



# Karma Yoga

Exploring the benefits of selfless service and the art of spiritualized action

By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami



**W**OULDn'T IT BE WONDERFUL IF WE HAD A WAY TO TURN OUR ordinary work into a spiritual practice, a contemplative art that could transform drudgery into acts of concentrated, worshipful effort? Wait! We do! It's called karma yoga, union with the Divine through service and sacred action. ¶ The word *karma* means action, or deed. It also refers to the principle of cause and effect. In its most profound sense, karma yoga is the doing of all actions in a spiritual manner, consciously, selflessly, excellently, as an offering to the Divine. Vamadeva Shastri shares, "Through karma yoga—as we learn in verse 2.50 of the *Bhagavad Gita*—we discipline ourselves to be skillful, efficient and wise in action, meaning that we act from a state of unity, doing the work for the highest value and most helpful result. All our attention goes to perfection in our work for the Divine, not in seeking glory or recognition for ourselves." ¶ Karma yoga is most commonly practiced as selfless service (*seva* in Sanskrit) at a temple or ashram. This is its most potent and accessible expression, one which helps establish the foundation of good character required for the more sophisticated aspects of yoga. This effort can be extended into other areas as well, such as the workplace and the home, quietly helping others willingly and without complaint. We are never too young or too old for karma yoga. Artist Lynda McClanahan depicted this fact by creating a river of karma (left), the waters of life flowing out from Lord Ganesha. As life flows from the source to the sea, our giving evolves. As children, we gather flowers for worship. As youth, we keep the temple clean. As young adults, we feed the needy. As grihasthas, we polish the temple brass and teach the dharma, and finally in our mature years we may weave garlands for the Lord and offer life-affirming guidance. The form of karma yoga changes, but its spiritual purpose remains the same throughout life. ¶ We begin this Insight with an exploration of karma yoga as the age-old science of spiritualized action, citing its sources in scripture and discussing how and why it is performed. Then we turn to *seva's* many forms as practiced today by Hindus, sharing testimony on how it benefits devotees, subtly strengthening their spiritual life. And we don't sidestep the conundrum of whether *seva* is a path to God sufficient unto itself or a preparatory step on a longer path.

LYNDA MCCLANAHAN



## How Simple Actions Become Divine Expressions

**T**AKEN IN ITS HIGHEST AND TRADITIONAL sense, karma yoga is the constant effort to surrender to God's will, to see Her/Him in everything and everyone and to perform every action as a divine offering, in a spirit of love and detachment.

In his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Christopher Isherwood commented on acting without attachment: "In general, mankind always acts with attachment; that is to say with fear and desire. Desire for a certain result and the fear that this result will not be obtained....The doer of non-attached action, on the other hand, is the most conscientious of men. He does not run away from life; he accepts it much more completely than those whose pleasures are tinged with anxiety and whose defeats are embittered by regret. No matter whether he is sweeping a room or calculating the position of a star, or taking the chair of a meeting, he does it to the utmost limit of his powers—so carefully, so devotedly, so wholeheartedly, that the dividing line between the chosen activity and the necessary chore disappears. All work becomes equal and vitally important. It is only towards the results



of the works that he remains indifferent." Satguru Yogaswami advised devotees, "Whatever work you have to do, do it well. That in itself is yoga."

Swami Chinmayananda taught in his book *We Must: Twenty-Two Notes on Self Perfection*, "Let our work speak for itself. No covering it with an excuse. Excuses are just the expressions of our weakness in the field of action. Reveling in our tiredness; joyous in our exhaustion, blissful with our fatigue, we shall still work on inspiredly in our endless love for Him who is thrilling us into performance from within....While thus working, we must cultivate in ourselves a special brand of independence—a spirit which shall sustain us, both in the busy marketplace and in the meditation seat. In the midst of the contending crowd or in the peaceful solitude, this daring spirit of freedom and fearlessness alone should spring forth from our consciousness that we are upright and pure, diligent and clean, both in our thoughts and actions."

My Gurudeva explained: "The [Tamil]

word *Sivathondan* signifies a 'devoted servant of God' or 'one whose service is devoted to God'—that is, one who does everything that he has to do for God, and not for himself. He must do his duty as a good servant. The results, whether successful or unsuccessful, are the concern of his master. As his actions are performed for God, he must execute them as well as he possibly can. Every act, from the grandest and noblest to the meanest and most trivial, thus becomes a sacred rite and then 'work is worship.' In this way the whole of life is sanctified and the distinction between 'material' and 'spiritual' ceases to exist." The attitude of surrendering all actions as service to the Lord is called *Ishwara arpana buddhi* in Sanskrit.

Sri Aurobindo wrote, "All work done for the Divine, from poetry and music to carpentry or baking or sweeping a room, should be made perfect even in its smallest external detail, as well as in the spirit in which it is done, for only then is it an altogether fit offering."

**In the workplace:** (clockwise from left) A craftsman restores a chair seat in Italy; an artisan paints the eyes of the Goddess in preparation for a Durga festival; discussing the next project with the supervisor



## Transforming Your Work into Worship

**O**VER THE LAST FEW YEARS I HAVE MET WITH A SURPRISING number of Hindus visiting our Hawaii temple and monastery who have shared the concern that "We are so busy with our professional and family life that we have little or no time to devote to religion." Their perspective is based on the belief that work and worship are totally separate. Worship is what is done in the temple, shrine room and meditation hall. Work is what is done in the fields, the factory or the office. Work is also taking care of our family members. When this perspective is held, the amount of time being devoted to "religious" practices is usually about one hour a day.

Imagine if we could devote the rest of our waking hours to religious practices without reducing the amount of time devoted to our profession and our family. To do this, clearly a new paradigm is needed, which Great souls have given us by saying that work—when performed in the right spirit—is worship. From this perspective, there are no longer any purely secular activities. Our daily work contributes to our spiritual progress just as much as attending pujas in the temple, worshiping in our home shrine, going on pilgrimage, singing bhajans, meditating or studying scripture.

My paramaguru, Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, verified, "All work must be done with the aim of reaching God." This is the essence of karma

yoga. Swami Vivekananda referred to it as the "science of work," meaning that by understanding the nature of work from a philosophical perspective, we can obtain the greatest spiritual benefits from it.

When we are stable in the viewpoint of performing all work with the aim of reaching God, this naturally leads to a deeper perspective that each task we are doing is an offering to the Lord, just as placing a flower in front of a murti or picture of the Deity is an offering. This observance is known as *Ishvara Pranidhana*, one of Patanjali's five *niyamas*. Yogaswami once told a young man just starting his career, "You are going out to work. You must dress well and look dignified. Everything should be an offering to God. The world is an altar."

Swami Ramakrishnananda of New York writes in *Yoga—Union with Reality*, "Far from instructing us to abandon our work

for a life dedicated solely to meditation or dividing our days into hours of labor and hours of spiritual life, karma yoga offers an attitude in which, once adopted, we can transform our work, as arduous or laborious as it may be, into yoga and meditation—tools for spiritual growth and evolution. It is essential for every aspirant who lives in our modern society to delve into the wisdom of karma yoga, without underestimating its value or importance."



## Two Ways Hinduism Looks at Karma Yoga

**H**INDUISM'S FOUR YOGA PATHS BECAME HOUSEHOLD TERMS IN the West when Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) articulated Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy to Americans. He summarized it as follows: "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or mental discipline or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be free." Thus, joining Patanjali's *raja* (ashtanga) yoga to the family of three yogas discussed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Vivekananda formalized the familiar foursome of karma yoga, bhakti yoga, raja yoga and jnana yoga. Furthermore, he put them all on equal footing, while enjoining, "You must, at the same time, remember that these divisions are not very marked and quite exclusive of each other. Each blends into the other." Further: "We have found that, in the end, all these four paths converge and become one. All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to one and the same goal."

Their equality was also promoted by Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh: "Union with God is the goal of this human life. It is the be-all and end-all of our existence. It is the summum bonum of life. This can be achieved by following the path of bhakti yoga, raja yoga, jnana yoga or karma yoga."

Within Shankara's writings, however, it is clear that in his view jnana yoga alone leads to the Ultimate. "The conclusion of the *Gita* and all the *Upanishads* is this, that moksha can be obtained by knowledge alone, unaided (by action)" (*Bhagavad-Gita with the Commentary of Sri Shankaracharya* by Alladi Mahadeva Sastri).

*A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* echoes this stance in its

definition of *karma yoga*: "Nishkama-karma (ordained actions performed without the taint of selfish desires) purifies the mind—this is called *cittasuddhi*—making it fit for the paths of either jnana or bhakti." The reference to bhakti calls to mind strongly devotional traditions, such as Vaishnavism, in which self-transcending love and surrender is lauded as the means to liberation. For example, Sri Ramanuja states that in preparation for "meditation," the contemplative remembrance of the Divine, one should engage in karma yoga.

Swami Vishnudevananda, a disciple of Swami Sivananda, propounded a similar idea: "Before practicing jnana yoga, the aspirant needs to have integrated the lessons of the other yogic paths—for without selflessness and love of God, strength of body and mind, the search for Self Realization can become mere idle speculation."

In the Saiva Siddhanta school of Saivism, the spiritual path is comprised of four cumulative, progressive stages called *charya*, *kriya*, *yoga* and *jnana*. The successful accomplishment of one naturally leads into the next. Karma yoga, when understood as humble service, is encompassed in the stage of *charya*, which focuses on overcoming basic instinctive patterns and learning to work for the sake of work rather than the fruits of our labor.

However, in its deeper aspects karma yoga extends into the *kriya* stage. Dr. S. Sabharathnam Sivachariyar shares, "Karma yoga, considered as union through spiritualized action, comes under the *kriya* section of the *Agamas*. Actions performed with the intention of dedicating them at the feet of Lord Siva are called *Pati-punya*. Such actions elevate the *sadhaka* to a higher level, enabling him to involve himself in the path of ashtanga yoga, also known as Siva yoga."

## Two Scriptural Sources

By Pandit Vamadeva Shastri (David Frawley)

### Bhagavad Gita

THE BEST KNOWN SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR THE YOGA OF ACTION IS the *Bhagavad Gita*. Within its pages we learn that karma yoga means pursuing the highest excellence and acting with the highest integrity for the Divine, guru and the good of all. This is the true meaning of its proclamation, "Yoga karmasu kaushalam" ("Yoga is skill in action"). Karma yoga does not mean simply acting without regard to consequences but rather seeking the highest good possible for everyone. It requires not seeking the fruits of action for oneself, on one hand, and making the action successful for the sake of dharma, on the other. Action done poorly or carelessly, or which fails to achieve its goal cannot be regarded as karma yoga.

Here are three key verses from Chapter Three, "The Yoga of Action," instructions from Krishna to the warrior prince Arjuna translated and commented on by Swami Nikhilananda (1895–1973).

Verse 9: "The world becomes bound by action unless it be done for the sake of sacrifice. Therefore, O son of Kunti, give up attachment and do your work for the sake of the Lord." Commentary: "Work that is done with a view to pleasing the Lord and not from any personal motive does not bind the worker."

Verse 19: "Therefore always do without attachment the work you have to do; for a man who does his work without attachment attains the Supreme." Commentary: "A seeker who does his duty for the gratification of God attains purity of mind and ultimately realizes the highest goal. Wise men in the past acted in that manner."

Verse 25: "As the ignorant act, attached to their work, O Bharata, so

should an enlightened man act, but without attachment, in order that he may set people on the right path." Commentary: "An ignorant person acts zealously for his personal happiness; but a wise man should act, with the same zeal, for the welfare of others. The only incentive to action for a knower of the Self is the welfare of others."

Karma yoga requires giving up the ego and attachment to material rewards. Yet, once we align ourselves with the Divine will, our power of action will increase manifoldly. The kriya shakti, or power of action, of the yogi is much stronger than that of ordinary people, who are limited by fear and desire. Detachment in turn improves our ability to act creatively and decisively. Those who are bound by desire act according to desire, which distorts their ability to see the

nature of forces operative in the world and causes them to disturb the natural equilibrium. The wise, who are detached in their vision, see things as they are and act effectively for the best that is possible.

Karma yoga is also not limited to seva or selfless service, as it is usually interpreted in the West. In Vedic thought, it includes puja and yajna, or ritual. All action done as karma yoga becomes a ritual or worship of the Divine. Even seva should be done as a ritual, accompanied by mantra, meditation and remembrance of the Divine. Temple worship is a kind of karma yoga. Karma yoga requires bhakti or devotion. We must surrender to the

Divine and to the guru for our action to carry the yoga shakti. Karma yoga ultimately means that our life itself must become a divine work, not merely a personal expression. As such, karma yoga is the basis of all other yoga paths.

**Venerable teachings:** (clockwise from above) Shri Krishna advises Prince Arjuna on the nature of karma; in India, a Vaishnava sadhu, seated at his place of sadhana, reads from scripture; beads of water on a lotus leaf, the perfect metaphor for detachment; Earth embraced by selfless, caring people



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### Isha Upanishad

It is highly significant that the *Isha*, the shortest (having just 18 verses) and by most accounts the oldest of the *Upanishads*, extols karma yoga in its first two verses.

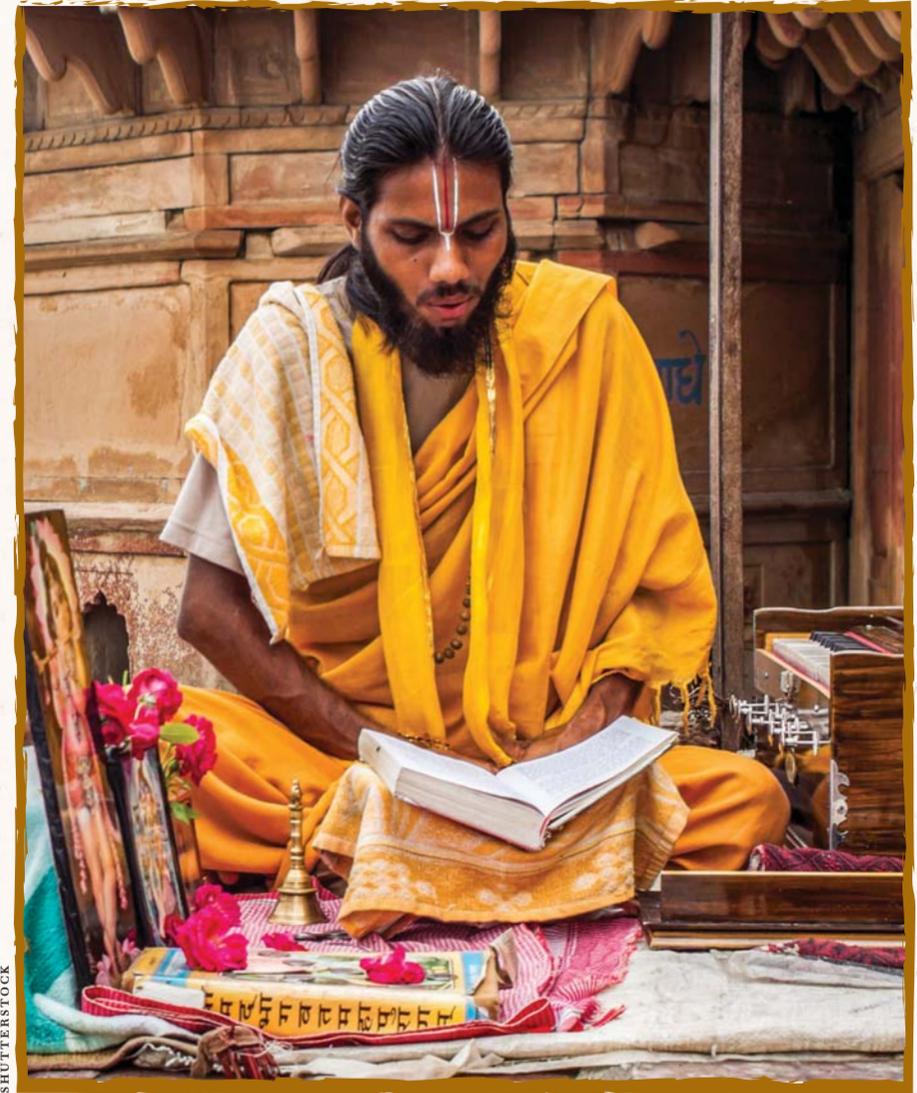
Verse 1: "The entire universe is pervaded by the Lord—whatsoever there is in this changing world. By this attitude of renunciation experience your life. Do not desire the wealth that anyone has."

Commentary: If we recognize the atman as the indwelling Self and spirit, pervading the entire universe, present in each thing within the universe, we naturally develop a sense of renunciation and detachment. We will not seek what anyone has, because we realize that no one really owns anything. Everything belongs to and is rooted in the Divine. We need to surrender to that Divine will which is the energy behind all.

Verse 2: "Thus (in that spirit of renunciation) performing your work, may you wish to live a hundred years. Only in this way will karma not cling to your soul."

Commentary: This recognition of the divine Self behind the entire universe is the foundation for karma yoga, action done with the attitude of renunciation—not merely renouncing the fruit of action but giving up the sense of being the owner and doer as well. Ishvara is the only doer, and His shakti is the only real power. Only if our lives are a form of karma yoga, rooted in an awareness of the divine presence, will karma not cling to and bind our souls.

To approach the wisdom of the *Upanishads* and jnana yoga, the understanding of our true nature, we must first develop the attitude of karma yoga—that we are not the doer. Karma yoga is rooted in devotion but also requires wisdom or jnana. We must be aware of the nature of the doer and the nature of the action. Karma yoga is action done with consciousness and creativity in accordance with the divine will.



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## Seeing the World as an Ashram

HOW WE VIEW THE WORLD IS CENTRAL TO karma yoga. As Swami Krishnananda of Divine Life Society stated: "We see outside what we actually are inside." To some, the world is a place where we have a chance to pursue pleasure; to others it provides opportunities to acquire wealth. Others focus on the many problems in the world and categorize it as troubled. To a karma yogi, it is none of the above. For him, it takes on a spiritual nature. Swami Vivekananda states: "The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually." Holding this attitude, we see life as it really is, the play of opposites, love and hate, joy and sorrow, and accept it all as Siva's benign grace. The world is perfect at every point in time. We are poised in the eternity of the moment within that perfection, eager to perform our dharma,



fulfilling our duties and responsibilities in a clear and loving spirit, striving through the various yogas we have been taught to make progress in developing our character and making spiritual progress."

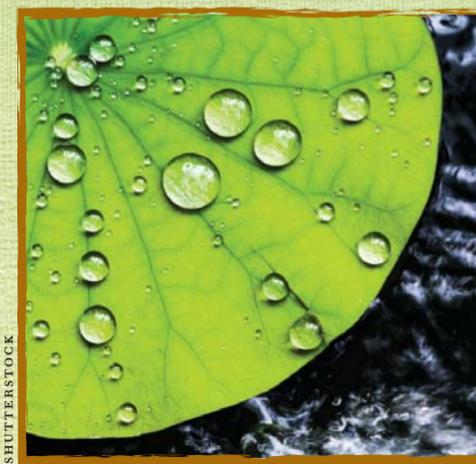
Swami Vivekananda added: "To those who have not controlled their own minds, the world is either full of evil or at best a mixture of good and evil. This very world will become to us an optimistic world when we become masters of our own minds. Nothing will then work upon us as good or evil; we shall find everything to be in its proper place, to be harmonious. Such is the end and aim of karma yoga, and such is its perfection in practical life."

Satguru Yogaswami sang, "Work for work's sake; love for love's sake. This world is a big temple to which all kinds of pilgrims come—good, bad and indifferent. Let us concentrate on our own worship, and not find fault with what others do."

## To Work without Attachment

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE UNATTACHED to the results of our work? We do what is right simply because it is the right thing to do. We raise our children with lots of attention and love; and whether they show appreciation or not we continue to do so. Our love is unconditional. We help out our neighbors often; and whether they reciprocate or not, we still continue. We run for public office; and whether we win or lose, we are unaffected—losing does not cause us to become depressed. We do our best at work; and if others get recognition and we don't, we still continue doing our best.

Remaining detached from the outcome



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of our actions allows us to remain apart from the swirl of outer emotions that comprises the world and be a witness to it. We become like the pearls of water on a lotus leaf, resting upon the leaf but not attaching to its surface.

Swami Vivekananda counseled, "Let the end and the means be joined into one. In other words, when you are doing any work, do not think of anything beyond. Do it as worship, as the highest worship, and devote your whole life to it for the time being, that is, the right performance of duties of any station of life, without attachment to results, produces spiritual advancement."

## Nine Keys For Karma Yoga

**P**RACTICING KARMA YOGA CAN SOUND COMPLICATED, abstract and difficult. Here are nine keys to help bring it down to earth, ideals for practicing the yoga of doing—whether in a formal seva program, helping out at the temple, performing daily household chores or tackling tasks at your place of work. Is it practical to impose such a system without hindering one's concentration on the task at hand? Yes. It is actually normal for our awareness to shift between five, six or more areas of concern through the day, like a bee flitting from one flower to another. Look at this set of keys as a new mental overlay of conceptual points for awareness to touch upon as you work, enjoy a meal, attend a class, or put on your shoes. No matter how well you fulfill them, they will be of benefit. Karma yoga can become a vital part of your daily life, making everything you do more selfless, effective and enjoyable.

- 1 Offer all work to God.** A mantra may be chanted, verbally or mentally, before beginning.
- 2 Let Ganesha guide your karma yoga.** He rules over all karmas, their fruition and their transcendence.
- 3 Act selflessly, detached from the results.** Focus on serving, helping, giving and surrendering egotistical urges.
- 4 Do your best.** Make the work a worthy offering, completing it as perfectly as you can. Then stop, review what you did, and make it even better.
- 5 Be industrious.** Stretch your capacities to overcome lethargy, fatigue, confusion and doubt. Remember to breathe.
- 6 Stay above the fray.** Refrain from disagreements, criticism of others, cynicism, blame and other base emotions.
- 7 Stay focused.** Be centered in the now, not thinking of other concerns. Pause between tasks and renew your yoga.
- 8 Align your will with the divine will.** Be rooted in an awareness of the divine presence within and around you. See the world as perfect.
- 9 Enjoy the effort.** Be positive, free of worry. Relax; take your time. Be happy and radiate blessings to the world.



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## Three Hands-On Ideas

**1 SELFLESS EFFORT:** RAMANA MAHARISHI EXPLAINED THE STRATEGY BEHIND karma yoga: "The effect of karma is two-fold; one is the immediate seen effect in the physical sense, the other is the effect left by the action on the mind of the person, a subtle latency called samskara which will come to fruition at a later date as a prarabdha karma. Therefore, what then is the technique to get over the trick played by the double-edged weapon of karma? If karma is performed without an eye on personal benefits, but entirely as an offering to God, as a service to the people concerned, not only the old samskaras or latencies find a way out, but also no further latencies or samskaras are impressed on the mind. Thus the mind gets cleaned, which in turn prepares the ground for moksha, or liberation" (*Power Unlimited: Relation of Man with God*, By D. N. Saraf).

**2. Disinterested Service**  
Swami Ramakrishnananda tells us, "For me, there is a great similarity between what we search for in karma yoga and the treadmills where people run for hours in gyms. I believe this to be an appropriate comparison because this is running

## Working with Our Karma through Seva

**T**HE FACT IS, THE MORE SELFISH WE ARE, THE LESS HAPPY WE ARE. And the less selfish we are, the happier we are. My Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, advised: "Through service and kindness, you can unwind the subconscious mind and gain a clear understanding of all laws of life. Your soul will shine forth. You will be that peace. You will radiate that inner happiness and be truly secure, simply by practicing being kind in thought, word and deed."

Every action we perform creates a samskara, a subtle impression in the mind. Each of us is the sum total of countless samskaras which makes up our unique individuality, determining our character and temperament and influencing our tendencies. The impressions left by previous actions become seeds or tendencies (vasanas) toward future effects. This is how we carry forward our karma. If our actions have been inharmonious, selfish or even cruel, then we will create situations in our future in which we absorb the effects or reactions of those actions. Samskaras of this quality bind us to the world in a way that makes life seem a bitter place. Spiritual or refined lifestyles are not possible when one is going through the turmoil of difficult past karma.

What is the remedy? Karma yoga. When we perform positive, unselfish, uplifting actions, we start accumulating positive samskaras. These mingle with our other less meritorious samskaras and begin to reshape our nature and future. Difficult karmic effects that we would have fully faced in the future become softened by the positive impressions of our present actions. If we act selflessly, offering the fruits of our actions to the Divine, the creation of troublesome new samskaras is lessened and our overall karmic burden is gradually diminished.

Slowly the world becomes a more cheery place. But the world did not change. We have begun creating a positive and joyful nature simply through our own actions, a nature that is calm and balanced. In this newfound peace, we see the world in a positive light. Turning within, we become sensitive to subtle depths of our existence, not previously experienced.

Gurudeva explained it in terms of "actinic," or spiritual energy. "The best way to keep the actinic force flowing through the physical body is practicing the art of giving, doing little things for others that you have not been asked to do. This keeps you creative; and being creative is actinic, superconscious and religious. Giving, doing without thought of return, affectionate detachment, creates an odic vacuum which your actinic, spiritual forces flow into and fill."

This is a gradual transformation, as Swami Vivekananda noted, "We have to begin from the beginning to take up the works as they come to us and slowly make ourselves more unselfish every day. At first our motives are selfish, but gradually this selfishness will melt by persistence until we are able to do really unselfish work."

Narasimhachar Prativadi of Columbia, Missouri, offered, "Doing seva allows us for a short period of time to forget about our selfish thoughts and worries and focus on helping others. It is in a sense, another form of meditation. 'Manava seva, Janardhana seva,' 'Service to man is service to God.'"

**Helping hands:** (clockwise from above) Comforting the aged and infirm; in Bangladesh, a newly thrown clay pot in the hands of its creator; a craftswoman in Kolkata decorates clay pots during the annual State Handicrafts Expo 2014



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without destination, running without reaching a certain end. Running is the goal in itself. This running benefits the practitioner's health, preventing the muscles from withering, improving circulation and strengthening the heart. In other words, the results cannot be separated from the act, which is similar to what happens in karma yoga. Service is the goal of our action, and it is this service itself that prevents the doors of the heart from withering away. This disinterested service will make us flow beyond the limits of our minute 'I' with its egoistic interests. We widen our hearts and surpass egoism."

**3. Abidance in Dharma**  
The question arises, what work should be done and what work should not be done. Some types of actions produce spiritual progress, others produce no benefit and some even cause us to move backwards spiritually. Spiritualizing our actions, transforming our work into worship, begins with overcoming basic instinctive patterns such as the tendencies to become angry, hurtful or competitive. A helpful list of the qualities we need to develop to control these tendencies is contained in the ten classical restraints called yamas, which are: noninjury, truthfulness, nonstealing, divine conduct, patience, steadfastness, compassion, honesty, moderate appetite and purity.



## Testimonials on Replacing Pride with Humility

**S**WAMI SIVANANDA USED TO PRAISE THE EXAMPLE OF GANDHI, "He never made any difference between menial service and dignified work. Scavenging and cleaning of the latrine was the highest yoga for him. This was the highest puja for him. He himself did the cleaning of latrines. He annihilated the illusory little 'I' through service of various sorts."

Performing menial tasks is an effective way to reduce pride and increase humility. Opportunities for such humble service are readily available at ashrams and temples all over the world—washing dishes, washing clothes, cleaning the kitchens and bathrooms, working in the gardens, polishing brass, chopping the vegetables, sweeping the paths—without seeking praise or approval.

Nurse Hiral Patel of Houston, Texas, gives this testimony: "Seva in my mandir has allowed me to grow both spiritually and mentally. It has taught me many valuable lessons which I wouldn't have experienced otherwise. In today's age, it is so easy to become self-centered and surround yourself with the thoughts of 'me, my and how will that benefit me.' Through seva, I've been able to learn what it means to be selfless and think about others before myself. The joy experienced by placing others before you is a concept taught by my guru: Pramukh Swami Maharaj."

Mata Amritanandamayi offered, "The beauty and charm of selfless love and service should not die away from the face of the Earth. The world should know that a life of dedication is possible, that a life inspired by love and service to humanity is possible. Meditation and studying the scriptures are like two sides of a coin. The engraving on that coin is selfless service, and that is what gives it its real value. Our compassion and acts of selflessness take us to the deeper truths.



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Through selfless action we can eradicate the ego that conceals the Self. Detached, selfless action leads to liberation. Such action is not just work; it is karma yoga."

Swami Sivananda shared this insight: "He who has understood the right significance of karma yoga will take every work as yogic activity or worship of the Lord. There is no menial work in his vision. Every work is puja of Narayana. In the light of karma yoga, all actions are sacred. That aspirant who always takes immense delight in doing works which are considered by the worldly man as menial services and who always does willingly such acts only will become a dynamic yogi. He will be absolutely free from conceit and egoism. He will have no downfall. The canker of pride cannot touch him."

Yogini Patel, a law student in Atlanta, Georgia, shares, "Seva in my life is a grounding factor. It tempers my success and drive for success with humility and selflessness. Without seva, I would have a very limited and tunnel-visioned outlook on my life. Seva reminds me that my life is bigger than my own goals or aspirations. It reminds me that my life is a vessel through which I can serve others and in turn God, and thus progress in my spirituality."

Manali Patel of Toronto, Canada, shares, "I can't define it but perhaps seva is like the mirror that reflects me just the way I am; the reality compels me to become a better person, every time I choose to face it, accept it and act on it."

**Pitching in:** (clockwise from above) Volunteers sweep the floor of Malaysia's Waterfall Temple; a traditional feeding of pilgrims in Varanasi, India; a BAPS volunteer serves meals to the impoverished



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## The Hindu Heart of American Seva

By Lavina Melwani, New York

**S**ERVICE THAT IS GIVEN WITHOUT consideration of anything in return, at the right place and time to one that is qualified, with the feeling that it is one's duty, is regarded as the nature of goodness." —*Bhagavad Gita*, 17:20

One of the most powerful words in the Hindi language is *seva*. This small, four-letter word can transform the world, transform lives. With it you can change the world by changing just one person—yourself.

*Seva* means service, devotion to others. It is the revolutionary Hindu concept of distributing happiness and peace wherever there is strife and poverty—by your own game-changing actions. It stems from the Hindu belief "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the whole world is one family) and the knowledge



BAPS SWAMINARAYAN SANSTHA

that your own karma or deeds are what help you attain oneness with the Paramatma, or Supreme Being.

*Seva* has always been a part of Hindu teachings, be it helping the needy or feeding the hungry—be it the lines of beggars outside the temple or the cows and the birds. Today most of the largest religious organizations in India have vast support systems, with free hospitals, free schools, kitchens and community centers that assist the needy and the sick. Some—like Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Chinmaya Mission, Divine Life Society, Isha Foundation and BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha—have expanded their philanthropic work to many parts of the world, including the US.

Yet, in recent years, as many Hindus have migrated to the larger world, we have seen *seva* become more and more about building a

better world for humanity by taking on health and education of the needy, disaster relief, human rights and the environment.

America has a long history of volunteerism and philanthropy, and Indian-Americans have drawn from both these virtues to have an engaging *seva* dialogue with many charitable organizations in India, offering them their expertise and their dollars. Many go to India to do *seva*. At the same time, they have started organizations in the US that benefit the needy both in India and the US and create awareness of Hinduism around the world. These are uniquely American organizations with a Hindu heart. By way of example, here we showcase four of the dozens of organizations that are doing good work.

**BAPS Charities** is active in nine countries across five continents, and volunteers are the driving force bringing Hindu caring and culture to America. I recall going to an event organized by BAPS in a hotel, where all the food was cooked and served not by chefs and waiters, but by young BAPS volunteers. They take on everything from organizing walkathons to community health fairs to humanitarian relief during international disasters. As devotees say, "We perform *seva*. We see God in each individual to whom we extend a helping hand; we serve God residing within each individual." Janki B. Patel of Chicago, Illinois, offers, "Performing various karma yoga (*seva*) puts me in many situations and in contact with numerous people. By serving with them and for them I have learned how to be

compassionate, humble, honorable and understanding."

**Hindu American Seva Communities (HASC)** is a progressive body helping the dharmic community create change through service in temples, schools and community outreach. It works to unite faith and secular communities in social equity projects and to strengthen the civic engagement of Indian-Americans in their new home. Anju Bhargava, founder of HASC, has also used public and private partnerships to develop Dharma Seva Centers in temples and colleges, serving low-income areas and engaging in social justice issues. Another innovative way that Hindu values have been merged with volunteerism is *UtsavSeva* by which people come together to serve on festival days, combining service with fun and celebration.

HASC, recognized by the Obama White House, merges Hindu devotion with American volunteerism, incorporating youth and non-denominational partners. The HASC Young Scholars Program engages students in community and refugee service projects. Living and co-existing in a larger world, young Hindus learn to serve people of different faiths, be they Latin American or Middle Eastern. Sai Santosh Kolluru, for instance, a Research Assistant with the Bhutanese Service and Research Project (BSRP), coordinates service programs in Ohio and nationally for Bhutanese refugees.

**Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus**, founded by Sunita Vishwanath, champions tolerance and inclusiveness. *Sadhana*,



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## Driven by Inspiration

HERE ARE MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO PERFORM SEVA BY HELPING out at temples with daily chores and puja preparations. We can also take time to hold classes for children, sharing the basics of our religion and culture. Visiting the elderly is a form of service that is greatly appreciated.

How much service should we perform? My guru suggested ten percent of one's time, or four hours a week. "Everyone, no matter what their skills, can and should give ten percent of their time each week in service to their religious institution. We calculate it as

four hours a week, which is ten percent of a forty-hour work week, which amounts to 208 hours a year. It is also acceptable to tithe, give ten percent of, one's time in intense projects all at once, rather than each week. For example, many of the devotees who helped build the Swaminarayan temple in London took months and even years off from their professions and labored twelve hours a day to build that magnificent edifice." All such acts of seva earn punya, good karma, merit that we carry into our next birth. In fact, merit is the only true wealth, for it is the one possession we can take from one life to the next.

When asked if there are advantages of doing seva at a temple or ashram, Gurudeva affirmed, "It is much better to do Sivathodu in a sacred place, such as a temple or an ashram. Here acts of selfless

which means faith in action, seeks to be exactly that. This year the White House recognized her as a Champion of Change for strengthening social justice and protecting the environment.

"Project Prithvi is our grassroots green project through which we mobilize Hindus, especially the youth, to live out the principle of ahimsa by taking care of the environment," she explains. Too often we do things as we do in the home country, destroying nature even as we seek to honor the Almighty. "Currently we are working on a project to clean up specific beaches in Jamaica Bay, where Hindus worship and leave mountains of litter." She says Hindus in America have to do things differently to enrich the land and create good vibes about their faith, adding, "We will bring priests into this effort so they can encourage greener rituals and raise awareness of the problem. We hope that priests will help us make the point that our Hindu texts describe the earth and the water as Goddesses; we do not honor them by polluting and destroying them."

**Hindu American Foundation (HAF)** has perhaps most radicalized the notion of sacred service by making fearlessly speaking out a form of seva in Hinduism. The young leaders of HAF do seva not



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SYBO

service are part of the proper way of behavior. While performing your work, you are observed by the devas living on the inner, astral planes. You are noticed by the priests and the management of the temple. The guru of the ashram would observe you. The hearts of these beings go out to you to help your efforts acquire punya. Thus, a spiritual fellowship is established. Many minds are aware of you, blessing your efforts. The effect is that you are drawing closer and closer to Lord Siva. More security comes as a result."

### Examples of Seva Programs

Disaster relief is large-scale form of dynamic seva. For example, in 2004, when a giant tsunami lashed coastal areas across South and East Asia, causing death and destruction on a massive scale, Seva International sprang into action to build houses, community centers, vocational training centers, schools and orphanages.

Hindu seva is developing in the Diaspora in varied ways. Once a community is established in a new land, it has a choice: to engage with the population by helping, or to remain apart and sequestered. Groups who reach out and get involved in service projects earn respect, acceptance and good will. BAPS, known for their fabulous temples, places strong emphasis on bonding with the broader

by distributing grain or chanting prayers but by making sure Hinduism is accurately portrayed in America, by fighting the perception and bias battles that few others are taken up. How is Hinduism represented in American school textbooks? How is it perceived in middle America? How is it promoted in the corridors of power in Washington?

HAF focuses on human and civil rights and shines a light on issues affecting Hindus worldwide. It also takes an innovative approach to nurturing future leaders by training interns in Washington's political process. HAF's seva is getting Hinduism a place at the table, be it in public policy or opinion. Whether it is yoga in public school, the ethical treatment of animals or the mistreatment of Hindus anywhere in the world, HAF does not stay silent.

In its summer internship program HAF teaches Hindu students this new form of seva in which ancient Hinduism is safeguarded by mastering the tools of the modern age. Pooja Patel, a sophomore at Princeton University, interns with Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, the first Hindu US Congresswoman and a great role model.

All these America-based Hindu organizations use the ideals of



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community. Here are just some of the creative offerings of the Neasden Temple in London: a special drive to enroll members of the South Asian community onto the National Bone Marrow Donor Register; a Community Health Fair; Neighbors Appreciation Day; a Party for the Elderly from local care homes; and an Annual Charity Challenge Supporting British Heart Foundation and Rosa (a charity that supports women and girls in the UK).

Many Hindu organizations in India are entirely seva-centric. A remarkable example is the Narayani Peedam in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, offering prodigious philanthropic events, health care, free meals for visitors, support for other temples, mass marriages, prisoner reintegration, shelter for cows, afforestation, recycling, educational programs and more.

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**Heartfelt efforts:** (clockwise from left) At BAPS London, devotees create colored-flour rangolis in preparation for Diwali; SYBO volunteers in Penang, Malaysia, clean the temple steps; members of the West Michigan Hindu Temple join with Habitat for Humanity to build homes for needy families; in South Mumbai, student cleans up Chaupati Beach after Ganesha Visarjana.

pluralism, equality and human rights to showcase a timeless religion and use contemporary means to inspire a new America-born generation to do seva. They use new containers to introduce Hinduism to America, though the contents are thousands of years old.

As Aanandh Chandrasekar, 18, who wrote the winning entry in HAF's Next Gen essay contest, points out: "Hinduism is littered with heroes who paved the way to justice on the battlefield, but the heroes of today are different. Both fight for the same cause—morality, justice and peace—but the battles of today take place in the boardrooms, presided over by men whose decisions affect the lives of millions and fought by us, the citizens who desire to make a change. Some achieve fame, but even those who don't, who prefer the quiet of daily life, make a difference. After all, every one of us is inseparable from God, and every one of us has the power to change the world."

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Lavina Melwani is a New York-based writer for several international publications and publishes Lassi with Lavina, an arts and lifestyle portal for the global Indian woman—[www.lassiwithlavina.com](http://www.lassiwithlavina.com). Follow @lavinamelwani and @lassiwithlavina

## Encouraging Youth to Get Involved

**A** YOUNG MAN STUDYING MY GURU'S TEACHINGS RAN ACROSS the statement "We must perform our duty to our community" and asked me what it meant. I answered that the community in which we live is like a distant part of our family, and as such we have a duty to help and support them. We need to devote part of our time and financial resources to helping solve community problems, such as providing food and clothing to the poor and organizing volunteers for after-school programs.

At the Auroville community outside Pondicherry, South India, we spoke to teachers about how they awaken spirituality in their students. One instructor shared a favorite tactic, to have each student secretly help another student in some way every day. She was delighted to find how much the children enjoy and are uplifted by the practice.

A recent news story featured a group of college students who traveled to New Orleans during school break to help with disaster relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. For two weeks they lived in simple conditions and helped repair damaged homes. Their testimony was heartfelt: they had never done anything like this before, were astonished at how good it made them feel, and hoped to have an opportunity to volunteer again and do more such rebuilding work in the future.

These stories illustrate the benefit of having youth participate in volunteer programs with their parents or other youth and be taught that Hindu dharma includes helping others and serving the broader community.

Mathan Kalimuthu, age 22, a volunteer at the Waterfall Temple in Penang, Malaysia, shares: "Our seva will give us a lot of benefit in times to come, if not immediately. We will carry forward this good

karma to our next birth. I appeal to parents to allow their children to join temples and do the service work. They need to understand what service and spirituality can bring to their lives. Through the SBYO (Shri Balathandayuthabani Youth Organization) I have developed a spiritual way of looking at life. I learned to walk on the right path and do good things." Young Nannthini Shunmugam shared, "We organize seminars twice a year after the exams to help youth plan for their higher education. It gives me a lot of satisfaction and peace of mind to serve the Lord through SBYO."

Parents are naturally focused on making sure their children are as successful in life as possible, which equates with studying hard and getting good grades. Unfortunately, they may feel that helping out occasionally in volunteer work or doing seva at the temple would be a waste of precious time. The SYBO example shows the opposite. While looking after the temple's various needs, youth learn to work as a team, interact with the public and function in an efficient, disciplined and organized manner. Working with SBYO has made them self-confident and enthusiastic and more successful in their academic

and professional work outside the temple. Parents who gained these qualities through decades of service in the SBYO are now working to pass them on to their children.

To experience such life-lessons themselves, children should be encouraged to spend time regularly helping others in any of the numerous seva programs that are available.

**Pitching in:** (above) Children of the Chinmaya International Residence school in Coimbatore join forces to plant trees; (right) youth volunteers of India's National Cadet Corps hold an awareness rally for disaster management



CHINMAYA INTERNATIONAL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL



CHINMAYA INTERNATIONAL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

Here are more testimonies from youth.

Shalini Pandya, Atlanta, Georgia: "Doing seva has built my interpersonal skills, has created a supportive community for my academic and spiritual strength, but most importantly, has helped me create my purpose and identity in my life endeavors."

Roshni Dave, Houston, Texas: "Given the opportunity of doing Seva, I have benefitted both mentally and spiritually. Mentally I have gained more confidence and am able to balance my school, work, and

Seva. Spiritually, I have been able to keep moving closer in attaining shanti, inner peace and bliss."

Nakita Makan, Toronto, Canada: "The greatest reward in doing seva is the feeling of humility. Being able to understand that everything we have previously done, are currently doing or will do is due to the grace of God. So no matter how small, seva is seva as long as we walk away with this understanding, ego-free."

## Four Ways of Serving Others

By Swami Yuktatmananda, Minister of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York

**V**EDANTA TEACHES FOUR WAYS WE CAN SERVE our fellow man, according to their needs and our resources. The *Upanishads* teach us that we are not limited individuals consisting of a body and a mind, but are divine in the core of our being. Our divine essence, called the atman, is the eternal source of all purity, power, strength, bliss and fulfillment. But being ignorant of this truth, we identify ourselves with our body and mind, seeking lasting peace and happiness in ephemeral things. However, after having our share of pleasure and pain from the world, we begin to understand the futility of worldly pursuits and realize that only a search for the Eternal Reality can lead us to true fulfillment.

One way to approach this reality is by



**Anna dana:** A box of basic food items, collected to feed a needy family

rendering service to all with an attitude of worshiping God, who dwells in all. Such service purifies our mind and awakens the infinite dimension of our being. There are several kinds of service corresponding to various levels of our personality. According to the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, we have five different selves. These selves are layers of our being that cover up the atman, our real "I."

**Physical self (annamaya atman):** We are the physical self when we identify with our body. We look upon ourselves and others as a man or woman, young or old, dark or fair, and think and act accordingly.

**Energy self (pranamaya atman):** Usually translated as the life breath, prana is responsible for the functions of breathing,

assimilation of food, excretion, circulation of blood and the exit of the life breath from the body at death. Prana activates our hidden mental impressions (samskaras), which influence our thoughts, actions and behavior. In the dream state, prana stimulates the mental impressions that create dreams.

**Mental self (manomaya atman):** As mental selves, we identify with the mind's desires, emotions and feelings, such as pain and pleasure, love and hatred. Due to imagining that we are the mental self, we are tossed about by the varying states of the mind: happy, calm and peaceful; or miserable, confused and tense.

**Intelligence self (vijnanamaya atman):** When we identify with buddhi, or the higher mind, we are the intelligence self, from which stems our sense of judgment, decision-making, discrimination and living a righteous life. Identified with buddhi, we are able to exercise self-control and discipline our wayward mind.



**Prana dana:** A volunteer provides medical assistance following a natural disaster

**Blissful self (anandamaya atman):** As blissful selves, we are detached from the other four layers of our personality and abide close to the atman, only removed from it by a fine screen of ignorance. Because of its proximity to the atman, this self is the source of bliss, unfiltered through the body, mind and senses. In the waking state, the ability to abide as the blissful self is a sign of some degree of spiritual realization. We also experience this bliss while listening with joy to elevating music or admiring an elegant work of art. We experience this bliss in deep sleep, though we are not conscious of it.

Swami Vivekananda classifies service into four types, which correspond to the

different selves described above.

**Physical help (anna dana):** Physical help is related to the physical self, or body, and takes the form of giving food, clothing or shelter and any service relating to the upkeep of the body.

# Seva: A Remedy for Mental Turbulence

IN DISCUSSING THE CALMING AND PURIFYING ASPECTS OF KARMA yoga, texts often begin with a discussion of *prakriti*. Prakriti is primal nature, the original energy from which the intellect, emotions and physical body are formed. Prakriti, also called *pradhana*, is expressed as three gunas (qualities)—sattva, rajas and tamas.

Sattvaguna is rarified, translucent, pervasive, reflecting the light of pure consciousness. It is the most subtle of the three gunas. Rajaguna is the stimulative, restless, expansive energy of growth and movement. It is said to be the driving power animating the other two gunas. Tamaguna is the quality of denseness, inertia, contraction, resistance and dissolution. It is the densest of the gunas.

These three gunas manifest as light, activity and inertia, and in the mind as happiness, sorrow and delusion. They dominate the soul's powers of knowledge, action and desire (jnana, kriya and icchha), and form the guna body, *manomaya kosha*.

The challenge many of us face is that our minds are under the influence of rajas and are therefore restless, agitated and distracted. If we sit and attempt to meditate, the mind automatically continues its restless pattern of constant distraction and does not allow us to experience anything of a contemplative nature. Through the harmonious actions of karma yoga, in which we are active in a selfless and detached manner, the restless activities of the mind, which are rooted in the ego, can be gradually subdued.

Swami Krishnananda of Divine Life Society offered: "The agitation, which is also a kind of activity, can be subdued only by another kind of activity, as a disease is cured by homeopathic medicines of a character similar to the disease already prevailing in the body. *Similia similibus curantur*: Like cures like. Action can be controlled only by action; diamond can be cut by diamond.... God-oriented work is the means of putting down work that causes agitation. Binding action can be subdued by liberating action. This is known as karma yoga."



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Another obstacle to contemplation is a troubled subconscious mind. The subconscious contains all the impressions of our past actions and our reactions to them. Karma, or action, that is hurtful, selfish or self-indulging leaves impurities or darkness and trauma in the subconscious. We feel this as a sense of burden that we did not possess as a child.

Imagine a pond of water with large gold nuggets at the bottom. If the surface of the pond has ripples due to wind, or if the water is clouded by mud, we cannot see the gold nuggets. The gold represent our soul nature; the ripples represent an overactive intellect; and the water's cloudiness represents subconscious impurities. In order to experience our soul nature and its oneness with God, our intellect must be quiet and our mind must be pure.

My Gurudeva indicates how karma yoga purifies the subconscious: "Go out into the world this week and let your light shine through your kind thoughts, but let each thought manifest itself in a physical deed, of doing something for someone else. Lift their burdens just a little bit and, unknowingly perhaps, you may lift something that is burdening your mind. You erase and wipe clean the mirror of your own mind through helping another. We call this karma yoga, the deep practice of unwinding, through service, the selfish, self-centered, egotistical *vasanas* (subconscious inclinations) of the lower nature that have been generated for many, many lives and which bind the soul in darkness. Through service

**Lending a hand:** (above) Raised hands represent the spirit of giving of one's time to help others; (right) the Helping Hands team at the Hindu Temple and Community Center of Mid-Missouri (HTCC) pose for a group photo in Columbia after the annual 5K Run/Walk for the Communities Responding to Overcome Poverty.

them strengthen their will and their power of discrimination, giving them spiritual instruction—these are directed to both the intelligence and blissful selves. Such help toward others gradually awakens the budhi, shows the way to the blissful self and, finally, reveals the pure atman.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "The gift of spirituality and spiritual knowledge is the highest; the next gift is the gift of secular knowledge; the next is the gift of life; and the fourth is the gift of food." In his lectures on karma yoga, Swami discussed this gradation of the various types of service. He said that physical help does not remove wants permanently and does not transform the recipient's character. In other words, it does not result in

de-identification with the physical self. Swami sounds a note of caution about physical help: "In considering the question of helping others, we must always strive not to commit the mistake of thinking that physical help is the only help that can be given. It is not only the last but the least, because it cannot bring about permanent satisfaction. The misery that I feel when I am hungry is satisfied by eating, but hunger returns; my misery can cease only when I am satisfied beyond all want."

Saving a life or prolonging it is a little higher than physical help. But mere extension of life without a qualitative change in it does not help the recipient advance towards the goal of life. Next is the gift of knowledge or education. In Swami's words, "The gift



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**Jnana dana:** Swami Vivekananda, who articulated many of the ideas in this Insight, showed thousands the way to the pure atman

of knowledge is a far higher gift than that of food and clothes; it is even higher than giving life to a man, because the real life of man consists of knowledge. Ignorance is death; knowledge is life. Life is of very little value if it is a life in the dark, groping through ignorance and misery...The gift of spirituality and spiritual knowledge is the highest, for it saves one from many and many a birth."

The higher we evolve spiritually, the higher the kind of service we are able to render. But we need not refrain from offering service to others just because we are not able to offer the highest service, that of spirituality. Giving food, saving or extending life, providing education—all are important on the road to spiritual realization when rendered with an attitude of worship.



VELLORE S. GOPALABRATNAM

and kindness, you can unwind the subconscious mind and gain a clear understanding of all laws of life. Your soul will shine forth. You will be that peace. You will radiate that inner happiness and be truly secure, simply by practicing being kind in thought, word and deed."

He spoke highly of the benefits of service, "The psychological secret is to have a goal, actually many goals, in service to humanity to accomplish. People helping people, people serving people; that is what the Hindu dharma is and has been proclaiming for some 8,000 years or more."

Gurudeva summarized, "Once a lot of Sivathodu (service dedicated to God) has been performed and the lower nature has been quietly sealed off, the raja yoga practices of breath control and deep meditation can begin. The process of purification is similar to clearing a mountain path to walk upon. First the big stones are removed. Then the medium-size stones are removed. This process goes on until the path is clear of all stones. This is the refinement process we must go through on the charya and kriya margas before we enter the yoga marga. Sivathodu is the refiner."