

### A MATTER OF CHOICE

*We all know that we have the power to choose. We all know that we have the power to get up and leave whenever we want. Or we think we do. Actually this is only speculative; unless we're actually getting up and leaving now. Does a car that's working and full of petrol have the power to get you from A to B? The answer is no. A lot more power is required to get you from A to B. The driver's intent and availability, an open road, favourable weather and traffic conditions. There's so much more to things, even simple things, than initially meets the eye. Yet make choices we constantly do. Make choices we constantly must. Not only in order to survive, but in order to flourish and express ourselves as freely and fully as possible, we have been making, we are making and we will continue to make choices continuously. Choices are so continuous that we tend to take them for granted. Maybe we shouldn't do that. Maybe we should take a closer look at this process that plays such a huge part in our lives.*

*Where do choices actually come from? How do choices actually come about? By what power is a choice actually made? By what agency do we make our decisions? Our decisions and our choices are recognised by others only through our actions or words, but we experience our choices and decisions before that, before they become actions or words: as thoughts taking place in the cerebral cortex. The cerebral cortex has an unlimited capacity to distinguish, to discriminate. Equally it has an endless capacity to imagine, anticipate, conceive, speculate. Were it not so, were we not endowed with such imaginative and discriminative powers, we would not exist. We depend on them both for our survival.*

*Making choices as we are, all the time every day, is to be thinking all the time everyday. It's only too easy to assume, without really thinking about it, that because we are thinking all the time, we know how to think, that we know*

*what thinking is, that we know what's involved in thinking. Likewise it's only too easy to assume that we know what's involved in choosing, that we know what's involved in making decisions because we are constantly making decisions and choices. However, the truth is that most of us have very little idea at all about how thinking happens, about how choices are made. Many choices and decisions just make themselves, without our thought. Some involve our thinking process. Some come from our conscious mind, some come from our unconscious, perhaps through the agency of the body.*

*So there seem to be two kinds of choices. You're walking along the track, up the mountain, you've got no clear idea where you're going, there's two paths. You go one way without really thinking about it, or you think about it and after 5, 10 minutes of trying to work out which might be the best option you realise it's too late, you have to turn round and go home for dinner.*

*Most of the choices shaping our lives are not made consciously through a process of deliberate thinking. Unconscious thoughts and thinking are driving them from the past where some of them were then conscious. I don't have to think about how to cut a carrot into matchsticks; I did the thinking years ago. Thinking that was guided by the prior thinking of others. Not least how to make a knife blade, how to sharpen it. So even if I'm not thinking about the process of cutting a carrot, there is a lot of accumulated thought involved in its happening, in its being able to happen.*

*When we think about the choices in front of us, when we have to deliberate about options there is something always going on, even though it may be expressing itself in different ways. Beneath the selection between conceived options, there is another kind of selection going on. There is a jostling inside us of desire, hope, fear, assumption, expectation, values, principals, morals, obligations, responsibilities. Each one of these factors has its own weight, its*

*own power. When you're faced with a choice they all come together and resolve themselves into a momentary hierarchy of priority so that you can make your choice. The shape of this hierarchy determines which way you go, which choice you make. So you don't always choose to tell the truth, you don't always choose to honour your parents, you don't always choose to pursue your desires, you don't always choose to fulfil your obligations. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't. Sometimes your choices can fulfil a number of those things together and sometimes they can't. There is always something being left out. To choose is not only to gain something, its also to loose something. As Bob Dylan said "You choose to loose". Walt Whitman put it another way. He recognised that within himself there dwelt a multitude: now this one coming to the fore, now another. Within this multitude there is a constant jostling for position, for priority. We're all deeply familiar with this. We're so completely familiar with this that perhaps we haven't really noticed it, let alone bothered to examine its implications.*

*If we begin to look a little closer we see that the decision making process is not so simple. A decision is not made by reason. It is not made by desire. It is not made by hope. It is not made by prior commitments. A decision is made on the basis of the balance of power between all these factors and more. A decision is the result of a power struggle in your conscience. Your conscience is not a moral compass. Its more than that. It's the overall effect of how your desires, hopes and preferences stack up against your obligations, responsibilities, values and fears. The fact is that it's not really your conscience at all. It doesn't belong to you; you belong to it. You didn't create it, you didn't choose the forces and factors functioning within you. You didn't shape it, it is shaping you. You can't tell it how to motivate you, you can't tell it how to organise your priorities and determine your decisions. Although sometimes you can create the impression that you are. You can say: 'This time I'm going to be noble, and I'm going to open the door and allow the person to walk through first.'*

*Where does this thought come from, this thought that pops uninvited into the mind: 'This time I'll be kind.' 'This time, I'll be thoughtful.' Did you command it to come? No. It just came. Of course, it may be that sometime in the past, maybe more than once, you made a commitment to be more kind, more thoughtful. Perhaps that event, especially if it has happened a few times, may predispose you to remember that it is possible to be kind and thoughtful: sometimes. But you keep forgetting don't you. You keep on being thoughtless and unkind. Even though you don't choose to be: most of the time. Even though thoughts keep popping up uninvited, they don't just come by chance. They come in response to the totality of the situation which you're in, current and historical. The situation which you are in is not just determined or defined by external objects and forces. The situation which you are in is equally defined and determined by internal forces. In the always unique meeting of those internal and external forces your conscience will respond and generate your actions accordingly.*

*Spinoza pointed out that the human being lives amongst superficial effects almost totally ignorant of causes. We might like to think that we are less ignorant of causes than they were 300 or 3000 years ago when maybe they thought rain was God crying, or thunder and lightning was God in a bad mood. Most of us still have virtually no idea what makes rain fall the way it does. We just feel the effect, and that's enough to keep us dry. We can quite happily remain in ignorance of the subtle causes, and just leave it at "clouds passing overhead". Being uncomfortable with ignorance, we turns effects into causes. 'I love him because he's beautiful.' The beauty that we say causes our love is an effect of unrecognised and unexplained causes. Even if we were to consider ourselves to be more psychologically sophisticated and profound and say: 'I love him because he reminds me of my father' or 'I love him because he doesn't remind me of my father,' this is still not the cause. This is still the effect*

*of other causes.*

*We must always remain ignorant of causes in all of their particularities, but we need not remain ignorant of causes in their generality. It doesn't take very much honest looking to be able to see clearly that cause and effect go out in every direction endlessly. It really is easy to see that the cause of any situation cannot be accurately outlined or definitively quantified. Yet it can be seen to be an immensity that we can never compute. This is always the case. For any event. For any action. For any thought that pops into your head uninvited. At the same time it's really not so hard to see that it is always that very same, single immensity that is behind anything, that is supporting and necessitating everything.*

*How many decisions did you have to make to be here doing this today? How many choices did I have to make to publish this book? How many people did I have to meet and learn from to be able to give the talks from which it has been composed? How many choices and decisions had to be made for there to have been people present for me to bother to give them? How many supposedly chance events led to our common interest in things subtle and deep? What did it take to get us born in the first place? How many couplings down the long and winding mammalian trail? How many births? How many deaths?*

*The causes of any event are as good as infinite. There's not just 1, 2, 10, 50, 5000, million, 60 trillion elements causing us to say to ourselves that we love someone. It's immense. It's infinite. When we see clearly this immensity, this infinity of causation, we don't need to know all about its specificity, much about its particularity. In seeing the singular totality of causation we know that all of our choices, all of our thoughts, all of our feelings, all of our reactions, all of our actions are the effect of that infinite network of causation.*

*You walk into a room and you feel a particular response to somebody. You don't choose that response. You can't choose how you will respond to someone. Not if you're being honest. After you feel your response then you can start making choices about whether or not you are going to express, ignore or mask your response. But even those choices, however consciously made, are not in your control. If anything is conditioned by prior causes, then everything is. Even your choices.*

*The power to choose is the power by which the universe unfolds. Which it appears to our perspective to be doing. The power to choose does not belong to the mechanism that chooses. You have no power that isn't put in you. It's just the way it is. It is not yours to change. It's not yours to decide how to use. It is using you. Seeing this doesn't change the way things happen. Things just carry on happening the way they always have and a very, very few of them happen through you, and a very, very few of those are experienced by you. A very, very few of those ones are chosen by you. A very few of those choices are actually acted upon. While a very few of those that are acted upon actually produce the intended outcome. Then perhaps a very few of those that are acted on and produce the intended outcome actually satisfy you in the way you hoped they would. While very few of those satisfy you for long. So more choices are made, more decisions are taken, more actions are undertaken and more experiences take place. Over which we have no control whatsoever, absolutely none.*

*Can you handle that? Can you see that? Or are you fiddling with the details to make them fit your borrowed assumptions? Can you see that if anything is conditioned it's because everything is conditioned? Can you see that because everything is totally conditioned you can not actually make anything be anything other than the way it is, the way it has to be. Even though you participate in its continual changing? Can you see that you are not in control*

extract from: THE POWER TO CHOOSE

*of your destiny, your life, your feelings, your thoughts? Can you see that you're not even in control of your little finger? Can you see how deep and broad are the physical, chemical, psychological, historical, social and cultural forces acting on the intention to make it curl? When we claim otherwise, when we say or think that we are in control of even one tiny thing, we are in denial of the indivisibility of totality within the immensity of which we think, choose and act. We are in resistance to life as it actually is. This is much more painful than it sounds. This resistance to life expresses itself as shame, guilt, blame, pride, contempt, animosity, insecurity, anxiety, manipulation, exploitation, dismay and despair; all of which rest on the unchallenged assumption that something, and therefore all things, could be other than the way they actually are.*

*If you want to no longer resist life you are going to have to see that you are not in control of your life in the way that you had thought you were. You must see clearly that you can not be in control of your boyfriend, husband, wife, lover, children. You need to see that you are not in control of your parents, your employees, or your employer. You need to recognise that you are not in control of your beliefs, ideas, thoughts, feelings or desires.*

*They have been put there by Saint Paul, the Bible ,The Baghavad Gita, Vogue and Time magazine, a George Bush or two, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, John Keats, Rumi, William Wordsworth and all the thousands and millions of individuals that have contributed to the way we feel and think at the beginning of the 21st century. Many of these thoughts and feelings are poignant, beautiful, but they are only yours in that they define you. They do not originate in you. They do not belong to you; you belong to them. They are borrowed, second hand clutter obscuring the clarity of your own intelligence and the totality of the matrix of causation. They are hiding the fact that you are not even in control of your vision, your hearing, your locomotion. You are not in control of your breathing. You are not in control of your mind. You can tell*

*yourself you are. You can tell yourself you are Napoleon, it doesn't make you a great general. Other people can tell you you are; it still doesn't make you something, being named it.*

*It can be a bit of a shock to realise that you really are not in control of your life. It can make you feel sick, depressed, angry even. Yet if you keep looking those feelings will start to fade away, if you keep really looking. If you look deeply and broadly enough to see the totality of this matrix they cannot survive. When you see very, very clearly with your own intelligence that you are in control of absolutely nothing, then you will feel deep release, a welcome relief: the spiritual call it 'surrender'. Its only when you are still clinging to the thought, the desperate hope, that you have some control over something, that the totally conditioned nature of all actions and objects can disturb you.*

*When you see that you are in control of absolutely nothing life will start to feel a lot different. You will stop feeling alone, afraid, oppressed and unsupported. Then you will start to feel relief, release. A lightness will replace the heaviness that was bearing you down. That weight will be felt as a support, bearing you up, carrying you forward into the mysterious adventure of your life. When you see that you are not in control of anything at all, not even the slightest, tiniest, weeniest, little thing, then you start to feel the freedom that this immensity is offering you. You start to feel the significance that that freedom bestows upon you. Instead of feeling irrelevant, you begin to realise how important you actually are. You see clearly how vital your every action actually is, how very important that you left undone everything that you left undone, how vitally important that you left unsaid everything that you left unsaid.*

*If you only see part of the matrix of causality it can make you feel trapped. You feel the matrix pushing you inexorably into this unskilful action, that poor choice, these compulsive reactions, feelings, thoughts. You begin to feel*

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*helpless, hopeless. In fact you begin to feel very, very insignificant and impotent. You begin to see how many forces and how many factors are making you want the things that you want, believe the things that you believe, think the things that you actually think, feel the things that you actually feel, choose the things that you actually choose, do the things that you actually do. You will begin to see how each one of those things that you did actually do, choose, feel and think were necessitated by the indivisible wholeness of this matrix.*

*If you have seen the matrix of causation clearly, really clearly, you will see something quite surprising. You will see that there is no such thing as specific causation. All events and situations are caused by exactly the same matrix of cause and effect. They each just happen to be sitting in a different location within that single matrix upon which they each entirely depend, and which entirely depends on each of them being exactly as they are. Because the whole matrix is exactly the way that it is, each event and action in it is exactly the way that it is. This tends to kill the “why?” bug. We stop wondering why bad things happen, why bad things happen to us. We stop wondering why we do things, choose things, feel things, do the things that we do. We already know the answer. Things happen because they happen. It’s a nonsequitur, a tautology. It doesn’t mean anything, but it’s true. Things happen. They happen just the way they happen. They happen because they are caused to happen. Not by the things that came just before them. Not by the things that came just after them. They are caused to happen by everything. Everything is. That’s the way it is, and it’s very easy to see that. Just look, and you will see it. Put your hand in a puddle and the wetness of water will be beyond any doubt.*

*Can you handle that?*

*This means you will find yourself pondering less and less about what you*

*should do. You will wonder what you should do less and less, though you will still probably wonder what you will do. Anticipation, choosing, decision making all get lighter, less problematic. The same things that were a big problem, that used to give you a headache in advance, will just happen, with or without a little ponderous deliberation. Even though you may find yourself in exactly the same kinds of situations as before, they feel a lot lighter.*

*This doesn't just apply to external situations. It applies to internal situations too. You may still find yourself wanting to go out with two people at once. You just find it easier to deal with. You just let it happen without pushing at it too much. If you suddenly find they both reject you and start saying bad things about you behind your back, your not going to find that fun. You're still going to dislike what you dislike. You are still going to want what you want. You're still going to be disappointed when you don't get it, but that disappointment won't become resentment, regret, blame or guilt. Maybe you're still going to get angry when people treat you like shit. Why not, anger is the natural response to external threat, and maybe you feel threatened by the way they are treating you. You may try to make them stop. You may try to get away from them. Still, something is going to be different. You are not going to hold it against them. You are not going to hold it against yourself. You may decide to have nothing to do with them, but that's all. You won't make an enemy of them. You won't make an enemy of yourself. Even if you hit them. You will know that you couldn't help it. You will know that they couldn't help it.*

*Let me tell you about my friends Edward and Laura. Edward was in love with Laura and when she left her long term boyfriend they got together. But after a while she needed to go back to her ex, so she left Edward. A while later they bumped into each other in Australia, and she was single again. They got back together. Then she needed to go back to her ex again, and so she dumped him again. She told me that Edward just looked at her and said: "it's all right, you*

*can't help yourself". Now this doesn't mean he wasn't sad. This doesn't mean he wasn't devastated. This doesn't mean his self esteem hadn't taken a body blow. It just means that Edward has seen clearly the conditioned and inevitable nature of all events and experiences. He can still hurt, but he doesn't have to hurt back for it.*

*The gift of seeing allows you to enjoy the unpredictable movement of life through and as your actions, choices, decisions, knowing they are not yours by way of ownership, only by way of agency, instrumentality. The matrix takes on a transparency that wasn't there before, a clear seeing that within the bodimind that bears your name there is no controller, no doer, no chooser. You know there is no-one to mess up and so you don't have to worry anymore about the possibility of messing up. You don't have to worry any more about the consequences of your actions because you know that they are coming. You know that they are unavoidable. You know you are going to be held responsible for them. You know more or less whether or not you're going to try to evade that responsibility. Yet you don't have to worry about all that. You don't worry about the future because, as far as you can tell, it hasn't happened and you don't know enough about it to know if you should be worried.*

*Within this clear seeing the controller, the chooser, the thinker, the doer, totally evaporate. They leave the scene, which doesn't mean they've been removed from only your organism, but they are removed from all organisms. This is the eradication of the self: not just the sense of self, but the assumption of selfness. The sense of self is thinking, feeling that you are the doer of your deeds, the thinker of your thoughts, the chooser of your choices. The assumption of selfness is the assumption of ownership, authorship, origination: that actions belong to their instruments. All of the anxiety, doubt, guilt, blame, shame, hostility, resentment, manipulation that necessarily and inevitably arises from and expresses the sense of self and the assumption of selfness is replaced by*

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*something that you've been seeking all your life but that you've been seeking outside of you, where it cannot be found.*

*The word we normally have for this is love. Not possessive, manipulative, romantic, sexual love, but love itself. Perhaps the easiest way to consider what this might mean is to consider water. Love is the bond between hydrogen and oxygen. They are totally committed to each other without any thought for what they can get from it. Instead of wanting and taking they are giving, giving life: giving life to us all. Genuine wisdom is based on the discovery that you are love. If you do actually and truly discover that you are love, you will discover that everyone else is too. Then you will have nothing to fear from love. Love is the absence of space, of separation, of distinction. Another word you could use for love is unity, and unity is another word for the indivisibility of wholeness. The realisation of unity is a collapse into love. The collapse of all your strategies, all of your defences. The other day I asked a friend how it was going between her and her lover. She replied. "Oh, I'm in love but I don't think it's with him."*

*It may be not so difficult to follow these words and the thoughts behind them intellectually but that is only a beginning. It can perhaps motivate an ongoing enquiry to question the culturally embedded assumptions that you are the doer, the chooser, the thinker, that you are in control of your thoughts, that you are in control of your decisions, that you are in control of your conscience. When you see really clearly for yourself that you are not, your confusion and doubt will dissolve. You will begin to feel God's right hand in the small of your back, moving you forward and her left hand on your skull, turning your head this way and that to make sure you go in the right direction. They've always been there, she's always been there. You just haven't noticed. You've been too busy looking for something that doesn't exist.*