

The Will to Change

By Ezra Sullivan

“How satisfying it is to know that the first and most important meeting with a being of the suprasensory world is a meeting with the full reality of our own being which will, in turn, lead us onward in our development!”

- Rudolf Steiner, *The Threshold of the Spiritual World*.

Upon beholding this vivid and uncompromisingly truthful experience of our being, a tendency arises to turn away from the spiritual world, and the reality of ourselves, back towards the material world. Often this tendency is more powerful than the will forces which are available to us. Rudolf Steiner advises us to *cognize* the tendency to turn away. When faced with a shadow that is seemingly impossible to illuminate, cognition is a pathway to engage the will to change. It is a new theory of change beyond force, abstention or compulsion, call it cognition, or attention, or call it love.

“If I put on a magician’s cloak and asked people to perform the craziest exercise, like running up some mountain at midnight to do something nonsensical, believe me, they would all do it! Everyone would be chasing after me. But to spend years of effort to overcome and set aside perhaps just one character weakness or bad habit - that’s just not interesting, is it? People simply don’t believe that a single change in their own character - such as a vain person admitting his vanity and becoming ashamed of it - could possibly have more impact to their spiritual progress than listening to hundreds of lectures or committing all of my lecture cycles to memory [...].”

- Adelheid Petersen, *Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner*.

Where do I find the least will despite my best intentions? When does my aspiration meet an immovable force? I decided to experiment with controlling my thoughts because the concentration exercise recommended by Steiner was the most

difficult that I had ever tried. I had been consistently failing in my various attempts at it for eight years. Every time I dedicated five minutes to it every day for one month, I would repeatedly and pathetically avoid it. Meanwhile, I thoroughly enjoyed the strengthening experience from the other “basic” exercises: controlling the will, balancing sorrow and joy, open mindedness and positivity. But this control of thinking exercise was really difficult for me, even to the point of being undoable.

The exercise requires setting time aside from everyday life to concentrate on one object. The length of time suggested depends on the capacity of the individual and their life circumstances: it is important to find an amount of time which is doable yet still challenging. Thirty seconds could even be a start, and the amount of time dedicated can increase as capacities are strengthened. Also, when we are too tired or distracted to perform the exercise, it is better to abstain until better conditions present themselves than to perform it poorly.

As a rule the object should be as simple as possible, say a spoon or paperclip. When the object is not interesting, only our inner decision and effort can maintain concentration. A man-made object, in contrast to an object created by nature, is preferable because the creation of an inorganic object can be more confidently cognized.

The essence of concentration is to stay on the theme. All daily concerns, sense impressions, and unrelated concepts are distractions from the exercise. I found that, initially, the distractions are intense and overpowering in two directions: above and below. Thoughts appear which are so fascinating and interesting that they pull me up into their realms of spiritual light. In contrast, my body suddenly manifests urgent needs to shift, to scratch or to relax. I must look through, or over, these distractions, back into the theme. Distractions are aspects of ourselves that we have not yet mastered, coming into conscious experience. We cannot master that which we are unconscious of, so we can become grateful for distractions.

Georg Kühlewind says to do the exercise as if sitting down to practice an instrument. This changed my approach and reminded me of a similar activity that I had positive associations with. I realized that the concentration exercise is similar to the

imagination games I played as a child. I would spend hours imagining conversations, battles and other dramatic events. I remembered the level of uninterrupted concentration that I achieved during my childhood imaginations. This realization brought me confidence through self-recognition, and more levity to the practice.

Every day I changed the focus, alternating between shape, function and idea. For shape, I began by working through the different physical aspects of the spoon imaginatively, cognizing every angle and detail. For function, I considered the manufacturing of the spoon, the experience of its use in the hand, the utilitarian purposes for different aspects of its design, and the impulse behind the original creation. Why have a spoon anyway? Finally, in idea, I moved in the direction of contemplation, which involves thinking the theme directly rather than thinking around the theme, as in concentration. Here, the particulars of the object are transcended into the general formative idea: I imagine different spoons and dissolve the image over and over again until the archetypal idea of the spoon begins to resonate within me as strongly as a sense perceptible object. I attempt to stand within the same stream as a child, or creator, when an idea is first realized. Although to speak of when and where is only descriptive, as the experience itself requires me to transform normative conceptions of time and space.

These exercises began filled with words and fast moving imaginations that held my focus together, but as my capacity for focus increases, and the nature of distractions are better understood, the words start to dissipate and the images simplify. As my attention-giving capacity increases, the content decreases.

By keeping the same theme for practice over a long period of time, the differentiation between remembering past thoughts and thinking in the present becomes more and more evident. Remembering past thoughts is a distraction from the exercise. The objective is thinking as both activity and perception, which happens in the present, not as a memory exercise. When I can think the same thoughts every day without the use of memory, it actually becomes fun. I begin to play.

After a time, thanks to Kühlewind, I became aware of the bridge to monism that this exercise presents. To perform the exercise we often fragment ourselves into one

who has willed the thinking and another who actually performs the concentration. It is a subtle realization but powerful. Is there a self who has stepped back from the theme to compel the execution of the exercise? The aim of the exercise is not willed thinking but the will living in the thinking. "The more I notice what I do, the less I do it." One way to achieve this is to bring attention to this aspect of the exercise by repeated false starts until we can experience a unified consciousness performing.

This seemingly excruciatingly dull exercise became a pathway to developing treasured capacities. I came to know thinking as an act - not as a means to an end but as an end within itself. It wasn't easy, but it was achievable once I came to face the self who couldn't do the exercise. Every day as I sat down to the exercise I experienced two beings: the one who had never wanted to do this, and the one who had already decided to do it.

I was seeking to understand how attention itself is given, no matter the theme. At the same time I was running away from the concentration exercise, which was the very activity that could give me a living experience of attention. What we seek is veiled in the very thing which we struggle to face.

Cognition is the key to shadow work. Here is a potent theory of change, especially when the tendency to turn away overpowers the will. The world becomes through love, not force. When I give my attention, I begin consciously relating. From intimate relationship arises new depths of understanding. After understanding, we are graced with forgiveness. Here the threshold to love is opened. When love is present the will is effortlessly available. Then, I marry the self to the world, and become.

Giving attention,
Creates
Intimacy,
Understanding,
Forgiveness,
Love,
World-Becoming.