

## THE PARADOX OF GRACE AND SELF-RELIANT EFFORT

(KRIPĀ AND PURUSHĀRTHA)

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Even among those who recognize the spiritual nature of humanity and the possibility of our knowing directly the Reality, which is hidden within the universe and ourselves, there are two schools of thought with regard to the methods by which this knowledge may be obtained. According to one, our spiritual progress depends entirely upon the grace of God, or *Kripā*, as it is called in Sanskrit. This grace descends upon the devotee due to the beneficence of God and is not due necessarily to any merit earned by him through self-reliant effort, or *Purushārtha*. According to the other school, the descent of grace depends entirely upon our self-reliant effort and the karma generated by it, and therefore the grace of God really has no place in our spiritual unfoldment and its consummation—Self-Realization.

The truth underlying both these extreme positions transcends both views and reconciles them in a deeper perception of the spiritual facts of existence. This paradox is really a *dvandva*, or pair of opposites, which the intellect poses for us owing to our limited vision. It can be completely resolved only when we are able to transcend the intellect and perceive that reality from which the *dvandva* is derived by a process of polarization.

As our attitude in this matter is bound to profoundly affect our life and the means we adopt for unfolding our spiritual nature, it is necessary for us to consider this question carefully and arrive at definite conclusions if we are to avoid drifting, which always results when our mind is confused and uncertain about the course of action that we should take in a particular matter. We may not be able to know the real truth hidden within the paradox, yet by clarifying our ideas and understanding the problem, we can steer a middle course with faith and confidence.

That the grace of God sometimes descends suddenly and raises the devotee to high states of exaltation and enlightenment is a fact of experience, and it is useless to deny it. But the impression that it descends without any cause, which is widely prevalent among the followers of certain schools of Bhakti Yoga, cannot be considered as quite correct. This idea cannot be accepted as it is, because it implies that God has favorites and His grace is showered upon them in an arbitrary manner.

The wide prevalence of the idea and its unquestioning acceptance by a large number of aspirants may be attributed to two causes. One is that it frees the aspirant from all personal responsibility in the difficult task of unfolding his or her spiritual

nature and the necessity of undertaking the systematic self-discipline, which this requires. It accords with the general tendency in human beings to get something for nothing without paying its fair price. The other cause is that on most occasions the grace of God descends upon the devotee rather suddenly without any apparent immediate cause. It does not generally follow periods of strenuous endeavor but comes without any warning when the devotee is comparatively relaxed and expects it the least.

In order to understand these phenomena and to account for them on the basis of our knowledge concerning the inner realities of existence, let us consider very briefly the few fundamental facts that determine the events and their sequence in the life of an individual. These facts are well known to students of Theosophy and therefore only a brief reference to them should suffice.

The first and the most basic factor in the life of a human being is the Divine Plan and its unfolding according to the Divine Law of unfoldment—generally referred to as *Ritam* in Sanskrit. In its broad outline, the sequence of events in any manifested system is determined by this unfolding process in the Divine Mind.

Within the broad framework of this Plan and its orderly unfoldment are evolving countless Monads<sup>1</sup> in order to unfold their spiritual nature and to become capable of taking more and more important parts in the drama of the universe. The evolution of these Monads does not take place in a haphazard manner but according to the eternal Divine pattern, which is hidden within each Monad and is unique in the case of each one. This eternal Divine pattern within each Monad also exercises an inexorable influence on its evolution and to a considerable extent determines the course and nature of its lives, especially in the advanced stages. How the lives of countless Monads are coordinated, how their individual uniqueness is able to find expression, how they are able to fulfill their appointed destiny in spite of all these complications—all these are fascinating mysteries of spiritual life of which the materialist can have no conception. But it should be clear to the student that it is only in a Cosmos, at the basis of which there is only One Supreme Consciousness and one guiding Power, that this is possible.

The third important factor which determines the events and course of lives in the case of each human being is their Karma, the totality of impressions and potentialities produced by the forces they have set in motion by their thoughts, emotions and actions in their present and past lives. These accumulated potential forces—called *Vāsanās* in the *Yoga-Sūtras*—can be precipitated in the form of experiences and faculties

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<sup>1</sup> *Monad*: a word of Greek derivation meaning an indivisible unit. In Theosophical writings, a technical term used to refer to the immortal part of a human being that reincarnates.

in a particular life only when appropriate conditions for their working out are present, as has been pointed out in aphorism IV-8 of the *Yoga-Sūtras*:

From these (accumulated *Vāsanās*) only those tendencies are manifested for which the conditions are favorable.

These favorable or appropriate conditions are provided in the *prārabdha*<sup>2</sup> that each human being brings with them in each incarnation, and their external life has to be lived more or less within the framework of this karmic pattern.

It is necessary to dwell momentarily on one aspect of the law of Karma, which has special bearing on the particular question that we are considering in this article, namely, the relation of grace and self-reliant effort and their respective functions in the life of an aspirant. It is frequently observed in natural phenomena that even with the repeated and continuous application of a force or stimulus in any direction, the effect of such an application does not appear immediately. It is only in the case of chemical, physical, and mechanical phenomena that the effect follows the cause immediately, though in these fields, too, this does not always happen. But in biological phenomena, which are associated with life, we begin to notice a definite and considerable time lag. If you subject an organism to any kind of stimulation or action, the effect need not appear immediately, although each stimulus produces its corresponding effect all the same. The continued stimulation leads, as it were, to the “piling up” of effects in the invisible realms of Nature without any outward expression; then suddenly, all or a part of the accumulated effects finds expression in a kind of crisis.

It is this phenomenon which makes it appear as if a major or minor crisis had suddenly appeared from nowhere without any apparent cause. But the cause of this apparently causeless phenomenon is simply that we have not been able to see the effects accumulating somewhere. In a world based on exact natural laws, the effects that are suddenly produced in the final visible crisis—without any apparent or immediate cause—must be mathematically equivalent to the totality of causes that have produced them. It is only the time lag and the internal accumulation of effects that gives the misleading impression of a causeless event.

This law operates almost universally in the realm of the mind and frequently gives rise to the wrong impression that things happen without any cause. Thus we see that the circumstances and conditions in which human beings find themselves seem to have no relation with the causes which they have set going in the present life. And so, to those who do not know the law of Karma and Reincarnation, life appears very arbitrary and frequently unjust and cruel. Similarly, the descent of grace, which

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<sup>2</sup> *Prarabdha*: A Sanskrit term indicating that portion of a person’s accumulated past-life karma that has been selected to be worked out in the present incarnation.

frequently takes place suddenly, seems to have no relation with any previous efforts, and it appears as if the grace of God descends without any reason, just to satisfy the whims and desires of some fortunate people.

Another argument, which is sometimes put forward to show that our spiritual progress is due solely to *Kripā*, or Divine grace, is that even if we consider *Kripā* as having been caused by self-surrender and such other practices that are part of self-discipline on the *Bhakti-mārga*,<sup>3</sup> these cannot be considered as forms of self-reliant effort, or *Purushārtha*. This is again a misconception. The attempt to empty yourself and to surrender successfully to God requires greater effort and is a far more difficult task than other kinds of efforts which are of a more positive character, just as the creation of vacuum in a vessel is more difficult than filling it with something. The production of a high vacuum in a closed vessel is one of the most difficult operations in scientific work and requires a very elaborate technique, while filling it up with some gas is quite easy. So self-surrender and such other apparently negative<sup>4</sup> practices on the path of devotion should not be considered as outside the realm of *Purushārtha* but as some of its highest forms. In fact, the highest kind of *Samādhi*, which is called *Dharma-Megha-Samādhi* (*Yoga-Sutra* IV-29), is nothing but the supreme and final effort of the Yogi to empty himself completely and dissolve the last vestige of the “I” consciousness before he can attain Nirvāna, or *Kaivalya*.

It will be seen therefore that the well-known techniques of Bhakti Yoga involve as much well directed effort, and setting in motion of causes, as any other kind of self-discipline. The grace of God, which follows at its appropriate time, can be considered, at least partly, as the effect or karmic result of causes thus set in motion. If the expansion of consciousness which follows the practice of *Samādhi* can be considered as the direct effect of causes set in motion by the Yogi, there is no reason why the ecstasy caused by the descent of grace should not also be considered as the effect of causes set in motion by the devotee. The fact that there is generally a time lag does not invalidate the causal relation between the two. There is also a time lag in the case of positive efforts like meditation; results do not generally appear immediately after the effort. Nothing seems to happen for a long time, and then—abruptly—without any apparent cause or previous indication, the relaxation that follows after a supreme effort may bring about the desired result. Similarly, in the development of devotion nothing seems to happen as you go on surrendering yourself, praying intensely, and emptying yourself to the extreme limit. Then, suddenly, there either is a descent of grace which raises your consciousness to a state of exaltation, or He fills you with His

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<sup>3</sup> The path of devotion as it relates to Bhakti Yoga.

<sup>4</sup> In this context the terms *positive* and *negative* are not to be understood in a pejorative sense, but rather as indicating the *presence* or *absence*, respectively, of a state or set of conditions within the mind of the spiritual aspirant.

indescribable influence and draws you closer to Himself in a more intimate bond of union. Or you find yourself temporarily with a Great One who shows you the method whereby you can easily bring about the desired result.

The important point to note is that while you were making all these efforts at self-surrender etc., forces were accumulating somewhere within yourself, though you were not aware of them, and it is the accumulation of these forces to the critical limit which brings about the sudden and sometimes unexpected result. Before the development of modern scientific knowledge, people thought that a bolt of lightning was a freak of Nature without any cause but now we know that it is caused by the accumulation of opposite electrical charges on the cloud above and the earth below.

The grace of God need not necessarily express itself from within the mind and heart of the aspirant and take the form of exaltation or expansion of consciousness. It can find expression in many other ways depending upon the need, temperament, and stage of development of the aspirant. For example, the aspirant may temporarily come into direct personal contact with a highly spiritual person and may derive immense spiritual stimulation from such a contact. Great emphasis is laid in most Hindu schools of Bhakti Yoga on the value of personal contact with a great soul and what such a contact can do for the spiritual unfoldment of the aspirant. But like all such ideas which embody truth of great value and significance, it has been grossly vulgarized and is even exploited by all kinds of unscrupulous people who pose as Mahātmās and claim to pass on all kinds of mysterious spiritual benefits to their disciples.

There is no doubt that personal contact with a great soul is highly stimulating for our spiritual nature. A Guru can help his disciple a great deal in overcoming his difficulties and unfolding his spiritual potentialities. But he can do so only if he is in direct contact with the inner realities and sources of power, and it is a big "if." Most of those who pose as Mahātmās are merely learned people or people who have been able to develop some minor psychic power, and in many cases not even that. Their claim to Mahātmāship rests solely on the external paraphernalia and claptrap of religious life.

The following four aphorisms taken from the *Bhakti-Sūtras* of *Nārada* throw some light on the conception of *Kripā* in Bhakti Yoga and will be found to be relevant to the question we are considering:

But that (*Bhakti*) is obtained principally by the grace of the Great Ones or by the grace of God in the slightest degree. (38)

But the company of the great is difficult to gain. It is difficult to say how and when the aspirant may be able to come into personal contact with the great. But once obtained this personal association with the great is infallible in its operation. (39)

And the company of the great is gained by the grace of God alone. (40)

Because there is no distinction between Him and those whose consciousness is established within the Divine consciousness. (41)

The above four aphorisms bring out another aspect of the great mystery of Divine grace. What has been said above with regard to the paradox of grace and self-reliant effort was meant to show that neither grace nor self-reliant effort can be the sole cause of our spiritual progress; the two can be related and be considered merely as two aspects of the same process, as in the case of the law of Karma. The tendency to divide truth into watertight compartments, and to make different points of view mutually exclusive, is the bane of religion and philosophy and also, perhaps, of science. We always tend to think that *either* this is true *or* that is true and then take a side, instead of considering the truth in any matter as an integration of this and that, which is found in a higher point of view or a deeper understanding of the problem. We Theosophists should set about the task of finding this deeper understanding and higher point of view in all conflicting ideas and ideologies. This work is part of that alchemy which converts purely intellectual knowledge into wisdom.

The descent of Divine grace, as a result of the accumulation of spiritual forces set in motion by self-reliant effort, does not mean that we have unraveled the mystery of grace or that there can be no independent Divine action in relation to an individual irrespective of what they have done in the matter. He would be a poor sort of God if He were merely a titular Presiding Deity of a manifested system which is run on purely mechanistic lines and in which everything happens according to the interaction of a number of rigid laws of Nature with no room for free Divine Will or for the unfettered flow of Divine love and power. Such a mechanistic conception of the universe, in which God would really be redundant, will not be very different from the mechanistic conception of modern science. This is certainly not the Theosophical conception of God, the universe, and the relation that exists between the two.

It was pointed out in the very beginning that Karma is not the only factor in the evolution of an individual. The Divine Plan for the universe, as well as for each individual soul, are also two very important factors in this evolution, which profoundly and mysteriously influence the unfoldment of consciousness and potential faculties. These two factors alone imply the exertion of a silent but relentless pressure of Divine Will in the unfoldment of the universe, as well as each individual Monad, so that the Divine Plan may be fulfilled in the appointed way. It is this invisible exertion of the Divine Will in manifestation that is expressed in mystical statements about this Divine Will "which mightily and sweetly ordereth all things." If there is this kind of Divine action, which transcends the law of Karma, then there is also nothing inherently unreasonable in the doctrine that the descent of *Kripā* can be *ahetukī*, i.e., irrespective of any causes set in motion by the devotee. But we must try to understand

the doctrine in its profound significance and not make it merely an excuse for not doing anything for our spiritual unfoldment, expecting the plums of spiritual life to fall into our lap without any effort on our part.

In considering the nature of Divine grace, it is not necessary to consider only its expression in particular cases on particular occasions. The whole relation of God and the human is, from a higher point of view, permeated by Divine grace. Is it not a proof of His unbounded grace that He has created us in His own likeness? Is it not His grace that He has endowed us with the potentiality of growing and becoming like Him? Is it not His grace that He enfolds us in His infinite Love and patiently waits for eons of time for us to grow like Him and share His Love, Power, and Knowledge? Is it not His grace that He does not force upon us anything and leaves us to grow freely in our individual uniqueness? Is it not His grace that He gives us whatever we want, things of the world when, under the influence of illusion, we want things of the world and even Himself when we get fed up with these illusory things and want Him and Him alone? Is it not His grace that He never forces Himself into our heart and enters only when we invite Him wholeheartedly to do so? Is it not His grace that He always brings us back to the right path when we go astray through compromises with evil, so that we can never lose the battle of life and our Divine heritage is secure in His keeping? We can see innumerable signs of His grace and beneficence and love if we have the necessary wisdom and devotion within us and do not insist that His grace means that He should come and stand before us whenever we want without our doing anything. This will be violating the elementary principle of justice which should give to each individual what he deserves. The perfection of Godhood includes not only love and beneficence but also justice and impartiality.

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