

## **Sevā Bhāva - Service Inclination <sup>1</sup>**

### **By Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati**

Pujyasri Swami Dayananda Saraswati established AIM for Seva in 2000. The idea for starting this movement came from a conversation with an elderly woman in Anaikkati, a village in southern India. She appealed to Swamiji to help educate rural children as they did not have schools where they lived, and they did not know how to educate the local village children. Puja Swami Dayanandaji started thinking about creating an infrastructure for educating children in remote<sup>2</sup> areas; they typically do not have the privilege of going to school or they drop out due to the prohibitively lengthy commute from many kilometers away.

Some people are effectively separated and disconnected from the main society because modern developments, namely economic development, social development, and infrastructure development have not reached these areas. Puja Swamiji thought it was very important to bring these people into the mainstream and integrate them with the rest of the country through education. Some people are deprived of even basic necessities – food is a necessity, education is a necessity, healthcare is a necessity, cultural education is a necessity, and a sense of self-worth is also a necessity. Connection with one's culture, education, health, economic well-being – all these provide a person a sense of self-worth. Then alone one can live one's life happily.

The poverty is not only in terms of money, but also in terms of education and health; it is also in terms of self-worth. Self-worth is a very important asset in making a person feel happy. People are deprived of this self-worth for various reasons, including intergenerational social injustice. Puja Swamiji felt that those who have the capacity to contribute must do the task left undone by our forefathers, in integrating society's most marginalized through service. It is very important that those who possess one or more types of wealth or means – money, education, healthcare, religious education, spiritual education – need to reach out to those who are needy.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a Talk given by Sri Swami Viditatananda Saraswati, one of the foremost disciples of His Holiness Pujyasri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, founder of AIM for Seva. The talk was transcribed by KK Davey and edited jointly by Vinita R Davey and KK Davey.

<sup>2</sup> Puja Swamiji did not like to use the word remote; he used to say it's all Bharat, all India

### ***We are blessed and should reach out to those who can use our help***

We should recognize that we are really fortunate. We are what we are on account of the favor and contributions that we continue to enjoy from the rest of the world. We should count our blessings and recognize that we are enjoying the grace of *Īśvara* or the Lord, the grace of our parents and ancestors, the grace of our teachers, and the grace of all those who have helped us. Puja Swamiji used to say that when we reflect back on all of our successes, we can see that we did put in the necessary effort but at same time, we happened to be at the right place at the right time. If we examine our lives and look at whatever small and big successes we have, we realize that we have been always enjoying lots of blessings, lots of favors. We recognize that we are what we are, on account of the many favors that we have been enjoying from many sources. Our scriptures say that we enjoy favors from five sources: parents and ancestors, teachers, divine forces, other human beings and nature. Teachers also include those who taught in the past, *ṛṣis*, who contributed to the storehouse of knowledge. Divine forces, called *devatās*, substantially and continuously contribute for us to function. That our body functions, that we can see, hear, walk, talk, think, learn, feel, remember, and communicate – all of these are possible because of the grace of the divine forces. We also enjoy the favors of other members of human society such as farmers, merchants, doctors, soldiers and many others. We enjoy favors from both animate nature like plants, trees, and insects but also inanimate nature like rocks. It looks as though the whole universe is designed to support and sustain us.

We may perhaps feel that we are not as lucky as some others, or that we are deprived. Maybe we feel that we do not have what many others have, that we wish we had more or that we deserve more. It is possible that we do not have what others have, we do not have what we think we should have, etc. Everyone feels that they are not lucky enough. But we are very lucky if you look at our life and the privileges that we are enjoying, the benefits that we have and the various opportunities that we receive. All of this is a blessing and there are many who do not enjoy these privileges. It may be the fructification of all of our past good deeds. Some others are not as lucky as we are because they did not have the benefits of good *karma*. We are not to judge that, but what we see is that there are some who are not as lucky or privileged as we are. Therefore, it becomes our obligatory duty to reach out to those who are not as privileged as we are.

### ***It is our duty to reach out to others***

*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* teaches us that we are indebted by our privilege and it is our

duty to return that favor. That is how the idea of contribution comes. Each one of us needs to become a contributor. A consumer is one who keeps receiving favors. We are all consumers. To keep living, we need these favors. At the same time, there should be contribution too, as an expression of gratitude for the favor that we are receiving. We have needs at the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual levels and these needs should be satisfied. But at the same time, in the scheme of the universe, each entity enjoys a certain relationship of being privileged and offering privileges. Every entity is helped and is helping in return, whether sentient or insentient. Mutual aid is the inbuilt order of the universe. Every entity, whether a tree, an insect, or an elephant, contributes in accordance with its ability to the functioning of the universe. This is true for all other beings in the creation, except for the human being. When it comes to the human being, this system may or may not work because the human being has been given the free will to make choices. There are barriers within our nature that are obstacles to the free flow of the emotional and spiritual growth that is required for happiness. The human being has inner barriers such as greed, which other creatures do not seem to have. An emotionally mature person can be happy. A spiritually mature person can be happier, and to grow in maturity is the primary purpose of the human embodiment. Other creatures do not have this privilege, which is fine to live their life because they just sustain their life. These are the natural instincts given to all, including human beings: food, sleep, self-preservation, and procreation. Nature has given them means to fulfill those needs. We also have those needs, but further we have a need to become happy and free, which requires emotional growth. We have an ego with which to make choices. In making the right choices, we are guided by the mind. We may believe that we make choices that are good for us, beneficial for us. But our understanding of what is beneficial may not be accurate, and we may, in fact, make poor choices that result in self-harm. The human being is in a position to use his free will properly after judging a situation appropriately to make the right choices. Or, we can make wrong choices and hurt ourselves. Therefore, making right choices is important to us. However, it depends upon our maturity.

### ***We have to conquer detrimental impulses to recognize our self-worth***

Pujya Swamiji was fond of quoting a *mantra* from *Sāma-veda*, *setūmstara, setūmstara, setūmstara, dustarān setūmstara*, do cross the (four) barriers not possible to cross by any other means. *Setu* is a barrier or a dam. *Setūmstara*, cross the barriers. We have many barriers and this *mantra* highlights four of them: *lobha*, greed or miserliness, *anṛtam*, falsehood, *krodha*, anger and *aśraddhā*, lack of faith or trust in others. *Dānena adānam tara*, may you cross the barrier of *adānam*, inca-

capacity to give by *dānam*, generously giving. *Akrodhena krodham tara*, by compassion, may you cross *krodha*, anger, another barrier, that makes us violent. *Satyena anṛtam tara*, by truthfulness, honesty one crosses the barriers of falsehood and dishonesty. *Śraddhayā aśraddhām tara*, by *śraddhā*, faith in the words of the scriptures and teachers, may you cross the barrier of *aśraddhā*, the incapacity to respect scriptures or wise people.

Lord Krishna identifies *kāma*, *krodha* and *lobha* as the three barriers to cross in *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.<sup>3</sup> *Kāma* is the impulse to indulge when something is very tempting. *Krodha* is anger. *Lobha* is miserliness. These barriers are within us and we have to cross them for our own well-being and self-worth. When one feels that he is weak, he cannot have self-worth. An angry person's self-worth is undermined as he knows that anger is a sign of weakness. Similarly, indulgence is also a sign of weakness. A weak person cannot resist when there is a temptation for pleasure, power, wealth, fame etc. Very often, values are compromised, and we fall prey to many vices when we are weak. Greed or miserliness is also an obstacle, and those who suffer from these cannot have self-worth. We have to cross or overcome *kāma*, *krodha* and *lobha*. These are the barriers or obstacles which deprive us of self-worth. When we do not look upon ourselves as worthy, when we do not respect ourselves, we cannot be happy. One can be a wealthy, powerful or famous person, but he is not necessarily a happy person. Happiness comes from a sense of self-worth, self-respect, self-acceptance, and self-satisfaction. Therefore, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* teaches us a way of life, certain values and attitudes which are conducive to discovering self-worth. This cannot be acquired externally, but rather we have to tap into ourselves to discover this worthiness. *Kāma*, *krodha*, *lobha*, *anṛtam*, *aśraddhā*, etc. deprive us of our self-worth. That is why *Sāmaveda* says *setūmstara*, cross these barriers. Then, we discover worthiness in our own perception. Wealth, power etc. are not necessary. One can feel worthy when one is compassionate. When one is charitable, giving, generous, and can control his own impulses, he feels, 'I am worthy.' This is the purpose of human life. When one who has inner wealth of honesty, charity, compassion, faith, trust, self-control, and self-discipline, one feels worthy irrespective of his wealth, power, fame, etc.

***By recognizing our inner wealth, we can help others become self-worthy***

*Dānena adānam tara*. *Adānam* is the other barrier. It is lack of charity, but Pujya Swamiji explained it as the incapacity to give. Something prevents us from giving, it is an innate miserliness. Greed prevents us from reaching out. Unwillingness to

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<sup>3</sup> *kāmaḥ krodhastathā lobhastasmādetattrayaṁ tyajet, Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, 16-21*

give, Incapacity to part with what we have. This is an obstacle to our emotional growth and to our sense of self-worth. *Dānam* should be given to deserving people at the right time and right place.

Ritual, religious discipline and charity should be in our daily routine.<sup>4</sup> One is rich when one gives, when there is an urge to give, or when he feels he has more than enough to spare. Inner richness is required. If you do not have this sense, 'fake it till you make it.' How much do you give? Give until it pinches you.

Pujya Swamiji's message was: Become self-worthy and help someone realize their self-worth. Because of lack of education, lack of connection with our own culture, lack of benefit of good physical and intellectual growth, because of these deprivations, there are those who are not as privileged and are not happy. They don't feel self-worth. Therefore, we should reach out to them. Because we have enjoyed a lot of privileges, and continue to enjoy these privileges, it becomes our duty to reach out and become contributors. Transform yourself from being purely a consumer to a contributor. We can remain consumers because of our needs, but at the same time, we also need to become contributors. That will create a sense of self-worth in us.

Pujya Swamiji loved the word *sevā*, service done with care. Reaching out can provide us an opportunity to perform various acts of kindness. That is how we can initiate or enhance our own inner or spiritual growth and become instruments in the growth of others. This is in recognition that what we are is due to the privileges that we enjoy and there are others who are not as privileged as we are. Therefore, we should reach out to them. People helping people. This is why Pujya Swamiji established AIM for Seva.

We have to contribute ourselves and create an awareness of this movement. The more people become aware of this movement, the more they will contribute and help rural children. We have to solve the twin problems of lack of education and lack of health. Our Free Student Homes help solve these problems. These homes also can become a hub for many related activities like caring for women in nearby areas and to make them aware of their own rich heritage in terms of spirituality, religion, arts, social forms, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> *yajñadānatapaḥkarma na tyājyaṁ kāryameva tat, Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, 18-5*

Charity need not only be in terms of wealth or money. We all have one or more of the three Ts: Time, Talent, and Treasure. We may not have all of them, but most in our positionality have at least one or more. Sharing what we have with those who are more needy than we are in the spirit of sharing, the spirit that is abundantly prevalent in the whole universe. There is a *subhāṣitā* which says that trees bear fruit for others, rivers flow for others to use, cows give milk for others, this body of ours too is meant to serve others.<sup>5</sup> When this spirit of sharing comes in us, we become happy, and therefore, we should give. It is a sign of emotional maturity and it makes us happy. Share with others what you can. If that urge does not come, then you should pretend to have that urge till it slowly develops in you. One should give anyways, because it is our duty to give. *Īśvara* has given us what we have. It is our privilege to share and to give. Start with the idea of duty and it will slowly become our nature. The whole process generates happiness and leads to discovering our own self-worth.

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<sup>5</sup> *paropakārāya phalanti vṛkṣāḥ paropakārāya vahanti nadhyaḥ, paropakārāya duhanti gāvaḥ paropakārārtham idam śarīram.*

*Om tat sat*

The *Bhagavad gītā* is more than a book of promise. It has a message that is immediately relevant for every struggling human being. It does not present God as infallible, but helps you see that the Infallible is God. In the wake of such understanding, the struggling person relaxes in the awareness of the Infallible

- Swami Dayananda Saraswati