

## **Musings on Music and Meaning**

*Anjan Goswami*

I was recently engrossed in a magnificent piece by Bhimsen Joshi – the raga Bilaskhani Todi. Its melancholic strains set me in a contemplative, somber mood. Legend has it that the song was composed by Bilas Khan, Tansen's son, during his father's funeral, which possibly explains the profound sense of loss infused within its notes. Seeking a change of atmosphere, I transitioned to raga Amrithavarshini by Balamuralikrishna, and it was as if the clouds had parted, filling me with a divine tranquility.

It's evident that music has the power to alter our internal state. Scientifically speaking, music can either stimulate or dampen activity in our brain's reward pathways, influence neurotransmitter levels like serotonin and dopamine, and even modulate our cortisol, the stress hormone. Essentially, we can "engineer" our moods, using music as a tool. But it begs the question: Are these artificially induced emotions genuine?

This thought leads me back to the ancient teachings of Shiva, the ancient sage, who purportedly discovered that specific breathing techniques and dance movements could also elicit comparable emotional and physiological responses. If we consider these findings through a modern lens, we're essentially manipulating our biochemistry. Shiva's conclusion was profound: life, in its essence, might be but a play of biochemical reactions, a Maya or illusion.

Reflecting upon this, the nature of our existence and the pursuit of pleasure, sorrow, and survival come into question. Is our journey merely dictated by the ebbs and flows of chemicals in our brain? This existential quandary reminds me of a statement made by the brilliant Stephen Hawking towards the end of his life, where he posited the possibility of life being devoid of an intrinsic purpose.

Yet, amidst this existential conundrum, wisdom from the Bhagavad Gita offers solace. It counsels, "We have a right to perform our prescribed duties, but we are not entitled to the fruits of our actions." In this perspective, the quest might not be for overarching meaning or purpose, but to act with sincerity and commitment, undeterred by the biochemistry steering our emotions and choices.

**The End**