

Strengthening your will power

Spiritual disciplines test and strengthen your will power. For example, you may decide to meditate for a half-hour every morning — but then some mornings you want to sleep in or are thinking about quitting meditation early to go have a nice breakfast (I know this one!). These will-power struggles give you a chance to increase your power of self-control.

Consider

Self-control is like a muscle that you strengthen through meeting challenges with your willpower. Gaining more self-control in one area also gives you the strength to free yourself from other harmful habits you may wish to drop in the future.

Suppose that you're considering ending your meditation early to have breakfast. You're sitting quietly, repeating your mantra, watching your breath, watching your thoughts, and quieting your mind, when suddenly you see in your mind's eye an image of eggs . . . with toast and a piping hot cup of tea. Yum. You try to push the image aside, but you can almost smell it, as your mind gets drawn into the imagined, tantalizing odors, flavors, and textures.

At this point, you may think, "Well, I'm not exactly focused on meditation right now anyway. May as well end it early and get on with my day." That part of the game is where your mind makes excuses to convince you to fulfill your immediate desires rather than to complete the spiritual practice at hand.

The important thing to notice is that point where your will meets the pull of the desired object. Your will is saying, "Hey, I made a commitment to myself to meditate for a half-hour every morning, and I'm going to do it." But the eggs are saying, "Come here . . . you are getting hungry." This uncomfortable but magical moment is when you can use your will power and intention to create a new pattern and strengthen your resolve.

In the midst of your inner struggle, there comes a time when you may be just about to give in. In that moment, you can take control, using the force of your will to say "No" to the desire. You can stay focused in your commitment to meditate for the full half-hour. This practice is just like exercising your muscles or your mind. Every time you conquer the pull of your senses, you become more in charge of how you live your life.

Changing your habits

Spiritual practices help you in two important ways:

- Getting rid of bad habits
- Making new, good habits

You have the power to transform your life, and spiritual practices are tools that can help you achieve your highest goals.

Consider

Even if you sometimes give in and lose the battle, whatever efforts you've put into confronting that desire or habit still bring you greater strength the next time. However, giving in to desires and habits without even making efforts to overcome them can weaken your will power.

This same technique can be applied to other will-power situations, such as quitting smoking or maintaining an exercise program. The key is to make a decision and honor it, keeping your word to yourself, which means remaining steady even over the many hills and mountains of temptation that may arise to test your strength.

Spirituality in Action

Taking a break from negativity

For one day, use your will power to catch every negative thought that passes through your mind. If you're complaining about the weather, or are upset that someone took your parking space, or are bothered or disturbed by anything or anyone else, catch those negative thoughts as if you were an expert goalie. Don't get negative about your negativity, but see these thoughts and hold them at bay with the power of your intention. Here are three ways you can get rid of negativity:

- Neutralize a negative thought by substituting it with a positive one.
- Study, remember, and contemplate spiritual teachings that help to move your mind beyond the temporary situations that cause negative thoughts to arise.
- Raise your perspective and self-identification into a higher, more spiritual perspective where you remember that everything ultimately happens for the best.

See Chapter 8 for more ways to calm and uplift negative thoughts.