

[Dimensions of Service](#)

Category : [July/August/September 2009](#)

Published by senthil on Jun. 01, 2009

Minister's Message

Dimensions of Service

Vedanta teaches four ways we can serve our fellow man,
according to their needs and our resources

By Swami Yuktatmananda

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 that only a search for the Eternal Reality can lead us to true fulfillment.

One way to approach this Reality is by 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.

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. They 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.

Saving life (prana dana): Saving a life, healing or extending it by medical means are ways of serving others pranically.

Giving knowledge (vidya dana): This is not just making people literate, but giving them the knowledge they need to stand on their own feet, think for themselves and solve their own problems. Dissemination of strengthening and character-building ideas also falls under this type of service to the mental self of others. Swami Vivekananda advocated "that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet" (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 5.342).

Spiritual help (jnana dana): Awakening people to the goal of God Realization, helping 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 buddhi, 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 Vivekananda 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 Vivekananda 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 Vivekananda's words, "The gift 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 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.

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