

HINDU
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FOUNDATION



Charity and Service in the Hindu Tradition: Reflections and Ideas for Action

Presented in partnership with
ONE Seva

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Dana, Seva, and Karma Yoga

Charity and Service in the Hindu Tradition

"Give. Give with faith. Do not give without faith. Give with sensitivity. Give with a feeling of abundance. Give with right understanding." -Taittiriya Upanishad

The alleviation of tangible forms of suffering, such as hunger, disease, and poverty, is an essential component of the Hindu tradition. Hindu scriptures are rich with hymns extolling the upliftment of all humanity through *dāna* (charitable giving) and *sevā* (selfless service), not only for the betterment of the lives of those suffering, but also for the giver's own spiritual growth. The Hindu worldview holds that all beings are interconnected as God dwells within all beings. To see the suffering of another as something separate from oneself, or as "someone else's problem," then, is a form of delusion. Therefore, to help and serve others is a way of serving and worshiping God.

A great sage of modern Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda, coined a famous expression to capture this idea, "Work [in the service of others] is worship!" According to Swami Vivekananda, service to relieve the suffering of others, without any regard for one's own discomfort, and with no selfish motive of fame or gain, is one of the paths to God: the karma yoga, or path of good works, described in the Bhagavad Gita as "detachment from the fruits of action." One does good for others purely out of the love for God within them, rather than with the expectation of a reward or recognition. When one gives of oneself in a spirit of *dāna*, one is not only relieving the suffering of another, but engaging in an act of renunciation of selfish attachment to what we regard as our own—whether it be our time, our money, or our effort. Nothing in this world is really our own, the ego being a veil that keeps us from perceiving the true nature of existence as One.

In a world of suffering beings, one of the most important acts of worship a Hindu can perform is selfless service to relieve that suffering. When one encounters someone who is suffering, one has been given an opportunity to perform *sevā* – an opportunity that one should gratefully and eagerly seize. Service is worship, no less than performing a puja or practicing meditation or studying scripture.

How can you join the over 2 million ONE members to raise public awareness about the issues of global poverty, hunger, disease and efforts to fight such problems in the world's poorest countries? Consider recruiting your friends, families, local temple, yoga class, satsang or study group, balavihar (youth study schools), student organization and cultural and social organization to take action:

1. Contact your members of Congress to support critical legislation to save lives from preventable disease, put children in school, create needed economic and trade opportunities and fight extreme global poverty. Learn about current legislation on ONE.org and mobilize your community to call or write letters to Congress at important legislative moments.

2. Hold a Food or Charity Drive Share the Hindu concept of dāna during the festival season, such as Navaratri, Diwali, Makar Sankranti or Holi by holding a food drive in an effort to alleviate hunger locally through organizations such as Second Harvest (secondharvest.org). Or hold a charity drive with collected proceeds benefiting charities such as the United Nation's World Food Programme (www.wft.org) that are involved in food relief in hard hit areas around the globe such as Africa and Southeast Asia.

3. World Seva Day

Share the Hindu concept of seva with your fellow Americans and rally community members to hold a local day of service. Help a local soup kitchen, participate in local clean-up campaigns (parks, highways, etc.), hold a charity walk-a-thon or charity yoga-thon, volunteer at your local Boys or Girls club or donate to a food bank.

4. World Vegetarian Days:

Share the Hindu concept of ahimsa (non-violence) for six days of Diwali, commemorating victory of good over evil, by going vegetarian. Why vegetarian? Consider the fact that there is more than enough food in the world to feed the entire human population, yet more than 840 million people still go hungry. Studies have shown that a meat-based diet is partly to blame, as land, water, and other resources that could be used to grow food for people are being used to grow crops for farmed animals instead. In fact, a report by Compassion in World Framing found that it can take up to 16 pounds of grain to produce just 1 pound of edible animal flesh. A meat-based diet also has detrimental effects on the environment. A 2006 United Nations report summarized the devastation caused by the meat industry by calling it, "one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global." So, leave the meat, if only for a few days, to raise awareness about world hunger and environmental issues such as clean water that impact the lives of millions less fortunate.

"Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." -Gandhi