

Turning Our Will and Our Lives Over to the Path

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The phrase “turned our will and our lives over to the care of God” can be one of the most troubling in the Steps. For those uncomfortable with the Western theistic tradition, the language here can be off-putting. It certainly has the tone of Christianity, and in our polarized culture, such a tone can be enough to send some people running out of a Twelve Step meeting. It doesn’t have to be this way.

If we break down the phrase “turn our will and our lives over,” we see that, first of all, it’s talking about two separate things, will and life— motivation and action. In Buddhist terms, our will is our intention, and as I talked about before, “Right Intention” is one of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha’s prescription for freedom. Right Intention comes out of Right View, seeing clearly what causes suffering and what ends suffering. When we see these things clearly, we more naturally set our intention to do what it takes to end suffering. So, when we turn our will over to the Dharma, we are making a commitment to try to follow this path, even if it requires us to do things that go against our preferences or impulses.

Turning our lives over is about the actions we take based on our intentions. The most obvious factor of the Eightfold Path that this reflects is Right Action, the five precepts of non-harming. When we turn our lives over, we are saying that we are going to live differently, to follow the set of moral guidelines that our spiritual beliefs set forth instead of acting on addictive craving.

When we change our actions, we change our karma. Simple as that. For teenagers—at least this teenager—I think this idea can be hard to grasp. If you have been well taken care of as a child, when you get to that crossover point as a teenager where you are old enough to make a lot of your own decisions and where you start to believe that you know more than the adults around you, it’s easy to be deluded. The benefits you’ve had in your early life largely did not come from your own efforts; your food, shelter, clothing, and medicine were provided by your parents, who usually expected little in return. What I subconsciously learned from my comfortable upbringing was that everything just came to me without any work on my part. Today we call this a sense of “entitlement,” and that’s not an inaccurate way of describing it. But in my memory it’s more of a deluded, magical way of viewing the world. I made bizarre logical leaps, such as, since the Beatles didn’t know how to read music, then I didn’t have to.

I remember distinctly sitting on the couch in our big living room, my parents facing me in one of those “We want to talk to you” modes. They were desperate to help me figure out a way I could be happy in school since I’d dropped out.

“What about music school?” my mother said. “We’d be happy to pay for that.”

“No!” I screamed. “That would ruin it!”

Music school, as far as I was concerned, would turn me into a drone. I imagined playing muzak at a country club or being expected to play classical guitar. Really, I just wanted to do what I wanted to do—which was play around on the guitar, get high, and be a star. And the delusion was that, somehow since the Beatles had become rich and famous, I would, too. I had no fallback position. No Plan B. What if I didn’t become a rock star by the time I was 21? My parents suggested that it might be a good idea to have a degree so I could do something else if need be. To me, that was just absurd. Why waste time studying stuff I didn’t care about to get a degree I’d never use? That would just slow down my inevitable rise to fame and glory.

These decisions were the essence of not turning my will and my life over to the care of God—or of anything else. I was basing my decisions on a self-centered, reactive craving and aversion. Like the spoiled child I was, my response to my parents’ generous, helpful, and sensible suggestion was to have a temper tantrum: No, I won’t go to music school and you can’t make me.

The years after this were spent mostly hanging out, getting high, playing the guitar, but not really working at it; writing songs, but without a rigorous discipline. In my 20s, I did get some discipline, and my songwriting developed. But when I listen to those old songs, I see that there is always at least one line that’s weak or embarrassing. I never had the creative discipline to rewrite and rework a song until it really clicked. I had a fatalistic approach to songwriting, just as I did to much of life. I would stick to my first idea even if it wasn’t that good. Again, this reflected a laziness, and also a fear of criticism, in this case just self-criticism. My songs were the one place in my life I felt as if I had control, so I didn’t want to mess with them. And besides, all those songs were written when I was stoned, and being high on marijuana just makes you feel good, makes the songs sound good, and saps any critical energy. It was just too much trouble to try to improve on the first idea I came up with. What’s even more absurd about my attitude, is that even with the songs I did write, I rarely made any effort to sell them. Occasionally I would make a tape and send it to

a record company. But it takes more than that to become successful. It takes some business sense and footwork. I just spent my time playing in Top 40 bands wondering why I wasn't a star.

Not taking action, but expecting results, is not to understand or live in harmony with the Law of Karma. I believed that just by thinking about something or wishing for it, I would get it: I want to be a rock star, so I will be one. This was flawed thinking, wrong view.

When I got sober and took the first Step, I saw how my approach to life, as Step One says, was "unmanageable." I realized that I needed to be open to other possibilities—my music career wasn't working, and not much else was either. The whole idea of seeking God's will suggested to me that I shouldn't just follow my impulses or do the first thing that came to mind. I should be more careful in my decision-making. Of course, this is what Step Three talks about—making a decision. I recognized that now, at 35, I hadn't built a life for myself, but that I still could. I saw sober people around me who were changing their lives, who were doing whatever was needed. I realized that my approach to life, which was that if I met any resistance to anything I tried I should just give up, was not reasonable. If something was difficult, it wasn't a message from the universe. It just meant that more time and/or effort might be necessary. Or perhaps a change of course. While in the past I had thought that I was following God's will by giving up if something didn't work out right away, I now found that by making more of my own effort to accomplish things, I was more in tune with God's will. That's because, God's will isn't some magical fate laid out beforehand, but, rather, the fruits of karmic efforts—as well as the "truth of the way things are."

Those fruits aren't always the ones we want. Sometimes we make a great effort, only to fail or to get some unexpected results. When I signed up for a creative writing class on the advice of my first community college English teacher, I was just trying to do "God's will," to respond to the wisdom of other, more knowledgeable people. But, much like my music career, my prospects as a famous novelist didn't pan out the way I wanted.

This is when the acceptance implied in the Step is so important. When things don't turn out as we'd like, this is where we need to place our heart. As the Serenity Prayer says, it is through acceptance that we find peace. Winding up as a technical writer wasn't glamorous, but it gave me a respectable

profession, something I'd never had. And that profession came as a direct result of all the work I'd put into learning to write: it was the karmic fruit of my efforts.

Many people in recovery have similar stories, finding themselves living a life that they never imagined but that is satisfying and meaningful. This comes about not through forcing our own preferences or desires, but by accepting the cards we are dealt and doing our best to work with them. Turning our will and our lives over to the care of God is a two-way street: we let go of our self-centered desires as best we can; we show up and do our best, and, although we might not get exactly what we think we want, something good comes, usually something that actually makes our lives work better than our fantasies would. #