

Effort and Grace

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

The old name for "Yoga" is *tapas*. This Sanskrit word means literally "heat" or "glow." In ancient Vedic times, it was used to refer to the radiance and warmth of the Sun but also to spiritual practices that are commonly grouped under "asceticism," or "austerity." In a spiritual context, *tapas* stands for any voluntary practice that is designed to challenge our habit patterns, which causes a certain degree of frustration in us. We begin to "stew in our own juices," and this generates psychic energy that can be used to power the process of self-transformation. As we become increasingly able to gain control over our instinctive life and replace automatic patterns with mindful living, we experience the delight behind this kind of creative self-frustration. We see that we are growing and that self-control is not at all a negative experience.

Tapas implies effort. Conscious endeavor or exertion is in fact at the heart of all spirituality, including Indic Yoga. In the *Yoga-Vâsishtha* (2.4.1ff.), Sage Vashishtha seeks to dispel Prince Râma's mood of dejection and fatalism by exhorting him to make a diligent effort. By effort alone we can overcome the principle of inertia (*tamas*), which is one of three primary qualities of cosmic existence. The other two are *rajas* (the dynamic principle) and *sattva* (the principle of lucidity). The combined play of these three cosmic principles is said to be responsible for all forms and conditions found in the universe at any level. The idea is to transcend these three principles by step by step increasing the principle of lucidity over the other two. To be able to accomplish this, the spiritual practitioner must first cultivate the principle of dynamism in order to overcome the principle of inertia. Thus an effort must be made, which gradually leads to ever greater inner clarity, harmony, and peace.

When most people think of Yoga, they rightly think of personal effort rather than grace. But since its earliest beginnings, Yoga has also included in its understanding of the spiritual process the element of grace (*prasâda*), or divine intervention. As Swami Niranjanananda of the Bihar School of Yoga observed: "Self effort is the first step in the experience of grace."¹ Grace is in fact an integral concept in most schools of Yoga, whether or not they conceive the ultimate Reality in personal terms. The classic path of the theistic orientation within Yoga is Bhakti-Yoga, which was given expression already in the 5,000-year-old *Rig-Veda* (3.59.2) thus:

Whosoever is in Your grace is neither slain nor conquered; and distress does not reach him either from afar or near.

Over two millennia later, the anonymous composer of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* (3.20b) declared:

Free from grief one beholds, through the grace of the Creator, that [transcendental Being] as action-free (*akratu*), as majestic, and as the Lord (*îsha*).

Patanjali, the compiler of the *Yoga-Sûtra*, likewise did not fail to mention the role of the transcendental Lord (*îshvara*), who instructed the Yoga masters of yore. In aphorism 1.23, he names *îshvara-pranidhâna* as one of the principal means of self-transcendence leading to liberation. Vyâsa, in his *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.23), explains *pranidhâna* as a kind of devotion (*bhakti*). In his valuable commentary on Patanjali's aphorism 1.23, B. K. S. Iyengar states: "Through surrender the aspirant's ego is effaced, and the grace of the Lord pours down upon him like torrential rain."²

Devotion to the ultimate Being and grace form the nucleus of the spiritual practice mapped out in the *Bhâgavata-Purâna* (a ninth-century work). This scripture, held sacred by the Vaishnavas, has served many generations of sages and writers as the foundation for their own inspired writings.

The medieval Shaivas and Shâktas, too, included grace in their philosophy. If it did not correspond to an actual experience, why would untold generations of yogins, sages, and saints have sought it out so eagerly?

There are of course several ways of looking at grace. We could, for instance, see it as a function of our own stock of good karma. According to the age-old teaching of karma—the moral law of causation—we reap what we sow. Thus our good thoughts, our positive emotions or dispositions, and our morally sound actions create good karma for us. In other words, we are our own source of grace.

I personally believe that most of the experiences we attribute to grace (*prasâda*) are simply good karma manifesting for us. I also believe, however, that there are occasions when an apparently objective agency—residing in the subtle or even the transcendental dimensions of existence—favors us in some way. Tradition, moreover, speaks of the guru's grace and reminds us that the true teacher (*sad-guru*) is never far from the ultimate Reality. In other words, his or her favor is divine grace.

Sincere Yoga practitioners, especially those resorting to prayer, are likely to encounter graceful interventions more frequently than others. To quote Swami Niranjanananda again: "In order to be the recipient [of grace] one has to go through self effort."³ Sri Ramakrishna said: "Through the practice of spiritual discipline, one attains perfection, by the grace of God. But one must also labor a little."⁴ Then one sees God and enjoys bliss.

Vimala Thakar wrote: "The aspirant, he who seeks the Self, is never alone in any of his efforts. The whole of totality is eager to render assistance. It runs out to help. Your eyes are fixed on your efforts and, therefore, you fail to notice or comprehend the cooperation you receive. Never in this world was there an aspirant who was left alone by God even if he dwelt in the loneliest of places. If the aspirant takes one step towards the truth and God, the totality takes ten steps to meet him."⁵

The Dalai Lama put it as follows: "This is the way: try, try, try! Then, over time, there is hope. There is the possibility to improve oneself. Blessings from others are not sufficient. As a Buddhist, there are thousands and thousands, millions and billions of buddhas and bodhisattvas out there; but we are here, still passing through many difficulties every time something goes wrong. So blessings are not enough. Is that clear? Blessings must come from within. Without your own effort, it is impossible for blessings to come."⁶

This very recognition lies behind Patanjali's recommendation to practice *īshvara-pranidhāna*, which broadly can be translated as a "positive regard for a higher principle." More narrowly, we can understand it as devotion to the Lord (*īshvara*), whom Patanjali considers to be a special kind of *purusha*, or transcendental Spirit. However we may conceptualize the ultimate Being, there is always room in our practice for opening to grace. As part of this, Western Yoga practitioners, instead of relying exclusively on postures, breath control, and meditation, might also want to include the beneficial traditional practices of prayer (*prārthanā*) and ritual (*kriyā*).

Notes

1. Swami Niranjanananda, *Yoga Sadhana Panorama* (Munger: Bihar School of Yoga, 1997), vol. 2, p. 222.
2. B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* (London: Thorsons, 1996), p. 73.
3. Swami Niranjanananda, op cit., p. 222.
4. Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952), p. 363.
5. Vimala Thakar, *Yoga As Life* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1977), p. 193.
6. Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 155-156.

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