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Yogi in the World #3

Making a Difference

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Making a Difference

When I became a swami, I was surprised to feel a startlingly powerful impulse arising within — I wanted to feed people. Having been kitchen-averse for decades, it was a shock to me that I actually enjoyed cooking for others. I soon realized it's because of the sutra:

J~naanam annam — Shiva Sutras 2.9 True
knowledge is food.

It means that a seeker hungers to know the Truth of their own Beingness. One who knows and shares that knowing is truly feeding you. Pure knowledge is the only real nourishment, that which gives satisfaction.

I remember giving a discourse on sutras where one yogini cried all the way through. She never sobbed, but tears ran down her face the whole time, more than an hour. I paused a couple of times to check in with her, but she waved me off. When finished, I asked her, "What are the tears?" She answered, "I feel like I've been waiting my whole life to hear these words. I feel fed for the first time in my life." I understood completely for that is how I felt with my Guru.

This is truly what I want to give, that which nourishes you at a level that mere foodstuffs cannot reach. But when you allow me to give you a meal or snack, I pump it full of Divine energy so it feeds you on both the physical and subtle levels.

I live a dedicated life. A consecrated life. This is a sacred way of living, where every breath is holy. Every thought comes from God and is put into words or actions that serve God. That's what a swami strives for, to be a light unto the world. That's what everyone wants, even if they don't yet admit it to themselves. That's why we love the children's song, "This Little Light of Mine."

The first step is to find your own light. Then you can shine into the world. Ah, but there's a catch here. You might think the point is to shine so that others will see you. Nope! It's about shining in a way that you help others find their own light. Then we're all shining together.

I always wanted to make a difference. As a preteen, I remember holding my younger cousin on my lap one day when she was unhappy. I talked and played with her, wanting to make her happy again. Unbeknownst to me, someone snapped a photo. This was when the Polaroid camera was new, so the photo printed out in one minute. I was amazed when they showed me the photo, for I looked happy. That was not my usual state, to say the least. I quickly learned that helping others made me happy. Research bears this out. The Mayo Clinic reports that those who serve as volunteers have better physical health as well as lower rates of depression and anxiety. Volunteering reduces stress and increases positive, relaxed feelings. In addition, volunteers feel a sense of meaning and appreciation. Other studies show that volunteers live longer. Providing support to others actually promotes longevity more than receiving support from others. Why? Because when you help others, you are making a difference.

You love to give. Making a difference for others matters to you. So many times, you have worked hard for another's benefit. It's built into the human being. It's also built into many animal species including dolphins, walruses, raccoons and bats.

Yoga inspires altruism. It arises in you because the practices change your inner state. As you settle into your own Essence and Beingness, you feel less needy and anxious. Now life is about what you can give. Your interest in others extends beyond the reach of your shared DNA, as you discover that your own essence is the One Essence that is being all. I can describe it personally: everyone is dear to me. It's a heart-filled way to live.

Altruism is the opposite of egoism. One who is caught in ego is focused on "me, me, me." They approach everything in life with the question, "What can I get?" Instead, an altruist asks, "What can I give?" So does a yogi.

Shakyamuni Buddha spoke about this as well, warning of three egoistic fires that will burn you up: greed, anger and ignorance. He taught his disciples to cultivate their opposites: generosity, compassion and wisdom. What great motivators!

Yoga's great text about making a difference in the world is the Bhagavadgita. Krishna tells his student Arjuna to perform the same actions as before, but now motivated by service to God.

Saktaa.h karma.nyavidvaa.mso yathaa kurvanti bhaarata;
Kuryaad-vidvaam-stathaasakta"s chikiir.sur-lokasa.m-graham.

— Bhagavadgita 3.25

The unwise cling to the fruits of their actions, Arjuna;

the wise must act in the same way, but without clinging, in order to benefit the world.

A yogi reported her volunteering as a Board member for her homeowner's association. After several weeks of full-time work without pay, she had reason to be tired. But she wasn't asking, "Did anybody notice?" She's not looking for them to pay her, not with money and not with their good opinions of her. In doing things that must be done, she has made herself available.

God doesn't care about your ability. God cares about your availability. When you make yourself available, God makes sure you gain the skills and abilities needed for the job. While many others benefit from what you give, so do you.

In yoga, this is called guruseva, service to the Guru. Any volunteering is beneficial, including at the homeless shelter, for the local library or senior center, for the local schools or parks department. All of these are good. But when you give your time, energy and efforts to the Guru, something else happens. The mystical relationship deepens. I know, for I've been doing full-time guruseva for over 40 years. Some Gurus give their energies toward helping the poor. I had the great fortune to meet one who mobilized thousands of devotees in a clean water project that has spanned decades. Other swamis focus on medical care or social justice. In India, a number of swamis are members of Parliament, working on making a difference in government.

My Guru focused on giving people enlightenment. Along the way, he also instituted several charities, feeding the poor and providing free medical treatment. Yet his goal was to improve our inner state by blasting us with Divine Energy, the initiation called Shaktipat.

He worked tirelessly to educate us in texts and oral tradition as well, so we could bring this great tradition home with us and into our lives. This was Baba's guruseva, his service to his own Guru: to give the world more enlightened beings.

Baba's favorite text, Shree Guru Gita, describes this important yoga practice, guruseva:

"Srutism.rtii avij~naaya kevala.m gurusevaka.h,

Te vai sannyaasina.h proktaa itare ve.sadhaari.na.h. — verse 108

Without knowing the ancient texts, those dedicated to serving the Guru are called the true renunciants. Others merely dress the part.

Baba told us about the sage Shankaracharya giving a discourse, but his disciple would be out picking fresh herbs for preparing his Guru's dinner. Yet this disciple became one of the greatest of the wise ones, for his devoted service opened up his heart as well as his mystical knowledge.

Only when you give of yourself do you truly receive. The research has proven it to be true, but the yogis have known it for thousands of years. This is why guruseva is one of yoga's most important practices. While our many Ashram sevites make what we do possible, I know they are the ones who get the most benefit. Doing guruseva makes you altruistic, even if you weren't when you began.

They are making a difference in the world. They are helping me make a difference in the world. That difference is an inner difference. When you're changed on the inside, then you can truly work to benefit the world and all in it. It's another reason to do more yoga.

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