

Behind Will Stands Desire

The ancient statement “Behind Will Stands Desire,” concerns the subject of the will and has been discussed by philosophers, theologians and spiritual teachers of all times and eras. The invisible tool, faculty, and capacity referred to as the will, is necessarily one of the central themes in any discussion involving intellect and spirit. When many of us think of the concept of will, it often leads to the question of whether the will is *free*, or *determined*. Such categorical questions tend to arise, especially in the West, due to its dualistic conceptions, separating mind from body, body from world, soul from body, body and soul from God. Such thinking raises serious questions regarding the will. In so far as we remain ignorant of our deepest desires and motivations we will be unable to understand any conception of a spiritual will capable of achieving deliberate, conscious choices. This would imply that much of what we call free will — making choices — is, from a higher standpoint, illusory. In discussing the ancient teaching, “Behind Will Stands Desire,” we seek to raise awareness and questions concerning one of the deepest and most mysterious of subjects. The most ancient spiritual text on the planet, the *Rig Veda*, begins with the statement “Behind will stands desire” or, “Desire first arose in *It*.” The same text inquires whether the fundamental nature of this can be known. The answer given is “Perhaps the Highest Being knows, and perhaps the Highest Being does not know.” Given such ancient teaching, carried on within all true mystic traditions, we can release any claims to Absolute Truth that we may be carrying. Therefore, we can experience and gradually develop the awareness that we do not know a condition cited by Socrates as the “beginning of wisdom.” The utter *otherness* of this desire in which first arose our inability to know *It*, will help us to realize the relativity of our truths, no matter how grand. This awareness is what led Gandhi to emphasize that in possessing only relative truths no form of violence or coercion can be morally justified.

That which emanates from this Desire is sometimes referred to as “Be-ness.” From “Be-ness” emanates what we experience as *being* and *non-being* — both of which are nearly impossible to fathom. This teaching concerns the very highest levels of metaphysics, which we are not seeking to understand in this essay. However, to continue, Lao-Tzu in the *Tao Te King* admits ignorance of these highest conceptions. In some

Behind Will Stands Desire

traditions the highest manifest aspect of existence is referred to as The Word, or Brahma – Vach. Each of these implies the critical importance of sound, manifesting upon ever more differentiated planes. Further study and thought will lead the student to discover the equally important concepts of color and number — these three qualities being the fundamental irreducible aspects of manifest existence, and the means through which *It* can be ultimately understood. That, which emanates from a source, albeit unknown, carries with it something of its source. Thus, on the planes of human existence we will find both desire and will, microcosms of the macrocosm — “As above, so below.”

Just as it is taught, there can be no effect without a cause in a law governed universe, so too, there can be no will without a desire behind. Thus, when we experience a will, no matter how we might see fit to categorize it, we could begin to practice looking behind the will for the desire impelling it. Such practice can lead to clarification of motives and to greater singleness of will, of purpose. Plato, for example, taught, “The entire purpose is to become one man instead of many.” This points to the need of developing a singleness of mind and will — an ability to hold to a purpose. This clearly requires the development of one’s will. Consider the example: the typical results of our sincere New Year’s resolutions by mid-year, should we be able to remember these resolutions at all. This indicates the further need for us to, through self-study, inventory our various desires as best we can at a given time. Having done so, it is recommended to consciously prioritize them. How I think, feel, and act all manifest my currently operating desire nature, which in turn is governing my will. Self-study sustained regularly through time, combined with clearer awareness of motives will enable one to gradually discern aspects of the desire nature hither to unconscious. It is, in this sense, perhaps, that Karl Jung once wrote, “It comes down to making the unconscious conscious.” In this context, he was speaking of what he called “the collective unconscious,” not what we imagine to be our own individual unconscious — that is, in the end, an illusory notion. To embrace gradually this collective unconscious is said to be, in most cases, the work of lifetimes. It is also taught that this uncovering is not always pleasant, a fact sensed by many people, leading to various modes of flight from

Behind Will Stands Desire

the encounter. As Krishna teaches, “Light and darkness are the world’s eternal ways.” The collective unconscious can be seen as both — darkness that elicits the greater fear, while at the same time, as Arjuna discovered, to see too much light too soon.

It becomes increasingly apparent that an existential understanding of our title phrase “Beyond Will Stands Desire” is not the work of a day, or even of a lifetime (as stated earlier). It requires in fact, nothing less than a full commitment to its understanding in theory and to its applications in practice.

As one moves progresses in self-study, the question naturally arises, “To whom do these desires and consequent *willings* belong?” We say, “Well, they belong to me.” Who then is this *me* to whom they belong? The pursuit of this question will lead to the awareness that the desire nature and the actions based upon it imply no agent. Krishna taught: “All actions are performed only by the three qualities, *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*”, corresponding roughly to the good and the pleasant, the desirable and seeking, and the relatively inert darkness respectively. Further, he taught that these three qualities have to be transcended in consciousness if one is to discover the true nature of desire and of will. Clearly, this requires increased attention to which of the three qualities we seem to be most attached. None of the three are seen moralistically, and even *sattva* (goodness) must be overcome. This all may seem quite complex. Indeed, it is. Were it not so, we would have heaven on earth. However, we do not due to the fact that our collective desires are leading us to willing a different kind of earth.

A distinction is made between the human and the spiritual will and between the lower and the higher will. Behind the former stand personal, limited, and structured desires. Behind the latter stand unchanging, impersonal, and universal desires. The question thus becomes whether I choose to nourish personal or impersonal desires. This is a choice. We do have, in this important sense, free will. The so-called free will determinism debate is little more than a means of remaining in the same place. Therefore, we come back to self-study — the need to water the plants of desire we wish to grow. If one’s motive for being an aspirant is to become the better able to help and teach others, the spiritual will must be gradually activated through dwelling upon that

Behind Will Stands Desire

which is to be realized. Such pondering is an early stage in any form of meditation. It is, by far, the most difficult of human undertakings. The personal desires, leading to personalized living, thinking, and seeing rage within nearly every human breast must come to be extinguished. They will not easily or voluntarily relinquish their position in the driver's seat of one's life. Therefore, the Path is characterized as a war, a battle within us. The battle is never truly external. Such is merely mankind's poignant way of avoiding the true battle within, thus remaining prideful, afraid of death, willing to do violence, mentally, emotionally or physically. This is far from how such worldly activities are usually explained and understood. Unwilling to face and to contend with the desire nature within, we superimpose it upon others without, thus seeming to relieve ourselves of responsibility for our actions.

It is no mistake that Arjuna is characterized as a warrior. Seeing the battlefield, even as a warrior leads to his utter despondency and statement to Krishna that he dares not engage in the battle. Krishna reminds him that he is a warrior and that his duty is to fight, adding: "Neither I, nor thou, nor all these creatures of men have ever not existed, nor will we ever cease to be." There is, in fact, no one killing, no one killed." This leads to the consideration of deeper mysteries not relevant to this discussion. Suffice it to say that the battle and the battlefield depicted in the *Bhagavad-Gita* are not to be interpreted literally. That we (whomever we be, wherever we be) have duties to perform *is* the teaching. It is the duty of a seeker to seek. From the highest standpoint, all are seekers. From the same standpoint, most are seeking for themselves and those close to them, in some sense, alone. That is to say, that the personal desire nature is predominant in most of current humanity, leading to its terrible suffering.

It is only due to the great sacrifice of those who came before, who have become one with universal desire and the spiritual will, that we humans have any idea of our true nature and potential. It has been said, in recent times, that one must believe in spite of the evidence. This can only be authentically done as a result of self-study of meditation and of gradually withdrawing one's likes and dislikes, desires and aversions, and one's sense of separateness from one's consciousness. It is not necessary to "reinvent the

Behind Will Stands Desire

wheel.” The teachings exist. The teachers exist. It is our choice whether to follow or not to follow. Thus, we can begin to see that the mysterious phrase “Behind Will Stands Desire” is far more than an intriguing metaphysical proposition. It can become (if one so chooses) a magic talisman enabling one to maintain a line to the mysterious, unknown Center from which all flows. This has been referred to as “maintaining a line of life’s meditation” by the twentieth century Sage, Raghavan Iyer. Creating such a *line* must be done on purpose. It will not create itself. Lacking such creation, the line of one’s life meditation will be spotty, narrow, personal, and relatively illusory. To begin to create the line suggested by Iyer, he suggests that one string together, as beads on a necklace, one’s golden moments, seeing one’s self in terms of that line rather than the line growing from mere personal and cultural considerations and causes. Practiced over time, this exercise will show the need for as well as develop more universal desires — a more all-inclusive beneficial will. This leads naturally to the concept of practice about which we have written elsewhere. Required development can only flow from a continuity of practice. If one were so fortunate as to encounter a True Teacher this being may recommend a practice. If one is attracted to, but not in the presence of a True Teacher, one can study and try to apply the teachings found in texts and commentaries. There is never an appropriate need to contend regarding our various chosen practices. Rather, it becomes a great joy to encounter a fellow seeker, no matter their teaching or their Path. Before becoming somewhat Westernized, solitary human beings walking upon treacherous Himalayan trails would, when meeting another person first ask (in one way or another) “From which great tradition do you come?” Such a question points to the underlying awareness that all traditions ultimately stem from the same mysterious unknown and are thus equal in their ability to bring love, wisdom, understanding, and Light.

All of the Great Teachers, known and unknown, of humanity were such to the degree they had become one with the Universal Desire underlying the Universal Will. It is for this reason that their teachings, if carefully studied, will be found to be identical. From their desire comes Light, and through their will this Light is emanated. These

Behind Will Stands Desire

beings have taught that they are different from us only in degree, not in kind. Thus, we too can seek to emulate their ways, if we so will.

The desire to so will is usually a function either of a natural inclination, what some have called “a peak experience,” or a dawning awareness that the world of the body and the senses cannot be all there is. At this point, the teachings of the wise become worthy of our more honest attention. Lacking such factors, there will be seeking, desiring, but to no very good end -- individual or collective. Socrates taught that the unexamined life is not worth living. Camus taught that to begin to think is to begin to be undermined. Both spoke truly. One must become willing to practice *dianoia* (think things through) – this will initially undermine one’s conceptual framework. It is here that one must recall Socrates’ teaching: *to know you do not know is the beginning of Wisdom*. If taken seriously, the collapse of one’s structures can be seen in a positive rather than a negative light. It is also at such junctures that one becomes more willing to consult the teachings of the wise. The cowardly often at the same juncture, flee back into some form of worldly activity, some lesser framework trying as best they can to make it meaningful all the while deeply knowing the falsity. These are among the saddest of human beings having glimpsed, however briefly, the Void and having retreated there from. There is always the hope that such will turn again towards the unstructured Light.

Another way we could think about this topic is by considering the following statement from a Hindu sage, “We see what we *want* to see. Remove the *want* and you will see what is.” This statement can be experimentally applied to any situation, rather like might be done by scientists. At any time I can ask myself – What am I seeing? I can tell myself the answer. I can then ask myself – Am I seeing this because I want to? So says the sage. So, how should I see it? What is it really? A twentieth century philosopher, Wittgenstein, developed the concept of “seeing as.” We can, according to him see it as whatever we wish, agreeing with the sage. Unlike the sage Wittgenstein said that we remain caught within our “language games,” unable to see beyond them. If we could see beyond them, what we see would be incommunicable: “If a lion could speak, we would not understand him.”

Behind Will Stands Desire

We are all familiar with various conventional manners of seeing. These are often collectivized. If one chooses to see *It* in a different manner, one is often ostracized. To see it the way others do is the prevailing momentum. If one were, for example, to study a little physics, one might be taught that the human five senses *see* only one sixty-ninth of the known measurable electromagnetic spectrum. Nearly ninety-eight percent of the known spectrum we do not experience through any or all of our senses. This alone should indicate the problems inherent in seeing — as in seeing what we want to see. Even most of what science has discovered remains invisible. In regard to the vastness of the cosmos we inhabit, Sages teach that science remains in its infancy — its visible form concealing from our gaze the compassion filled beings behind and within it.

Given all this, we can see how important it becomes to examine and to transmute our desires so that we become willing to believe, as the sages teach, “the heart of things is sweet,” the essential nature of reality and compassion permeated with wisdom. In order to move towards such vast awareness, a student was told by a sage: “First deserve, then desire.” Thus, though behind will stands desire, we are being told here that we must first deserve before desiring. This implies that one has been willing (on at least a preliminary level) to purify one’s lower nature making it sufficiently porous to receive awareness of hitherto hidden realities. Although we can speak in this manner, the realities being discussed can in fact, be better characterized through the mediums and understandings of mathematics or music than through ordinary language. Being deserving represents a certain ever changing, yet porous configuration of mind and heart. This too is not the work of a day or even quite likely of a lifetime.

You want a lovely garden. You till the soil, removing the rocks and sticks. If needed (you may need advice on this), perhaps add fertilizer. You must then decide what you would like to plant. The seed you plant will determine what emerges from the soil. The soil must be watered, neither too much nor too little. You cannot control the weather. Impatience in waiting to see a sprout or two can be overcome. Do something else for a while. When a sprout or two finally appears, avoid becoming so excited that you pull it up to see how its roots are doing. Let it grow. You did not create it. You did

Behind Will Stands Desire

help it to grow, doing your part. Its beauty is not of your doing. It is not really your garden. Share its beauty, its bounty with all. Why not pass it on to others, give it away. Continue giving it away until you have nothing left to give. Enjoy the silence and warmth of the fertile earth, the peacefulness of the gentle breezes. The land is not your land. It belongs to no one single person. It belongs to all.

The sprout “needs breadth and depth and points to draw it towards The Diamond Soul.” The sprout desires to reach the sun: the will to get there leads it to the Light.

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August 3, 2003