

Freedom in Action

By Swami Dayananda Saraswati¹

Human Life is a privilege

It's a great privilege to be a human being because we can say so. I do not know what a monkey would feel when I tell that monkey that I am a privileged person. But the poor monkey cannot make a statement: "I am a privileged monkey!" In our scriptures there is a praise of human life. '*jantūnām narañanma durlabham,*' meaning that among all living beings, the life of a human being is scarce indeed. It is a privilege to have this human birth.

What does really distinguish a human being from all other creatures and living organisms on this planet? A peculiar physical body cannot be the basis for such a privilege. In fact every animal has its own features. Anatomically and otherwise, each animal has its own features. An octopus has its own features. A bat has its own features. And a human being also has his or her own features. That does not make a person highly privileged.

But, in this human being alone is there a great capacity and that is the capacity to make choices. I can make a choice. I can talk to you in any form I want. I can confuse you or, I can communicate. If talking is meant for communication, then I should make an attempt to communicate. It is a silly thing to talk to another person in a form that the other person cannot understand. Thus, I have a choice. This faculty of choice is given to me as a human being.

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Choices govern our life

This is how our daily life is governed by our choices. If there is anything in which I do not have a choice, it is in exercising this faculty of choice. What choice do I have in exercising this choice? I am not given any choice. What kind of clothes you wear, what kind of food you eat and how much you eat, how often you eat, with what attitude you eat – well, it is all open for choice. That a cow is a vegetarian is not by choice. If an Indian cow goes abroad, the mother cow need not say, “Yes, you are going abroad, continue to be a vegetarian; for ages we have been vegetarians; don’t change and bring bad name to us”. Whereas, if a person who is vegetarian at home for many generations goes abroad, the mother says, “Yes, be a vegetarian”. And if he is honest, he will say, “I will try”. He has a choice.

Exercising choice is a very important thing and necessarily implies that one should know. Every human being has got to know. Certain things you cannot afford to be ignorant of. The Government expects you to know everything about the laws that they have enacted because if we go against the law, then you are doing something illegal. We are supposed to know. In the court of law you cannot plead ignorance. You are supposed to know. You cannot say that I did not pay tax because I did not know. So in life also, you cannot afford to be ignorant with reference to living.

Goal of life is living

Somebody asked me the other day, “Swamiji, what is the goal of life?” The fellow is 40 years old and he is asking me this question! All this time I do not know what he did. His goal of life was perhaps marriage, or parentage, or a job, I do not know. But suddenly it strikes him high, and

after having spent 40 years of his life, he wants to know what the goal of life is.

What is the goal of life? Some people say that the goal of life is going to heaven. This is an idiotic thing because if the goal of life is heaven, why should I come here to go to heaven? Is it a detour? You should not be required to do that. And if somebody says the goal of life is death, upon death I am going to be absent. Death will bring about a cessation of me as a person. That means my goal of life is the absence of myself as this person. Then was it not already there before I was born? Before I was born I was absent anyway. Therefore, I need not be born to be what I was before. It is silly again. Therefore, death cannot be my goal of life, nor going to heaven can be the goal of life. I should simply say that the goal of life is not to die, or not to seek anything. In fact, the goal of life is just to live.

Live your life. Understand this. You have to live your life. To be alive is one thing but to live your life is quite another. In a coma, you are alive, aren't you? A person who is in a state of coma is alive and with all the support system that we have these days in hospitals, a person can be kept alive for years. But that is just being alive, it is not living. I can make a difference between being alive and living my life. I would say I have to live my life, for which I have to relate to the world.

Living is relating to the world

Someone who is alive in a coma or in deep sleep does not relate to the world. One must relate to the world or, he need not be here at all. One who refuses to relate to the world need not be blessed with senses and other faculties. Even an animal has to relate to the world. Therefore, to live my life is to relate to the world. The goal of life is to live my life, and to live my

life is to relate to the world. Relating is something you cannot avoid as long as you want to live. In this relating, how far you are objective or, how far you are able to exercise the faculty of choice determines how far you have achieved your goal.

You can accomplish different things. But all these imply how you are relating to the world. Therefore, you must relate to the world intelligently. Exercising your choice is the challenge you have, for we do not all the time exercise that freedom. Often we are more mechanical than free. If there is a motor set to revolve so many times per minute , that motor does not have any freedom of choice to revolve now 200 times and then 300 times. It is set to revolve so many revolutions per minute and it will. I would say that is mechanical. If the clouds gather, and the atmosphere is conducive, the rains happen. The clouds do not choose to rain here in Karaikudi because we are a notch above others. At least there does not seem to be a choice on part of the clouds. Clouds cannot get angry with you and go away saying, “You fellows never looked up and you never welcomed us. Therefore, we will go to Udumalpet”. If the atmosphere is conducive, rains will happen. This I would say is mechanical in the sense that under certain conditions, certain things happen. These happenings are called, for our purpose of understanding, as reactions. If we call them as reactions then, there is no action taken there, only a reaction happening. That means you have not achieved the goal of living. And if we have to achieve the goal of living, I must necessarily learn to be conscious, free, choose and, avoid myself being mechanical.

Reaction is mechanical

If I request you all to clap, some of you may clap, others may not clap and some of you would clap the way you want. You are free. You are free enough to act. This is freedom in your action. Understand here. One may clap once, twice, thrice or five times. Literally, the freedom is in your hands. You enjoyed that freedom. I look at this particular action as action. Because I enjoyed the freedom, I decided to clap. I am conscious of what is happening to me. In other words, I am alive.

Now, if I ask you to be angry for half a minute. Just be angry for half a minute. Go on. What happened? All of us are angels or what? You can never get angry for asking. You may say, “No Swamiji, I do get angry. But, I do not know when I will be angry”. Anger happens. It does not take permission from you, understand. Anger is a reaction. Similarly, jealousy is a reaction, sadness is a reaction, your sorrow is a reaction, and they do not take permission from you. If you permit yourself to be angry, you will be pretending and your child will know that. When dad is really angry, you won't see the son anywhere near. And he also knows how long it will take for dad to cool down. The child knows when Mom or Dad will be angry because, the anger is something that happens and in anger, what happens is again furthered.

If anybody says, don't be angry, you are likely to get angrier. Therefore, I do not say, 'Don't be angry.' I am not an advisor. I teach what anger is. What jealousy is. It is entirely a different thing. Our whole society is full of advisors. Even religious teachers have become preachers. The preacher does not want you to understand – because he himself does not understand – what he is preaching. We do not require preachers. In fact,

anybody can be a good preacher when somebody else has a problem. But, what is the use of telling him, “don’t cry” as though he wants to cry? What choice has he got?

Relating is acting

A reaction is something that happens without being conscious of it. You are what your psychology is. You have certain cognitive skills. You may have understood certain things but, that does not make the life. You can be a successful and learned person and still be a miserable person in relating to the world. You can be an ordinary person in relating to the world. You can be an ordinary person in a village without any certificates or any kind of degree and still be a successful person in life if you know how to relate to the world. Therefore, our scriptures, which are highly pragmatic, want you first to be a *svāmi*, a master. It tells you that every one of you is born as a child and therefore, must grow up as a *svāmi* alone.

You have to grow into a *svāmi*. You have to cut down your mechanical-ness for which, you have to understand how to live your life and to relate to the world, intelligently. Unless I am conscious of what I am doing I cannot be independent. Unless I am conscious, my mind cannot serve me, my memory cannot guide me, my own poise cannot guide me. Anything that happens without your being conscious of it is a reaction. Understand the difference between action and reaction. If you are an actor, you are free in your action. You can choose your action and not submit to the pressure, the pressure of environment. You may even be obliged to be a person who conforms to what is happening around, but then that is your choice. It is not because of pressure, if you choose to do what others do. If it is your choice, you will be able to change, alter and give up also. If others

do and pressurize you to do it, then necessarily, you are going to face problems in life which do not belong to you at all. You do not deserve it at all. Whenever I choose, I have got to be careful to see what I will gain in the bargain. Will I surrender my choice? Do I lose my freedom?

Relating is deliberate choosing

I have to be extra cautious relating to other human beings because they too enjoy the privilege of exercising choice. It is easy for me to relate to a dog, a tiger or an elephant because I can study the patterns of their behavior. They are already programmed. Therefore I can relate. But I do not know the human being. He is unpredictable. How can I relate to a human being if that person also used his own sweet choice?

If he used his choice wrongly, is it not because he was reacting to the situation? You may say he (or she) was ignorant. But ignorance is not a problem for relating with that person, really. It is not a sin. We are all born ignorant. One thing we need not work for is ignorance. We need not apply or seek admission to gain some ignorance. For electro-chemical ignorance, you need not come to this Institute. Ignorance is our capital. To shed ignorance, of course, is a privilege that I have. A donkey does not have that privilege. It has no freedom whether to do, not to do or, do it differently. It has got the donkey's freedom of kicking. Whether it is his master behind, his '*masterani*' behind or, someone else, if the donkey feels like kicking it will kick. It has no choice. The freedom of the donkey is the reaction that is programmed, and therefore, there is no freedom.

On the other hand, if you feel like kicking and you have even lifted your foot, still, you have the freedom. Anger is there. You are a small fellow. You get easily angry and therefore you are angry at the whole

world. You can lift your foot. But the other fellow is a basket ball player, he is 6'4" and weighs 220 pounds. What chance do you have in kicking that fellow? You will become *chutney*. You know that very well and therefore, what do you do? Having lifted the foot, you now have to make it mean something else because that fellow will ask you, "Why did you lift the foot?" Even for lifting the foot, you may get a few. So, you make a gesture of scratching and go away. This capacity only you have, not the donkey.

The animals have reactions, responses that are naturally programmed, and are more often predictable than not. If not predictable, it is only a failure or inadequacy in our understanding of the animals. On the other hand, a human being is not totally programmed. Therefore, you have to respond consciously. You can kick, you need not kick or, you can achieve the same thing differently. You can get the fellow kicked by someone other than you. Thus you can abuse your foot or, you can use your foot. If you kick a football, you are using your foot. If you kick a man, I do not know. You better decide. Similarly, when you use a word that hurts another person, you abuse the word. More often than not you are not deliberate. And that means you regret what you said and you say "I did not mean it at all". What does that mean? What kind of respect the other person can have for you? You do things without meaning to do them. You yourself will not have any image about yourself. Even your wisdom will not be available for you. All your education, your culture, your status, your prestige and everything about you is not available for you when you are mechanical, when you fail to exercise your choice.

Choice in action is the privilege

There is freedom in action only when you choose to act. You have no freedom in action when you allow things to happen to you. Understand this. This is something every human being should know. Grown up or young, everybody should know. You cannot afford to be ignorant. As long as you are conscious of your action, you can learn from your actions. The previous action did not produce the desired result, and therefore, you can learn from it. You can correct your mistake. And if it is a reaction, you do not learn from it. You do the same thing and then say: "I did not mean it at all". Again you are angry. Afterwards you say the same thing. What a pitiable life it is! You and I have to live on this planet together. You can expect me to be conscious of what I talk and I can also expect you to be conscious of what you do. If you are inimical to me, at least I can know that you are inimical without becoming an enemy myself. You can be doing things to hurt me and you did not mean it at all! What a thing it is!

What we call *dharma*, universal values and attitudes, stems from conscious living. You know very well what you do not want me to do to you. In this way, everyone is 50 percent totally ethical. You know how a mosquito should behave towards you. It should not bite you. It can bite the other person; you do not mind. You want the mosquito to behave properly towards you. You want the people, the whole world, fire, sun, entire solar system, all of them to behave properly towards you. Even if you are a thief who has come to rob with a knife in hand and ask the woman in the house, "Where are the keys?" you expect the woman to tell the truth. That means we want the whole world to behave in a certain manner. It is like a person saying that he is 50 percent married to the famous movie actress because *he*

has decided to marry her! Thus, everybody is one-half right. In so far as others behavior is concerned, you have no doubt at all. Everybody should be caring, loving, everybody should be telling the truth, nobody should be deceptive, nobody should be angry with you. You are very, very clear.

Unfortunately, the world expects me to behave in the same manner. That is an unfortunate thing or, a fortunate thing if I understand *dharmā*. If I do not behave as expected by the world, definitely I can say this is my conscious choice. This capacity to choose makes me the most privileged living being and it becomes a blessing for me because I use it. The same faculty becomes a curse if I do not use it. Therefore you have to distinguish in your daily life whether it is your conscious choice in your talking and in your interactions with people. If you find difficulty in choosing, you can always consult someone.

I have gone through many scriptural books. I have never seen a better advice than what is found in the Taittirīyopaniṣad (1-11):

*yānyanavadyāni karmāṇi, tāni sevitavyāni, no itarāṇi...
atha yadi te karmavicikitsā vā vṛttavicikitsā vā syāt,
ye tatra brāhmaṇāḥ sammarśinaḥ, yuktā ayuktāḥ,
alūkṣā dharmakāmāḥ syuḥ,
yathā te tatra varteran, tathā tatra vartethāḥ*

If you have to make a choice or, if you get confused as to what is right and wrong, go to those people in contemporary society who are given to a life of *dharmā*, who are dispassionate and therefore, have a capacity to be objective. Go to them, talk to them and follow their advice till you gain an understanding and maturity to make proper choices.

Life is a challenge

Some people say you must go through the experience to understand. Nobody goes through the experience of getting electrocuted to understand

what electrocution is. And so, until you understand, follow what the wise say. If they do not understand your situation, talk to them so that they do. Use your *buddhi* and understand. Never be sheepish. You will be better off if you were a sheep. No one will tell the sheep, “You are a sheep”. Nobody can blame a sheep for being a sheep. But we can use all these words against a human being because he can be sheepish.

This is not at all a sermon from a Swami. This is just saying that the privilege of being a human being on this planet is to live a responsible life. Life is full of challenges, and without challenge life is nothing. Just think of the life where there are no challenges at all.

A soccer game was going on. A great philanthropist spent millions of Rupees to build the stadium and then he dedicated it to the city. The inauguration was with a soccer game. Two important teams in the country were playing. He had invited an uncle from a nearby village who had never seen a soccer game. While watching the game this uncle became sad. He told the philanthropist, “I do not know why you behave like this”. The philanthropist asked, “Why, what is wrong with me?” The uncle said, “You have spent so much money. Then why are you so miserly at the end? There are 22 people in the field. But, you have given them only one soccer ball and everybody is chasing that ball. Is it not unfair? Should you not give 21 more balls?” If 21 more balls are given, there will be no soccer game. There should be one ball and 22 players. Understand. Only then there can be a challenge, a game. If everyone has a ball then there is no game. Real challenge in life is not merely in classrooms. In classrooms and labs there are challenges. But in the lab of life, the challenge is to be conscious and choose what you want to do. If I understand the beauty and the privilege of

living a conscious life even for one moment, well, my entire life is made in spite of all the pain and suffering!