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"THE ACT OF WILL" \* AND ITS ROLE  
IN THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION

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The world is said to be in the grip of a "power crisis", but few people realize that this 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 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 by way of drugs, 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 these circumstances it is no wonder that the human will has come into disrepute and identified with the concept of power, and especially ego-power, that either dissociates the individual from the universe or acts as a repressive force of certain qualities of the 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. Assagioli's book "The Act of Will",\* that in spite of all these subconscious

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\*THE ACT OF WILL by Roberto Assagioli, M.D.,  
an Esalen Book, published by the Viking Press, New York, 1973.  
X + 278 pp. Price \$10.00.

drives and conditioned reflexes, the role of the conscious will is not only of decisive importance in the intellectual life of the individual, but even more so in the fulfilment of his spiritual aspirations and creative faculties. It is the basis of our sense of self-responsability 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 of the other aspects of the human nature" (p.10) 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 non-existent problem. No will can arise 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 into 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." <sup>Assagioli</sup> ~~Comparing~~ <sup>e.s.</sup> the function of the will to that of a 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." (p.10)

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.

It is here where the principle of 'free will' comes in, namely in the form of knowledge that permits an alternative between a right or a wrong decision, or between a more favourable and a less favourable decision or between two equally acceptable alternatives. Thus, the action of the helmsman is (the conscious individual) is prompted by his knowledge of "what the ship's course should be", in accordance with his chosen destination.

In other words: the nature of our will depends on the level of our knowledge. So long as the human being conceives himself as an independent or separate 'ego', his will is egocentrally determined and limited. The moment he conceives and experiences himself in perfect relationship and harmony with his surroundings and his fellow-beings, his will takes on a transpersonal quality. And if the individual realizes himself as an exponent of the totality of the universe, his will becomes the expression of that universal law, which Indian philosophy calls "dharma" and which manifests itself in the human heart (or his innermost centre) 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 place 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 it must be recognized that there are volitional acts which do not necessarily require effort." This, for instance, is the case in the more advanced stages of meditation and contemplation, in which inspirational and intuitional powers take over from conceptual and intentional motivations, which have their justification and their proper place in the initial stages of meditative practice. In these higher stages the personal will is effortless, because, ~~the~~ 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."(p.21)

The concept '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 towards highest 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 will-power in so far as it is intentional, goal-directed and concentrated; the other, that it is a state of complete freedom from thoughts, concepts, ideas, volitions, aims or goals, without discrimination, evaluation or any intellectual attitude, in fact, a state of pure awareness, of contemplations, of mere 'being'.

To illustrate this attitude, I may quote a few sentences of a recent essay on "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." (p.5) "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 then become the state of contemplation, the realization that all is One."(p.6)

If we take the Buddha's advice - which has proved its value

through the millenniums 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, (in ~~the same~~ <sup>a similar</sup> sense in which 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 monades, but 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 greater (universal) stream.

This is beautifully expressed in the opening sentence of the above-mentioned essay by Alan Watts: "The individual is an aperture through which the whole energy of the universe is aware of itself, 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.<sup>2</sup>" How much nearer comes such symbolical and poetical language to reality than all merely logically constructed theories! Is not the hollow space in the center of the vortex the very 'aperture' through (or emptiness) which the individual becomes capable to be 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, as such and 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 and with it all individual effort towards 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 again is born from an ever and infinitely progressing polarity. Reality, therefore, does not reside in the abstract concept of ~~xxxxxxxx~~ 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 'all is One' is as onesided 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 over-estimating the role of its will-power. The first standpoint regards all techniques of meditational training as superfluous, if not 'absurd', and leaves the individual to the action of 'divine grace' or the spontaneity of intuition. The second standpoint relies too much on force, routine-like training and personal achievement and suppresses by its intentionality the spontaneous forces of intuitive insight.

Also here it seems to me, the middle way (as proposed by the Buddha and advocated by Assagioli's attitude), which makes use of human endeavour and effort as well as intelligence (in form of clear thought and higher aspirations) as a starting point for meditation, is a sound method on the path of realization. The Buddha's illumination was, as Assagioli points out "the result and the reward of his willed endeavour." And quoting D.T.Suzuki: "Enlightenment ~~xxxx~~ therefore must involve the will as well as the intellect. It is an act of intuition born of the will ...."

It is clear that this 'will' is no more the ego-motivated will of the ordinary self-seeking individual, but what Assagioli would

term the 'Transpersonal Will', a will ~~that~~ that has been sublimated and transformed into a force, directed beyond all <sup>narrow</sup> ~~limited~~ aims and purposes, transcending all individual limitations, and finally turning the individual into "a willing channel through which the powerful energies of the universe flow ~~and~~ operate."

So long as the individual bars this channel by its ego-directed will, its illusion of separateness, or by simply being unaware of this potential source of energies, it cannot make use of it. ~~xxx~~ Meditational practices have, therefore, no other purpose than to awaken, ~~xxx~~ to develop and to strengthen the awareness of the individual, to remove the hindrances that stand in the way of the free flow of creative and life-giving energies, to open the mind to the infinite possibilities of experience and to make it an instrument capable of integrating those experiences in actual life. Even the greatest genius, be he a musician, a poet, a painter or a sculptor, a great philosopher or scientist, has to prepare and to master his organs of receptivity, the medium of his creative activity and the laws governing it. Thus the employment of conscious will, effort directiveness and concentration are not impediments of spontaneity and intuition, but act to prepare the ground for the reception and integration of intuitive experience and spontaneous insight into the nature of reality. Meditative training, therefore, has no other purpose than to put us into an attitude of receptivity, to strengthen our sensibilities, to make ourselves a "willing channel" for the forces of inspiration. Inspiration, however, dissipates itself in merely momentary feelings of elevation and freedom, or in mere emotionality, unless it has been integrated into our very being by the creative act of giving it form or expression, because no force can act unless it is formed and directed. Herein lies the power of art, of clear thought or profound vision or the realization of a new dimension of consciousness, which changes and directs our attitude towards life by giving it a deeper meaning.

Without the creative act of the Transpersonal Will, neither

drug-induced visions (which are not an expansion of consciousness but a confused transmission of neurological messages) nor auto-hypnotic trance states of misguided meditational practices have any ~~xxxx~~ spiritual value, but are merely attempts to escape the ~~escape the~~ realities of life. Another attempt <sup>of such an</sup> ~~to~~ escape ~~is~~ is "by returning to a primitive state of consciousness, to be reabsorbed into the 'mother', into a prenatal state, to lose oneself in the collective life. This is the way of regression. The other is the above-mentioned way of transcendence, of 'rising above' ordinary consciousness. - - - So we need to face courageously and willingly the requirements for transcending the limitations of personal consciousness, without losing the center of individual awareness. ~~(xxxxx)~~ This is possible because individuality and universality are not mutually exclusive." (p.113) To unite them in the final realization of the human mind in the state of enlightenment is not only the aim ~~xxxxxx~~ of Assagioli's Psychosynthesis, but of all creative meditation, which means an attitude of mind that does not try to evade but to solve the problems of life. Psychoanalysis is a valuable tool in the exploration of the human mind, but unless it is followed by a synthesis its therapeutical effect is of limited value. It is for this reason that Assagioli's Psychosynthesis is of special importance for our time, in which the analytical attitude of a dissecting and discriminating intellect may lead to a dissolution or depreciation of the creative effort, unless we recognize again the role of the human will as a conscious force, dependent on the level of our knowledge and imagination, which alone can free us from the tyranny of blind drives and compulsions.

Knowledge and imagination are the two interdependent sides or poles of consciousness. Knowledge is based on experience that has been stored in memory, while imagination is the creative application of knowledge or the intuitive quality of consciousness, <sup>quasi</sup> a playful attitude, whose inherent impetus gradually creates a



direction (or directedness) from which all works of art and all great discoveries of the human mind are born. That intuition and will-power are not mutually exclusive, or even spontaneity and a training of mental or technical faculties (necessary for the creative expression, formulation and realization of intuitive insight) is demonstrated by the lives and works of great artists and thinkers, whose creations involved sustained effort, perseverance and intense concentration.

However, the creative principle and the source of strength is the power of imagination, which inspires and guides the genius of man. "Of all the distinctions between man and animal, the characteristic gift which makes us human is the power to work with symbolic images: the gift of imagination. The power that man has over nature and himself lies in his command of imaginary experience." (Jacob Bronowski). This is the very foundation of Tantric meditation, which has been practiced in India and Tibet and spread its influence over the greater part of Asia up to the Far East, stimulating the greatest works of art and a literature which ~~xxxxxxx~~ the West has only now started to explore.

According to William James "every image has in itself a motor element", and Assagioli formulates this fundamental law in the following sentences: "Images or mental pictures and ideas tend to produce the physical conditions and external acts that correspond to them." (p5194) And vice-versa: "Attitudes, movements, and actions tend to evoke ~~xxxxxxx~~ corresponding images and ideas; these in turn evoke or intensify corresponding ~~imagesxxxx~~ emotions and feelings." (p.52) "Attention, interest, affirmations, and repetitions reinforce the ideas, images, and psychological formations in which they are centered." (p.56) In these words we have a competent description of the main elements of meditation and spiritual training, in which both will and intuition have their place and in which training is no contradiction to spontaneity. ~~Just as imagination stirs~~

In fact, "the power of images can be said to constitute a necessary intermediary between the will and the other psychological functions" and though "the will possesses no direct power over the intuitive function, ... the will can perform ~~the~~ a most helpful indirect action; it can create and keep clear the channel of communication along which the intuitive impressions descend." (p194f.)

Just as imagination stirs the will towards the actualization and realization of the contents of imagination, in the same way the will is capable to call up and to direct powerful or significant images. This is what Assagioli uses as a therapeutical method, which he calls "guided imagination". As mentioned before, this is a technique that has been practiced and developed, especially in Tibet, with only the difference that there the guidance was not left to the choice or the judgement of the individual practitioner or his spiritual guide, but was based on the collective experience of innumerable generations of sadhakas (religious practitioners), i.e. on a living tradition of more than a millennium.

The West has still to learn a great deal from this accumulated experience, but a psychological approach of the depth and wisdom of Assagioli's Psychosynthesis will go a long way in opening an understanding and in establishing the importance of the Act of Will, both in practical life and in the art of meditation.

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 Spero che lei ha ricevuto  
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 L.A.