respond: We can continue our futile attempts at managing our experience, or we can meet our vulnerability with the wisdom of Radical Acceptance.

Often the moment when we most need to pause is exactly when it feels most intolerable to do so. Pausing in a fit of anger, or when overwhelmed by sorrow or filled with desire, may be the last thing we want to do. Pausing can feel like falling helplessly through space—we have no idea of what will happen. We fear we might be engulfed by the rawness of our rage or grief or desire. Yet without opening to the actual experience of the moment, Radical Acceptance is not possible.

Through the sacred art of pausing, we develop the capacity to stop hiding, to stop running away from our experience. We begin to trust in our natural intelligence, in our naturally wise heart, in our capacity to open to whatever arises. Like awakening from a dream, in the moment of pausing our trance recedes and Radical Acceptance becomes possible.