



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

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Big Questions #3

Do I Have Free Will?

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Free will is the defining characteristic of being human. You can understand this by comparing yourself to the rest of the world. While boulders exist, they're not living entities. Trees are alive but don't have the ability to move around. Creatures of the land, sea and air move around and even communicate, but their life is driven by instinct. As a human being, you have all these qualities and something more — you can choose what to do. While instinct motivates you in many ways, you can choose to follow it or not. As an example, most people run out of burning buildings while first responders run into them.

As a teenager I thought that “American freedom” meant I could do what I wanted to do. Unfortunately, my desires were mainly instinctual impulses. Fortunately, my parents and society worked hard to control them, ultimately protecting me from my own worst instincts. Free will doesn't mean that you do everything that pops into your head. That would make you into a puppet, controlled by a capricious mind.

Free will means you can choose what to do as well as what NOT to do. Sometimes you have to stop yourself from doing the easy thing; you hold yourself to a higher standard. Yoga's yamas (lifestyle practices) focus on developing your ability to do this, also called impulse-control. In freeing you from instinctual responses, your power of will is refined and strengthened. Then you are able to use it more effectively.

Will is not the same as thought. Your mind thinks millions of thoughts. Only the ones you choose to focus on ever become real. You make them real by choosing to focus on them and by acting on them. Your ability to choose is your power of will.

Your will is not free when it is governed by instinct. Every animal is capable of fear, self-protection, dominance, desire and greed. You use your human capacity only when your choices are based on principles, values, faith, ethics or morals. In Sanskrit, this is called “dharma.”

Dharma is also translated as righteous conduct, meaning you are decent, respectable and honorable. You probably already are, at least most of the time. But sometimes you want to go your own way, pursuing personal pleasures and avoiding responsibilities. You might rationalize it, “Isn't this a way of using my free will?” Yes and no. You're using your free will to follow your animalistic instincts, in which there is no free will at all. Yes, I agree that it's confusing. Your free will is so powerful that you can use it to sabotage your own free will.

You have free will because of Shiva's unimpeded free will, part and parcel of his Divine Bliss. Free will is the means by which Shiva is being you and everyone. Shiva limits his own knowingness and beingness in order to become the universe. You can think of it like a lampshade that diminishes the light shining from the bulb. Shiva chooses to layer on several lampshades (malas) in order to hide his Divinity, while it is full and complete within every individual.

Cidvat-tac-chakti sa"nkocaat malaav.rta.h sa.msaarii. — Pratyabhij~nah.rdayam 9

Shiva, full of Divine Powers, contracts in order to become the transmigrating individual, whose Divine Nature is hidden by three obscurations (malas).

The whole of Shiva is hidden within every individual, like fire is intact in every flame. However, your inner light is covered over by the three malas: not-knowingness (aanava mala), neediness (maayiyaa mala) and busy-ness (kaarma mala). They make you shine less brightly. This is the human condition. Your human capacity is greater — to know, to overflow with bliss and to empower others. When you grow into your knowingness, your free will is expanded, so you live as an agent of Divine Will, a beam of light and ambassador of Grace. This is the purpose for which you were born. But you have to choose to go in that direction or you won't get there. That means you must apply both your mind and your will.

Some systems teach that you don't have free will; everything is pre-determined. In other words, you are destined to become enlightened in this life or you are not. When I found these teachings, I wanted to ask, "Who it is that gave you that destiny?" Yoga says you are the writer of your own fate, via the law of karma. You lay the groundwork for your own future through today's karmas (actions, words and thoughts). Additionally, the circumstances you currently face are the fruits of earlier karmas from this and prior lifetimes.

It's simple. If you have free will, you create future karma. This means you are the one who created your destiny. But if you don't have free will, you can't create karma nor do you have a personal fate. That would mean that God, Consciousness, nature or somebody (!) is choosing who will get enlightened and not. The universe is not so whimsical. It runs on a simple cause-and-effect process called karma. It means that you're in charge of whether you get enlightened or not.

When you are interested in spiritual upliftment, you embrace the principles of karma and dharma. You welcome the law of karma because you can use it to better yourself. Once you understand how the system works, you can maneuver within it more effectively. You step into your dharmic duties, motivated by two compelling reasons: because karma will get back at you if you don't and because you truly care and want to make a difference.

Family, community, country and planet – every level of dharma matters. If you sidestep any of them, you feel terrible inside. It's ennobling to fulfill these functions even when they are hard. In addition, you have a higher dharma, an inner calling to fulfill.

Without knowing your own Divine Essence, you will always feel that your life is incomplete. It's your deepest desire, called "mumukshutva" in Sanskrit — the longing for liberation. The promise is contained in the Sanskrit word, for "moksha" means liberation, freedom from bondage, freedom from karma and rebirth. It is your ultimate destiny, your greater dharma.

In pursuing that highest dharma, your petty desires fall away. You do have to participate in the molting process, like a snake shedding its skin. As you grow spiritually, your old skin becomes too tight. Your light shines more brightly and you have more to give. You can do that informally, with dear ones and strangers, or you can formally offer seva (volunteer work) or prepare to teach others on the path.

What won't work is for you to continue to hide. The deeper your inner experience becomes, especially accessible after receiving Shaktipat initiation, the more grounded you become and the more your heart opens. It shows. It's always so beautiful to see someone who is grounded in the inner infinity.

However, you may have habits of hiding yourself, by looking away from others or avoiding saying what you really mean. You can hide yourself by slumping so you seem smaller than you really are. I also know yogis who hide by draining themselves, by entertaining others or giving their energy away. Then they have to withdraw and patch themselves back together again.

It becomes time to shed your skin. When you do yoga, the poses as well as the meditation, your old persona simply won't hold you anymore. You will have to synch up your thoughts, feelings and inner impulses with the inner essence that is blossoming forth. That's why yoga has practices like yamas and niyamas as well as seva — to help you align all the levels of your being with your own Self.

This means that your petty desires do fall away. In life, you have already practiced pursuing your own interests without understanding whether they uplift you or not. Your interests have changed according to your whims, maybe as often as the weather. That happens because you have not yet found what you truly want. What you want is your own Self, your own Divine Essence. By delving into your own Shivaness, you are filled with the highest bliss. This is the greatest desire, the one that makes you finally fully satisfied. You do have free will. How are you using it?

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