**Standard Talks Outlines:**

**Willpower**

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The more perfect a nature is the fewer means it requires for its operation.

~ Aristotle

I often ask clients, “What do you think is the biggest threat to your staying clean and sober?” After sometimes-impressive discussion about certain “friends”, places, stressors, etc. I find myself invariably obligated to ask, “What about willpower?” Nearly always dismayed at first, I find the vast majority of my clients eventually get my point and resonate with it. After reading the popular book, *The Willpower Instinct*, I am further convinced that while the term “willpower” may have some beneficial use, its liabilities are greater.

It seems to me that despite it’s ancient religious, philosophical, and literary origins, in this age of neuroscience, “willpower” is essentially an abstract way of referring to either “healthy habit”, “healthy practice” or “healthy choice” – all forms of what is commonly referred to as “self-control” or “discipline”.  These terms are preferable to “willpower” for at least three reasons: 1) They are far less abstract – the meanings of which are defined clearly by observed behavior, 2) They do not require reference to the Pandora’s box of what the observed actor *supposedly* *wants* – separate from the observed behavior, and 3) They avoid unnecessary confusion by not signifying their source (Despite preliminary explanations of activity in several regions of the brain, I have yet to encounter a confidence-inspiring description of the source – the *power* – of “willpower”).

Moreover, if we *want* to include reference to a motivational source of “self-control”, we have a built-in, less abstract sequence of terms: “habit”, “practice”, “choice” and “desire” – all of which, again, can be easily recognized by resulting behavior.  If we want to take another step and define the source of “desire”, we still need not turn to some mysterious power-of-will. We can less abstractly refer to the combination of “genetics” and “values” (loosely, the realms of individuality and socialization, tautologically). That is, we can clearly describe all of the intended, associated features of “self-control” or “discipline” without wondering-off into the magical land of “willpower”.

The importance of avoiding the abstract ghost of willpower is that, as we may be reasonably inclined to invent this more abstract term to refer to a combination of the previously mentioned less abstract terms, so are we inclined to use abstraction as a means of avoiding responsibility and enabling manipulation. Consider: if one is to evade or misuse the truth, what is a more reliable course, to accurately identify and embrace the feelings that impel such unhealthy behavior and recommit to the carefully designed plan for healthy practice, or to attribute the unhealthy behavior to a lack of some *magical* *power*?

Essentially, “willpower” is a metaphor. Metaphor is meant to use well-understood ideas to help deepen understanding of less well-understood ideas. But, this linguistic invention, like all inventions, comes at a price – just as it may illuminate, it may obscure. Perhaps “self-control” is the less-understood idea most intended to be better-understood by the metaphoric “willpower”. But, unlike “willpower”, “self-control” is clearly recognized by its behavioral results, without reference to any invisible force or “power”. This fundamental difference cripples the metaphor, reducing clarity and understanding. If no clarity or deeper understanding is offered by a metaphor, are we not wise to avoid its unnecessary, potential liabilities?

It might occur to you that we regularly use metaphors similar to “willpower” without any apparent harm. For instance, we often describe someone as having “class”. This, however, simply illuminates the problem with “willpower”. There have been times in certain cultures where one’s “class” was considered a virtually immutable, natural law, determining one’s value to society and the resultant quality of one’s life. All this based on an ethereal, imagined substance or substances described by the metaphor “class”. Today, I know of few people who would subscribe to such a damaging use of metaphor. Yet, it is still common in our culture to ascribe quality-of-life value to the ethereal, imagined substance “willpower”, and to spend immense energy on its increase, diverting energy from more concretely beneficial goals. Used as casually or colloquially as we now use the term “class”, I would have no objection with “willpower”. Unfortunately, as it is, much misery results from our serious and distracting attitude toward “willpower” – just ask those who have attempted to overcome intoxicant addiction by relying on the application of their “willpower”.

In summary, the concept of “willpower” is a highly theoretical, speculative and abstract relic.  Terms like “habit”, “practice”, “choice” and “desire” (“needs, “wants”, “values”), though open, as all language is to various interpretation and application, are more concrete, and so less useful to those who wish to avoid responsibility or manipulate.

*“The Tao that can be articulated is not necessarily the eternal Tao.”*