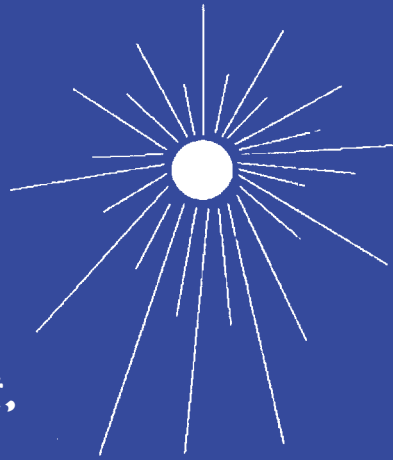


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Insight Into  
**SELF-EFFORT  
AND DIVINE GRACE**

by Swami Jyotirmayananda

At one time or another in life, most people begin to reflect upon whether they truly have freedom to act or whether they are just predestined by the past. In *Yoga Vasistha*, Sage Vasistha tells Rama that self-effort will lead one to Liberation and that an aspirant has infinite freedom

in that direction. It is past karma that hampers your present movement. What you consider destiny is that which you have created through your self-effort of the past, and you have all the resources you need to overcome the past and create a golden future for yourself.

You should not worry about the past or regret what has been. That past is already gone. In Yoga, “past” refers not only to what is past within this embodiment, but to what has occurred in your many previous lives. There is a vast karmic storehouse—called *sanchita karma*—that exists within the unconscious of every individual. From that *sanchita*, a portion, called *prarabdha* (fructifying karma), has given rise to your present embodiment.

*Prarabdha* does not determine every detail of your life in this embodiment—it just gives you a general outline. Just as a story or a novel is based on a general plot outline designed by the author, so too, your *prarabdha* has given you a general plot for the unfoldment of your life. For instance, your birth family, the general circumstances that will prevail in that family, certain important events that will occur between birth and death, and your basic physical makeup are determined by *prarabdha*.

You should not develop the idea that you have been pressured or forced by others to become what you have become in life. It is your own actions and thoughts of the past that are bringing different situations to you now. While *prarabdha karma* has given you a general outline, *purusharta*, or self-effort, gives you the possibility to improve upon that outline.

For example, suppose *prarabdha* puts you into a state of adversity. No matter how hard you try, you do not succeed in your business, and after many years you still have not attained a firm

economic footing. Should you allow yourself to be frustrated and stop striving to make things better with the idea, “Now let me wait until an astrologer tells me that it is the right time to work. Until then, I will just relax.” That idea is not philosophical. It is based on ignorance.

When, in spite of your best effort, you do not succeed, you should not blame destiny and allow yourself to just stay miserable. Rather you must learn to consider that situation of adversity as a challenge for your internal advancement. Do not be thwarted. No matter what your *prarabdha* might have been, you can, by adjusting your angle of vision, mold that *prarabdha* to your advantage.

If *prarabdha* brings prosperity, and that prosperity makes you more humble, then you have utilized your *prarabdha* in an effective way. If *prarabdha* brings you adversity, and because of that adversity you have developed patience, endurance, and willpower, you have utilized that *prarabdha* well and exercised self-effort. So, no matter what might have been your *prarabdha* from the past, it should not worry you if you continue your self-effort.

### The Four Purposes of Life

The Yogic scriptures present a general plan for effective self-effort, or *purusharta*. There are four objectives or purposes of life:

**Dharma—the ethical value of life:** Your *purusharta* should be directed towards cultivating

ethical qualities. Any attainment that you pursue, transgressing the laws of ethics, is shallow. Unethical attainments are like beautiful houses that have termites dwelling in them. Without *dharma*, the superstructure of your progress and success means very little.

This applies to societies as well as to individuals. If a whole society progresses in a material way, but there is no foundation in *dharma*, then all that progress is just an external show. Internally the society or the individual is being eaten up by termites—termites of worry, tension, stress, and moral degeneration. So *dharma* must be the foundation of your self-effort.

**Artha—the material value of life:** Everyone must strive to be secure materially. That does not mean you must be fabulously rich, but you must have sufficient means to make the effort that *dharma* requires you to make.

**Kama—the vital value of life:** *Kama* motivates you to enter into family and to have children and grandchildren; to have friends, and to interact with people around you and with society as a whole. If the laws of *dharma* are not transgressed, *kama* will bring a joyous and harmonious sense of fulfillment.

**Moksha—Liberation:** But all these—*dharma*, *artha* and *kama*—are means to an end. *Moksha* or Liberation is your ultimate goal, and that goal must constantly be kept before your mind. If you are sincerely interested in promot-

ing the best in life, the central task before you is the attainment of Liberation. That is the task that requires your unfailing self-effort.

In striving for Liberation, you should not rely on astrologers or palmists. If a palmist tells you, “Oh, you will not attain Enlightenment in this life—maybe in two lives from now,” you may unnecessarily become discouraged and develop a mental complex that, because it is not written in your destiny, no matter what you do you will not attain Liberation.

Liberation, or anything related to your deeper spiritual movement, is not determined by stars. It is determined by your self-effort, and in that domain you have infinite freedom. You can mold every situation to your advantage if you constantly direct your self-effort towards self-improvement. The world exists to aid your self-improvement. In His infinite intelligence and omniscience, God presents every situation necessary for your soul to prosper in a mystic way.



**Directing  
Your Self-Effort  
Towards  
Enlightenment**

Keeping this in view, you must qualify yourself for the project of attaining Enlightenment. Your life should flow towards cultivating discrimination (between the Self and the not-self), dispassion, aspiration for Self-realization, and all the fragrant Divine qualities that adorn an advanced spiritual personality.

In this project, as well as in every project that you undertake, develop deep within yourself an understanding that you have limitless resources. Have faith in yourself.

Seek the guidance of someone who is intelligent, efficient, and skilled—an authority on matters necessary for your success. If you receive proper guidance, economize your energy and time, plan your project in an effective manner, and continue striving with persistence and patience, your self-effort will lead you to success.

Be rational in your efforts. Suppose you are five feet tall and have brown eyes. However, someone tells you that if you became seven feet tall and had blue eyes, life would be more exciting. If you believe them and put forth great effort to achieve that goal, your project would be irrational. It has no real meaning for your life.

Further, you should not allow yourself to be under stress as you strive to attain your goals. Do not count the hours until the project is completed, or dream of how wonderful it will be when you no longer have to make any self-effort. With that attitude, even if you complete the project, you will be too mentally exhausted to gain any internal benefit from your success. Rather, when you perform any action, do it in the spirit of Karma Yoga. Do your best, but let your mind be relaxed about whether or not you succeed.

Ego should not be allowed to dominate your self-effort. If ego dominates, you are always unbal-

anced in your work—constantly swinging from elation to depression, unable to sustain your best efforts under frustrating conditions. There are always many factors in this world that are not under your control. Suppose you did everything possible to construct a building in an excellent manner, and suddenly a plane comes hurtling down from space and just crashes right into it. Should you become drowned in a state of despair? You should not. You performed your self-effort—and that fact should give you an internal fulfillment that cannot be touched by external failure or success.



### The Central Project: Self-Realization

When your self-effort is directed to the highest project—Self-realization—you must be vigilant and introspective about handling the moods of your mind. Watch yourself day by day. Are you breaking the chains of attachment? Are you learning not to lean upon others? Are you feeling an increasing sense of freedom? If you are not, then you are not attending upon that central project with sufficient self-effort.

As time passes by, your inner spirit should feel free, unencumbered. Your mind should feel more and more relaxed. You should be able to enjoy the sweetness of surrender to God and increasing inner tranquility. If those blessings are not unfolding in your personality, but, rather, life is

just giving you increasing stress, burden, and a sense of confusion, be aware that you need to make greater self-effort.

All efforts you make for external success must be subservient to the demands of inner unfoldment, and must pave the way for your inner growth. If not, then you become a materialist. You can conquer the whole world, but if you lose your soul you have not made any attainment at all.

On the other hand, you may have little to be proud of in the material world, and yet, like Mahatma Gandhi, you may influence an entire country, and present a great ideal to be emulated all over the world. It is not external attainment that makes you great; it is your inner unfoldment.

Remember that you have eternity before you. You do not have to race for Enlightenment. What is important is that you take the first steps on the path of right self-effort and then remain relaxed as you pursue a persistent, patient movement of increasing accomplishment.

You do not have to wait until something dramatic happens to be joyous. When you are making the right self-effort, every day will bring an inner joy—whether externally you succeed or not. To feel the Divine Presence, to enjoy Divine sustenance, to possess clarity of intellect, and to attain that state in which intellect blooms into intuitional Enlightenment—these are the objectives for the most fascinating project of self-effort.

It is your self-effort that draws Divine Grace and leads you to the ultimate goal—Self-realization. Once you become Self-realized there is no need for self-effort. You view the whole world as an amazing Divine drama.



### Insight into Divine Grace

In the course of spiritual movement, a person may often become confused about the relationship between self-effort and the act of Divine Grace. For people who have not yet developed a deeper understanding, the idea of Grace implies halting all self-effort. For example, an unemployed person reads a book on Divine Grace and then says, “Why should I bother to look for work? If I am meant to work, a job will just come to me. Someone will appear and say, ‘Here’s a perfect job for you.’ That is how Grace operates.”

Yet when the same person sits down to eat, he never says that Grace will cause the food to jump into his mouth! You never wait for Grace to bring you the things that your ego finds intensely interesting. If you discover something you like, you go after it with all your energy. But when the slightest obstacle hinders you, you start invoking Grace; and if you don’t get what you want, you assert that God’s Grace is a myth. You must understand that God exists as the indwelling reality in every person. To get God’s Grace you should never stop your effort, but rather continue to strive according to your capacity.

When you gain a deeper insight into Grace you naturally start putting forth effort in your life; you don’t just sit around brooding over a task that confronts you. You remark with a smile, “Even if it appears momentous I will do my best—and God within me will do the rest.” With this kind of attitude you will find your life filled with success. But when you stop your effort, relying entirely on Divine Grace, you have misunderstood.

God’s Grace operates through your intellect, through your mind, through your personality. Whenever you are exerting your effort in life, it is Divine Grace that is guiding your actions in that direction. As you do your best, it is God within Who prompts you.

## Four Aspects of Grace

**Ishwara Kripa:** According to the scriptures, Grace has four aspects. The first is called *Ishwara Kripa*, or the Grace of God. This refers to the Divine assistance that comes to your rescue when you encounter a baffling situation with which you are unable to cope.

The biblical story of Moses at the Red Sea is an illustration of this. In his efforts to lead his people out of bondage, Moses encounters the Red Sea surging before him, and the horses of Pharaoh in rapid pursuit behind. Moses did not know what would happen, but he did know that God was with him; so he determined to do his best and go as far as his effort would take him. Then, by an act of Divine Grace, the Red

Sea divided, dry land appeared, and the Israelites were saved.

You have probably experienced the Divine Hand many times during your life. Perhaps you momentarily lost control of your car in rush hour and barely escaped with your life. It was an act of Divine Grace that saved your life. Or maybe you had an important plane to catch, but couldn’t because of a traffic jam on the way to the airport. Your bitter feelings quickly turned joyous when you learned that the plane was hijacked. It was God’s Grace again that obstructed your plans to board the plane.

If your mind was highly sensitive, you would perceive that God’s Grace operates at every moment and at every place. Consider your body for a moment. Have you ever thought about how your nervous system works? How is it that you live as long as you do with a brain so tender that just one blow to the head can obliterate all your attainments in a moment? It is Divine Grace that enables you to live on despite all the inimical forces that threaten the life of your body and personality.

**Guru Kripa:** The second kind of Grace is *Guru Kripa* or the Grace of Guru. When an aspirant develops an eagerness to attain Liberation and approaches a Guru to offer his service, he soon falls under the influence of an amazing hand that sustains his movement in whatever he does. He is able to overcome temptations, endure adversities, and keep a poised mind during difficult situations. This aspect of Divine Grace that re-

moves impediments on your way and endows you with willpower is referred to as Guru's Grace.

**Shastra Kripa:** The third aspect is *Shastra Kripa*, the Grace of scriptures. If you are deficient in this, you may read the best scriptures, but all you get from them is words, contradictions, and confusion. Instead of being relaxed, your mind is all the more confused because the scriptures are often difficult to understand. Anyone can quote scripture to justify anything. So, *Shastra Kripa* means that you have prepared yourself in such a way that scriptures reveal their secrets. Whenever you read a stanza, the meaning and the spirit of that stanza harmonizes with your inner being, and you grasp its implications. This is a special type of spiritual development.

**Atma Kripa:** The fourth is termed *Atma Kripa*, or the Grace of your own soul. If you have *Atma Kripa*, you will have a sustained interest in spiritual movement. If that Grace is not there, today you will assert that you would like to attain Liberation, to be free of birth and death, and to attain peace of mind—but tomorrow you will assert that you want to be a millionaire and succeed in business, by hook or by crook. If your mind fluctuates in this direction, you are lacking your own Grace. It is only when you receive the Grace of your soul that you possess true resolve; you decide to do certain things and then do them, following through with patience and perseverance.

These four aspects of Grace are really one Divine Grace ap-

pearing in four ways. From a relative point of view, we give them four different names—God's Grace, Guru's Grace, scripture's Grace and the Grace of your own soul—but they are not really distinct from each other.



**A**t all times, Grace showers like rain pouring from the clouds in rainy season, driven by monsoon winds. Torrential rains of Grace are constantly falling upon the earth, filling the hearts of those persons who are ready to receive it. Human beings are like vessels: some are upside down; others lie on their sides; some lean to the right or left; and a few stand straight up. If you want to collect rain in a cup, you place it right side up; if you put it upside down, not a single drop will enter it. In the same way, if your personality has not been well-disciplined, then you will not experience Divine Grace to the fullest extent, though it is everywhere, sustaining you at all times.

Through *sadhana*, or spiritual discipline, you straighten your personality, so to speak. To the extent that you recognize God within yourself by subduing your ego, to that extent Grace flows, expressing itself in these four aspects.

Thus, to receive Grace, *sadhana* is important. Self-effort must never stop. Rather it must be done with a cheerful disposition, with the philosophical understanding

that God will not put you into a task unless he has given you the strength to perform it. He will never place you in a situation for which you do not have sufficient endurance. No matter how adverse the situation may appear, there is a meaning behind it.

If you have this understanding you strive with faith in your heart and tenacity in your effort. Faith is the secret of spiritual advancement as well as of worldly prosperity. But when faith is lacking, life is empty.

So, with faith and effort, one begins to experience the Divine Grace that purifies one's ego, promotes *sattwa* (purity of nature), and removes the subtle impurities of the mind. There is no effort on an individual's part that can remove the subtle roots of egoism, hatred, greed and pride. You may be highly rational and reflective, but it is only when you recognize the Divine Power within you and bow down to that power with love and devotion that Divine Grace will clear your path in a mysterious way.

**I**n fact, as you direct your self-effort under the guidance of a spiritual preceptor, you turn your steps towards God within. The advanced objective of your self-effort is to attain the state of surrender to God—the Divine Self Who is the intrinsic reality of your soul. In this process, as devotion develops, Grace begins to melt away the ego-created impediments. Thus you begin to experience the interdependence of self-effort and Grace, until you realize, "I am the Self. All this is nothing but the Self!"