

# **Train Your Brain: The Five Essential Skills**

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## **Using the Will: *Key Points***

*"Helping yourself keep wanting what's good for you . . ."*

### **Introduction**

- Using the will means helping yourself to want the good thing, to stick with your good resolutions and intentions easily, without white-knuckling.
- It's a combination of virtue and good purposes. Virtue is more static, while purpose is more active, but they intertwine.

### **Concentration**

Building the capacity to concentrate, to sustain a focus of attention, helps burn off the sluggishness and unconsciousness that undermine your virtues and purposes.

Basic instructions for doing a concentration meditation:

- Eyes open or closed
- Focus on a specific body sensation – typically the sensations of the breath around the upper lip and nostrils – and keep returning to that *no matter* what else arises in awareness. You can think about all that other stuff later. Keep letting that other stuff go to return attention to your breath.
- Try to be aware of each breath freshly, as an individual breath.
- Try to apply attention to the beginning of each inhalation and exhalation and then sustain attention all the way to the end of the breath.
- Try to be even aware of the brief pause after inhaling and before exhaling, and the pause after exhalation before inhaling.
- You can post a little guard, as it were, that is continually paying attention to where your attention goes, so that little guard will sound an alert if your attention starts to wander.
- Notice when your attention tends to fade. It's often after four or five breaths, almost a kind of fatigue. Be especially alert at those junctures to keep returning attention to the breath.
- It can help to count the breaths; a complete breath is 1. If you lose track, just start over. You can either count up – 1-2-3 . . . – or down: 10-9-8-7 . . . .
- You could also experiment with a soft verbal noting in your mind of what is happening - such as "In . . . . Out" or "Rising . . . . Falling" - giving that noting maybe 5% of your attention, most of it remaining with the physical sensations of the breath.

- Don't strain to do this, or be critical of yourself. Find a middle place between straining and being lackadaisical. Intend to become absorbed in the breath.
- You may find that you fall into relaxed state of absorption after awhile that is quite pleasant and peaceful and doesn't take much effort. Or you may experience a continual sense of muscular effort needed to concentrate on the breath. Either one is alright.

## Being For Yourself

There's a fundamental question of whether you are for yourself, whether you are on your own side. Especially regarding your true, deep interests: your long-term health, well-being, happiness, love, and success.

For some, this comes naturally, while others - especially those who were criticized, neglected, or shamed a lot as children, or otherwise have developed a sense of learned helplessness - have to work at it.

Four different ways to cultivate the attitude of being for yourself:

- Reflect on how you want to be fair to others. Reflect on your natural, basic goodwill toward others. On how you wish others well. On how you would want to treat them decently, with ordinary consideration, civility, respect, and kindness.

Let these ideas become feelings in your body, feelings of simple consideration and decency toward others.

Now imagine or get a sense of yourself as another one of the people on the planet. Perhaps imagine meeting yourself in a group, in a work setting, as a neighbor, etc.

Try to apply the same standards of fairness and decency toward yourself that you would naturally apply to anyone: why not you, too?

Try to bring the same feelings, the same emotions, of care and goodwill to yourself that you would naturally bring to other people.

- Consider your own child or children, or other children you know, or children in general. Call to awareness the sense, the feelings, of caring for children. Let it fill you.

Now get a sense of yourself as a little child. Good. Try to apply those feelings of caring to that child you once were, long ago.

Now sense the young parts that are still within you today. Maybe get an image of that, perhaps an image of a child. Apply feelings of caring, of sweetness, tenderness, even love, to those young parts inside you. Soak this in.

- Think thoughts to yourself that wish yourself well. Such as, "May you be happy. May you be at peace. May you be well. May your heart be at ease. May your body be at ease."

Perhaps also think of specific wounds or needs or long-time desires in yourself, and offer lovingkindness that is related to those.

You can experiment with different forms, like "May I feel good about who I am" or "May you, John (or Susan) feel good about who you are."

You can use both all-purpose statements - like "May I stay healthy" - and ones specific to particular needs or issues, like "May I release my anger. May I stay cool with the kids. May I think before speaking."

- Reflect on how being for yourself - so that your well-being and functioning improve - will help other people, especially the ones you care about most.

For example, bring to mind some aspect of your life, or some way that you are, that would clearly get better if you were more on your own side, if you were more supportive of yourself to go in a better direction. Consider how it would help and contribute to others, for you to be for yourself in that area.

Try this for a second example of how being for yourself would be good for others.

### **Key Virtues**

- Review the handout, HOW TO STICK WITH VIRTUES AND GOOD PURPOSES.  
Focus on "Taking In" a sense of confidence that you really can put into practice, that you really can live by, your best intentions.
  
  - List three or more important virtues that you routinely embody – perhaps virtues that are very central to your specific personality or character.  
A single word will often do, but it's OK to add some additional words if that's what speaks to your heart.  
For each one, first get the feeling, sense, or even posture of that virtue . . . and then soak in that feeling (i.e., Taking In).
  
  - List three or more important virtues that you would like to live by better. Do some soul-searching here.  
Sometimes it helps to be a little quiet in your mind and ask your innermost being – or even the Divine, if that's meaningful to you – for what it thinks.  
It's OK if there's a bit of wincing or remorse as you do this; remember that you are being a good person in your willingness to acknowledge where you could be even better.  
Some classics, just to prime your pump: Patience. Restraint of anger. Courage. Sobriety. Cheerfulness. Determination. Love. Generosity.
- Now for each one, take 30 seconds or so to do three things:
- Get the feeling of it in your body – and let that sink in.
  - Reflect on the benefits to you and others of living more from that virtue – and get an experience of those benefits in your body (more than a conceptual knowing of the benefits) – and let the enjoyable experience of those benefits sink in
  - Right here and now, make a choice about whether you will commit to that virtue, knowing that you can make a different choice in the future

## Life Priorities

- Think of major areas, domains, or activities of your life.  
Like Health, Spirituality, Love, Pleasure, Marriage, Childrearing, Career, Creative Expression, Finances.  
Write them out as a list.
- Now re-write that list in priority order. Sorry, no ties are allowed! Think of this as an exercise; in real life we tend to pursue multiple priorities.  
One way to do this is, ask yourself if you could have just one of those priorities fulfilled, which would it be? OK, then take that one off the table and repeat the question with the remaining priorities.
- When you have your priority list, take an honest look at it. Tell the truth to yourself about how you are and how you are not living your life accordingly.  
Make any notes to yourself about anything you want to start doing differently.  
It's OK to feel abashed, chagrined, or remorseful. Let those feelings become a conviction that you want to live truer to your real priorities . . . and let the feeling of that conviction really sink in.

## Concrete Admonitions/Aspirations for the Day, Week, and Month

- Keep in mind your confidence, related to the handout on HOW TO STICK WITH VIRTUES AND GOOD PURPOSES, that you can actually practice what you are about to preach to yourself.
- Put a heading on a piece of paper like: "Admonitions/Aspirations," "My Precepts," "I Agree To," "How To Make My Life Work." Whatever works for you.

### Daily

- Create a sub-heading: "**Daily.**" Under it, list bottom-line do's and don'ts for yourself that you want to do each day or always. Like:
  - Don't smoke
  - Go to bed early enough to get up to meditate the next morning
  - Meditate
  - Don't sneak sweets
  - No porn
  - Do not speak or act out of anger
  - No spanking the kids
  - Be loving and affectionate with my mate
  - Spend 15+ minutes of quality time with each child
  - Don't let Bob/Mary/whoever get to me
  - No dope
  - No alcohol
  - Play the piano
  - Read something spiritual
  - Re-center myself at every meal

### Weekly

- Create a new sub-heading: **Weekly**. This list is for things that you don't do daily but want to do at least once a week. Like exercising three times a week, or taking on a dinner or two instead of your wife making it, or initiating sex with your husband (!).  
Under it, list bottom-line do's and don'ts for yourself that you want to do each week.

## Monthly

- Create a new sub-heading: **Monthly**. This is for those few remaining activities that you want to do less often than weekly but at least once a month. Like have people over for dinner, see a play, do something really fun with your partner, or take a neat class.

Under it, list bottom-line do's and don'ts for yourself that you want to do each month.

## Reflection

- Look over all your admonitions/aspirations. Get a sense of the benefits to you and others of you actually living your life this way. Have the experience of those benefits sink in.

- On the basis of all that, see if you are willing to commit to this plan for your life in a serious, real way. If not, so be it, but if yes, GREAT.

- Imagine being retired, much older but still healthy and vigorous, and you're reflecting back on your life. Imagine something concrete and specific, like sitting on the porch of a cabin by a lake musing about your life.

Now imagine that you - as that older, future you - are reflecting on what happened in your life when you started living by the admonitions/aspirations you just created.

Looking backwards from that future point in time, really imagine how your life unfolded on the basis of the admonitions/aspirations you just created.

Try to consider specific aspects of your life in this light, such as your career, or your love relationships, or your spiritual/personal development.

Really help the fruits of this consideration sink into you.

## Conclusion

- What are you seeing and learning about the virtues and purposes and concrete actions that would be good for you to commit yourself to? About how you can help yourself stay the course with those commitments?
- And don't forget: *The inner skills are only worth something if you use them!*