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FOSTERING WILL-POWER
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Abstract

We desire to be successful in life. Whatever may be our pursuit—in the direction of worldly prosperity or spiritual illumination, in spheres secular or spiritual—not one of us likes to court with failure. We all want to win. It will be noticed in various spheres of life, truly successful men are only a few. Many are those who attain only a moderate degree of success. And many more just fail. There are various factors in the stories of men's successes and failures of life. But in every single case there will be one common factor involved. The potent factor is will-power. The degree of a person's success in life is commensurate with the degree of will-power he has attained. 'How to develop the will-power' turns out to be the most important fundamental issue of everyone's life. It should be the part of our education from our childhood to be trained in developing the will-power, for without it education remains largely ineffective.

Keywords: will-power, spiritual, Self-improvement, deep thinking, maya, temptation

Introduction

Self-improvement is almost impossible without the voluntary or involuntary exercise of the will-power. Whereas, given the willpower, one can bring about considerable changes in one's individual and also collective lives for the better, from very hopeless situations.

Given the will-power, man makes everything out of nothing as it were. In the absence of the will-power, all his talents and qualities and endowments come to a naught.

The one way of keeping grip on life is right thinking and deep thinking. These days we all admire free-thinking. Free-thinking is good. But right thinking is better. When right thinking becomes deep thinking, it is excellent. Without cultivating the habit of introspection, it is impossible to keep track of all the forces that are operative within us.

We know that it is beneficial to live a moral life, yet, in spite of ourselves, we commit sinful acts. And having committed them we have to take their painful consequences. We can give away our entire possession but there is no way of giving away the fruits of our karma. We shall have to enjoy or suffer them ourselves. We know it is good to live according to the commandments of religion and obey the precepts of the Guru. We know it is good to get up early in the morning and practice spiritual disciplines. But when in the morning the alarm clock dutifully rings, we feel annoyed and silence it as though it had committed some crime, and then pull the blanket over the nose and sleep half an hour more, only to hurry and worry all day long. In the evening when we return home we are a mass of tension, and so highly inflammable that any little thing is apt to set things on fire.

We may observe, even in little things how little of what we know to be good for us, to be beneficial for us, we are able to put into practice. On the contrary, we continue to do harmful things. We know it is not good to neglect our studies, but somehow we cannot turn our ears or eyes from the radio or TV, especially when a cricket match, a circus show, a fashion show or a movie is going on. If our mind timidly protests, we just give it a thrashing: how can I miss such an exciting thing, for the boring bla-bla-bla of my classes? And the consequences of it are too obvious in the ever growing restlessness and dissatisfaction among the youngsters.

People very well know that it is not good to drink alcohol. Still they gulp one or two glasses first occasionally, then more, compulsively. They promise not to drink only to break the promise again. Ultimately they even fail to promise. I believe it was Will Rogers who said: 'Well, it is quite easy to give up smoking. I have done it a hundred times!' But the record of Alcoholic Anonymous shows it is possible to start a new life as it were, by developing a new will to live a different kind of life.

We know that over-weight is a health hazard, and we should avoid eating too many sweets and other highly fattening things. But when these things come round, we neglect our own mental decisions and opposition of well-wishers.

It is well-known that some of us can resist everything except temptations! There is a great fascination in the prohibited, great attraction in the destructive, great pull in the bizarre and wicked things in this world of maya. They pull us by the ear and make slaves of us. We do things in a hurry and then repent at leisure, and lament in the darkness of our own making.

We perpetrate wrong things unwittingly. We must not commit the mistake of thinking that we do such things because we are essentially wicked or because of some kind of 'original sin' in us or because of our being forced by evil powers. Let us know it for certain that no one in this world is essentially wicked. Essentially everyone is divine, because the essence of every being is Atman, which is divine. The apparent wickedness of any person is only a fortuity, an outer mask, and hence it can be gotten rid of. No cow tells a lie. The inescapable conclusion, then, is that the basic daily tragedies of our lives are not rooted in any inalienable, essential wickedness in us, but in the failure of our will. Many of us have no idea how much of goodness, strength and greatness cry within us for self-manifestation. We have mostly known only the weaker side of ourselves, which in fact belongs to the not-Self, according to Vedanta. It is the basic tragedy of our daily life that effectively prevents a real encounter with our true self. Therefore it is important for every person to know how to avoid the failure of will. The only way to do it is to cultivate the will-power.

Developing Will- Power

- (a) First let us understand what exactly is will-power, in working terms. It is that positive and creative function of the mind which impels, propels and enables us to do chosen actions in a definitive way, and avoid doing unclose actions in an equally definitive way. It is that power of the mind which enables us to do what we know to be right, and not do what we know to be wrong, under all circumstances favourable or unfavourable, known or unknown.
- (b) Secondly, it is important to know and believe that will-power can be increased by everybody, without any exception, provided we are ready to apply ourselves to it and work for it steadily and methodically. Our past failures have not necessarily to be our future failures also. No one is destined to be weak all his life except him who chooses to be so. A departure for the better, nobler, higher state of existence—at least a determined effort for it—is possible at one's chosen time. It is never too early or too late to be good, true, pure and strong. Swami Vivekananda says: 'Stand up, be bold, be strong! Know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succour you want is within yourself.' What a life-giving, saving message! All the strength and succor we need is within ourselves. We should get a firm hold, an unshakable faith, in this fundamental truth.
- (c) Only when we have a firm hold on this truth we can develop a will for developing the will-power. Though it may sound like a truism, it is very important to have a firm will to develop the will-power. Incredible though it may appear, many of us do not have even the will to develop the will-power! We seem to think it is big botheration, too exacting a responsibility to be carrying about all the time. But when we know for certain that within ourselves is unlimited power, that we are not these puny things as we appear to be, that we are not weak reeds worthy only to be broken anytime—then we develop the mind to manifest that power in our life, by sharply cutting out all delusions and illusions to which are the contrary.
- (d) When this mind is developed, we are ready to take the most important step in developing the will-power. This step is to remove the dichotomy between the head and heart, the intellect and emotion, the thinking and feeling. How do we do it? It can be done only by loving the truth of our being. If we know it for certain that we are divine, we are the children of immortality, with a great history behind and a great destiny before, we will hate to do things which are unworthy of us, being determined to do things expected of us. In other words, our thoughts and emotions will unite in order to enable us to do the best expected of us by ourselves.

Maybe we shall not succeed without a struggle. What of that? What is the worth of a success achieved without a struggle? We shall most certainly succeed, if we give the fight

all right, without allowing hypothetical fears to sabotage our self-confidence and energy-supply.

This is the best way of fighting evil within ourselves: assert the divine and the devil will run out. How do we assert the divine within us? If we want to assert the divine, we must not do two things: we must not be cowards and we must not be hypocrites. We must be brave, take courage in both hands and follow the truth to its logical conclusion. Go with truth wherever it takes us: this should be our motto.

Opposition to this way of thinking and living will most certainly come. We must predetermine our proper attitude to such opposition and receive opposition without being overly ruffled, in good humour, with a smile, if possible. Swami Vivekananda indicates what should be our temper and attitude to oppositions. He asks:

Have you got the will to surmount the mountain-high obstructions? If the whole world stands against you sword in hand, would you still dare to do what you think is right? If your wives and children are against you, if all your money goes, your name dies, your wealth vanishes, would you still stick to it? Would you still pursue it and go steadily towards the goal?

It is in this temper that we shall have to face opposition. You may raise the objection: to begin with, I do not have the will to surmount mountain-high obstruction. That is my problem! That is not your problem. Your problem is you have not adequate love for truth. Intensify the love of truth, then this temper for facing the opposition will spontaneously grow in you.

(e) Two things will oppose this creative move within us: (1) our regrets about the past, and (2) our worry about the future. Both of these are detrimental to the cultivation of will-power, because they successfully undercut all forward-looking, creative, positive movements within our minds. They are also wholly unnecessary performances. Exaggerated regrets for our past and over much worry about our future, will only damage our present, weaken our minds and injure our future also.

Now you may honestly say: how can I but regret for my past? In the past I committed many sins. Is it not my religious duty to repent for my past sins? This is an important question which requires a thorough clearing and scotching. Sloppy Vedantins are apt to make light of sin in the vain hope that their reported divinity will somehow like a sponge suck out all their bad karma, and whisk them aloft to the empyreans of moksa by a trick that is not to be explained though they continue to live indifferent lives. Vedanta acknowledges the fact of sin, but completely rejects the theory of original sin as wholly irrational. Man has nothing but original divinity and adventitious sin. Adventitious though, sin has a powerful binding effect on the soul and its free expression.

Therefore, the fact of sin has to be acknowledged as any other empirical fact. It is one thing to acknowledge the fact of sin, but it is a totally different thing to become some

sort of a sin-monger, a habitual regretter. Whatever a pious face this regretting ad-infinitum may put up, psychologically it is an unsound approach if you intend to get rid of it. If you are over much regretting for any sin, it is likely that you are mentally enjoying repeating the sin under the cover of righteousness.

The most important thing to be done about sin is to stop sinning, physically or mentally. Bondage is of the mind, and freedom also is of the mind. A man is free if he constantly thinks: 'I am a free soul. How can I be bound, whether I live in the world or forest? I am a child of God, the king of kings, who can bind me?' If bitten by a snake, a man may get rid of its venom by saying emphatically, 'There is no poison in me'. In the same way, by repeating with grit and determination, 'I am not bound, I am free,' one really becomes so, one really becomes free.

The wretch who constantly says, 'I am bound, I am bound' only succeeds in being bound. He who says day and night

'I am a sinner, I am a sinner,' verily becomes a sinner.

One should have such burning faith in God that one can say: 'What, I have repeated the name of God, and can sin cling to me? How can I be in bondage anymore?'

If a man repeats the name of God, his body, mind and everything become pure. Why should one talk only about sin and hell, and such things? Say but once, 'O Lord, I have undoubtedly done wicked things, but I won't repeat them.' And have faith in His name.

This is precisely what we have to do in regard to our past sins: Say but once in true contrition to God of your heart: "This really I have done. Pardon me. I shall not do so again'. Then resolve to keep the word given to God. And repeat the name of God. Repetition of Lord's name will give us the power to keep our resolution

It is, however, more important that we live a wakeful life in the living present with an unencumbered free mind honestly trying to live according to our highest convictions. He who suffocates this moment with the worries of moments that are yet not, is doing everything possible to make his future fearful. 'In the heart of this moment is eternity!' said Meister Eckhart. And if this moment we have lived well, done our best, we may very well leave the rest. For nothing better can ever be done for future than always doing our very best right now.

We may, however, always examine our doing best and trying to find methods of even bettering our best-doing. Worry for the future is a mental disease, the medicine of which is to live entirely in this moment with all our powers poised and applied. Those who want to develop will-power must scrupulously avoid living in the past or future, and live in the living present. If we live in the present wisely according to best light, our future cannot but be good whatever the astrologers may say.

(f) To live in the living present wisely, we require the guidance of a sound sense of values.

We should be able to persuade ourselves that we are not fooling around. We must be able to tell ourselves, in and through whatever we may be doing, that we are gradually but surely proceeding to the fulfillment of our destiny. This sound sense of values must be ascertained with due regard for our physical, mental and spiritual needs. Indian sages have ascertained such values to be four: wealth, righteousness, pleasure and liberation of the spirit.

For the generality of mankind, physical and emotional starvation is not conducive to the cultivation of will-power or development of higher life. As starvation is bad, surfeit is also disastrous. For the fulfillment of our physical and emotional needs, we require wealth. But if we earn wealth unrighteous, we release some forces which will eventually limp upon us like tigers and that will not be good for our will-power at all. Hence, both the values of pleasure and wealth have to be obedient to the laws of righteousness or dharma. But this righteousness, again, shall be inspired by a higher motive which is the attainment of the liberation of the spirit.

When we function in our daily life in accordance with this sound sense of values, we stay protected within a fire-ring of wisdom, as it were, which the evils of life cannot easily penetrate. Then we live in the forceful conviction of living rightly without a trace of guilt sense. It is this guilt sense with or without reason that eats away the roots of will-power. When we live not only without a guilt sense, but positively with a sense of living rightly, we get hold of a power of conviction which releases a new force within us. And this force immensely helps the development of will-power.

Cultivate one power of conviction at least, if you want to develop the will-power. Believe with your whole soul you are on the right path; do not doubt everything all the time. This is not intelligence. Believe in Vedanta, in Ramakrishna, or in your own Atman, with all your might, and you will see how the will-power grows as if from nowhere. One thing rightly and powerfully done somewhere within oneself will help doing other things also.

(g) Now, this sound sense of values requires to be zealously guarded, for we are being constantly assailed by chaotic winds of various contrary ideas.

How do we guard the sense of value? We can do so by doing three things: (i) by constant discrimination between the real and the unreal; (ii) by keeping ourselves busy doing those things that we have decidedly accepted as beneficial; and (iii) by avoiding idle curiosity about things which do not concern our main pursuit in life.

What through proper scrutiny and discrimination we decided to be beneficial, we must just force ourselves to do, if necessary by pulling our own knee on our own chest, and boldly face the consequence. The hardest task in the world is not 'bringing up father' or bringing up children, but bringing up oneself! To one who knows how to discipline oneself, his other tasks will become easy. There is a case for doing some sort of a careful rough-

handling of oneself, in order to break down the barriers which impede the flow of the will-power. 'Do the right thing right now,' should be our day's order to the mind. That should be the principle. Instead of doing the wrong things hurriedly and repenting at leisure, is it not better to do the right thing promptly and enjoy the blessings of such actions at leisure?

If we ourselves are unable to decide what is right or wrong, counsel should be sought from the teacher. If the teacher is not available, guidance may be taken from scriptures. But even when we have decided upon a right action, many considerations will try to oppose its prompt execution. 'All are acting differently': will be one plea. Then there will be considerations of what they call 'worldly wisdom'. Much of the 'worldly wisdom' stuff is but a rationalization of our weaknesses compounded with the idea of what is supposed to be self-interest. And these considerations will be manipulated by our own mind. We have to carefully discern here the attempted sabotage of our good efforts to develop the will-power by the unregenerate or wicked part of our mind. We should then firmly slash down this opposition by that part of the mind which has already allied itself with truth. On the other hand, what we have known to be definitely wrong and harmful, we must as promptly stop doing that and boldly face the consequences.

Thoughtless people may ridicule us for standing apart, selfish people may torment us for not doing wrong things, even our friends may regard our behavior as strange. Yet we must follow what we have realized to be true and right. However, we must be extremely cautious, circumspect and also deep-seeing in ascertaining what is right, and what is wrong. We must not impulsively jump into conclusions and then move ahead in a fanatical manner. That will harm the development of will-power. If, left to Ourselves, we are unable to determine what is right and what is wrong, we should take the help of those who know the answer, and then act upon what we have learnt.

On the basis of whatever we have thus learnt and determined, we should ourselves plan a simple routine for our daily life. This routine should be planned keeping in view that we are seeking daily self-preservation and self-improvement on all levels, physical, mental and spiritual. It should be so planned that Other human relations, recreational needs, ideals and aspirations—everything could be actualized through that routine. No matter what happens, we should then follow that routine. In the preliminary stage this is a very helpful method to get a firm grip on the mind. Our senses will have to obey our decisions made with due circumspection.

Exceptional cases may arise when the routine will have to be set aside—as for instance, when there is serious accident in the house, or a friend has died—but as soon as possible we should again return to our routine. At a later stage when we have made sufficient leeway by succeeding in controlling the vagaries of our mind, we may adjust the routine according to the higher needs of our self-development

(h) It is extremely important to remember that in developing will-power the greatest help will come from the power of concentration we have already attained. In fact these two always go together. The power of concentration helps the growth and development of will-power, and will-power helps the power of concentration.

How can we increase the power of concentration? The simplest way to do it is to pour our whole mind into the work on hand, whether it is cooking, polishing shoes, playing basket ball, watching birds, experimenting in the laboratory or praying in the chapel. In other words, when you are meditating, you must not be seeing the movie!

(i) And for this we require a sufficient reserve of mental energy. That is to say, in order to develop the will-power we must stop all squandering of our mental energy. This squandering of mental energy is done through useless talks, purposeless work, futile controversies, wild fantasies, backbiting, day-dreaming, lewd thinking, concern for things which is none of one's business, hypothetical fears and finding fault with others. To build up a sufficient storage of mental energy, which is so necessary for motoring the will-power, we must stop doing things which drain our mental energy.

We will notice that men of powerful will are men of few words. People always wait to attentively listen to what they have to say. They are not pining to be interesting or exciting. They live with a purpose, for an ideal. They are immensely dynamic, but they are poised, intense but not tense. They are not easily shaken by anything.

(j) The conservation of mental energy in its turn will depend on the conservation of physical energy especially sex energy. Those who thoughtlessly or deliberately squander their physical energy are bound to have shallow minds. And shallow minds have poor will-power. Therefore in the educational system of ancient India supreme importance was attached to the practice of brahmacharya, continence, so much so that the period of studentship itself was called brahmacharya. The main secret of developing will-power lies in the proper practice of brahmacharya. Therefore, for developing the will-power we must conserve our physical energy. Physical energy is conserved by living a moral life of purity and moderation. In moderation is MippWn in suppleness is strength.

(k) Lastly, to develop the will-power we must never take our failures seriously, We must not lose heart in the face of repeated failures. For there is no other way to success except through repeated failures. Failures should be accepted as a part of the whole game, as steps to mount the pedestal of success. These steps when followed rightly, will surely help us in developing the will-power.

Remedies for failure of will-power

We should stop, think and analyze the whole situation. And we will most certainly discover that the failure of the will is taking place in a subtle way through a wrong thought process. It is thought that gets translated into action. If the thought is wrong how can the

action be right? Therefore to strengthen the will-power to the expected degree we should work on the thought process.

How to work on the thought process, or control the Light? This by itself is a major subject for discussion. For our present purpose it will be sufficient to know that 'working on the thought process' here means prevention of wrong movements of thought.

In one sermon Buddha specially instructs on thought control. In the conclusion of that sermon, summarizing his precepts, the Buddha said:

Remember, Bhikkhus, the only way to become victorious over wrong thoughts is to review from time to time the phases of one's mind, to reflect over them, to root out all that is evil, and cultivate all that is good.

When at last a Bhikku has become victorious over his wrong thoughts...he becomes the master of his mind, conquering desire and thus ending evil for all time.

One who has become victorious over wrong thoughts cannot but have that will-power which will never fail. Now, when we proceed to practise the precept, '...root out all that is evil and cultivate all that is good/ we find that it is something more than what we can do. What should we do when we discover our utter inner helplessness and shameful weakness? If we realize our true weakness, we should then humbly do the easiest thing. We should pray to God for will-power. It is an infallible method.

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