

Is Free Will an Illusion?

By Richard Blum

As I write this article, it feels as though I am doing so under my own free will. And I imagine that those of you who are reading this article also feel that you are reading with your free will. But I have come to an intellectual conviction that free will is just an illusion. I don't believe that you or I have free will. Yet the strange thing is, in spite of my conviction, I continue to feel as though I do. Why is this?

First, let me explain that by free will I mean the sense that I have self-will. I am the one deciding what I think, how I feel, and how I act. It's the intuitive sense that I am the doer, and this intuition runs deep down to the core of my being. I experience knowing that I am free to make my own decisions. I know this without a doubt, much the same way that I know that I am a man.

The concept of free will stands in opposition to the notion that all events of the universe are predetermined. Predetermination means that there can be only one outcome, and there is nothing we can do to alter it. If everything is predetermined, then we have no free will. But this is completely contrary to my actual experience.

Furthermore, although as far as I know Meher Baba does not directly say that free will is an illusion, many of His statements certainly seem to imply that is the case. But in spite of those implications, Baba speaks to us in a manner that assumes that we do have free will. He encourages us to love Him, to obey Him, and to hold on to His daaman, as though we have a choice to do so or not. At the same time, He informs us that life is like a movie; everything has already been predetermined.

How can these paradoxes be explained?

Consider a computer program that plays chess so well that it can beat any human opponent. The program is "free" to make any legal move on the chessboard that it "thinks" is best. But does a computer have free will?

I say no, because a computer's program dictates that it must always play the same move when confronted with exactly the same configuration of pieces. (On a technical note, a program could contain instructions to randomize its selected moves to make it appear as if it has free will, but randomization must be based upon a precondition, and if the precondition is exactly the same as a previous situation, it will result in the same randomness and thus the same move.)

Are we any different than a chess-playing computer? Again, I say no, not in that respect. We also are limited by programs through our conditioning, albeit our programs are immensely more complex. And it doesn't matter if one believes in the material life or the spiritual life; either perspective yields the same conclusion: there is no free will. A scientist who only believes in the physical world and nothing beyond understands that our programs lie within our brains. Our brain's vast network of neurons generates our thoughts and controls our actions. And the functioning of neurons is totally mechanical. As with a chess-playing computer, there is no room for free will.

And for those of us who believe in the spiritual realms, Meher Baba informs us that it is our sanskaras that determine our experience. Sanskaras are the impressions formed in our minds during all of our experiences in life. Sanskaras emerged at the beginning of the evolutionary process, and they continue to operate during our human incarnations. Baba explains:

The evolution of the limited individual is completely determined by the sanskaras accumulated by him through ages; and though it is all part of imagination, the determinism is thorough and automatic.ⁱ

And this "determinism" continues once the human form is obtained, Baba says.

...the accumulated sanskaras determine each experience and action of the limited self. Just as several feet of film have to pass in a cinema to show a brief action on the screen, many sanskaras are often involved in determining a single action of the limited self.ⁱⁱ

Our sanskaras are our programs. They determine all of our thoughts and actions. Their control is thorough and automatic. We don't control our sanskaras; rather our sanskaras control us. Like a computer we have no control, no free will.

So where does my sense of free will come from? Is it an illusion?

I suspect that it comes from my very own sense of who I am –my self-identity, my ego. Regarding the ego, Baba says:

The ego ... takes many forms. It may take the form of a continued self-conscious memory expressing itself in recollections like, "I did this and I did that; I felt this and I felt that; I thought this and I thought that." It also takes the form of ego-centered hopes for the future expressing themselves through plans like, "I shall do this and I shall do that;

I shall feel this and I shall feel that; I shall think this and I shall think that.”ⁱⁱⁱ

No doubt my ego takes credit for all of my thoughts, feelings, and actions. But is it really the “doer?” Does it really deserve to take that credit?

Baba says, “Since the ego takes shelter in the false idea of being the body, it is a source of much illusion.”^{iv}

Does that include the illusion of self-will? And if so, how is that illusion created?

Explaining that the ego is a “false nucleus of consolidated sanskaras,”^v and as being “hydra-headed,” Baba informs us of the ego’s true function – a mechanism through which competing unconscious sanskaric processes get resolved.

...the major portion of the real ego remains submerged in the dark and inarticulate sanctuaries of the subconscious mind. The explicit ego ... is by no means a harmonious whole; it can and does become an arena for multitudinous conflicts between opposing tendencies.^{vi}

So who I think I am is really only a small portion of who I really am. Most of “me” consists of subconscious sanskaras. Like an iceberg which is mostly submerged, my ego’s sanskaras remain submerged in subconsciousness. And many of these subconscious elements are in conflict with one another. Who I think and who I feel I am, the controller of my will, is in truth just an arbitrator of my conflicting subconscious elements. Whereas I experience that I think in order to make decisions, what really happens is that my sanskaras induce me to think certain thoughts. My sanskaras generate my thoughts, creating the illusion that I am deciding what I will do. The reality is that my thinking is a by-product of my sanskaras.

And I am not just a single entity. I am made of many parts. Baba says, “The entire ego is essentially heterogeneous in its constitution.”^{vii}

The fact that the ego is heterogeneous implies that there is not a single “I.” Rather than being just one “I,” there are various “I’s,” all competing to dominate and to become the primary “I.” The “I” that dominates in any given moment gets linked to consciousness and the others remain unconscious. Although it always feels like the same “I,” it is in fact many “I’s” that change from moment to moment – one “I” becoming conscious, the other “I’s” unconscious. It is only the conscious part of the ego that sustains the constant feeling of “I-ness.” That’s how the ego sustains the illusion that “I am the doer” – maintaining the illusion of self-will.

If free will is an illusion, why does it exist? Because, as Baba explains, the illusion of self-will is a central aspect of the ego. The ego, a product of evolution, developed so that

varied experiences of life can be intelligently synthesized in order to “organize and understand experience.” For this understanding to take place, it is necessary to integrate experiences around a single center – the ego. It is this integration of experience that produces full and complete consciousness in humans. Thus the ego and self-will were necessary for the development of full human consciousness.

But if free will is an illusion and everything is predetermined, why does Meher Baba speak to us in a manner that assumes that we can make choices, as though we have free will? I believe it’s linked to the fact that as the Avatar He comes down to our level, descending into illusion. He works within illusion, using illusion as a means of awakening us. We have the illusion of having a body, so He works with us as though we have a body. We think we have free will, so Baba works with us as though we have free will.

If Baba were to simply tell us that we have no free will, would it change our experience of having it? I don’t think so. In fact it might lead us to believe that it doesn’t matter what we do. I believe that one of the pitfalls for spiritual aspirants is to adopt the attitude that they do not have to assume responsibility for their actions because they have read that free will is an illusion. That is a fallacious and dangerous understanding. I believe that I must act from the level my experience. To the extent that I perceive that I have free will, then I am responsible for my actions. To the extent that I truly experience not having free will, then I know that God is responsible. In other words, if I feel and experience that I am the doer, that I am the agent of my thinking, feeling, and acting, then it would be hypocritical for me to stand back and say, “I am not responsible for my actions, because free will does not exist.”

On the other hand, if I intellectually believe that free will does not exist, even if I do not feel it, it behooves me to try to cultivate that experience and free myself from the false belief that I am the doer? But how can I free myself from the delusion of free will? Is it even possible?

Baba indicates that not only is it possible but it’s essential if we want to know Reality. He says, “With the surrenderance of self-will and ego-centered imagination, there arises a true perception of the infinite worth of that which IS.”^{viii}

By surrendering our self-will, we give up any possible notion of having free will. So how can we surrender our self-will and be free of the illusion of free will? I believe it starts with obedience to Baba. Obedience implies giving up our self-will in order to fulfill the Master’s order. In obedience, we act according to the Master’s dictates or wishes; we no longer act according to the promptings of our desires and ego. We must forgo our own wishes in order to do what the Master dictates.

No doubt we must exercise our own sense of will in order to obey – but our sense of will is harnessed to carry out the will of the Master.

A problem arises for those of us who follow Baba today, after He has dropped His physical body. How can we obey Baba, now that He is no longer physically present to give us orders? I have heard Eruch, Baba's close disciple, answer that question by saying that we all know deep in our hearts what Baba wants us to do. We must just follow the deepest promptings of our heart. I believe that this is the simplest, purest, and highest form of obedience. But it also requires that one have the purest of hearts. What about the rest of us?

Baba offers another means in the form of the subservient or "provisional ego," a meditative technique of relinquishing all ownership of one's actions. It begins by earnestly offering all that is in oneself to the Master, both the good and the bad, and then offering to serve the Master. Then he invites the Master to work through him. The disciple must not only think that the Master is working through him, he must fully feel and believe it.

The aspirant does not allow the ego to feed upon any of his actions—small or great, good or bad. He does not think "I do this," but on the contrary, systematically develops the thought that through him the Master is really doing all that he does. For example, when he looks, he thinks, "The Master is looking;" when he eats, he thinks, "The Master is eating;" when he sleeps, he thinks, "The Master is sleeping;" when he drives a car, he thinks, "The Master is driving the car;" even when he may happen to do something wrong, he thinks, "The Master is doing this." Thus he completely relinquishes all agency for his action, and all that is done by him is brought into direct reference to the Master. This automatically and necessarily involves and entails *determination of each action in the light of the spiritual ideal as seen in the Master.*^{ix}

With this discipline, it's not *my* self-will, but rather the *Master's* will working inside of me. It is the Master who controls my action, the Master who thinks inside my mind, the Master who feels inside my being. The Master who is conscious of everything I experience.

Now my skeptical mind asks, Is this just some trick? Some means of fooling myself into believing that I'm not the doer? And if my sanskaras control my will, how is it possible for the Master's will to work through me? Does the Master intervene and take over control, bypassing my sanskaras?

The answer, I believe, is that my sanskaras do continue to work within me, but not alone. The Master's impressions also work within me. How?

When someone comes into contact with the Master, either in person or through an inner experience, impressions are formed within the mind, in the same way as with any

experience. But the Master's impressions are much more powerful than any other impressions. His divine love, His charming personality, His beauty – all His qualities – are so irresistible, so compelling, that these impressions deeply penetrate our being. The impressions that He plants within us are so overwhelmingly powerful that they profoundly affect the multitude of our own impressions.

It is His impressions that are able to balance or wipe out our other impressions. And as we gather more of His impressions, something magical happens. As we remember Him, His presence comes into our being. We feel Him alive within us.

As His presence grows within, His being takes more control of our being. He begins to work through us. And when we recognize His presence within, we can honestly say, "The Master is getting things done through me." Then the provisional ego is fully active, and there is true recognition that we are not the doer.

Eventually, the Master's internal presence grows to such an extent that one's own existence becomes insignificant. At this point, one is ready to surrender.

Now there is no longer a need for the provisional ego. Being provisional, it was only meant as temporary scaffolding. Through surrendering, one reaches the higher realization that the Master's will is one and the same as the power behind all activity in the universe. As Baba says:

I alone am Real and my will governs the cosmic illusion. It is the truth when I say that the waves do not roll and the leaves do not move without my will.^x

Through surrendering, one becomes completely resigned to the Master's will. Accepting everything that happens as His will – every event in the outside world and every thought and feeling inside one's own being – one no longer judges. Experiences are no longer perceived as being good or bad. With the realization that all is His will, the illusion of self-will is gone forever.

The paradox of free will versus predetermination is swallowed up in the union of one's self-will with the Master's will.

Baba neatly summarizes the three stages of will:

One who loves desires the will of the Beloved.
One who obeys does the will of the Beloved.
One who surrenders knows nothing but the will of the Beloved.^{xi}

ⁱ Meher Baba, *Discourses* (North Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Foundation, 1995), p. 26.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 166.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 161.

^v Ibid. p. 165.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 168.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 169.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 120.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 232.

^x Meher Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing*, (Sydney, Australia: Meher House Publications, 1963), p. 62

^{xi} Ibid., p. 5.