



*One does not make
any thought, a deciding
thought or otherwise.
Thoughts occur. It is quite a
common occurrence that our decisions
seem to be quite out of our control.*

CHAPTER 5

*F*OLITION AND FREE WILL

There is an ancient story:

A young farmer, Raju, worked hard on his land. One evening, as he rested under a banyan tree, the royal herald rode by announcing that the king had an unusual dream. Whoever could explain it to his satisfaction would receive 100 gold coins. In his dream, the king saw a sneering jackal trying to jump on to his lap. While trying to ward it off, he woke up with an uneasy feeling.

'If only I knew the answer', murmured Raju to himself. Then a sweet voice said to him, 'I'll give you the answer provided you promise to give me half of your award.' It was a beautiful little bird that had hopped down to a lower branch right above Raju's head. An enthusiastic Raju immediately accepted the offer. The answer was: 'The throne symbolizes the kingdom; the jackal symbolizes treachery and selfish cunning dominating the atmosphere. Ask the king to be cautious.'

Raju met the king the next day and interpreted the dream. The king was satisfied and Raju received the 100 gold coins. Walking back, Raju thought, 'what a pity I have to part with half the amount of the reward.' He took a detour and avoided the bird. He invested the money prudently and grew rich. 5 years passed. One evening the king's general galloped down to his house and called out: 'Hurry up. His Majesty has had another intriguing dream. He saw a bloody dagger circling his head.' Raju promised to meet the king the next day.

It was a moonlit night, and as soon as Raju approached the banyan tree, the bird appeared again and said, 'I know about the dream.'

Raju promised to give the bird half of the reward, and the bird explained that the dagger represented violence, that the atmosphere was steeped in it and the king should be on his guard. In the morning, Raju explained the dream and got a reward of 1000 gold coins.

Raju was afraid that the talking bird might report the matter to the king, and when he met the bird the next day he threw a stone at it, wanting to kill it. However, the bird escaped. Raju forgot all about it, until 5 years later, he was again brought before the king. This time the king had dreamt of a delicate dove resting on his lap. Once again he went to the bird, promised half the reward and was told that the dove symbolized peace and the king could now rest in peace. This time Raju received 10,000 gold coins.

This time Raju made a beeline for the banyan tree, and offered to the bird the entire amount in total surrender. The bird, however, had no use for it and advised Raju to spend it on the people's welfare. A tearful Raju pleaded to the bird to be pardoned for his conduct. 'Your conduct', said the bird, 'where was your conduct? On the first occasion, there was treachery in the atmosphere; the second time, there was violence in the atmosphere, and now there is peace and trust in the atmosphere. No one really acts according to his personal will.'

If one were to choose one single event in our daily living that is the most common happening, it would perhaps be the fact that in almost any group of people in almost any class of society, the subject of the conversation is a happening for which someone is being blamed: someone is responsible, someone should be punished! This has become the very basis of living and has been causing the 'suffering' which the Buddha considered the very essence of life: "samsara is dukkha" – life is suffering. He, therefore, concluded that the only way to end this suffering is to accept that "events happen, deeds are done, but there is no individual doer thereof."

This would promptly raise the question: 'Does this mean then, that if I find something wrong, I just keep silent and do nothing?' The answer is simple: 'Just don't complain. Do whatever you think you should do. Whatever is to happen will happen or not happen. Whining and complaining does not help you or anyone else.'

One's sense of volition or free will would seem to depend upon a

certain balance between reliability and flexibility in relation to cause and effect, effort and result. Without the former, all outcomes would appear to be arbitrary and, without the latter, all outcomes would appear to be predetermined. In neither case would one's free will be concerned in an effective result. This would seem to be clear, but establishing a precarious balance has proved to be such a frustrating effort that Kant himself was forced to declare 'freedom of the will' to be one of only three metaphysical problems beyond the grasp of the human intellect (the other two intractable problems being 'God' and 'immortality').

Debate has been going on for several years regarding the belief that the human being is in control, not only of the environment but also of himself. Debate regarding this belief used to be primarily a religious matter known as the 'Free Will vs. Determinism' argument. Disagreement centered on the amount of freedom the Creator had given us to act – more specifically, to sin or not to sin. Back when most of the civilization believed that God was in control over our lives, it was often assumed that He could be bribed with a few good deeds or contrite supplications, which left us some degree of choice over our destiny. However, in the 20th century, science has investigated the issue by taking a close look at the biological and psychological makeup of the individual human being. And, as the ancient saying goes, self-knowledge is usually bad news.

What science is discovering – what mystics have known for centuries – comes down to this: we are not in charge of the cosmos or the planets, we are barely in charge of ourselves – we are chaff in the wind. As the poet Rumi has put it:

*Do you think I know what I am doing?
That for one breath or half-breath I belong to myself?
As much as a pen knows what it is writing,
Or the ball can guess where it is going next.*

It would seem that the old theological controversies still continue to have a lot more relevance today than what one might expect. There is the completely 'hands on' view of God's agency in the functioning of the manifestation: "Not a drop of rain falls without the express command of God." Such an extreme view of theological determinism posed problems such as the relevance of moral responsibility. This situation was not really

different from the present situation in which problems are posed today by the 'physical determinism' of scientists like Colin Blakemore.

Kant's analysis of the situation was that while physical determinism held sway in the world of appearances, the world in which there is empirical knowledge, there might still be room in the hidden world of 'things-in-themselves' for free will. Kant's analysis has not prevented physical sciences from continuing to be unfriendly to the concept of free will – witness Albert Einstein:

“If the moon, in the act of completing its eternal way around the earth, were gifted with self-consciousness, it would feel thoroughly convinced that it was traveling its way of its own accord on the strength of a resolution taken once and for all. So would a Being, endowed with higher insight and more perfect intelligence, watching man and his doings, smile about man's illusion that he was acting according to his own free will...

Man defends himself from being regarded as an impotent object in the course of the Universe. But should the lawfulness of events, such as unveils itself more or less clearly in inorganic nature, cease to function in front of the activities in our brain?

Leaving aside the inconsistency of such a view, the influence of alcohol and other sharply controllable factors on our thoughts, feelings and activities should show very distinctly that determinism does not stop before the majesty of our human will.”

So far as the physical sciences are concerned, it would clearly seem that the universe continues to go on its merry way as a thoroughly deterministic system, even if it is not totally predictable by man's limited intelligence.

Recent brain research has revealed that humans have actually three distinct brains: a reptilian brain, a mammalian brain and the new cerebral cortex or 'human' brain. Research has also revealed that we make maximum use of our reptilian and mammalian brains, and experiments show that we use our new human brain only at about 15% capacity and that even this 15% is used mainly in order to rationalize and justify the reactive behavior of the other two brains.

Most people feel that they act independently from moment to moment, but human freedom of action would seem to be severely