



The Act of Will and Its Role in the Practice of Meditation

The world is said to be in the grip of a “power crisis,” but few people realize that this statement is true in a much deeper sense than that of a mere economic problem. Power has become a human obsession and a self-destructive principle. At the same time it has resulted in a psychological revolt against the very root of power, namely the human intellect and the human will, which have led to the domination and misuse of the forces of nature and may result in the gradual destruction of our planet’s ecology and the human race.

The psychological revolt has taken two forms: that of trying to escape the intellect and responsible action, and that of overcoming the intellect and its desire-bound volitions by turning away from the external world and trying to take refuge in meditative practices—in which subconscious and unconscious forces are awakened without a clear understanding of their nature and without the capacity to integrate them.

Under the circumstances it is no wonder that the human will has come into disrepute and is identified with the concept of power, and especially ego power, that either disassociates the individual

from the universe or acts as a repressive force of certain qualities of human nature. Due to this misconception, the importance of the human will has been consistently pushed into the background of popular modern psychology, so that more and more the impression has been created that the human being is merely a product of biological drives, urges, and compulsions determined and conditioned by forces and circumstances beyond the individual's control.

At such a time it is good to be reminded by Dr. Roberto Assagioli's book *The Act of Will* that in spite of all these subconscious drives and conditioned reflexes the role of the conscious will is of decisive importance not only in the intellectual life of individuals, but even more so in the fulfillment of their spiritual aspirations and creative faculties. It is the basis of our sense of self-responsibility and therefore of all ethical values, without which human existence is unthinkable. In fact, without it, human existence would become meaningless. It is the basis of all religious thought and experience.

Only the narrow conception of the will as "something stern and forbidding, which condemns and represses most of the other aspects of human nature"¹ has created the present misunderstanding about the nature and function of the will, because the will cannot be separated from the discriminative and directive functions of consciousness. By artificially separating these functions in our conceptual terminology, we create a nonexistent problem. No will arises without a discerning consciousness. Thus a differentiating and focalized consciousness is the precondition for generating the directive force of the will, which thus is not a biological force, like those unconscious and subconscious drives, but a psychological one.

To put it in Assagioli's words, "The will has a *directive* and *regulatory* function—it balances and constructively utilizes all the other activities and energies of the human being without repressing them." Assagioli compares the function of the will to the helmsman of a ship: "He knows what the ship's course should be, and he keeps

her steadily on it, despite the drifts caused by wind and current. But the power he needs to turn the wheel is altogether different from that required to propel the ship through the water, whether it be generated by engines, pressure of the winds on the sail, or the efforts of the rowers.”²

Here wind, currents, and other forces correspond to biological drives, environmental conditions, and universal forces by which the individual is *conditioned*, but not wholly or exclusively determined. Here is where the principle of “free will” comes in, namely in the form of *knowledge* that permits an alternative between a right and a wrong decision, or between a more favorable and a less favorable decision, or between two equally acceptable alternatives. Thus, the actions of the helmsman (the conscious individual) are prompted by *knowledge* of “what the ship’s course should be,” in accordance with the chosen destination.

In other words, the nature of our will depends on the level of our knowledge. So long as human beings conceive themselves as independent or separate “egos,” their will is egocentrically determined and limited. The moment they conceive and experience the self in perfect relationship and harmony with their surroundings and fellow beings, their will takes on a transpersonal quality.

If individuals realize they are an exponent of the totality of the universe, their will becomes the expression of that universal law, which Indian philosophy calls “dharma” and which manifests itself in the human heart (or the innermost center) as the realization of the highest spirit or the universal consciousness. Here the power aspect, the will to dominate, to control, to suppress, or to resist, disappears and makes room for a state of profound harmony.

Thus a proper understanding of the will includes a clear and balanced view of its dual nature: two different but not contradictory poles. On the one hand, the “power element” needs to be recognized, appreciated, if necessary strengthened, and then wisely

applied. At the same time, we must recognize that there are volitional acts that do not necessarily require effort.

For instance, in the more advanced stages of meditation and contemplation, inspirational and institutional powers take over from the conceptual and intentional motivations, which have their justification and their proper places in the initial stages of meditative practice. In these higher stages, the personal will is effortless because, according to Assagioli, “The willer is so identified with the Transpersonal Will, or, at a still higher and more inclusive level, with the Universal Will, that his activities are accomplished with free spontaneity, a state in which he feels himself to be a willing channel into and through which powerful energies flow and operate.”³

The concept of “will” thus takes on different meanings on different levels of consciousness, and Assagioli therefore distinguishes the various aspects of the human will as the “Strong Will” (in which we recognize the will as a dynamic force), the “Skillful Will” (in which we recognize “the ability to obtain desired results with the least possible expenditure of energy”), the “Good Will” (in which skillful means are applied to altruistic purposes), the “Transpersonal Will” (which is the urge to find a meaning of life, the urge toward higher realization [Sanskrit: *Dharma chanda*]), and finally the “Universal Will” (in which the human will is in perfect harmony with the universal law [Dharma]).

These different aspects of the will on different levels solve one of the ever-recurring problems in the definition and practice of meditation. The one maintains that meditation employs willpower insofar as it is intentional, goal-directed, and concentrated; the other maintains that it is a state of complete freedom from thoughts, concepts, ideas, volitions, aims or goals, without discrimination, evaluation, or intellectual attitude—in fact, a state of pure awareness, of contemplation, of mere “being.”

To illustrate this attitude, I may quote a few sentences of a recent essay, “Contemplation” by Alan Watts:

You, considered as that ego, cannot get polar vision or cosmic consciousness. It might arise all of itself, as if by divine grace, but there is nothing, just nothing, you can do or not do to bring it about. . . .

If this becomes clear, the effort to transform one’s mind should collapse, and along with it the whole illusion that one is a separate center of consciousness to which experience happens and for which these happenings are problematic. This collapse would be then the state of contemplation, the realization that all is one.⁴

If we take the Buddha’s advice (which has proved its value through the millennia and is equally valid for our time), namely to avoid extremes, both in thought and life, then we should recognize that to think ourselves different from the universe in which we live is one extreme, and to think ourselves identical with it is the other extreme. The real position is that we are neither the same nor different from the universe (just as, in a similar sense, we are neither the same nor different from the person we were yesterday or in our childhood), because we are not separate and unchangeable units or monads, but rather the product of infinite, interrelated causes and conditions, which in their totality correspond to the totality of the universe. The individual may be compared to a whirlpool in a moving stream: inseparable from it and yet not the same; of the same origin and yet different in form and appearance; creating a center by its own unique movement, and yet remaining part of the creative (universal) stream.

This view is beautifully expressed in the opening sentence of Watts’s essay: “The individual is an aperture through which the

whole energy of the universe is aware of self, a vortex of vibrations in which it realizes itself as man or beast, flower or star—not alone, but as central to all that surrounds it.”⁵

How much nearer such symbolical and poetical language comes to reality than all merely logically constructed theories! Is not the hollow space (or emptiness) in the center of the vortex the very “aperture” through which the individual becomes capable of being the supreme vessel in which the universe becomes conscious of itself?

In this very notion lies the justification of individuality and the importance of the individual as the other pole of the universe, and as such, inseparable from it. The Vedantic standpoint of absolute oneness, which tries to ascribe reality only to the universal pole by denigrating the individual pole to a state of mere illusion, makes individual life meaningless, including all individual effort toward self-realization. Therefore, the contention that “all is One” does not eliminate the fact that oneness is meaningless without otherness, unity without diversity, and that diversity is born from an ever and infinitely progressing polarity.

Reality, therefore, does not reside in the abstract concept of undifferentiated oneness or sameness, but in the recognition of creative polarity, in which the tension between the positive and the negative pole creates the unifying spark of life and consciousness, in which alone oneness can be experienced. Thus, what we call “reality” would be better described as “actuality,” because only what acts on us or through us can be experienced, and what cannot be experienced exists only as a concept.

Therefore, the standpoint of “all is One” is as one-sided as the standpoint “all is different”: both are conceptual extremes, the one denying (or depreciating) the value of individuality and individual effort, the other denying the inherent universality of the individual, while overestimating the role of its willpower.