

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

**The Riddle of Fate and Free-Will Solved: The Riddle of Fate and Free-Will Solved
(A dialogue between His Holiness Shri Chandrashekhara Bharati
Mahaswami and a Disciple): [His Holiness was the Sringeri Mathadhipati
1912-1954.]**

H.H. : I hope you are pursuing your studies in the Vedanta as usual?

D. : Though not regularly, I do make some occasional study.

H.H. : In the course of your studies, you may have come across many doubts.

D. : Yes, one doubt repeatedly comes up to my mind.

H.H. : What is it?

**D. : It is the problem of the eternal conflict between fate and free-will.
What are their respective provinces and how can the conflict be
avoided?**

**H.H. : If presented in the way you have done it, the problem would baffle
even the highest of thinkers.**

**D. : What is wrong with my presentation? I only stated the problem and
did not even explain how I find it to be a difficult one.**

H.H. : Your difficulty arises in the very statement of the problem.

D. : How?

**H.H. : A conflict arises only if there are two things. There can be no
conflict if there is only one thing.**

D. : But here there are two things, fate and free-will.

**H.H. : Exacly. It is this assumption of yours that is responsible for your
problem.**

**D. : It is not my assumption at all. How can I ignore the fact that the
two things exist as independent factors, whether I grant their
existence or not?**

H.H. : That is where you are wrong again.

D. : How?

**H.H. : As a follower of our Sanatana Dharma, you must know that fate is
nothing extraneous to yourself, but only the sum total of the
results of your past actions.**

**As God is but the dispenser of the fruits of actions, fate,
representing those fruits, is not his creation but only yours.
Fre-will is what you exercise when you act now.**

D. : Still I do not see how they are not two distinct things.

**H.H. : Have it this way. Fate is past karma; free-will is present karma.
Both are really one, that is, karma, though they may differ in the
matter of time. There can be no conflict when they are really one.**

**D. : But the difference in time is a vital difference which we cannot
possibly overlook.**

**H.H. : I do not want you to overlook it, but only to study it more deeply.
The present is before you and, by the exercise of free-will, you can
attempt to shape it.**

The past is past and is therefore beyond your vision and is

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

rightly called adrishta, the unseen. You cannot reasonably attempt to find out the relative strength of two things unless both of them are before you. But, by our very definition, free-will, the present karma, alone is before you and fate, the past karma, is invisible.

Even if you see two wrestlers right in front of you, you cannot decide about their relative strength. For, one may have weight, the other agility; one muscles and the other tenacity; one the benefit of practice and the other coolness of judgment and so on. We can go on building arguments on arguments to conclude that a particular wrestler will be the winner.

But experience shows that each of these qualifications may fail at any time or may prove to be a disqualification. The only practical method of determining their relative strength will be to make them wrestle.

While this is so, how do you expect to find by means of arguments a solution to the problem of the relative value of fate and free-will when the former by its very nature is unseen!

D. : Is there no way then of solving this problem?

H.H. : There is this way. The wrestlers must fight with each other and prove which of them is the stronger.

D. : In other words, the problem of conflict will get solved only at the end of the conflict. But at that time the problem will have ceased to have any practical significance.

H.H. : Not only so, it will cease to exist.

D. : That is, before the conflict begins, the problem is incapable of solution; and, after the conflict ends, it is no longer necessary to find a solution.

H.H. : Just so. In either case, it is profitless to embark on the enquiry as to the relative strength of fate and free-will.

A Guide

D. : Does Your Holiness then mean to say that we must resign ourselves to fate?

H.H. : Certainly not. On the other hand, you must devote yourself to free-will.

D. : How can that be?

H.H. : Fate, as I told you, is the resultant of the past exercise of your free-will. By exercising your free-will in the past, you brought on the resultant fate.

By exercising your free-will in the present, I want you to wipe out your past record if it hurts you, or to add to it if you find it enjoyable.

In any case, whether for acquiring more happiness or for reducing misery, you have to exercise your free-will in the present.

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

- D. : But the exercise of free-will however well-directed, very often fails to secure the desired result, as fate steps in and nullifies the action of free-will.
- H.H. : You are again ignoring our definition of fate. It is not an extraneous and a new thing which steps in to nullify your free-will. On the other hand, it is already in yourself.
- D. : It may be so, but its existence is felt only when it comes into conflict with free-will. How can we possibly wipe out the past record when we do not know nor have the means of knowing what it is?
- H.H. : Except to a very few highly advanced souls, the past certainly remains unknown. But even our ignorance of it is very often an advantage to us.

For, if we happen to know all the results we have accumulated by our actions in this and our past lives, we will be so much shocked as to give up in despair any attempt to overcome or mitigate them. Even in this life, forgetfulness is a boon which the merciful God has been pleased to bestow on us, so that we may not be burdened at any moment with a recollection of all that has happened in the past.

Similarly, the divine spark in us is ever bright with hope and makes it possible for us to confidently exercise our free-will. It is not for us to belittle the significance of these two boons-- forgetfulness of the past and hope for the future.

- D. : Our ignorance of the past may be useful in not deterring the exercise of the free-will, and hope may stimulate that exercise. All the same, it cannot be denied that fate very often does present a formidable obstacle in the way of such exercise.
- H.H. : It is not quite correct to say that fate places obstacles in the way of free-will. On the other hand, by seeming to oppose our efforts, it tells us what is the extent of free-will that is necessary now to bear fruit.

Ordinarily for the purpose of securing a single benefit, a particular activity is prescribed; but we do not know how intensively or how repeatedly that activity has to be pursued or persisted in.

If we do not succeed at the very first attempt, we can easily deduce that in the past we have exercised our free-will just in the opposite direction, that the resultant of that past activity has first to be eliminated and that our present effort must be proportionate to that past activity.

Thus, the obstacle which fate seems to offer is just the gauge by which we have to guide our present activities.

- H.H. : The obstacle is seen only after the exercise of our free-will; how can that help us to guide our activities at the start?
- H.H. : It need not guide us at the start. At the start, you must not be

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

obsessed at all with the idea that there will be any obstacle in your way.

Start with boundless hope and with the presumption that there is nothing in the way of your exercising the free-will.

If you do not succeed, tell yourself then that there has been in the past a counter-influence brought on by yourself by exercising your free-will in the other direction and, therefore, you must now exercise your free-will with re-doubled vigor and persistence to achieve your object.

Tell yourself that, inasmuch as the seeming obstacle is of your own making, it is certainly within your competence to overcome it.

If you do not succeed even after this renewed effort, there can be absolutely no justification for despair, for fate being but a creature of your free-will can never be stronger than your free-will.

Your failure only means that your present exercise of free-will is not sufficient to counteract the result of the past exercise of it.

In other words, there is no question of a relative proportion between fate and free-will as distinct factors in life. The relative proportion is only as between the intensity of our past action and the intensity of our present action.

D. : But even so, the relative intensity can be realised only at the end of our present effort in a particular direction.

H.H. : It is always so in the case of everything which is adrishta or unseen. Take, for example, a nail driven into a wooden pillar. When you see it for the first time, you actually see, say, an inch of it projecting out of the pillar. The rest of it has gone into the wood and you cannot now see what exact length of the nail is imbedded in the wood. That length, therefore, is unseen or adrishta, so far as you are concerned. Beautifully varnished as the pillar is, you do not know what is the composition of the wood in which the nail is driven. That also is unseen or adrishta.

Now, suppose you want to pull that nail out, can you tell me how many pulls will be necessary and how powerful each pull has to be?

D. : How can I? The number and the intensity of the pulls will depend upon the length which has gone into the wood.

H.H. : Certainly so. And the length which has gone into the wood is not arbitrary, but depended upon the number of strokes which drove it in and the intensity of each of such strokes and the resistance which the wood offered to them.

D. : It is so.

H.H. : The number and intensity of the pulls needed to take out the nail depend therefore upon the number and intensity of the strokes which drove it in.

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

D. : Yes.

H.H. : But the strokes that drove in the nail are now unseen and unseeable. They relate to the past and are adrishta.

D. : Yes.

H.H. : Do we stop from pulling out the nail simply because we happen to be ignorant of the length of the nail in the wood or of the number and intensity of the strokes which drove it in? Or, do we persist in pulling it out by increasing our effort?

D. : Certainly, as practical men we adopt the latter course.

H.H. : Adopt the same course in every effort of yours. Exert yourself as much as you can. Your will must succeed in the end.

Function of Shastras:

D. : But there certainly are many things which are impossible to attain even after the utmost exertion.

H.H. : There you are mistaken. There is nothing which is really unattainable. A thing, however, may be unattainable to us at the particular stage at which we are, or with the qualifications that we possess.

The attainability or otherwise of a particular thing is thus not an absolute characteristic of that thing but is relative and proportionate to our capacity to attain it.

D. : The success or failure of an effort can be known definitely only at the end. How are we then to know beforehand whether with our present capacity we may or may not exert ourselves to attain a particular object, and whether it is the right kind of exertion for the attainment of that object?

H.H. : Your question is certainly a pertinent one. The whole aim of our Dharma Shastras is to give a detailed answer to your question.

Religion does not fetter man's free-will. It leaves him quite free to act, but tells him at the same time what is good for him and what is not.

The responsibility is entirely and solely his. He cannot escape it by blaming fate, for fate is of his own making, nor by blaming God, for he is but the dispenser of fruits in accordance with the merits of actions. You are the master of your own destiny. It is for you to make it, to better it or to mar it. This is your privilege. This is your responsibility.

D. : I quite realise this. But often it so happens that I am not really master of myself. I know, for instance, quite well that a particular act is wrong; at the same time, I feel impelled to do it. Similarly, I know that another act is right; at the same time, however, I feel powerless to do it. It seems that there is some power which is able to control or defy my free-will. So long as that power is potent,

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

how can I be called the master of my own destiny? What is that power but fate?

H.H. : You are evidently confusing together two distinct things. Fate is a thing quite different from the other one which you call a power. Suppose you handle an instrument for the first time. You will do it very clumsily and with great effort.

The next time, however, you use it, you will do so less clumsily and with less effort. With repeated uses, you will have learnt to use it easily and without any effort. That is, the facility and ease with which you use a particular thing increase with the number of times you use it.

The first time a man steals, he does so with great effort and much fear; the next time both his effort and fear are much less. As opportunities increase, stealing will become a normal habit with him and will require no effort at all. This habit will generate in him a tendency to steal even when there is no necessity to steal. It is this tendency which goes by the name vasana. The power which makes you act as if against your will is only the vasana which itself is of your own making. This is not fate.

The punishment or reward, in the shape of pain or pleasure, which is the inevitable consequence of an act, good or bad, is alone the province of fate or destiny.

The vasana which the doing of an act leaves behind in the mind in the shape of a taste, a greater facility or a greater tendency for doing the same act once again, is quite a different thing. It may be that the punishment or the reward of the past act is, in ordinary circumstances, unavoidable, if there is no counter-effort; but the vasana can be easily handled if only we exercise our free-will correctly.

D. : But the number of vasanas or tendencies that rule our hearts are endless. How can we possibly control them?

H.H. : The essential nature of a vasana is to seek expression in outward acts. This characteristic is common to all vasanas, good and bad. The stream of vasanas, the vasana sarit, as it is called, has two currents, the good and the bad.

If you try to dam up the entire stream, there may be danger. The Shastras, therefore, do not ask you to attempt that. On the other hand, they ask you to submit yourself to be led by the good vasana current and to resist being led away by the bad vasana current.

When you know that a particular vasana is rising up in your mind, you cannot possibly say that you are at its mercy. You have your wits about you and the responsibility of deciding whether you will encourage it or not is entirely yours.

The Shastras enunciate in detail what vasanas are good and

Riddle of fate and freewill.txt

have to be encouraged and what vasanas are bad and have to be overcome.

When, by dint of practice, you have made all your vasanas good and practically eliminated the charge of any bad vasanas leading you astray, the Shastras take upon themselves the function of teaching you how to free your free-will even from the need of being led by good vasanas.

You will gradually be led on to a stage when your free-will be entirely free from any sort of coloring due to any vasanas.

At that stage, your mind will be pure as crystal and all motive for particular action will cease to be. Freedom from the results of particular actions is an inevitable consequence. Both fate and vasana disappear. There is freedom for ever more and that freedom is called Moksha.

.. shrii shaN^karaarpaNamastu ..