

Seva as Saving Grace

Seva – “Compassion in Action” – so the ancient practice of karma yoga in its most outward expression is concisely defined by the Seva Foundation of Berkeley, California, which raises money to improve the lives of the indigent poor the world over. Seva has also been described as, ‘the holy spirit in work clothes.’ The Bihar Yoga School of Mungar, India teaches that Seva means ‘to be with the Self’, (saha-eva) *That (Self)*, which we can define as God, human nature, consciousness, etc.; it is the natural manifestation of creative, harmonious, positive energy (1). In essence, through spiritual striving, focus, practice, we reach eventually the experience of Unity, wherein the heart begins to open and blossom, and our connectedness to Life as a whole becomes something felt rather than intellectualized. Our natural response is then nurturance – the desire to give, reduce suffering, teach peace. As the spirit evolves thus, the personality takes on more of the characteristic of selflessness, and a predisposition towards altruistic action becomes an inherent quality.

And what a gift! The best-kept secret is that, in truth the greatest blessing rests in learning to love giving the gift. For as the Taoists say, ‘to rule truly is to serve.’ This feeling begins to define our sense of meaning, and thereby has the power to neutralize the painful processes that many minds succumb to in our current society – feelings of worthlessness and disconnectedness, ennui and fear, that are often diagnosed as anxiety and depression. As we engage in Seva, the work of compassionate, selfless giving, we work to heal society *from the inside out*, for as we know, all charity, health and healing begin at home. And we create a formidable therapeutic tool as well, when, both by example and instruction, we inspire others to embrace service. Seva then, proves both a personal, and a social, saving grace.

Our society appears in need of healing. Working both as a counselor and as a yoga teacher for many years, I am dismayed by the prevalence of anxiety and depression in our society. I took up the study of child and adolescent psychotherapy because of my awareness of the increasing incidence of children and teens prescribed psychotropic medications for these disorders. These observations were validated by the lead instructor of the certification program at Bryn Mawr College who said, as introduction on the first day of class, “Well, the kids are getting sicker.” The implications are staggering. These are the innocents, our children -- the clean photographic plates that we share the responsibility for imprinting lasting images upon: of life, society and self. We are failing our children; it seems, for many bear the marks of pain and fear and the prevalence of ego and competitiveness in our society. They question their worth – believe their goodness is defined by looks, accomplishments, or another’s feedback. In the wake of such a startlingly low ebb in general self-esteem, bullying plagues public schools as never before, for how do humans respond to fear? By lashing out.

It is sad but not surprising in our society, where prescriptions written for anti-anxiety medication now far exceed one million per year, and the reliance on SSRI antidepressants (Prozac, Zoloft) has reached epidemic proportions, since so many people have turned to these and related medications to save themselves from depression. However, to

counselors, therapists and psychiatrists, medication is but one among many options for healing these disorders: techniques from cognitive paradigms to Gestalt therapy, and a lengthy list in between, abound, creating a broad range of choices for clinicians to sift through in choosing a healing approach.

On a sociological level, we may wonder whether our focus on individuality, our celebration of ego as a society, has recreated us as renegade players on the field, without the ability to sense the need to cooperate, seeking only narrow self-interest. Still the more immediate issue for the counselor persists: how to help the individual coming for counseling. I have often experienced while with clients a sudden insight, a surety, with that particular sense of rightness that marks intuitive knowing; and suddenly the real problem is clear. And then the healing routes blazed by the Humanist schools open naturally: empathy as the path to self acceptance, and the drive towards self-actualization. These approaches have much in common with what might be considered 'Yoga Psychology', something that has been propounded for ages by the yogic scriptures for pursuit of equipoise.

Part of the pursuit of equipoise – mental ease and balance -- exists in the practice of Seva. In counseling those who are depressed or marked by ennui, dysthymia, disconnectedness or a sense of meaninglessness in life, the recommendation to pursue giving has proved greatly healing. Sometimes beginning simply with loved ones. Many married couples have benefited by being reminded that love is about tolerance and surrender and sacrifice even more than it is about getting one's own needs met. It has been gratifying to find that clients who agreed to look outside themselves and join the community or church in assisting those less fortunate have come away with a new sense of meaning to their lives, and self esteem. When someone else benefits by our actions, and happiness springs from them, joy comes to reside our hearts, and remains there. We learn that singular self-interest is really a trap that keeps us isolated, and, as the Buddha taught so clearly, isolation is suffering. It is in making connections, and in giving, that we learn to identify goodness as our essence.

It would seem that the last ten years or so could be called the 'age of anxiety', as anxiety disorders dominate the American psychological landscape: Eating disorders, Panic Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Phobia, Separation Anxiety, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Even Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is anxiety-based, as are the Personality Disorders, which are becoming much more prevalent. The current rise in Bipolar Disorders may also be triggered by anxieties brought on by the staggering stresses in our society. One might even propose that Oppositional Defiant Disorder in children occurs in response to stressful environments: environments dominated by competitiveness, ego and hyper-stimulation resulting in irritability, intolerance and fear. If we can reroute the narcissistic focus created by fear and loneliness to a perspective based on connectedness and kindness, how much better, more supported, more meaningfully useful would an individual feel? And how do we accomplish that? Perhaps by presenting the option of connection – the gift of Seva – acting outside of self-interest to connect to others, through which we connect to that which is highest in ourselves.

And this sense of finding the best in ourselves is key, for then *we can clearly perceive our capacity for real beauty*, and this is in large part the solution to the enormous problem of self-esteem for which we have so ardently sought the cure. The question of self-esteem lies often at the base of manifest anxiety, and not infrequently of depression as well; then counseling is sought to answer the question in our clients' minds: what am I worth? Am I in any sense loveable? The more we turn away from our fears and embrace kindness and empathy, the more we grow in tolerance, towards ourselves and others. In the process, we can learn to appreciate ourselves. Is it always this simple? No. Could this generally bestow some benefit? Yes.

So as part of therapy for many clients with anxiety disorders, it is useful to inspire clients to learn to love themselves, partly by giving to others in a variety of ways: loving well, teaching, coaching, helping at the YMCA, giving to the poor, cooking for the salvation army, giving soup to an ailing neighbor, working for human rights or environmental healing – the list is as long as our potential is broad, and the gift of positive results persists. And how much more enduring learning to rely on our highest potential, our greater selves can be, rather than giving over responsibility for our mind states to pharmaceuticals! Because along with exploring ourselves and finding goodness, we come ineluctably to two truths: first, that there are many resources untapped awaiting exposure within us, and second, that ultimately the nature of our being is one of connectedness – we are never alone. Thus through the practice of Seva, we enlighten ourselves to the knowledge of being supported and of being competent, and in such a healthy radiance, anxiety pales.

Psychotropic medication undeniably has its place – when needed, it can prove quite invaluable. Yet like many of my contemporaries, I share the belief that the willingness to turn to the 'magic pill' has been all too pronounced, its shadow side, too often ignored. Prompted by a growing expectation for immediate gratification, in our mad rush to band aid the pain and mask the fear and vulnerability that arise when situations seem to conspire against us, we gloss all too quickly over both the long term side effects and the potentially addictive properties of these medications. And in the bargain we lose the enormous opportunity for self-exploration, within which reside both the inherent possibility of resolving painful emotions at their foundation and of establishing the beginnings of wisdom.

In part I seek to share personal learning of the immense joy of giving: offering free classes or extra time to clients, feeling heart connection to others in Sufi healing circles, knowing the deep joy of bestowing peace and a sense of connectedness to students of meditation, healing a child through empathy. Through Seva, one learns the secret first hand: it is only in giving freely that we are truly freed ourselves, that we feel the light flowing through us and know ourselves as an expression of our connectedness to all life which some call God. The detachment from the fruits of our labor has for millennia been the yogic philosophic and spiritual ideal – one we have struggled with our egos, that promote self-interest at every turn, to fulfill. But what few scriptures outline adequately is the vaulting sense of sweetness and serenity that accompanies even fleetingly transcending the ego into altruism. To give fully for the joy of giving – without thought

of reward leaves us with a sense of fullness in turn – the indomitable buoyancy of spirit one thus attains negates utterly the sense of emptiness that so characterizes pathology in our time.

There are those who say, ‘There are no coincidences.’ Six months after my son was born and I could return to meditative practices, I resumed meditation with the addition, near the end of each practice, of the visualization of a golden light, reaching from my heart to my son’s heart, so that he would know how much he was loved, and be protected and soothed by this energy. When he was five, he turned to me one day and said, “Mom, do you know what is my favorite thing to pretend?” “What?” I asked. “That I am the Master of Light. And I have a Golden Power Cell here,” he stated, indicating the center of his chest, “that is so powerful it has the power to turn people good!” In practicing this meditative Seva, I inadvertently taught him to value the good in himself! What greater blessing could have been bestowed upon me?

Thus therapeutic method, like life itself, is not necessarily less for the inclusion of spiritual ideals. Indeed, quite the contrary. For what would our future society look like if we could teach our children, our younger clients, to believe in themselves, to love themselves and thereby others, to care as much about the welfare of the community as about themselves? As parents and therapists, we teach first by example: we cannot teach something we do not ourselves understand or practice. And in teaching ourselves, perhaps we positively affect society, for what is society but the collective perspective of individuals?

In 1983, in The Discovery of Being, Rollo May wrote that society was becoming increasingly schizoid in type – tending toward symptoms of isolation and alienation like a person whose sense of relatedness had become broken – that we were increasingly marked by a detachment from one another, a sense of unrelatedness, lack of affect and depersonalization that we tended to cover up through a startling propensity for intellectualization and technical formulations (2). Was he far from describing our culture just twenty years hence, or even the current vogue in the direction of psychological inquiry? Shall we not infuse our striving to understand and heal the human mind with the reaching of the human heart, the relentless drive towards evolution of the human spirit? Whether we see the bestowing of kindness, the giving of love, or the formation of empathy as something spiritual, something psychological, or just what mother would approve of is really immaterial. The Seva that we perform in whatever context benefits everyone. Not just via whatever acts to the benefit of others we perform, but also via the enormous benefit to ourselves in actively countering the loneliness, the listlessness, the isolation that threatens to engulf our age. And thus, on a good day, we inspire others to rise above suffering to embrace, even share, the best in themselves.

Yogic philosophy teaches that by performing karma yoga, acts of selflessness, or Seva, we begin to wipe away a lifetime or lifetimes of accumulated samskaras – the unconscious mental images, fears and old wounds that hold us back from evolving easily. In this context it is easy to see Seva as personal saving grace, but what if we could also use it to save our children from pain and fear, use it as a tool to teach both the personal

and the social benefits of tolerance, kindness and peacefulness to them, the harbingers of our future societies? What if the practice of Seva could heal us of self-esteem issues that cause us to isolate, to lash out to protect ourselves both as individuals and as societies? This would indeed constitute grace, and a saving one. And what of the immense grace we, as Seva practitioners, begin to sense of being but an instrument of greater consciousness, or of God? Is there any greater joy than this feeling of the lightness of our being, our sense of the swelling of love until it is so great as to encompass all others? All things? My experience says no. I know to this point no greater joy, and this knowledge belongs as much to the ancient sages as to all of us. Perhaps the cynic, even the existentialist, in or among us begs to remind us that if we receive so very much personal growth and elation from giving, then altruism – selfless service -- cannot truly be possible. There is an answer: they are One – try it and see.

Footnotes:

1 Jignasu Madhumati, “Live Well To Love Well,” Yoga Magazine, Year 5, Issue 11, November – December, 2006, p. 31.

2 May, Rollo, The Discovery of Being. (New York, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1983), p. 118.

Copyright March, 2007

Katie Tandon has been a certified Yoga teacher since 1983. She has studied, and teaches, many forms of Yoga, including Therapeutic and Meditation. She is also a Dance Instructor, Certified Massage Therapist, Licensed Counselor, Certified Employee Assistance Professional, Certified Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist, and Certified Addictions Counselor Diplomate, and as such works in private practice where she incorporates Yoga Psychology into her therapeutic style. She is a Professional Member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists, of Himalayan Institute International, and RYT. She has received initiation in mystical schools of Yoga, Buddhism and Sufism.