

5. Experience

In spiritual matters, experience alone is the deciding factor. Reason is rendered dumb before the testimony of actual experience. All the arguments of logic, all the tricks of dialectics are powerless to nullify the direct effect of that inner evidence. For example, take the question of image worship. Many people laugh at those who practise it and condemn it as superstition. But those who do worship idols have the faith that the Omnipresent Almighty is present in the symbol before them. For them, it is not a mere external adjunct or apparatus or object. It is a part of the inner mechanism of devotion and faith. Of course, all the “worship” carried out with the idea that the idol is lifeless wood or stone or bronze is so much waste of time. But if it is done in the full confidence that the image or idol is alive, saturated with consciousness and power, then image worship can bestow Realisation of Godhead itself.

The spiritual aspirant should see the power inherent in the idol

A spiritual seeker once approached a guru for guidance. The guru gave him an idol of Vishnu and also necessary instructions for daily worship. But the seeker found that, even after some months of meticulous worship, he did not get any spiritual reward or elation. So he reported his dissatisfaction, and the guru gave him another idol, this time of Siva, and asked him to have another try. The disciple came after another six months demanding another idol, because even Siva had failed him.

This time, he got a Durga idol, which he duly installed in his domestic shrine. The two previous idols were standing, dust-ridden and neglected, on the window sill. One day, while ritual worship of the Goddess Durga was going on, the disciple found that the perfumed smoke from the incense stick was being wafted by the breeze toward the idol of Siva on the window sill. He got wild that the ungrateful stone-hearted God who was deaf to his powerful entreaties should get the perfume intended for his latest idol! So he took a piece of cloth and tied it round the face of Siva, closing up the nostrils that were inhaling the perfume.

Just at that moment, to his immense surprise Siva appeared in His Splendour and Glory before the seeker! The man was dumb-founded. He did not know how the ill-treatment had induced Siva to give him *darshan*. But what had really happened? The seeker for the first time believed that the Siva idol was alive, conscious, full of life (*chaithanya*-full), and it was that belief which forced him to tie the bandage to the nose. The moment he realised that the idol was full of consciousness (*chit*), he got the Realisation he was struggling for.

Therefore, the spiritual aspirant should see not the stone, which is the material stuff of the idol, but the Power that is inherent in it, that is symbolised by it, the same Power that is inherent in his own heart and that pervades and transcends all creation.

Tirupati, 1961-04-06

When Dharmaraja, the eldest of the Pandavas, had to make the difficult choice of whom to save when the *Yaksha* said he could select one among his four brothers, who lay dead on the ground, Dharmaraja struck to the highest principle, righteousness (*dharma*). He did not select Bhima or Arjuna, though war was imminent and they were

indispensable. He selected Nakula because he was the son of his step mother and he did not want her to feel that she had no son left. That is the way in which people in the past upheld *dharma*.

Sathya Sai Baba