

Free Will: The Last Word

Ram (James Swartz)

2012-03-25

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/384>

This excellent interview by *Non-Duality Magazine* with a disciple of Swami Dayananda explains free will very clearly.

NDM: I speak with many non-traditional non-duality people, both seekers and teachers, and there seems to be much misunderstanding, confusion, strange and often funny ideas about the question of free will.

Can you please tell me about free will from a traditional Advaita Vedanta perspective, and what this is exactly?

A: First of all, in order to talk about this, it depends on the level that we are discussing free will.

NDM: Okay.

A: If it is at the individual level, if you think you are at the individual level, that I am separate from you, that I have a separate body and that you have a separate body, separate from everything and any other living thing then, yes, there is individual free will.

NDM: Okay.

A: “Free will” is kind of within quotes because it isn’t total freedom. For example, as I grow up I discover that I’m not calling all the shots. When I observe my life I see that some things just happen. They don’t take place because of my volition. They just happen. If there was total free will it would mean I could shape my life in any way that I wanted to.

NDM: Yes, like you could fly [laughs].

A: Yes, right, like I could fly [laughter]. If that were the case, then there would be no reason for us to even discuss the question of free will. So we both know what free will is for name’s sake.

NDM: Yes.

A: The traditional example is that it’s like a cow tied with a long rope. So the cow has the capacity to go around freely and graze. But it doesn’t have total freedom to go anywhere it wants. So free will is like that.

NDM: It's limited?

A: Yes, it's limited.

NDM: So what limits free will? Is it conditioning?

A: That depends upon what you mean by the word "conditioning." In Hinduism we hold that there is continuity, which governs your likes and dislikes. Otherwise there would be no reason that you would like one thing and I would like another. Why is that? So there is a reason behind it.

NDM: Okay, so what is it?

A: There is a software inside of you that dictates or which pushes you, for example, towards liking things that are blue in color or me towards liking things that are white in color.

NDM: Can you speak a little about the software, what this is exactly?

A: "Software" is a modern name. From the traditional perspective we would say that the software is composed of the likes and dislikes that a person has in his or her life. We think there is a reason for these likes and dislikes.

I'm a chemist by profession. So from that perspective it might be said that there is DNA sequencing which dictates one's likes and dislikes. However, from the traditional point of view what we would say is that there are impressions from previous lives.

NDM: *Samskaras*?

A: Yes. This life is not standing on its own. It is a continuation of what went before. So that same continuity takes you, dictates to you, guides you or drags you, however you want to put it, in life. So within the context of that continuum we have some limited choices or options available; and again, these options are dictated and colored by one's previous impressions.

NDM: And again, those previous impressions come from...?

A: The Hindu traditional view is that they come from previous lives.

NDM: And if you take these previous lives back all the way to the very foundation?

A: Again there are levels. As long as you think you are an individual and you are asking me this question from that perspective, the above would be my answer.

However, if you understand that the entire thing you see here, the entire universe, including your body, is one, then there is no creation whatsoever. It is just an appearance, just like you see in your dream, just like a dream that somebody is dreaming.

NDM: It's *mithya*?

A: It's *mithya*, it is an appearance. So at that level what is is only you, the conscious, awareful presence without which nothing can be recognized.

[Pointing at the tape recorder] I know that this is a tape recorder. How? Because first and foremost I am a conscious being, even though identified with my body-mind complex. The body is composed of matter, and matter is inert. But I am certainly not inert.

NDM: Yes.

A: Okay. And without me there is nothing. So we say that everything is *mithya*, in a sense. Everything else depends on me for validating its existence.

So this table is here [pointing to the table]; how do we know it? Without a conscious being, with nobody conscious around, then nobody would know the existence of the table.

But to know myself, to know that I am here, nobody needs to tell me that. I know I am here. I am self-evident. Because of my being self-evident, just like a lamp lighting the entire room I am lighting up everything. Everything I see, whether it is something which is inert or conscious, whether it is sentient or insentient, everything is lit up by me, the only conscious being.

When I say "me" that includes you also. There is no "me" as an individual. So that "me," the only conscious being, lights up the entire thing. Everything else depends on this consciousness, this one conscious being, for its existence.

That which depends on this one consciousness for its existence is called *mithya*. *Mithya* doesn't have any independent existence. Its existence depends on consciousness. There is only one consciousness that independently exists, and it knows itself. It is self-evident.

You know that you are. Even if I put you in the darkest of caves, you know absolutely that you are in there.

NDM: Yes [laughter].

A: The thing you really need to know is how to separate the I, consciousness, from the clamoring *vasanas*, the impressions, thoughts, emotions – all those things.

NDM: Okay, what happens when someone mixes the levels of *mithya* [dependent reality] and *satyam* [absolute reality] when they talk about free will? What is the problem?

A: See, the mixing of levels happens because one's understanding is not clear.

Something that is *mithya* cannot exist on its own. The traditional example we give for this is the clay pot. The weight of the pot is the weight of the clay, right?

NDM: Yes.

A: In reality there is no such thing as an independently existing pot. Can you imagine a pot existing without any clay? It's really impossible. The clay gives being to the pot. Without the clay there is no pot. The pot is *mithya*. It doesn't have an existence of its own. The pot depends upon the clay for its existence.

So as long as there is clarity behind your understanding, you can be here as an individual because at the back you know that everything is okay. I, you, the table, everything, has the same existence.

As a chemist I can tell you that all these things are all from the same material electrons, protons, subatomic particles, muons, all those things.

In the end it results in a conscious being saying, "There is a muon." So finally it ends up in knowledge, knowledge that has materialized. So everything is only word and meaning. This is a tape recorder. What is a tape recorder? Is this really a tape recorder? No, you can break this apart into pieces, and each piece you can take and try to look into it further in order to find out what it is. You can reduce it to so many levels.

So with the clay pot example, if we take a clay pot and analyze it, it goes from the clay level to the molecular level to the atomic level to the subatomic particle level. It goes all the way down. Finally, where does it end up? It ends up in knowledge, in this knowledge manifesting.

So the *mithya/satyam* confusion, this *mithya/satyam* mixing up, happens only if the understanding is not clear. As long as there is a clear understanding that *mithya* has a dependant existence, it's okay.

So if you encounter someone whose understanding about the levels of reality is not clear, there will naturally be confusion.

NDM: Okay, can I give you an example? So if somebody says, makes a statement like this, "There is no free will..."

A: Okay.

NDM: Or, "There is no *karma*, no cause and effect, so there is no free will..."

A: It is true, at the highest level there is no free will, there is no *karma* [results of previous actions], there is no individual, there is nobody to ask this question.

NDM: Okay, that's true at the highest level, but on this level, as soon as you open your mouth to communicate this, you have to speak on this empirical level.

A: Yes, I understand that.

NDM: Yes, I know, I'm just doing it for the tape recording [laughs].

A: So *karma* is there only for somebody who thinks that he or she is a doer, or he or she is born. So why is somebody born? What is the reason? Is it by accident? What is the reason for somebody's birth?

NDM: Somebody's birth, a person?

A: Yes, a person or even plants and animals, why are they there?

NDM: Why?

A: Yes.

NDM: It's just the cause and effect, the nature, the manifestation on this relative level. But on an absolute level, it just is.

A: Okay, so if you know it as a manifestation, then the manifestation has only a dependant reality. It is not an absolute reality. Absolute reality is knowledge, the conscious being.

So if somebody says to you there is no free will, no *karma*, that is perfectly one hundred percent true at the absolute level. At the relative level, you are an individual and there is *karma*. How are they going to prove there is no *karma*?

I'll give you an example. Why do you like the color blue and why do I like the color white? What is the reason? We live in a cause-and-effect world. So what is the reason?

NDM: Cause and effect.

A: But what is the cause? There are many theories to explain the cause. One of the theories that explains this, from the traditional point of view, is impressions from past lives.

NDM: *Samskaras*?

A: That is *karma*, previous impressions; we call it *karma*. The previous impressions are the result of previous *karmas*, i.e. actions.

NDM: Okay.

A: Another thing you should understand about *karma*: it is a law, you can't even say it's theory. Just like when I drop something, it goes directly to the ground because of the gravitational force, it is the same way for an action: there has got to be a result, right? That is the law of *karma*.

NDM: Right.

A: Anything you do has a cause and an effect. So for instance, suppose I get into an accident. There has to be a reason for it. We may not be able to see the entire network of *karma*, whatever action led to the particular result that I am experiencing; there is no way of tracing it out, because it is a very complicated network connection. Just as we haven't decoded all the neural network connections in our body, similarly, it's very difficult to decode the *karmic* network. There is a network, so that is how it is.

So even the fact that we are all at this table there is some kind of *karma* that brought us together. There has got to be a reason, and the law of *karma* helps us explain what are normally considered to be unpleasant things. We can't explain it any other way. So it's very common for a Hindu to say, "It's my *karma*." Therefore you don't blame others and get into some kind of blaming business.

NDM: Yes, it's accepted [laughs].

A: Yes, so you take responsibility for whatever happens to you.

NDM: Okay, the next question has to do with people who still have problems with their *samskaras*, their *vasanas*, their tendencies. What would you suggest to people with these types of problems? They still have negative tendencies. Say, for example, they realize the truth of what they really are, they understand they are not the body-mind complex, but they still keep getting into problems.

A: See the whole problem of human suffering is centered on "I." If I have a wound in my body it is painful. Nobody denies pain. Nobody says, "You are imagining this." Nobody says that. There is pain. That is a fact.

But because of pain, if my body is hurt or something like that, and I have to go to the doctor and if it all just makes me get so frustrated, then that frustration you have created for yourself. If you deal with pain as it is, there is pain, you see a doctor and

do the treatment.

But if you go on saying, “Why should I get hurt, why should I get sick, why do I have this?,” that is superimposing pain on the “I,” which doesn’t actually suffer.

So the way to deal with the problem of human suffering is to see that you are only a conscious witness of the entire show that is going on, including whatever is happening to your body and mind.

The “I” never changes. You can see this when looking back on your childhood. If the “I” changed as you are growing up, you wouldn’t be able to recall the incidences of your childhood. You can recall them because you were always there as an unchanging, ever-present witness.

Changes can only be seen against a changeless background. That is true scientifically. To move anything you need something that doesn’t move. An axle which does not rotate is needed for a wheel to rotate. The axle should stay put.

So in the same way the one which stays put all the time is the conscious witness. That is the real “I.” If you identify it with your body and mind, there is a problem. It is there watching everything. Because of the incredible mixing up of this conscious witness with the body, mind, intellect, etc. it’s very difficult to see the pain separately to see that “I,” the conscious witness, am actually lighting up the pain.

If the “I” were to change then it would hinder the cognition of objects. Only an unchanging witness will allow for the cognition of changing objects.

NDM: And what about the methods that you use for doing this, like mind control practice, some of the meditation practices, that prepare you to have equanimity and so on?

A: To appreciate the truth at the highest level, your mind should be relatively calm. Usually our mind goes on chattering about something or other. Even when we drive, we are usually thinking of something else. We don’t concentrate on the road all the time. The mind keeps on chattering, chattering, chattering, we are thinking about something, planning or brooding over the past, something other than what is going on. This mental chatter disturbs the surface of the mind so much you are not able to see or appreciate your self as it is. So the first thing anyone needs to do is to calm the mind down. There are many methods for calming the mind down, right?

NDM: Yes.

A: So the best method, without getting into any of the physical or neural problems, would be to watch the breath. This method is recommended by Ramana Maharishi.

NDM: Watching the breath through meditation and *pranayama*?

A: Yes, through *pranayama*, control of the breath. But that could lead to some problems if you don’t know how to do it properly. So the best and easiest method

would be to just keep watching the breath. Then automatically your mind will calm down. There is an intimate connection between the *prana* [the breath] and the mind.

NDM: So you would want the mind to be *sattvic* [pure]? You don't want too much *rajas* [activity] or *tamas* [inertia]?

A: It should be *sattvic*. To understand this knowledge the mind has to be *sattvic*. To understand the truth completely you need to have a *sattvic* mind. You need to have *antahkarana suddhi* [purity of mind], which means that the mind should be relatively free from agitation, binding likes and dislikes, etc.

For any living being there needs to be a balance of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. For one who is interested in understanding of the truth of oneself, *sattva* should be predominant, subserved by *rajas* and *tamas*. There should be very little *tamas*.

NDM: Okay, that's clear. So if somebody has a tendency to have a very dull mind, a *tamasic* mind, how do they adjust that?

A: The traditional advice is to control your food habits because the mind is also matter. The mind is made up of what you eat, just like the body. Since the mind is also matter, its quality depends on the quality of the food you eat. To avoid having a *tamasic* mind one should not eat leftovers. The *Bhagavad Gita* clearly says what should be eaten. It says leftovers should not be eaten nor should too-spicy or too-hot food. Also, non-vegetarian food like meat is not advised.

NDM: Because it makes one too slothful, meat is too heavy?

A: Yes, meat products make you *tamasic*. Hot and spicy food makes you *rajasic*. So you have to have a balanced diet.

NDM: So, fruits and vegetables?

A: Those are *sattvic* foods.

NDM: Now, the next problem is, if the person is too *rajasic*, would they solve this through food and meditation?

A: For too much *rajas*, clearly you have to slow down. Slow down your mind and slow down your body. Like when you walk, you can walk really fast, but you can also walk slowly. If you want to reach a place in a particular time you can still be punctual but not rush through the street to get there. Just take your time, start earlier and then reach there.

Also, every time you speak, don't be in a hurry to say what needs to be said. You have to watch Swami Dayananda and see how he teaches. You will see that he takes

time before he says a word. What he is going to say gets clearly registered in his mind before it comes out.

If people speak too quickly, the words are not properly chosen and they end up, oftentimes, either taking back what they said or amending it. So it is a question of slowing down. It is a practice; you train yourself to slow down. Every day you consciously have to say to yourself, "Slow down. Slow down."

NDM: So this is a daily practice.

A: Yes, even when you walk you should watch your breath. That is tremendously helpful. If you watch your breath your mind will calm down a lot. And *yoga* really helps.

NDM: So you would suggest traditional types of meditation as well.

A: Meditation depends on what kind of temperament you have. You do meditation to just concentrate and focus your mind on something, on an object of meditation other than you. The object could be something that you like, on which you can dwell on for a long time. It could be a natural scene or something pleasing. That would be one way of controlling the mind.

The other way is the direct path wherein you meditate on the meditator. It's very difficult. Who wants to meditate, really? Who is the meditator? This is Ramana's approach. That is direct enquiry.

NDM: So can you say more about the direct path of Ramana and Nisargadatta?

A: People like Ramana and Nisargadatta Maharaj say first you need to know yourself before you can see and understand all the other things. You have to first know who you really are.

Actually, that is the best and most direct way to get at the truth. But not everybody can do it.

NDM: Because they are not prepared for it?

A: Yes, you need a *sattvic* mind to do this.

NDM: And if you don't have a *sattvic* mind or if you have too many *samskaras*, then you can have problems with the direct path?

A: Yes, *samskaras* will tend to cloud your mind. So you have to slowly process these *samskaras*. But eventually you can do it. It's not difficult.

NDM: Thank you very much.

A: You are welcome.