



Professor Frederick Hollows was the embodiment of Seva. www.hollows.org

The *not-so-simple* Art of Seva

Seva – selfless service to others – may be a simple concept, but for most of us it presents an enormous challenge. How can we let go of our egos and give to others without any expectations of return? Swami Vimalratna explores the paradox yoga masters have long recognised: that through helping others we inevitably help ourselves.

Seva¹ is simple. It means giving without expectation of personal reward. When we act with love for our child, without expectation of anything in return, this is the attitude that underlies the concept of seva. When this same attitude is applied in relation to others, outside our immediate family, this is where seva begins.

Seva may be simple but it is also a very fine art. It is a challenge to work out how to give to others without becoming entangled in their suffering.

Through the effort of practising seva, the mind is realigned. When our troubles are not our main concern, surprisingly, our life becomes less troubled. The mind is no longer focused on itself. When we turn our attention towards others through seva, we create something that has been described as a goal in all yogas: a quiet mind. It is possible, through seva, to remove the barriers between us and the essence of yogic experience.

Seva and yoga

Over the last century, as yoga emerged from India as a gift to the world, an attitude of seva accompanied it. The aim was to provide yoga to alleviate human physical and mental suffering. The early disseminators of yoga were often working without pay, carrying out their guru's wishes. Without knowledge of the world, appropriate language skills, or a credit card, they did what their gurus asked.

Swami Vivekananda, for example, inspired by an attitude of service to his guru, Ramakrishna, went penniless to New York. The prominent followers of Swami Sivananda Saraswati, such as Swamis Satchidananda, Venkatesananda, Vishnudevananda and Satyananda, were motivated to travel the world by the inspiration and instructions they had been given from their guru to "give, give, give." The tradition stemming from Krishnamacharya that gave the world BKS Iyengar, Desikachar and Pattabhi Jois, particularly with its emphasis on the therapeutic value of yoga, may also be seen to have its origins in providing a service to humanity.

Swami Sivananda describes eight steps in yogic life: "Serve, love, give, do good, be good, purify, meditate, realise." In this series seva comes first, well before

meditation. His own life exemplifies a spirit of continuous selfless service. Before he became a *sannyasin* (spiritual seeker), he trained and worked as a doctor and throughout his life he continued to help people with his medical skills and in any other way he could. At times the residents of his ashram would be without blankets or food because he had enthusiastically given everything away to the poor.

Yoga without seva?

Whether seva traditionally came first, or after one was established in asana (the physical postures), pranayama (breathing practices), or meditation, it is significant that the yoga taken up throughout the world today is generally without any obvious references to *seva*, or the ideal of

Beyond all paths of yoga, giving breaks down all barriers. The yogic training provided by this type of experience is not longer asana and pranayama, but seva.

selfless service. Perhaps this is because the world's initial interest in yoga came from a desire for physical fitness, health, and the release of stress. Physical yoga practice, and also meditation in this form, appealed to many and was embraced, whilst anything that could be confused with religion, such as the *yamas* and *niyamas* (guidelines for personal conduct), was minimised. Yoga became streamlined, made into a scientific formula accessible to all.

Even the most generous and openhearted of the current generation of yoga teachers typically chooses a business model to work through. There is a contract. A fee is paid and yoga classes are given in return. When the motivation remains for the welfare of others, with a disinterest in personal financial return, this may still be seva, but the attitude of seva may easily be lost. There are often confused attitudes associated with needing money and simultaneously wanting to help others. This is particularly true for yoga teachers, who are typically inspired to share something they know is of benefit to health and wellbeing. Often teaching yoga is itself an attempt to avoid

being caught in the struggles of a typical working life. Unfortunately, yoga teaching, which is initially a refuge, may also become part of the same struggle.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati was one of the pioneers who promoted yoga around the world. Yet in the 1980s, although he had practised every form of yoga, he walked away from everything he had achieved. Despite his success in bringing the benefits of yoga to many thousands of people, he felt something was missing. He went into a long period of isolation. During this time, he found that when he began to think of others, his life was transformed. He experienced what he had been searching for his whole life. He changed his way of teaching.

Now, he says, "helping others has become my obsession, my passion. Seva is the simplest and easiest path."

Seva as part of personal evolution in yoga

Initially yoga practice may be self-oriented; not that this is necessarily a bad thing. Yoga practised for health and wellbeing begins a process of realignment with the world. This may include a partial withdrawal from it. The aim of achieving personal contentment and a quiet mind is a notable one, yet it can only lead so far. As Swami Satyananda says, "We may practise hatha yoga, raja yoga, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga, but they only pacify the mind for the time being. They are all first aid treatments. We will not be able to deal with the mind, whether we are young or old, rich or poor, capable or incapable, until we can think and aspire passionately to help others."

Seva isn't necessarily only related to the spiritual aspect of yoga. If yoga is a systematic science of personal development, seva may be seen as an essential part of this science. We may reach *manipura chakra* (the navel centre associated with strength and power) by



Seva photo caption.

applying the appropriate hatha yoga techniques, without any concern for others. However, to reach *anabata chakra* (the heart centre) and beyond, it is necessary to address the ego. In order to progress, in parallel with the physical practices, it is essential to turn the mind away from its obsession with itself.

To rise beyond manipura, the yoga practitioner is compelled to step out of the yoga studio. As Swami Sivananda says, “Through your seva, other people are benefited. This is more than meditation in solitary places.” Seva is able to break the trap of ego, in a way that other paths can’t. Similarly as Swami Satyananda says, “The mind has a vulnerability, a weakness. If you think of the misery and misfortune of others, the mind melts.” When we break through the self-oriented aspect of the mind, yoga is able to truly begin.

Learning to give

Seva is a system for overcoming selfishness, a way to overcome a life of conditioning that stresses the overriding importance of maintaining personal space, security and happiness. It requires patience to learn the new ways of thinking that are necessary to succeed. “Why did God give us so much strength?” asks Swami Satyananda. “To support the weak. But what have we done? We have used everything for our own self. We have created our own little world, our own little cage.”

In Sivananda’s opinion, each act of giving is an opportunity to grow and learn about ourselves. In seva, humility is an essential ingredient. Swami Sivananda also suggests that every time you help someone, be grateful to them for giving you the opportunity.

There are many opportunities to help others, but this does not happen in an economic or cultural void. It is easy to be caught up in the drama, politics, or injustice of the situation. Those we are helping may not always behave well. Most difficult of all, we are often caught by our own emotions and reactions. Swami Sivananda says, “You have to prepare the mind for seva. The mind always expects something. When you smile, you expect a smile in return from your friend. When you raise your hand in greeting, you expect a greeting from other people. Even when you give someone a cup of water you expect gratitude.”

Each year Swami Satyananda, in Jharkhand in northern India, in the remote rural village of Rikhia, organises a festival – Sat Chandi Mahayajna – dedicated to giving. Thousands of people come from all over the world. In a ceremony spread over five days, wealth from all over India and the world is redistributed to many thousands of poor village families. Whoever comes is fed. Children are given what they need for school, farmers what they need for farming, and women what is essential for

their lives. Widows and the elderly are given sufficient for their dignity. Participants in this festival, often passing bundled gifts from one person to another for hours at a time, become lost in a sustained act of giving.

When giving is organised in this way, according to rituals which are thousands of years old, it is possible to experience a clear empty mind, transformed into nothing but an expression of giving. In this festival Swami Satyananda is demonstrating that, beyond all the paths of yoga, giving breaks down all barriers. The yogic training provided by this type of experience is no longer asana and pranayama, but seva. When the people helped are complete strangers, and those helping are acting without a desire for personal wealth or reputation, then the process is very effective. The greatest challenge is to apply this same attitude in everyday life.

Seva and karma yoga

Seva is a method for achieving karma yoga. Karma yoga is concerned with being in the world in a balanced way, unaffected by the suffering or confusion of the world. Through karma yoga we dwell in the inner spiritual identity while fulfilling all duties necessary in the world. It is a means of expressing existing karmas without creating additional new karma. The karma yoga attitudes of balanced action, discrimination and wisdom, and non-attachment to the fruits of action are equally applicable in seva. When we offer

our actions for the sake of someone else, breaking away from the dominance of our own needs and desires, we begin to break the karmic chain. When we express karmas as seva, the karmic repercussions of our actions are minimised.

Seva is possible well before we feel capable of giving selflessly. The turning point is when the mind is released from its self-obsession, even for a short time, and focuses instead on the needs of others.

Seva incorporated into lifestyle

Seva is a process with distinct techniques to keep the practice from becoming superficial. We all have skills and resources that can be given as seva. Swami Sivananda says, “Regardless of our financial or social status, we can serve by offering physical work, professional skills and genuine empathy or compassion.”

Strategies and attitudes to prepare for seva include simplifying our lifestyles and reducing personal possessions. It may be a matter of giving away something instead of accumulating it. It may mean giving a regular percentage of income to

charity. Allocating regular time to working in a community organisation is an obvious way to practice seva. It may simply be a matter of providing time for others.

When asked for help from someone who is in trouble, there is a tendency to shrink from potential contact. If courage is found to engage in these situations, overcoming personal constriction, there is an opportunity to expand and develop a sense of common humanity. Any action that helps overcome fear is of great benefit to a yoga practitioner.

For those who teach yoga there are multiple opportunities to give. The attitude of holding income from yoga teaching in trust, rather than as personal income, is a traditional approach to dealing with this. Others teach by donation or as a gift. The opportunities for teaching yoga in the community as seva are enormous. Hospitals, schools, prisons, or drug and alcohol rehabilitation places are just a few examples.

Steps to living on trust

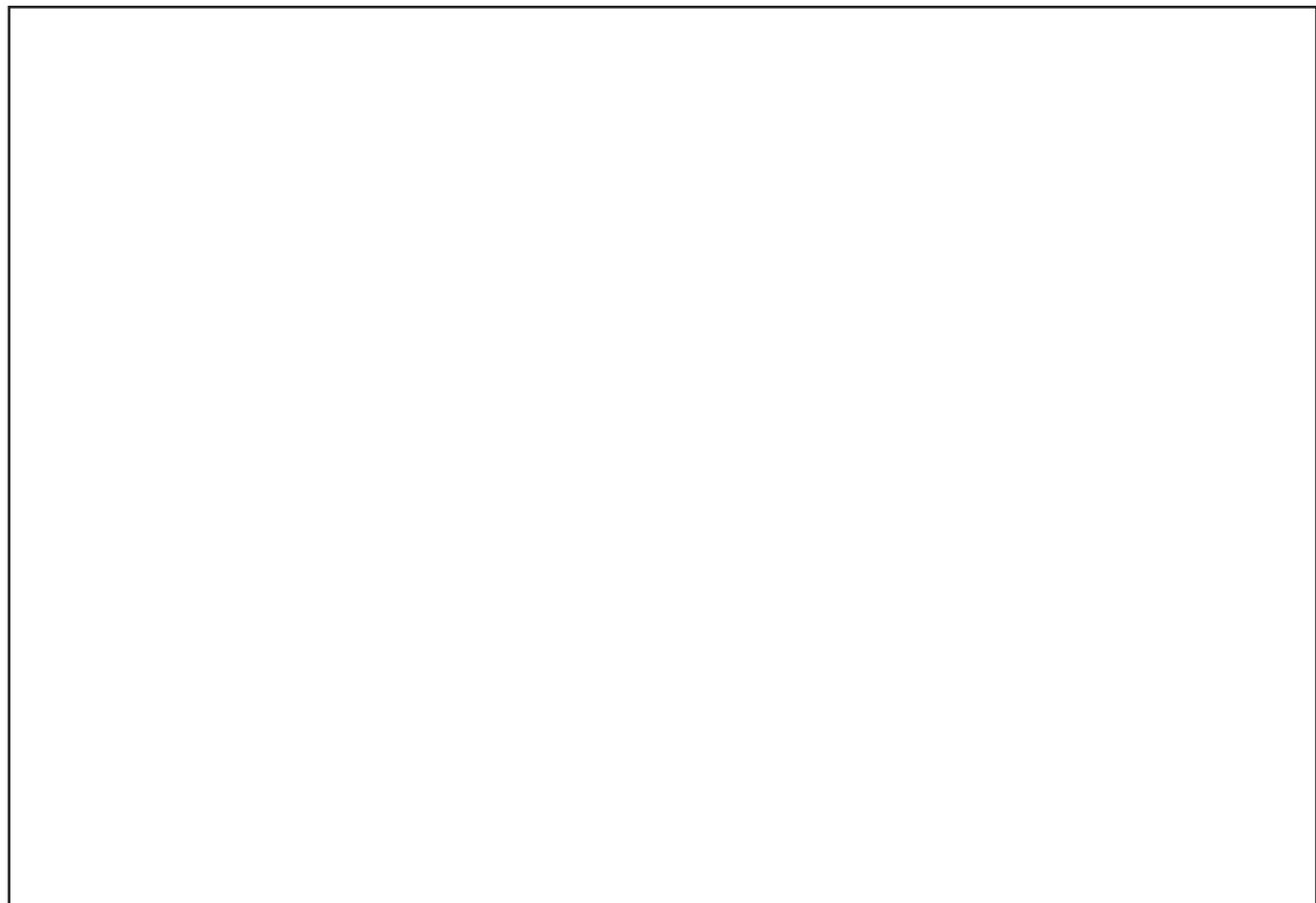
Typically, those who live their lives as a continuous gesture of seva act on faith

and trust. There is a feeling that when actions are unselfish, support will come from God, the universe, or whoever will write the cheque. Swami Satyananda says he has an arrangement with the goddess Lakshmi, the Indian goddess associated with prosperity. As long as he doesn't keep anything for himself, the swami says, she will always give him whatever he needs to support others.

As long as we depend on a high maintenance lifestyle, we'll find it hard to give anything away because we will always believe we need resources to sustain our lifestyle. Reducing our wants and needs is a giant step towards living a life that is free of worry. When we minimise psychological attachments to possessions, and the fears associated with being without them, then we have more time and resources available for helping others.

Change yourself and then the world

The impulse to turn yoga into a vehicle for political change is strong. However, Swami Sivananda suggests, “Do not bother yourself much about reforming



Reducing our wants and needs is a giant step towards living a life that is free of worry. When we minimise psychological attachments to possessions, and the fears associated with being without them, then we have more time and resources available for helping others.

this crooked world. Reform yourself first. Then the whole world can be reformed.” Traditionally yogis are not involved in political life. The emphasis is on self-transformation. As a result of this transformation the yogi becomes an example to others, with social change emerging from this example.

One tool to create this personal transformation is seva. Seva is not motivated by political intent, but if seva were to be taken up widely, nothing could be more radical for a society’s future.

According to Swami Sivananda, seva is necessary at all stages of the yogic journey, from the beginner to the realised being. It is easy to pass judgements on the state of the world; it is more difficult to address ourselves with a critical attitude. If we make ourselves all we can be, then when we speak, the world will listen.

Atmabhava – empathy with others

Seva relates to both actions and feelings. *Atmabhava*, the attitude of intense feeling for the needs of others, seeing the divine nature in everyone, is the pinnacle of seva. Swami Sivananda says, “Serving humanity must not be a mere mechanical act. It must be done with atmabhava.”

This attitude of atmabhava connects us with the whole of humanity. For the sages who have evolved with yoga, the goal of seeing one’s true nature is only the first step. The discovery and experience of this same divinity in everyone may be seen as the climax of a

yogic life, a realisation of the unity of all beings. As Swami Sivananda says, “Have a large and loving heart with atmabhava. Then you will be happy and peaceful. Identify yourself with all. Feel that you are one with the whole universe.”

Seva is closely related to *bhakti* (devotional) yoga. The attitude of seeing the divine in all, or of being god’s servant, serving the poor, is closely linked to both the Christian as well as the Indian bhakti traditions.

Seva as part of a balanced yogic life

Seva may be seen as a complementary part of a yogic life. The practice of seva, in parallel with the physical yoga practices, enables consciousness to expand in a beautiful dynamic way. Swami Sivananda says that through the practise of seva alone, all the positive qualities necessary for the practise of bhakti and *jnana* (wisdom) yoga will be gained.

Seva develops qualities that balance the behavioural flaws that need to be overcome for success in yoga. Seva has the potential to accelerate the yogic journey. Yet, as Swami Satyananda says, “First we must take care of others and then take care of ourselves. First work for their *moksha* (liberation), then our moksha is guaranteed. First ensure their peace and prosperity, then our peace and prosperity are guaranteed. If we can’t think about and understand the problems of others, we can never realise our self.”

i In Sanskrit, the ‘e’ is pronounced similar to the French, so seva sounds like ‘tape’ or ‘neighbour’. It does not rhyme with ‘beaver’, as most English speakers might expect.

Further Reading

Seva: The Path of Purification: From the teachings of Swami Sivananda Saraswati and Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Published by Sivananda Math, Munger, India, for free distribution.

Satyananda Saraswati Swami. *Bhakti Yoga Sagar*, vols. 1 to 7. Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, India
Satyananda Swami. ‘Sayings of a Paramahansa’ in *YOGA* May 2002. Sivananda Math, Munger, India.

Extensive information on Swami Sivananda Saraswati, including downloadable books of his writing, is available from the Divine Life Society at www.dlshq.org

Articles by Swami Satyananda Saraswati from the magazine *YOGA* are freely available from www.yogamag.net
Information about the Sat Chandi Mahayajna festival in Rikhia may be found at www.yogavision.net/sk/about.htm

Swami Vimalratna is an Australian currently coordinating the development of yogic studies courses for Satyananda Yoga in Colombia, South America. He has developed courses in various aspects of yoga in Australia and Europe. He has a particular focus on yoga as an integral aspect of lifestyle. He is author of the book *Yoga with Attitude*.