



***BE THOU  
THE JOYFUL PLAYER***



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*Things are not always, not even usually, how they seem. Human beings tend to have a deeply cherished, and deeply irrational, attachment to the notion that they have free will. It is free will, supposedly, that gives significance and meaning to our actions and lives. Without it, so it is said, we are nothing but automata, with neither meaning nor dignity.*

*Independent research has led contemporary scientists in many fields to conclude, as Newton suggests, that all experiential phenomena are totally conditioned and totally dependent. As scientific research goes deeper into the structure and function of the human brain, this turns out to be as true for the realm of mind as it is for that of matter.*

*At the same time many of them nevertheless declare that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, free will definitely exists. This claim is almost always justified with the unjustifiable declaration that otherwise no one would take responsibility for their actions and society would descend into chaos.*

*This hypocrisy is the result of cherished beliefs and unconscious assumptions overpowering and limiting rational thought and inspiring trained professionals to refute the implications of conclusive evidence. Yet the truth is really not so hard to see: that free will is a subjective impression generated by inattentiveness and supported by cultural assumption. Any one with an open mind can discover the uncontrollable nature of their conscious thought processes, which no matter how much they can momentarily be driven by conscious intent, are more deeply and more consistently driven by the relentless and opaque power of the unconscious.*

*Usually we don't look very deeply when we try to see what makes something happen. We see only the obvious, only what we have learned to take account of from experience. Yet what we take account of is but a fraction of what our unconscious has processed. We are by nature and necessity functioning, not in*

*the dark, but in a world of shadows. Shadows that allow us to navigate and survive, but which so often prevent us from truly thriving. The unconscious edits most of what is actually happening out of view, leaving us with a deep distortion at the heart of our conscious experience: free will.*

*We attribute desires and feelings to people whose motives and intentions we are completely unaware of. We attribute motives and intentions to ourselves when we are completely unaware of most of our motives and drives. We assume that we know why people did things that they do, on the basis of insufficient evidence. We assume that we know why we did the things that we have done while actually we do not.*

*No apple can fall without the power of gravity being met by some other power: the pick of the picker, or the autumnal descent of sap. No human being can be understood without learning to speak. Nothing you have ever done could have happened if your parents had never met. Jellyfish would not exist if life had not discovered the cellular membrane. There would be no plants or animals at all were it not for the love affair between oxygen and hydrogen. Everything that happens not only happens because of an innumerable quantity of current and prior conditions, but it happens exactly the way that it does because all of those conditions are happening or happened exactly the way that they are or did.*

*The problem is that, even though we can easily have a clear sense of how massive the matrix of conditions upon which everything rests is, we know hardly any of the specific conditions which make up its immensity. We know, but tend to overlook, the deep, contextual conditions such as gravity, electromagnetism, chemical bondage. We know a very few of the specific conditions: even when we know hundreds, or thousands, there are millions and millions more that we do not know.*

*How did you get to be interested in thinking deeply about things? Not everyone is. A lot of people don't have the time or freedom to. You do, but you have a lot more besides. You have the safety, the resources, the opportunity as well as the interest, the inclination. Of course you had to be born, you had to learn to read and understand subtle concepts. You know many of the events, situations and actions that brought you to read these words. There are many, many more that you don't know and can't know: ever.*

*You don't know what time it was when your parents met. You don't know what it was, and it wasn't one thing, that persuaded your father to make love to your mother, and vice versa. You don't know what brought them to be living where they were when you were born. You don't know how they came to dress the way they dressed, like the music and movies that they did. You are ignorant of most of the forces and factors that have shaped your life. We all are. Yet we think and act as if we know how we got here. As if we know how we got to be the way we are.*

*You have been conditioned to be the way you are. You have not chosen to like or dislike football. You have been conditioned to. You have not chosen to like or dislike chocolate. You have been conditioned to. You have not chosen to like or dislike your friends. You have been conditioned to.*

*You have been conditioned to respond the way that you respond. You did not choose the language that you speak, no matter how well you speak it. You did not choose the time or place that you were born. You did not choose your parents. You can tell yourself you did, but this doesn't mean you did. You didn't have the power to choose until long after you were born. You can tell yourself things are other than the way they are, and you can believe it, but it doesn't actually change the way things are. It only changes your relationship to them, and not in a fruitful way.*

*Everything is totally conditioned. Everything. Without exception. Even though we can never know in detail and specifically all the conditions that brought anything about we can know that everything has been brought about by a massive number of prior and current conditions. We can even also know that any specific act, event or situation is resting inextricably within a matrix of supporting conditions that reaches out and back without recognisable end in every conceivable direction. We can also see that every other act, event or situation is resting on the same 'infinite' matrix of conditions.*

*There is nothing random about cause and effect, about conditioning. One thing leads to another, inexorably. The only reason none of us know where our lives and actions are leading is because we are ignorant of most of the forces and factors at work. We are even ignorant of most of the information we have in our own unconscious mind. Many of us are racially prejudiced and don't know it. In fact, we all carry prejudices and assumptions we are unaware of, and they play their unseen part in our reactions and actions, making our experience exactly the way that it is.*

*If we carefully examine how any particular action, event or situation has come about we will soon get lost in ignorance of the details. Nevertheless we can still see that the originating matrix of causation behind it is far more extensive and inclusive than the details we can recognise.*

*Take your birth for example. Important as it was that your parents made love this is only a tiny part of the picture, pivotal though it was. In order for your parents to have had sex, even if one was not so willing, their parents had to have done so as well. So had theirs, and on and back through the whole ancestral lineage that has participated in your DNA. This is a lot of sex, and a lot of individuals upon whom your existence, and even your every action, decisions, feeling and thought depends. If just one of those couples had not coupled, you would not exist. You would never have had a thought or a feeling.*

*Significant though it is, your ancestral origins are only a small part of the necessary events and actions permitting you to be aware of these words: there is also my ancestral origins, those of the book retailer's, distributor's, publisher's, and printer's employees who in any way participated in them reaching your conscious awareness. Not to mention the many, many more people and the contribution they made to your life, my life, getting to the point that this can be happening.*

*Of course ancestral origins are not enough to bring this moment to be the way that it is. Take my marriage for example. I met my wife at a yoga workshop in England. From Australia she was visiting her mother because she was ill. She was a yoga teacher and had used my second book in her training. She wanted to attend the workshop but couldn't because it was full, with a long waiting list. She was due to return to Australia, but decided to stay longer to visit her other in hospital some more. On the last day she was told she could attend the workshop. Many people had to cancel for that to happen: many reasons in many different lives coalescing so that she could meet me.*

*Many would say that we were destined to meet. Of course we were. Yet for that destiny to be fulfilled all those other people had to cancel. For them to cancel something they wanted to do, and had paid for, strong, unexpected and probably unwelcome forces in each of their lives had to bring them to cancel: all of them. It seems like such a fluke, sheer chance that she had that opportunity to present herself to me as she did and invite me to Australia. It only seems that way because we are ignorant of the specific causal details that led to all of those cancellations. Each one of those cancellations was set up inexorably long before the moment of cancellation, but no-one could see it coming. No matter how much we know we always know very little of the details.*

*Yet it is also easy to write all those details off, or most of them, as mere coincidences. Yet actually every one of them happened because previously unrecognised forces and factors caused them to happen; forces and factors that rested on other forces and factors in a matrix deeply and inexorably embedded in a past unchangeable. They all had to happen, like everything that does actually happen.*

*The impression of being free to choose is strong and deep, and even necessary. We need to feel as though we play some part, and a significant one, in our lives. Yet when this is an imaginary part we are irresistibly dragged down into the swamp of insecurity, guilt, shame, pride, envy, anxiety, regret, arrogance, despair, hostility, resentment, blame, self-pity, contempt, hope, manipulation and exploitation.*

*Whenever we make a choice we do so on the basis of our, mainly unconscious, data evaluation. Our final, conscious, decision is always a result of many factors, internal and external, conscious and unconscious, known and unknowable, combining together in a specific and unique way. The way that they came together determined the choice that we make so that even though it was voluntary, and even though pondering and analysis did take place, that choice was the only one that could actually be made.*

*When you decide what to do on a Friday night it seems at first like you have many options. Certainly you consider many hypothetical options. Yet at a certain point you decide that you don't actually feel like going to the pub. You also realise that you don't want to watch TV. You certainly don't have the energy to read, and you know you don't feel like spending time with other people, and even though you're tempted to give your ex a call, you know that way leads to rejection. So you settle down to a movie. All choices are like this. We imagine a number of options, and then we process them. One of them always comes out as the best available, and therefore the only actual option.*

*We take it, and even though we take it voluntarily without coercion, we take it because we have to, because it seems to offer more in that moment than the others do.*

*Perhaps you live not far from the sea, or you have gone there for a holiday. You are not alone and willingly share with your family or friends the responsibility of domestic duties. After a funpacked evening of playful drinking and supportive snacking you volunteer to clear up, but in the morning. As everyone goes to bed grateful for your generosity, you slip into sleep caressed by it. In the morning you wake up with a thundering headache before anyone else. Outside the sun is pouring down, already high in the sky, and your first, powerful impulse is to head for the beach. As you reach for the door you remember your generous offer and the pride that you took in it. You also remember that everyone but you has already done one round of clearing up. You realise that they are all asleep and may not wake for a while. A small tussle takes place in your mind, as your desire is confronted with your obligations and your sense of responsibility. Eventually one of them wins, the one that settles this tussle most effectively, and it is not always the same one.*

*Within the deep attachment that the human mind has to free will it is assumed that if our response to such situations is totally conditioned and we truly have no free will, if we actually are unable to initiate or genuinely determine anything then there is no reason to take responsibility for our actions. This is a mistaken assumption for a number of reasons.*

*First and most obviously the tendency and willingness to take responsibility for actions is not something we can actually choose, even if we tell ourselves we can. We only tell ourselves that we can from the unrecognised or unexamined assumption of free will. Our willingness or unwillingness to take responsibility for actions is a function of our conditioning on the one hand, and circumstance on the other. Even those who pride themselves for taking*



*responsibility for actions and even usually do, do not in fact always do so. While those who feel no obligation to do so nevertheless very often do take responsibility for actions.*

*Second, anyone who truly sees clearly the totally conditioned nature of all action will be deeply disinclined to avoid taking responsibility. All actions have a final instrument. To take responsibility for an action is to acknowledge the undeniable fact of immediate instrumentality. To refuse to take that responsibility would be a denial of instrumentality of, or participation in, action. It would be a lie.*

*Moreover the assumption of volition, or the belief in free will, which is shared by almost all human beings, does not lead automatically to a willingness to take responsibility. Many are those who assume they have free will, who only too willingly avoid taking responsibility for actions. There is no direct correlation between the nature of our beliefs and our actions. Our actions are determined by the interaction of external circumstance with all of our internal conditioning, not just our conscious beliefs. The outcome of this continual, mostly unconscious, interaction is neither fixed, predictable nor consistent.*

*Nevertheless, the fact remains that taking responsibility for 'one's' actions is a necessary requirement of social acceptability, and rightly so. Not only because it acknowledges the fact of instrumentality, but also because to do otherwise is to attempt to deny what is actually happening.*

*If you hear me say something, you hear the words because i speak them: the words come from my mouth, and no other. I am their instrument. To take responsibility is to acknowledge that. If my words offend you my responsibility for speaking them does not have to make me feel guilty about your reaction. It is not that i can dismiss your reaction as being a matter of your choice, it is a matter of your conditioning. Rather it is that i know both that i could not have*

*not said what i did, and you could not have not reacted the way that you did. So, even though i might not like it that you are offended i will not feel guilty or ashamed. I may well, however, take account of your sensibility as a reminder to be careful the next time i speak on that subject in your presence.*

*Perhaps the most fraught objection to the more intimate implications of the totally conditioned nature of all phenomena is that without the free will that we most definitely experience we are bereft of significance, meaning and dignity. Actually, when we see clearly the totally conditioned nature of all phenomena we find ourselves blessed with a significance, dignity and meaning far greater than any that can be based on free will and personal accomplishment. For what we have to see equally clearly, is that everything we have done had to be done in order for everthing else that is happening to be happening in eaxctly the way that it is: which it is.*

*What this means is that the universe, just as it is, in its awesome sophistication and grandeur, is no less qualitatively dependent on us, than we are on it. The universe depends on everything within it, including our every action feeling, choice and thought. Our every thought, choice, feeling and action is actually required for and by the whole universe to be the way that it is. This is an awesome contribution that each one of us is making, all the time. There can be no greater significance, dignity and meaning than to be absolutely indispensable to the whole universe, just as you are: as you are.*

*Nevertheless human experience is by nature illusory. What you take to be the world, and everything in it including your body and mind, is actually only a simulation generated in the conscious mind. It is generated there by the brain on the basis of its historical sensory input. In order to be able to generate a coherent context for the decision making upon which so much human activity depends, your brain must analyse, categorise, prioritise and compress huge amounts of sensory data each second, and then every second thereafter. Of*

*course, a lot of that information is repeated, yet much of it is constantly changing.*

*While dozing on a train the rhythm of motion and its sounds may be more or less consistent, as too may be the distribution and appearance of your neighbours. Yet each one of those, as well as yourself, is moving, even if only a little, and many of them, perhaps all if you are in Italy, are talking. The amount of varying information is hundreds of thousands of times more than the amount of information the conscious mind can handle at once.*

*In between the conscious mind and sensory input, which is between five million and five hundred thousand times more, lies the process of simulation. The massive amounts of data entering the brain are interpreted, on the basis of past experience, so that you can make conscious assessments and decisions.*

*Nevertheless, it turns out, physical action, such as raising your arm or crooking your finger is not as simple as it seems, especially in relation to your conscious mind. Brain research has shown that the initiation of a motor command in the brain actually precedes the conscious intention to take action by a little less than half a second. That's actually quite a long time, but the main, startling, point is that conscious intention is not the initiator of our actions and movements. What actually happens is that the conscious mind receives information about motor activity in the nerves before the action is fulfilled and processes it as if a decision, and then refers it back in time to make it seem like it came first.*

*This is a startling discovery. The fact that it has also been discovered that we can learn to inhibit such an impulse before it actually takes effect does not erase the undeniability of the deception played on us by our conscious minds, convincing us that it is by its power that actions arise, when it is not. Actions are arising on the basis of the unconscious processing of huge amounts of*

*data in the unconscious mind, on the basis of our current, historical and genetic conditioning. What is potentially disturbing about this is that we are not, and cannot be, in control of our unconscious processes. To be in control of something we have to be aware of it. We are not, and cannot be, aware of the unconscious processing upon which are actions and reactions, which includes our feelings and thoughts, are based.*

*What this means is that the conscious mind, whatever else it may be, is an illusionist. Amongst the tricks it plays, so that we can navigate and survive, is creating the illusions of volition and selfhood. This is actually a necessary part of the simulation (illusion) produced in the conscious mind. The sense of self is the core referent for all the other navigational criteria that give significance to our neurological simulation. The self is the (imaginary) centre around which the simulation is constructed. The simulation is not constructed on behalf of the self, it is constructed on behalf of the body. The sense of self is simply an expedient tool for organising and fertilising the simulation. Implicit in the sense of self, as an independent counterpoint to all that is external and other, is the sense of autonomy or agency, at the heart of which is the sense of free will.*

*Freewill, autonomy, independence, agency and self-hood are all parts, and crucial ones, of the simulation. Human beings are unique in many ways, that all rest on the awesome sophistication of our nervous systems. As our perceptual and motor scope evolved behavioural instincts could and had to be discarded. As they were we became more dependent on each other. Unable to run away from danger soon after birth like other animals we need the close protection not only of our mother, but of a powerful, dedicated social support system: family, community, tribe.*

*Yet this kind of dependence is expensive, in both energy and resources. To ensure our survival, by ensuring our protection, we have to conform to the*

*tribal conventions. These conventions, like the way that we walk and the language that we talk, are not programmed into our DNA. We have to learn them, from our tribe.*

*In order to win the security of tribal protection we have a deep impulse to conform, to make ourselves acceptable. To do this we have to learn what is acceptable. In order to ensure biological survival we have to secure social acceptability. At the same time as we encounter and learn about the physical environment of earth, water, fire and air, we are learning about the social environment of people, custom, expectation and obligation.*

*Agency, the impression of which depends on the impression of free will, is fundamental to human society as we know it. It is the only way that we can be held accountable for our actions. If we cannot be held accountable, if we do not take responsibility, for our actions the tribe is at risk of any maverick tendency we may have. The Freudian analysis is similar, within which the ego is the necessary response to the pressure that socialisation sets up against our deeper biological drives so that we are not in continuous conflict with ourselves<sup>1</sup>.*

*At the same time the sophistication of our nervous system continuously presents us with consciously recognised possibilities, or options. This is central to our sense of agency. While our actions are actually generated from the unconscious, on the basis of current, historical and genetic data, in order for us to be able to be held accountable, and to take responsibility, we need to feel as though we are consciously and freely choosing them. At least the socially significant ones. Agency, autonomy, independence and free will are all fundamental psychological and social requirements of conscious awareness. Yet they are all illusory, and need to be known to be so if we are to enjoy a*

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<sup>1</sup> unconscious repression replacing conscious conflict

*fulfilling, responsible life free from the anguish of insecurity, guilt, shame, pride, envy, anxiety, regret, arrogance, despair, hostility, resentment, blame, self-pity, contempt, wishful thinking, manipulation and exploitation.*

*Even when we see very clearly the totally conditioned nature of all phenomena, not least our sense of independent, autonomous agency, this does not eradicate our need for a compressed simulation in the conscious mind. Nor, therefore, does it do away with the impression of agency. What it can do is allow us to function through the simulation of agency consciously, so that we do not get caught by it in the fruitless debacle of the blame game wherein we use blame, shame and guilt as tools to manipulate ourself and others.*

*Conscious recognition of the illusory nature of volition and the self totally transforms day to day experience. We are no longer able to indulge the painful feelings of insecurity, guilt, shame, pride, envy, anxiety, regret, arrogance, despair, hostility, resentment, blame, self-pity, contempt, hope, manipulation and exploitation that may nevertheless continue.*

*Instead we are engaged by the world playfully and willingly as an actor upon the stage of the world, whole-heartedly and appreciatively playing the part ascribed to us in the limited scenes we have been given, knowing that without our part the Play itself could not even exist. This is a joyful state to be in, and one that can embrace difficulty and tragedy as readily as it does ease and triumph. The rich flow of life is no longer resisted by the proprietorial impulse and the disturbing coating of insecurity and doubt that it generates at the centre of conventional social interaction, and individual self reflection.*



Godfri's is a voice that breaks all the rules. A voice that has been forged in the bitter sweet fires of deep selfenquiry. A voice that has been tempered on the anvil of the guru, and seasoned in response to the questions of thousands of seekers. A voice that shouts and swears as freely, as easily as it sighs and sings. A voice that plays freely with the possibilities of being human: while grounding the clearest teachings of advaita, yoga, tantra and zen in the challenging particularities of daily life.

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