

Free Will and the Ego

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2014-11-04

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1884>

Simon: Hello to everyone at ShiningWorld. I hope that all is well! I have been meaning to write for a while and follow up on the *satsang* I had with James a few months ago. A lot has happened since then and I needed time to do the recommended “homework.” So here are my Vedantic field notes (apologies in advance for potential dinosaur lengthiness).

Sundari: Apologies accepted!

Simon: During my session, I had asked a question about “free will” (I can’t remember exactly) and James said, “Aha! There’s a doubt face, you need to go work on that.”

Sundari: A “doubt face” – good one.

Simon: Firstly, I realized that I had a particular hang-up about the notion of free will because I was terrified by the prospect of either ultra-religious, Calvinist ideas of “everything that happens to the last detail was planned by God so it really doesn’t matter what you do” or scientific, materialistic, reductionistic ideas like those of Richard Dawkins who is rather keen on telling us that we’re just meaningless sacks of chemicals arising from chance phenomena and endlessly seeking to replicate ourselves to no purpose.

Sundari: I totally understand your reluctance to give either system of thought credence. What both religion and science fail to take into consideration is the knower, pure consciousness. They take the apparent reality to real and religion takes the causal body, *Isvara* or God, to be pure consciousness. Science with or without the reductionist view à la Dawkins et al. if they take consciousness into account at all, believe it is something we have and not who we are. Both religious and scientific views are “below the line.”

Simon: As such, I was really stuck on having “free will” because the above prospects were deeply unsettling. I looked into the Western philosophical tradition to see what they had to say on that matter. From what I could gather, the field is split between (a) free will exists and (b) it doesn’t exist. Of those who say it exists, there is no unilateral agreement on what it means or how to define it. Not very helpful.

Sundari: No one has ever solved the issue of free without self-knowledge. If one examines free will, taking one’s conditioning into account, the answer to whether or not we have free will is yes and no. Vedanta agrees. However, that still does not solve the problem because one has to take the logic one step further (which you have) and can only do so with self-knowledge. The answer to the question is: it

depends who you are talking about. Vedanta says that the most important discrimination to make is you, awareness, from the objects that appear in you, i.e. the person who thinks it is a doer with free will. When you are looking at the issue of free will from the point of view of awareness, who is there to choose – and what is there to choose – if there is only you?

Simon: I remembered an article by Swamini Prakashananda who said that it simply meant the ability “to choose” and that we can either do something, not do something or do something differently.

Sundari: Yes, that is true, but for whom? Who is the chooser, the one doing/choosing or not doing/choosing? *Moksa* is about negating the doer, the one who has the issue with free will.

Simon: I related this to other teachings on *karma* and that we are “authors” of action only and that we do not, as in the *Gita*, have rights to the “fruits of action.” Basically, events happen and we get some choice in our responses but that’s all.

Sundari: That is basic *karma yoga* and it is correct insofar as only *Isvara* knows and understands the total. This is the most important teaching for the seeker of liberation and it is the only way to negate that notion of doership. *Karma yoga* is an attitude one takes towards action, and states that although you have a right to act and, in fact, cannot not act (even no action is an action), you do not have control over the results. The right attitude to action is gratitude: consecrating every thought word and action on a moment-to-moment basis to *Isvara*, knowing that the results are not up to you and taking the results that do come as *prasad*, a gift.

As far as the doer goes, there are appropriate actions you can take that are pretty likely (but not guaranteed) to give you what you want. As the person, we do have relative free will in that we can make choices to succeed. If this were not true, it would not be possible to achieve anything in the apparent reality. The point about *karma yoga* is not about action or no action, it is about renouncing the idea of doership. Even though one may want a particular result but do not get it, one accepts that this is for the best because *Isvara* is always taking care of the total, not just one’s personal needs.

We must remember that though we have freedom to choose and perform an action, whatever result comes is in accordance with the laws governing the action. *Karma yoga* is an attitude of taking the result as it is, maintaining equanimity of the mind both in success and failure.

In reality there is no such thing as success and failure in what we get or don’t get. Every result is in accordance with the laws of action. Laws are not made by anybody; they are made by the *dharma* field or *Isvara*, so they can never go wrong. Every result is a right result. The more you appreciate the laws, the more you are in harmony with the things around and you can find your place in the scheme of things. Action never really fails, it only produces results. A given expectation may be said to have failed but the one with the expectation has not failed. That “I have failed” or that the action has failed is the wrong conclusion – only the expectation is the problem. So nobody fails. It is only a matter of wrong judgment because we are not

omniscient and we cannot have the knowledge of all the factors that shape the results of the actions. Only *Isvara* has all knowledge of these factors.

Simon: From there I started to consider the influence of conditioning. Not everyone is aware that they are subject to habits and conditioning. They might think they are exercising a “free will” when acting and making decisions but may just be running on habits and rationalizing after the fact. (The classic addict believes they aren’t addicted and can “stop at any time.”) A person very attached to particular beliefs will see the world in a particular way and act accordingly, all the while believing they have full control.

So I started thinking that what little latitude we have in exercising choice is only available when we’re not identified with our bodies whether physical or mental/emotional. Even then, the choices are limited and the outcomes cannot ever be known with certainty. These identifications mean that we’re largely regurgitating the same thoughts/words/deeds ad nauseam throughout our lives. With that cheery thought I then posited that there is “freedom” (the self) and “will” (a subtle body function) but there isn’t “free will.” The self is free, the will is ensconced in *vasana* conditioning and *karma*. Teachings on “doers” and “non-experiencing witnesses” started to get clearer for me. Question: am I in the right Vedantic ballpark?

Sundari: Right on the money. You pretty much have it sewn up on the free will issue. It is a thorny one for the doer, that is for sure. As I said above, without self-knowledge, not much can be worked out with any certainty for the apparent person. As ignorance is so hardwired, most are totally identified with the person and are truly oblivious to their conditioning, so do not know what is running the mind. The question, as always, is free will for whom? As you so astutely point out, awareness is already free and does not have “free will” because there is nothing for it to choose. As it is all me, it is all good. As you also say, if you are identified with being the person (body/mind/story), then you do (apparently) have relative free will.

To recap, free will means (1) that you can choose do this instead of that, e.g. eat an apple instead of a pear, stay home or go out, etc., (2) the *dharma* field is a lawful universe which runs on certain principles that apply to everyone; if you take appropriate action you will have a good chance of getting what you want, (3) the results of action depend on the nature of the field, meaning the *gunas*, or *Isvara*, and on the nature of the action taken, (4) the results of action do not necessarily depend on the state of mind of the doer because one can achieve a negative result with positive actions or vice versa and (5) if a certain amount of free will was not possible, success for the person would not be possible.

Even though all actions taken by the doer or person are limited and cannot achieve a limitless result because the person is limited, self-inquiry, although also an action, produces a limitless result because the result of self-inquiry is self-knowledge which is limitless. Ignorance can be removed by self-knowledge because ignorance is not real; if it was real, there would be no way to remove it.

Once ignorance has been removed and the knowledge that your true identity is awareness is firm, then you know that the person is only relatively real. Therefore you understand that the person is no more than a conglomeration of tendencies – likes and dislikes or *vasanas* – that create a certain personality that has a name, an address and a life story. As you have figured out, the choices that people make,

although they seem to be volitional and individual, are usually pretty predictable and repetitive. This is because most people, who have very limited or no self-knowledge, behave like automatons, although they don't know that they do. They think that they are doing the choosing but actually, their conditioning (*vasanas/gunas*) is doing the choosing. Still, it does look like one has free will and, in a way, the person does. From this standpoint free will gives the person the choice to "make the best" of their lives, and relative success is thus possible in the apparent reality.

The *dharma* field is like a computer game: although you can take action to win the game, all the actions that are possible to take are already programmed into the game. Freedom is the knowledge that the game and the player of the game are both objects known to you, so you are not invested in what the results are. This means your binding *vasanas* have been rendered non-binding and the notion of doer-ship has been negated. You will then respond appropriately to every situation without thinking about it, so "free will" is of no real concern to you because you will automatically do what brings peace of mind.

Simon: Recently I acquired a really nice vintage copy of *Atma Bodha* with translation and commentary by Swami Nikhilananda from the Ramakrishna/Vivekananda lineage. The first half of the book is kind of like a 1940s version of *How to Attain Enlightenment* with all the "greatest hits" presented concisely as a preliminary to studying *Atma Bodha*. The part that jumped out at me was when Swami N. said that the "I thought" (*ahamkara*) was just a very subtle reflection of *atma* in the causal body. It's pretty pure and clean, but a reflection nonetheless.

Sundari: Yes, indeed. Who is it that knows the "I" thought? If you know it, it can't be you, can it?

Simon: This was a cosmic whack on the snout I needed. The whole notion of "I, me, mine" suddenly became very ridiculous. I still exist regardless of whether the notion of "I" is said or thought. If I say, "I like chocolate" or "I don't like country music," it's really just some objects and conditioning glommed together and associated erroneously with a body or bodies. The "I thought" is no more real than a desire for chocolate or an aversion to steel guitars.

Sundari: It depends what the word "I" is referring to. It could be the person identified with being a person (the doer bound by ignorance), it could be referring to the person who knows about awareness (indirect knowledge, where awareness is objectified) or it could be referring to you: consciousness (direct knowledge). It depends how you use the "I" word and what it points to. If I say, "I am whole and complete, non-dual, actionless, unchanging, ever-present, limitless awareness," and know what that means, "I" is statement of fact and another word for me, awareness. In fact, a good practice is to press "pause" every time you hear yourself use the word "I" and do inquiry into who is speaking.

Simon: Another useful snippet came from his discussion of *brahman*. To paraphrase, the book said something like "the irreducible substratum following the

removal of all tangible objects.” The term “irreducible substratum” stayed with me and bounced around in my brain as I walked to the office. A neighbor’s dog barked at me, *brahman* in canine form barking at *brahmin* in human form. For days I would look at things around me and think “irreducible substratum.”

Sundari: Yes, you, awareness, are that which can never be negated because you are unchanging and always present. You are that by which all objects come to be and can be known, although you are always free of all the objects. Here is a great article written by James on the difference between you, awareness or *satya*, and the objects, *mithya*: *The Essence of Vedanta: The Real (satya) and the Apparently Real (mithya)*. Once you are qualified to inquire, you are capable of gaining the understanding that is liberation:

“Every visible, mortal, perishable, individual has an inner core or essence which is immortal, imperishable and invisible. This core or essence is called the self. It is what is real. Everything else, the experiences and objects that present themselves to you, the inner core, is apparently real. The real and the apparently real are connected in an interesting way. How they relate to each other is explained by the following example: you directly experience a table. It is visible, solid and tangible and weighty. It seems quite obvious. But if you think about it for a minute, you will realize that you are not experiencing a table at all. Why? Because you are actually experiencing only wood. The wood is solid, tangible and weighty, not the table. The table has no physicality, no attributes. It is a misconception to think you are experiencing a table. The table exists in name only, not in actuality. The word “table” exists to identify wood in a particular form. But the name does not belong to the wood. It belongs to the mind that sees the wood in the form of a table. The table is only a thought that depends on the experienced wood. Wood is one but the possible names and forms of wood are many. The apparent table borrows its existence from the wood, the real substance. It does not stand alone but depends on the table for its existence. You – limitless non-dual, ever-present, ordinary awareness/consciousness – are the “wood” of everything that is experienced. You are existence itself. Every tangible and intangible object borrows its existence from you, limitless consciousness.

“So when you see an object, gross or subtle, you should understand that you are only seeing existence/consciousness. Existence/consciousness is you, the essence of everything. So all objects are just you. And since you are existence/consciousness, you are free of every object, including the objects nearest to you, your body and mind. This understanding is variously called liberation, enlightenment and freedom. It is not an experience. It is knowledge extracted from experience by inquiry. If you think that existence and consciousness are two different things, try to separate one from the other. It is impossible; they are two words that refer to you. It is your direct experience that you are only one being. You always exist and you are always conscious. If this is true for everyone, then it is the essence of everyone, not an incidental attribute of some aspect of your being like your body. Therefore, there is only one “person” here, not many. Names are forms are many but the consciousness on which they depend – you – is one.”

Simon: It wasn’t long before I got an opportunity to apply my Vedanta study practically. Someone said something to me in a way that was a little overwrought and unnecessarily spazzy given the circumstances. It wasn’t hostility so much as “emotional disproportion.” I could feel my solar plexus tighten and a hot rush of

adrenaline kick in as my body reacted. I said, "Um... yeah, okay," and eventually they walked away. I took a moment to observe the sensation and then thought "to whom does this feeling belong if there isn't really 'I'?" Right away the feeling dissipated as if someone had popped a balloon. I chuckled and then went about my day. That had to be the fastest processing of emotion I had ever experienced in my life. Wow! So that's the latest report from the trenches. I've been wanting to talk to someone about this lately but there's a shortage of Vedantins in my neighborhood and for a while I wasn't really certain on how to describe the above. Anyway, thank you for reading and thank you for all the wonderful ShiningWorld resources too.

~ Best wishes, Simon

Sundari: You made me laugh! I love the way you use words - "emotionally disproportionate" - what a great term! I hope you don't mind if I steal it - and the knowledge kicked in, discrimination and negation. All that remained was you, awareness, the non-experiencing witness. Beautiful! What blows people away (literally, no pun intended!) is Vedanta WORKS. When self-knowledge is applied to your life, it is so powerful it can blow your socks off. Yet life remains ordinary and to the outside people might not even be able to tell that your inner world is totally extraordinary. Well done to you. For self-actualisation to take place the knowledge has to translate into all aspects of the *jiva's* life - this is the hard work part, cleaning up the mind and negating the doer. Sounds like you are doing just fine!

~ Much love, Sundari