

Resolving a Paradox

In the beginning, the spiritual life can seem to be quite simple and straightforward, but inevitably, as we move on, we discover that it is full of paradoxes. Indeed, we can reach points where we can become utterly confused. One of the common paradoxes or points of confusion is the question of whether our spiritual progress depends primarily upon our effort or on God's grace.

Those who say that it is our own effort point out that nothing in this world is accomplished without effort. Moreover, the whole first section of the *Yoga Vāsīṣṭha* is about the necessity of self-effort, and almost all of Gurudev's and Pūjya Swāmī Chidānandajī's teachings are based upon the need for self-effort. On the other hand, when we think of the breakthroughs we have had in the spiritual life—those moments of clarity that really have been important to our spiritual life—we recognize that they have all come unsought, by surprise, not as a result of our own effort, but of some inner grace.

How then do we resolve this paradox? One wise person said, "Work as if it all depended upon you. Pray as if it all depended on God." And this seems to be a very wise answer. Make all the effort we can, but offer everything to God. Say, "Without your grace no effort would be possible." However, this doesn't seem to truly solve this very real question. Is there then a further step that we need to take in our understanding? Our late Vedānta teacher, revered Śrī Swāmī Brahmānandajī, gave us the solution. He said that we can never solve this paradox as long as we think that there is more than one. In other words, as long as we think that we are one thing and that God and divine grace are something else, we can never resolve this paradox.

Our fundamental problem is that we don't believe the scriptures when they tell us that we are That. Nor do we truly believe the scriptures when they tell us that Brahman has entered all these names and forms and is the very life of them. We don't, in other words, integrate this "I" that thinks it is the body and mind with Brahman. This is why Gurudev wants us to enquire, "Who am I?" We have to recognize that there is something within us that is the witness of the body and mind and is the witness of even the ego.

Therefore, when we make effort, we should, at the same time, be aware of this inner witness—the witness that has no location, the witness that we cannot grasp, that is universal. It is this awareness that integrates the individual with the Divine, and this we must continuously practice until it becomes our realization.

There is actually no paradox. We are what we are seeking. When we offer everything to God, we are putting ourselves in contact with a deeper part of ourselves, the more universal part of ourselves. That is the first step. Whatever effort we make, we offer it to God. That puts it in a universal dimension. Ultimately, we must be ever conscious of that universal dimension of ourselves, realizing that everything is actually coming from That, until at some point there is the conscious integration of the Universal and the individual, of God's grace and our effort.