

## HOW FREE IS OUR WILL?

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THERE is an idea current for some decades now that man's will is unfettered, that it is free. A straight negation of this statement is not possible, nor can it be blindly accepted as wholly true. Why can we not assert one way or the other? Why should we hesitate to accept or reject this statement in toto? Let us examine these questions. What is meant by will? According to the Oxford Dictionary it means: 'the faculty by which a person decides or conceives himself as deciding upon and initiating action'. Again, it gives us the meaning of 'free will' as the 'power of determining one's choice of action independently of causation'. The Indian philosophers call this 'deciding faculty' as *buddhi* in Sanskrit. According to them it is a part, so to say, of the inner organ (*antahkarana*); *manas* (mind), *citta* (mindstuff), and *ahankāra* (the ego) go to form the other parts of it.

The first objection that will be raised against the theory of free will, if the above definitions are accepted, is how can an instrument be free. If it were so the writer's pen, the artist's brush, the carpenter's chisel, the blacksmith's hammer and such other instruments would have done work by themselves. To this we may be answered that, it is not the instrument by itself that is meant here but the instrument or faculty which is energized by consciousness. In that case it is not the will that is free but the person, who to many is at most the ego, the 'I'. Then the question arises: Is the ego free? What is the ego? These are questions that must be answered in order to come to a clear conception of what we have to say about the will. The ego according to the Advaitin is a false identification — due to nescience or ignorance — of the Atman or soul with the idea of 'I'. How can that which is by itself under the spell of ignorance be free? Perhaps the person wishing to favour this idea of free will may not like to go into this intricate method of reasoning. The idea appeals to him. So he accepts. But it is one thing to accept a theory and quite a different thing to put it into practice in the day to day life. A man of free will as defined above must not be deterred by circumstances. All his resolutions must come true and be fruitful or he should not be worried or disturbed over the results. Even when the results are unfavourable he must be able to take them on calmly. Does a man, who subscribes to the theory of free will, happen to possess this tranquillity? That is the

question. That is what ultimately counts; for the ultimate aim of man, to which end are all his struggles and efforts throughout his life, is to attain tranquillity, peace and blessedness. Ask yourself: Why do I want freedom? Because in it alone there is peace, and joy. In bondage, in dependence a great many things compel you to act and behave against your wishes in spite of yourself; you are inhibited by circumstances, and goaded by inherited tendencies and obtaining situations.

How then can one be free? We need not go far to test this freedom. Try to break a bad habit or cultivate a new good one and you will find the difference. We make good resolutions in the morning but by evening, carried off in the current of habits, they are all washed away, and this happens day after day, month after month, year after year and yet we are not able to put the resolutions into effect. Is that the indication of a free will? So, it goes without saying that the will, with whatever it is identified, is not so free as we think.

Yet, this idea has been placed in man's mind as an incentive to work. If this incentive was not there, if everything has been automatic then there would have been no evolution of man; perhaps he would have been as primitive today in his habits, customs and manners and morality and religion as the man of paleolithic age, living in caves and moved by passions like animals. Man is man because he can struggle against nature outside and inside of himself; he has that much of freedom. Sri Ramakrishna speaking of the free will says: 'It is God alone who has planted in man's mind what the Englishman calls "free will". People who have not realized God would become engaged in more and more sinful actions if God had not planted in them the notion of free will. Sin would have increased if God had not made the sinner feel that he alone was responsible for his sin'. We would have found that the laws of the land would have no meaning if everyone was not made responsible for his actions. There would have been no rule of sanity; it would have been a pandemonium, a chaos. That is what happens to people who take the sense of the theory of Karma in a perverted manner. Overcome with *tamas*, inertness, they have no urge to work, and attribute everything to Karma. But ask them as to what they know about the theory, which is much maligned by the foolish or un-understanding, and you will come to know that either they do not know about it or stop with saying that it is the result of the actions in past lives. They do not pause to consider as to who did the actions in the past whose results they are reaping now. Everyone reaps the results of his own actions, and not that of another. Justice may be miscarried in a court of law where the judge has to go by the evidence that is put before him; but before God who is the witness of all our actions, all evidence is self-revealed and there can be no injustice. Only the weak and the ignorant do not want to pursue this line of thinking. For then they will naturally be confronted with the question: if the past actions have produced the present results why not change the pattern of our actions to mould our future lives? These thoughts are

perhaps, too much for the idle, because they are logical and convincing arguments and would naturally lower them in their own eyes if after coming to this conclusion they were to remain indolent.

## II

Whence has this idea of freedom arisen? We know there are some notions which are fundamental to man, e.g., eternal life, unalloyed bliss, and unlimited freedom. The Advaitin says that they are the nature of the essence of man, of the Ātman. Therefore it is not possible for him to forget his nature, however much he is smothered by nescience, however much impeded he is by his limiting adjuncts. Just as a man who has seen a fearful dream even after waking up continues to be in a scared state for some time more, similarly man's inner nature though covered by heavy encrustations persists to assert itself in some way. The notion of free will is one such.

The question which now faces us is: Why does that which is free need not be called free? Let us not confuse one thing with another. It is a fact that the Ātman is free but not in the state of identifying itself with the body. The Ātman has no action to do, nothing to be attained; what has the one which is eternal, pure, enlightened and free, by its very nature to attain?<sup>1</sup> Nothing. Whereas action is for a purpose, to satisfy a want, to fulfil a desire. Of course we have to make exceptions for the actions of the Incarnations and their apostles. They come to redeem humanity, to show them the path; they have no purpose of their own to attain. Sri Krishna says in the *Gītā*: 'I have no duty to perform in the three worlds, nor have I anything to attain which has not been attained, yet I engage Myself in action'.<sup>2</sup> Others are moved to act by some motive, either high or low. The higher motives such as realization of God, attaining *bhakti* are good and do not bind man down, do not make him go round the cycle of birth and death. He becomes more and more free as this motive gets strengthened. The lower motives which are mostly selfish and are concerned in the satisfaction of the desires of the body and mind do not liberate us. On the other hand, they drive one more nail into the coffin of our bondage. Thus we see that to involve in action shows a state of imperfection. How then can there be perfection in an imperfect state? It is not possible, and that is where we stumble — by trying to see perfection in the imperfect; rather, seeing the imperfect as the perfect. And when we once know that what we consider as our self is not the Self but the non-self it is not correct to call it free. But this discriminative knowledge comes later, on realization of God or Ātman; till then this error will remain. Only we have to know, at the beginning, that the will is not entirely free though the appearance of freedom is there. Sri Ramakrishna has explained this idea in his marvellous way. He gives the example of a

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<sup>1</sup> Maitre. Up., 1.16.

<sup>2</sup> Gita, 3.22.

cow tethered to a peg by a rope. The cow can move freely within the area described by the circle with the rope as the radius and not more. If the owner is pleased he may lengthen the rope and allow more space for the cow to move about and graze. The cow may think itself free but when it wants to go beyond the length of the rope it will feel the pull of the rope round its neck. Man's will is also like that. He has been given freedom within certain limits beyond which he cannot go. A hero like Arjuna asks Sri Krishna, 'By what is man prompted to do wicked deeds, though unwilling, compelled as it were by force?'<sup>3</sup> 'This desire, this anger, born of *Rajas* is a great depredator, and a great sinner; know that to be your enemy here',<sup>4</sup> replies Sri Krishna. So where is the free will, when it is easily motivated and moved by desires and swayed by passions? We come to know of our limitations only when storms of failures toss our boat of life on the sea of *samsāra*. A young man, full of health, wealth and power does not realize this. He thinks he is supreme. Even grown-up people who have not had to face any great calamity will not understand it. But there comes a time when everyone has to face life as it is and not as a rosy dream. The thorns in the rose will prick and open man's eyes to reality. Only one will is free and that is the will of the Most High. One who submits to His will glides smoothly through all storms and stress.

### III

How to be one with the will of the Creator? There is a story of a *Yogi* who was standing on the shores of the sea. A gale arose and he saw a ship caught in the gale and being mercilessly driven and thrown about on the sea. The *Yogi* had attained some powers. He could control even the natural elements. Out of compassion, as it were, he exclaimed 'Let the storm cease', and his words were fulfilled. But as the wind suddenly died away, the ship capsized drowning all who were on board. This shows that human will is not all-perceiving, it cannot look beyond appearances and then falters and misjudges things. Therefore it is all the more necessary that we should try to attune our will to the will of God. There is a beautiful parable of Sri Ramakrishna which illustrates this attitude. There was once a weaver who was a devotee of God and who did all the work that was expected of him in his station of life, but never forgot God. Even in his transactions he saw the will of Rama, his chosen Deity. He was honest and therefore when people came to deal with him he would say: 'By the will of Rama the value of thread is so much, by the will of Rama cost of labour is so much and by the will of Rama the profit is so much and price so much'. People of the whole village liked him and trusted him. One night, however, when he could not sleep and was sitting in the worship hall and remembering the Lord some thieves who had nefarious intentions forced him to accompany them. They burgled a house and put the booty

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3.36.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.37.

on the weaver's head to carry and marched him on. Just then the police arrived and the robbers fled. The weaver was caught with the robbed jewels and was put in the lock-up. Next day he was produced before the magistrate. People of the village who had gathered in the court were astonished to find the weaver in the dock. They said to the magistrate that the weaver could never have stolen the jewels. The magistrate then asked the weaver to state his case.

The weaver said: 'Your Honour, by the will of Rama I finished my meal at night. Then by the will of Rama I was sitting in the worship hall. It was quite late at night by the will of Rama. By the will of Rama I had been thinking of God and chanting His name and glories, when by the will of Rama a band of robbers passed that way. By the will of Rama they dragged me with them; by the will of Rama they committed a robbery in a house; and by the will of Rama they put a load on my head. Just then, by the will of Rama the police arrived and by the will of Rama I was arrested. Then by the will of Rama the police kept me in the lock-up for the night, and this morning by the will of Rama I have been brought before your Honour.' The magistrate realized that the weaver was a pious man and ordered his release. On his way home the weaver said to his friends, 'By the will of Rama I have been released'.

But this type of surrender to the will of the Lord is obtained by long and sincere practice, and by living a pure and unselfish life. To borrow an expression of Sri Ramakrishna there should not be any theft in the chamber of one's heart of such a person. The mind and speech should be one. Such a one is called a great soul, a *mahatma*. A Sanskrit verse describes him as: 'Same in thought, word and deed'. If we attempt to follow this principle we shall gradually get rid of our ego and be able to surrender ourselves to the will of God.

What is the use of such surrender? Does it not look like slavery? We glibly use the word slavery when it concerns the upholding of our ego but when it concerns our material prosperity we are ready to undergo any humiliation. And what do we gain by such demeaning? Unrest and thirst, desire for more, whereas surrender to God's will brings us peace. Nothing perturbs a person who has surrendered to the will of God. He bows down to the will of the Lord with calmness not because it is inevitable but out of joy, knowing that in it alone lies the blessedness of his life. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'You are not worried when you rely on a good man'. And who can be more good than God? As long as we think ourselves as separate entities possessing separate wills of our own, we shall be thinking of our duties to perform, desires to be attended to, ambitions to be achieved, and the idea to trust another, however good, will not arise in our minds. And as long as these ideas remain we will be severally impelled to seek our selfish interests which naturally will come into conflict mutually. So wills with worldly ambitions cannot be free as they would limit one another. Unless all the thought-currents flow in one direction, towards God, there could not be oneness of our will with that of

the divine and as said earlier without achieving identity of our will with that of God's there will always be turmoil and strife making the will more and more subject to constriction. Let us try to cultivate reliance on God, without in the least slackening our efforts towards realization. For all spiritual teachers have pointed out that grace of God is the most potent and essential factor in the progress and attainment of the goal of life, liberation.