

Fundamentals of Thelemic Practice

An essay explaining in simple terms the nature of the Thelemic 'will'
and the method of its discovery, in both conceptual and practical
terms.

by

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Fundamentals of Thelemic Practice

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN OF THE theoretical side of the philosophy of Thelema, and much has been written of the practical side of ‘occultism’. Yet when it comes to the actual question of discovering and fulfilling the will these writings uniformly fall short. There is a marked reluctance within the ‘Thelemic community’ to even discuss questions such as ‘what is the will?’ and ‘how does one discover it?’ Most often, the enquirer is told simply to ‘do the work’, usually referring to some form of yoga or ceremonial magick. Given the central importance of the concept of will to Thelema, it is curious that almost no attention at all is given to considerations of why a particular form of ‘work’ should be done, how it should be expected to lead to the discovery of the will, or even what the discovery of the will entails in the most general of terms. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, most self-professed Thelemites, even (or especially) the more ‘experienced’ ones appear unwilling — or, as is more likely, unable — to explain what the will even is when asked.

This kind of unthinking faith-based approach is both utterly fatal to success and completely useless to the sincere aspirant, who suffers from an almost complete absence of anybody who is prepared and able to tell him, in plain language, precisely what it is that he is supposed to be achieving. Frequently he is referred to various works of Aleister Crowley by people who don’t understand those works any better than he does, leaving him none the wiser. Even more frequently he is encouraged to avoid asking questions, and to just put his faith in dubious practices, because otherwise he shall ‘fall down into the pit called Because, and there he shall perish with the dogs of Reason.’¹

Fortunately, it does not have to remain this way. It is indeed

¹AL II, 27

possible to state, in plain language, what the nature of his task is, and to provide some concrete guidance as to how he might approach undertaking it. Such is the purpose of this essay.

The Essence of the Task

The practical side of Thelema can be summed up simply:

Thou must (1) Find out what is thy Will. (2) Do that Will with (a) one-pointedness, (b) detachment, (c) peace.²

In this case, simplicity runs the risk of obscuring rather than clarifying, since this statement assumes that we know perfectly well what is meant by ‘Will’.³ The reality is that ‘will’ is probably the single most widely misunderstood concept in the whole of Thelema, which — given its central importance to the philosophy — is clearly problematic. Our first priority will therefore be to describe what this means.

Will is the dynamic expression of the preferences of the self. On the simplest of levels, most individuals prefer to eat food that tastes good, to drink enough water, and to stay warm and sheltered from the elements; in most cases, the will includes the tendency to fulfill these basic needs. Beyond this, an individual may be inclined towards certain types of intellectual stimulation, or towards various physical activities, or towards particular creative pursuits, and his will may include tendencies towards performing these types of tasks. He may also prefer — or prefer to avoid — particular types of human intercourse or geographical surroundings. He may have a preference at various times for travelling rather than settling down, for learning about certain subjects, or for developing particular skills. The possibilities for what can comprise will are as endless as the differences between individuals. Regardless of the details, any particular individual — given his unique nature — will, in a particular set of circumstances, exhibit a tendency towards certain types of action, and the sum of those tendencies comprises the will.

Put in these terms, our concept of will sounds *too* simple. After all, doesn’t everybody do what they are naturally inclined to do, every day of their lives? If this is all ‘will’ is, then what is so special about it?

²*Liber II*

³In the works of Aleister Crowley, the first letter of ‘Will’ is usually capitalised, and often qualified as ‘True Will’, in order to distinguish it from mere wants or whims. We will not follow this convention here, and unless otherwise specified, ‘will’ in this essay refers to the Thelemic concept.

Liber II also states that:

it should be clear that ‘Do what thou wilt’ does not mean ‘Do what you like.’ It is the apotheosis of Freedom; but it is also the strictest possible bond.

Many self-professed Thelemites interpret this to mean that the will represents some kind of ‘higher purpose’, some cosmically-ordained ‘path’ that one has either a moral obligation or a practical imperative to follow. These interpretations echo the Christian ideas of ‘sin’, the doctrine that human nature is fundamentally deficient and must be somehow ‘overcome’ in favour of a ‘higher calling’. Aside from being an aesthetically displeasing notion, a cursory examination will reveal the absence of any such ordination, of any overarching power or order in the universe compelling us to strive for unnatural goals.

The actual interpretation of this passage is much simpler. The fact that “Do what thou wilt” does not mean “Do what you like” does not imply that there is something wrong with the simple preferences we have described above; it implies that we think we want something else. It is not the preferences of the self that are problematic; the problem is that we are all too often not aware of what those preferences are, because they are masked by false ‘wants’ and illusory ‘needs’ that are created by the mind.

This must be carefully understood: what we think we want differs from what we actually want, because under most circumstances we are not aware of our ‘true’ preferences, only of a confused web of illusory preferences. ‘Do what thou wilt’ would indeed mean ‘Do what you like’ if only the false wants of the mind could be replaced by the true preferences of the self.

Many people believe themselves to have a rather good idea of what they actually do want, but experience shows that the vast majority of them are mistaken. Time and time again, people achieve what they thought they wanted, and find that it fails to satisfy, that it wasn’t what they wanted at all. The applicability of the phrase ‘the grass is always greener on the other side’ shows that desires in many cases are not driven by an actual preference for the subject of the desire, but by the mere absence of it. Billions of dollars are spent by the advertising industry precisely to convince people that they want things that they really don’t. The modern phenomenon of the ‘mid-life crisis’ arises precisely from a realisation that the things one has worked for all one’s life, the things one has achieved, have been motivated by something other than one’s real preferences, whether that something is a perceived need for financial security, by false values instilled in one

by others at an early age, or by the simple proliferation of seemingly attractive alternatives.

The fact is that the average individual today has no idea at all what his true preferences really are, and instead follows the false wants and desires which have been created by his mind, whatever the cause. The average ‘student of the occult’ — completely contrary to what he believes — is rather less likely than most to be aware of his true preferences as a result of a strong tendency amongst occultists to replace one web of confusion with another of even greater opacity and thickness, but to convince themselves that they have achieved clarity. It is without much hope that I offer this warning to any occultists reading these words and nodding knowingly to themselves, feeling pity for the hapless profane fools who have yet to ‘know themselves’, safe in the knowledge that they have long since resigned their membership of that particular group: you are overwhelmingly likely to be mistaken.

The question of ‘discovering the will’ is therefore not one of identifying one’s ‘ordained path’, but of clearing away these false wants and desires which divert one from acting in accordance with the true preferences of the self, which one would naturally do if free from these influences. The significance of the ‘true’ in ‘True Will’ therefore is not to denote some special consecrated course, but simply to distinguish it from the ‘false will’ comprised of the illusory wants and desires contained in the mind. The complexity, ingenuity and ubiquity of these illusory wants makes the task of clearing a path through them inordinately difficult. It is this task that forms the core of the practical aspect of Thelema.

The Nature of the Task

Although the core of the practical aspect of Thelema is the piercing of these illusory wants, this not a complete description. It has been remarked by many that ‘the mind is the great enemy’, and in the sense that it is the mind that is responsible for veiling the will in the first place, this is true. However, human beings do have a mind, and it is part of their nature to be inclined towards activities which require the use of the mind, so it cannot be shut down entirely. It will be found necessary for the mind to be pressed into the service of the will if one is to be successful in following it. It is not sufficient to just prevent the mind from interfering, therefore; it must be made aware of the preferences of the self, and trained to avoid interfering with the perception of will whilst in normal operation.

The role of the mind must be carefully understood in this practice. It is necessary, as we have said, for the mind to be made aware of the preferences of the self — of the will — but *not* in order for us to ‘know what to do’. The will is always made apparent by paying attention to it *instead of* paying attention to the mind. The purpose in making the mind aware of the will is *not* to enable the mind to make a representation of that will in order to guide us in action. Instead, the purpose is to enable the mind to *assist* in the fulfillment of will. If, for instance, one’s will is to move from the city to the country, we will quickly find that such a task is impossible without the assistance of the mind. Yet, the mind cannot help accomplish this task unless it knows that moving to the country is the desired objective. From another perspective, such an objective could never be the will unless the self is aware of the both the existence of the countryside and of the possibility of living there, and such knowledge belongs to the mind. Crucially, however, regardless of whether the mind contributes knowledge to the process, the self informs the mind of these objectives; the mind does not inform the self.

One implication of this is that whilst it is possible to *find* out what the will is, it is not possible to *figure* out what the will is. The will can never be discovered by thinking about it, by working it out, by a process of analysis; one must ‘know the will’ before one can think about it. ‘Figuring out’ is a purely mental process, and the mind cannot become aware of the will by attending to its own processes; it must be informed by something external to itself. Even if the mind can be made fully aware of the will, the will is a highly dynamic quality, and if one attends to the mind’s representation of the will instead of to the will itself one will find that representation becoming rapidly out-of-date. Again, the mind must become capable of consciously formulating or representing the will, but *not* in order that one can ‘know what to do’; the mind is there to help one know *how* to do it.

The ‘training of the mind’ — which forms the bulk of Thelemic practice — comprises a number of aspects, therefore. Firstly, the mind must given a comprehensive general education. If the self is to have the maximum chance of fulfilling its will, then it must have a good knowledge of the *opportunities* for doing so, and a good knowledge of the *methods* for doing so. On a very basic level, the self cannot satisfy its basic need for food if it doesn’t know that plants and animals can be eaten, and even if it does that will remains unfulfilled for as long as the self has no idea which plants and animals to eat, or how to harvest them. Of course, much of the ‘knowledge’ for such basic needs comes in the form of instinct, but much of it also resides in the

mind, knowledge of agriculture, domestication, tracking and weapons manufacture being good examples of things which can increase the chances for success. More generally, a mind hampered by false knowledge of the nature of the world — particularly false beliefs in notions of morality — will be far less able to assist in the fulfilment of the self's preferences, or unable to even accept that those preferences are what they are. A mind contaminated by a belief in morality, for instance, or by false notions of 'duty', may never be able to come to terms with the preferences of the self in matters of sexuality or human relations, which will be a severe and possibly permanent handicap.

Secondly, the mind must be trained to become *aware*. The will is made apparent through the observation of the interactions between the self and its environment when that observation is free from the distorting influences of the mind itself. This awareness itself is multifaceted. Aleister Crowley wrote of the need to obtain 'emancipation from thought by putting each idea against its opposite, and refusing to prefer either.'⁴ The use of the word 'prefer' in this statement is important. Imagine the difficulties one would encounter in the matter of electrical products if one insisted on connecting all three wires to the same pin of a three-pronged plug, because one 'just preferred it that way'. Put in these terms such an idea appears rightly absurd, but this is rarely carried over to matters of the mind. So great a man as Albert Einstein famously rejected the idea of an expanding universe which was implied by his own equations, introducing the infamous 'cosmological constant' into them, something that he years later retracted and referred to as 'the biggest blunder of [his] life'. He found himself unable to even consider the full implications of his theory because he simply *preferred* the idea of a static universe to a nonstatic one; that preference interfered with his ability to perceive with clarity. By learning to '[put] each idea against its opposite, and refusing to prefer either' the mind learns to avoid *influencing* perception because of a simple desire to accept one idea rather than another; it learns to perceive things as they are, rather than how it wants them to be.

As well as learning to avoid contaminating perception by filtering stimuli through its own personal processes of judgment, the mind must also be trained to simply distinguish between what is real, and what is imaginary. Charlotte Beck gives a good illustration:

Suppose we are out on a lake and it's a bit foggy — not too foggy, but a bit foggy — and we're rowing along in our little boat having a good time. And then, all of a

⁴ *One Star in Sight*

sudden, coming out of the fog, there's this other rowboat and it's heading right at us. And... *crash!* Well, for a second we're really angry — what is that fool doing? I just painted my boat! And here he comes — *crash!* — right into it. And then suddenly we notice that the rowboat is empty. What happens to our anger? Well, the anger collapses... I'll just have to paint my boat again, that's all.⁵

In this example, we can see clearly how we may interpret the exact same event in two radically different ways, simple because of the layers of imaginary interpretation the mind imposes on our perception. The anger, in this example, is not a reaction to something external in the world — in this example, we later find out that the boat was empty — but a reaction to something in our mind. We are getting angry at our own thoughts, not at the world, yet we *think* we're really angry at the 'other guy' who, in this example, doesn't actually exist at all. It's a classic example of the mind giving 'reality' to things which are, in fact, mere imaginations. This, indeed, is very much the problem facing the aspiring Thelemite; he mistakes his imaginary preferences for his real preferences, and until he makes himself aware that that's what he's doing, he'll never be able to correct it.

The mind must, in short, be trained to become aware of the particular ways in which it colours, influences and distorts perception. It is not sufficient to merely obtain a general knowledge of the ways in which the mind may do this; it must become able to identify the *specific* ways in which it does this itself, and ultimately able to detect when it is doing this in real time. Once it achieves this awareness, it must then work on alleviating those tendencies; it must be trained to avoid obscuring reality in these ways. With application, it will be found that developing the awareness in fact constitutes more than half of this task. Once the mind is able to detect itself distorting perception in a particular way, it becomes more proficient at it, and with time becomes able to consistently and reliably identify those occasions. When this happens, little active effort is required to ameliorate the tendency, simple familiarity going most of the way towards removing the mind's inclination towards having faith in its own faulty interpretations.

Once the mind becomes able to do this, and perception is allowed to occur without contamination, then the mind must observe the interactions between the self and its environment from the perspective of this clarity. Over time, patterns in those interactions will start

⁵ *Everyday Zen*

to become apparent, and it is from those patterns that the will can be consciously inferred; this is how the self ‘informs the mind’ of its true preferences. Armed with this knowledge, the mind can then be pressed into the service of the will, and turned towards the question of fulfilling it.

These simple fundamental concepts describe the essence of the task facing the aspiring Thelemite. When it comes to putting this into some kind of motion, he is faced by a mass of potential ‘practices’. The unfortunate association of Thelema with ‘the occult’ has caused a great deal of mischief, with an alarming number of people believing that ‘ceremonial magick’ rituals are the most useful — some people even consider them *necessary* — to discovering the will. The main cause of this frankly weird misunderstanding is precisely an almost complete ignorance of what the will is and how it can be discovered. As the foregoing discussion should demonstrate, this is not a subject which can be approached unintelligently, or which can be approached with a standardised and mechanical ‘system’, if one is to have any hope of success. Although there are commonalities, the details of how the mind distorts perception are unique from individual to individual, and the minds which have to be trained to perceive those details are equally as different, meaning that not only must the approach be heavily tailored to the individual in question, but that the individual himself is really the only person who has any kind of hope of effectively doing that tailoring.

That being said, there are a number of simple and effective practices which can be described and which will likely be of great use to the beginner and the ‘experienced’ alike. Matters of general education are widely understood, and need not be given any great attention here, but practices to develop awareness will be much more helpful. Even if the individual wishes to modify the practices described here, the ideas embodied in them will be instructive in helping him to design his own. We will now proceed to describe them.

Quiet Awareness

The purpose of the first practice is simply to develop the ability to be aware of the environment without the interference of the mind.

The aspirant should first of all adopt a comfortable position which he can maintain for a period of time. He should feel completely relieved from the necessity to adopt any kind of special ‘yogic position’ or *asana*; sitting still in a comfortable chair will suffice perfectly well.

Ideally he should choose an environment relatively free from distractions such as televisions or music, although he may want to experiment with the practice in this type of condition. He should use his discretion as to whether he wants to employ what may be described as ‘props’. He may find candlelight more conducive to the practice than harsh artificial lighting, or he may prefer darkness. Many people find burning some incense helpful.

Having positioned himself comfortably, the aspirant should first endeavour to remain as completely still as he can, aiming for no movement other than his own breath. He should relax as completely as he is able. Opinions vary on whether the eyes are better open or closed. If open, he should choose something to rest his eyes upon — *not* to ‘concentrate’ on — such as a candle, another object, or even a point on a wall; he should not permit his eyes to wander.

Opinions also vary on what to do with the breath. Some find it helpful to count the breaths in various ways to encourage rhythmic breathing. It may be a simple in-out count — breathing in to ‘one-two-three-four’ and out to ‘one-two-three-four’ — or a compound count — breathing in to ‘*one*-two-three-four, out to ‘*two*-two-three-four’ and so on, typically in cycles of ten. Others prefer not to force the breath into a rhythm at all, but to let it ‘settle’ by itself. Such questions are best decided by the aspirant himself with a little experimentation. Either way, after a few minutes he should settle into a deep, slow and at least relatively rhythmic and constant rate of breathing.

In the early stages, the aspirant may wish to restrict his practice to this simple process of sitting and breathing, until he is able to reach a state of deep relaxation, which should be achievable within a week or two. There is neither a need for overstrain, nor a benefit to it; between fifteen and thirty minutes daily is a perfectly respectable period of practice, and at no stage should a need arise to extend beyond an hour. It is helpful to employ an alarm clock or sports watch to alert the aspirant when his time is up, so that he need not worry about watching the clock.

Once success is achieved on the physical side, the aspirant may begin the practice proper, which is to simply practice being *aware*. He should not attempt to ‘focus’ or ‘concentrate’ on anything in particular, but instead should just pay attention to what is happening. He may hear a dog barking or a car passing in the distance. He should not attempt to ‘label’ these sensations at all; he should simply be aware of *experiencing* them. He may notice a particular part of his body is tense; again, he should simply experience that feeling, and gently relax the part in question. He may notice an itch, or a breeze playing

over his skin; once more, he should simply accept these impressions for what they are.

He will, naturally, find his mind frequently wandering. He may find daydreams triggered by the sensations he perceives, or they may arise in a seemingly random fashion from his mind. When he becomes aware of this, he should not get angry, or frustrated at his inability to maintain awareness; he should simply experience the fact that his mind has wandered, and gently bring it back to awareness. As he does so, he will very likely experience secondary thoughts such as ‘oh, my mind has wandered again!’ or ‘maybe I’ll get better at maintaining awareness soon.’ In the same way, these thoughts should simply be observed and accepted, and the mind gently brought back to awareness. He may further start to get bored; instead of subsuming himself in his boredom, instead of believing his boredom and saying ‘I’m bored’, he should observe the fact of his mind feeling bored, he should simply observe his feeling of boredom as an experience happening to him, instead of as something he is being.

What the aspirant is really doing with this method is just ‘practising being in existence’. He should not undertake this practice in the expectation of getting some kind of ‘result’, such as a particular type of ‘trance’ or ‘altered state of consciousness’. On the contrary, being able to simply sit and be aware *is* the result. This practice may be the only opportunity he has in his week to do absolutely nothing else other than to be in existence, and to be aware of that. At other times of the day he may be shaving with one hand, stuffing down his breakfast with the other, whilst talking on the phone and trying to keep his dog out of the trash. At this time of the day he can simply experience *being*, experience being the aware and conscious individual that he is. When he achieves some success, he will start to notice just how much awareness his mind normally filters out, just how much his mind tends to concentrate on its own creations rather than on the reality of his existence. He should not be surprised if he starts to find himself looking forward to this brief daily time.

Further, he should extinguish from his mind any ideas of trying to ‘improve’ his practice, particularly any ideas that he should be aiming for an ability to go the entire time without his mind wandering once. Instead, he should just accept whatever impressions he finds from the beginning, including any impressions of his mind wandering. Of course, with practice his ability to maintain awareness will improve by itself, but the *purpose* of this practice should not be to ‘get better at it’; it should be to simply do it. Such thoughts of ‘progress’ are precisely the types of intrusion upon awareness that he is trying to

free himself from. This sounds paradoxical, but the reality is he cannot practice maintaining awareness if his mind has no tendency to retreat from awareness in the first place, and it is the practice of being aware that is the point of this method.

This practice is, in a sense, both the beginning and the end of the matter. On the one hand, it may be his first real experience of separating his self from the vagaries of his mind; on the other, the practice — properly performed — is the quintessential expression of will, since he is doing absolutely nothing at that particular moment other than simply *being*, simply being the individual that he is. As such, this practice should be maintained for some time. Indeed, it is one he may well find himself wanting to continue permanently.

On that note, and before we move on, one more point must be raised. The practices we are describing in the current essay are ‘basic’ practices. This should be kept in mind, but for a different reason than the aspirant may at first think. There are many people who seem to constantly clamour for more ‘advanced’ practices. The aspirant would do well to consider the meaning of ‘basic’. A ‘basic’ practice is not one that is solely for beginners, an introductory ‘taster’ which has little continuing value. On the contrary, a ‘basic’ practice is basic because it is *fundamental*; basic practices are *more* important than others, not less important, and they are more important precisely *because* they are basic. As anybody at the top of their field will tell you, it is precisely the mastery of basic skills that constitutes a master. ‘Advanced’ techniques are, at the end of analysis, merely a combination of basic techniques, and it is the mastery of basic techniques that makes the advanced techniques easy. For this reason, rushing towards more ‘advanced’ techniques may well make one *feel* more ‘advanced’, but it will not make one actually *be* more advanced. Those who clamour for more advanced techniques merely demonstrate that they have never mastered the basics, because if they had, they wouldn’t need to ask for something more advanced since it would be readily apparent to them. One is not ready for ‘advanced techniques’ if one has to go searching for them.

Active Awareness

The previous practice developed the skill of being aware, of transferring the attention away from the mind and onto the external environment. It will have taught the aspirant — in an elementary sense, at least — to distinguish the real from the imaginary. However, it has

only taught him to do that whilst sitting still in a state of relaxation. The next practice is to extend that into ‘daily life’.

The second practice has been called ‘mindfulness’, especially in the Buddhist tradition, and it is in essence simple. The objective is to take a moment — any moment — and to bring the awareness developed in the previous practice to bear on it. It can be done at any time throughout the day, for short or long periods of time, so it affords the aspirant great flexibility.

Activities that form part of the daily routine are ideal for this purpose. For instance, when taking a shower in the morning, instead of rushing through it, instead of ‘showering to get clean’ whilst thinking of all the things he needs to do at work that day, the aspirant should instead ‘shower in order to have a shower’, and pay attention to the real sensations. Instead of thinking about how early it is, and how much he’d like to be back in bed, he can be aware of the feeling of the water cascading over him, of the warmth on his skin. He can look at the soap as he lathers it in his hands, feel the sensations as he washes himself. He may find it helpful to deliberately slow down, once more to take the time just to spend a moment being and experiencing what’s actually happening.

Eating is another good occasion for practice. So many people eat in order to relieve hunger, their minds elsewhere, barely even tasting the food itself. Instead he can take his time to experience eating, to observe the sensations that he perceives for what they are. The idea is not so much to become conscious of his *actions*, but of his *experiencing*, of his *being*.

Taking a walk presents another prime opportunity, whether he is deliberately walking the dog or just taking the short stroll from the parking lot to the office. Rather than to rush with huddled shoulders to where he is going, he can take the opportunity to look around, to notice the clouds and the trees, the concrete of the pavement slabs, the sounds of the birds and the feel of the Sun and the wind on his skin. He may be surprised to notice a wealth of detail in the smallest of moments that he has never been aware of before despite having walked this route a thousand times previously, a depth of richness in the simplest of situations waiting to be enjoyed if he simply turns his attention to it.

It should be borne in mind, however, that although this practice of mindfulness may generate a sense of ‘wonder’ at the richness and wealth of the world — the ‘man-made’ world as much as the natural world — the purpose of this practice is not to generate trances, but to maintain awareness. With proper mindfulness, he will be able

to observe the onset of any such sense as impartially as he is able to observe that which is external to him.

Obviously, the opportunities to practice mindfulness are almost limitless, and the aspirant should have no difficulties at all finding his own ways to bring awareness to different moments.

Awareness of Thought

The purpose of the previous two practices has been to develop the skill of awareness, of perceiving what is happening in the external world free from the contaminating influence of the mind. The opening of the third practice was hinted at in the previous section. As far as the ‘self’ is concerned, what is ‘external’ to it does not only consist of what we normally call the environment; both the body and the mind are also ‘external’ to the self.⁶ The third practice is to turn that awareness towards the mind itself.

In the practice of mindfulness, the aspirant learned to perceive details in the act of, for instance, brushing his teeth, details that would normally pass him straight by whilst he attended to his mind. The third practice is to be mindful of the mind itself, of observing — free from the influence of the mind — exactly what the mind is doing.

The ‘hit by an empty boat’ example of Charlotte Beck’s on page 8 provides us with a good example. When the boat gets hit, the anger starts to rise. In the third practice, the aspirant develops the ability to become aware of the activities of the mind such as this, as they are occurring. Rather than blindly ‘feeling angry’, the aspirant takes a step back and attempts to observe the mind impartially, instead experiencing ‘the appearance of a growing feeling of anger’.

Again, the possibilities for applying this practice are endless. He may be getting a telling-off from his boss, and either getting angry, or feeling incompetent, or both. He may develop feelings of resentment towards his boss — ‘how dare he talk to me like that!’ — and even start to reason that ‘I never intended to stay here for the long-term anyway’, possibly setting of a chain of thought that leads to him leaving for no reason at all. Once more, instead of identifying himself with these feelings, instead of ‘believing’ them, he should simply observe them arising, as they do. When emotions run high it is easy to project onto the world, and especially easy to ‘see bad’ in people and even inanimate objects, and part of this practice is developing the ability to identify

⁶The question of exactly what constitutes ‘the self’ is a difficult one. Refer to *True Will* for an extended discussion of this question.

and detect when the mind is doing that. The skill of maintaining awareness developed in the previous two practices will be necessary in reliably achieving this.

Crucially, the point is not to judge these activities of the mind, or to try to control them, but to simply become aware of them, to identify them and to observe them. If the aspirant finds himself saying ‘Damn! There I go believing in my anger again! How stupid of me!’ then he is missing the point of this practice. Any tendency to judge or evaluate these mental activities is precisely the kind of coloration that he is attempting to become aware of, and he should identify any instances of this that occur in the same way. The purpose is simply to become aware of how his particular mind works, to gradually become aware of the contents of that mind that may previously have been concealed to him.

Similarly, the aspirant may well — in fact, almost certainly will — identify contents of his mind that he doesn’t like. He may have, over a number of years, developed a self-image of himself as a strong and fearless individual, yet application of this practice may reveal to him occasions — perhaps many of them — where he is nervous, even positively fearful. He should accept these observations impartially, neither rejecting them because they conflict with his self-image, nor allowing doubt and worry to gnaw at him. Again, either of these reactions represents a coloration of the mind, a failure to avoid ‘preferring’ one impression over another. He should approach the practice as if he were observing the mind of another, and indeed this is very close to being the truth; after all, it is not *him* that is fearful, it is his *mind*, just as it is his mind that may be balking at that realisation.

As this practice progresses, and the ability of the aspirant to observe the workings of his mind increases, he will naturally tend to identify himself less and less with that mind. The tendency of an individual to identify with his mind is essentially an error, an oversight. One rarely runs the risk of identifying oneself with one’s car, for instance, since it is clearly external and appears to be distinct. By becoming increasingly more aware of the workings of his mind, by becoming increasingly able to observe his thoughts and feelings as something distinct from himself, he will naturally over time shift his identity away from that mind, and towards his actual self. This by itself will go a long way towards clearing the murky veils around the will, since by simply distancing his ‘self’ from his mind he will lessen the influence of the latter on the former. Also, as already mentioned, the simple identification of these tendencies will reduce their influence, since they primarily work by *distraction*, by leading the individual to

mistake them for reality. Simply by identifying them, by highlighting them, the aspirant becomes aware of their unreality, and as a result they lose a significant amount of their power over him, of their ability to fool him.

Observing the Will

The preceding three practices should not be rushed, and should be undertaken for a substantial period of time. The mind is a very complex organ, and uncovering even a significant fraction of its operation takes not only time, but variety of experience, often repeated experience in various settings. It is not a process the beginner should expect to accomplish in a few months, or even in a few years. Any temptation to assume a degree of ‘success’ in such a timeframe should be strenuously resisted, because continued application will repeatedly show the aspirant that every time he thought he had his mind figured out, he actually didn’t. In particular, if the aspirant finds himself entertaining any thoughts along the lines of ‘I have exposed my illusions, and found that *this* is my will, so *this* is what I should do’ then he is mistaken, because the very act of doing that demonstrates that he is still attending to his mind, and not to his will.

And indeed, this leads us to the fourth — and, for this essay, final — practice, that of observing the will. Unlike the others, this is a passive rather than an active process, and it *must* be so. As we explained earlier, one doesn’t find the will by searching for it, or by figuring it out. As the aspirant gains proficiency in observing his mind, and his attention is filtered less and less through its distorting lens, he will naturally begin to pay progressively more attention to those things outside of his mind. Slowly, over time, he will be able to observe the interactions between his self and his environment (including his mind) in a clear and impartial way, and even more slowly patterns in those interactions will begin to become apparent to him.

It is completely fatal to success to go looking for these patterns, to search them out and to actively infer the will. The reason should be obvious; to do this is to seek to create a conscious formulation of the will, and we have already stated the dangers of attending to this formulation instead of to the actual will. All the aspirant can do is to develop his ability to perceive clearly, and then to wait patiently for those patterns to make themselves clear to him; in the words of magick tradition, he must ‘build a fitting temple and then await the indwelling of the spirit.’ The purpose of consciously formulating the will is, as we

have said, categorically *not* to guide his action, but merely to inform his conscious mind of what it needs to be doing to help the will achieve fulfilment. *Trying* to consciously formulate the will results merely in another layer of mental confusion being wrapped around it, making his task that much difficult.

With this understanding, the reader should have little difficulty in appreciating just how unwise searching for ‘advanced practices’ really is, for without a long and extended period of the basic groundwork — indeed, without a period long enough for him to outgrow such a need, his will by that time providing all the guidance that is necessary — such practices will be futile. That’s not to say that there is no point in *doing* anything else, but he should do what he feels inclined to do, rather than what he thinks he *ought* to do in the interests of ‘progress’.

Summary

These, then, are the fundamentals of Thelemic practice, the cultivation of awareness, and specifically of the awareness of the workings of one’s own mind. It is, as we said at the beginning, the veils of one’s own mind that are responsible for masking the will in the first place, and whilst meditation or other practices alone can render one temporarily outside of their influence, if the will is to infuse ‘daily life’ these veils must be identified and understood if they are to be continuously managed.

The details of the practices can and should be varied by the individual, and he may well utilise many other practices or devise some of his own. In particular, we may mention the practices of divination⁷ and simple ritual⁸ as ones that could be potentially useful to him. But, in both evaluating potential practices and in executing them, he should keep in mind the fundamental principles outlined above, since in all cases they form the basis of the actual process of approaching the will.

⁷Refer to *The Value of Divination*.

⁸Refer to *The Qabalistic Cross* for a good example.

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