

## Practice through Service

by Rodney Smith

Many of us yearn for a quiet and simplified life, one which contains more intimacy, caring and self-worth. These are spiritual qualities which we sense can be nourish inwardly. We believe we could foster these qualities if we could get away from all the commotion and be alone. We seek out special environments such as churches, temples, or retreats to disentangle ourselves from our social interactions and discover who we are.

But we are also social beings with job and family responsibilities. The obligations from our social actions seem to pull us counter to our spiritual needs. We wrestle with the dilemma of meeting our daily concerns and sustaining our spirits. The paradox exists, however, that our lives in and out of work are full of relationships which foster our sense of community and interconnection. These are also spiritual qualities which seem to be tied to engagement and interaction. So the question we work with through much of our spiritual development is how to benefit from our social actions and still work inwardly.

Our lives can seem fragmented between the secular and the spiritual with little common ground between the two. We sense that being with people can help us connect with our hearts but there remains so much psychological interference within relationships that we often despair and withdraw from the effort. The long evolution of practice brings resolution to the conflict between our outward and inward needs. By moving repeatedly between engaging and withdrawing, a new understanding develops. We grow beyond the specific practices into a formless and wordless connection with all of life.

I remember after spending several years on retreat, including a few years in Asia as a forest monk, feeling that my practice was becoming dry. I was not sure why. My life was very serene and simple, but it did not feel complete. I needed to connect with people and work with my heart in some undefined way. I had always thought that the monk life would fulfill my spiritual needs, and it did for awhile, but I soon began to realize that the longing in my heart was not about to obey my spiritual design. So I decided to disrobe and return to the West.

From time to time we stay too long in the pursuit of one expression of our journey or another. Inwardly we know something is wrong as we keep casting ourselves in a different mold than the shape of our hearts. We see teachers who we hold in high regard practicing in a particular style. Not trusting who we are, we think their practice must also be good for us. Or we simply resist change. To move with the yearning of our hearts is to take our lives in an undefined direction, and that can feel very unsettling.

Coming out of the forest was difficult because there was nothing to fall back on for security. I felt adrift on an unknown course. My old spiritual practices were no longer as vital or as relevant to me as they once were. There was no turning back, and yet there was fear in moving forward. I felt very alone and exposed and was not sure of my strength or ability to face the growing responsibilities of a layperson. I needed a focus which could be universally applied not one that fit only within a special environment; one that included others and was not dependent upon my being alone.

I sought advice from many people on how to make my new journey more safe and secure. I remember a revealing conversation about service with Ram Dass, who was staying at the same western meditation center. I had always admired his understanding of engaged spirituality and looked forward to his wisdom. I told him all my props had been removed and I was left with Neem Karoli Baba's instruction, "Serve everyone." The problem was I had no idea how to do that. "Serve everyone, what does that mean? There are too many people, and I do not feel up to the task!" Ram Dass told me very compassionately that he did not know either. Somehow that helped. "Okay", I thought, "I'm on my own, no role models, no mentors for the leap I am about to take." That freed me up to be creative and to let the path unfold in my own unique way.

However, I do keep looking for clues on how to serve under every rock and around every corner. I search for them in the eyes of the rich and the poor, the wise and the destitute. Discovering the clues is a part of the beauty of the path. A treasure hunt for one's heart. I remember once walking downtown during the Christmas holidays and stopping for a light to change. A homeless man was next to me. I could feel he wanted to connect, but he smelled awful, and I was in a hurry. I deliberately moved

away from him, and when the light changed, dashed eagerly off the curb. As I stepped out, I caught his eye, and he said, "Merry Christmas." There was the inward resistance to service as clear of a clue as Professor Plum in the kitchen with the knife.

Or the time I was feeling angry and frustrated, embroiled in my own thoughts, when a very gentle coworker asked me how I was doing. Annoyed, I waved her away. She looked hurt. Secretly I tried to convince myself she deserved that reply and was too softhearted for her own good. But the clue was there, and later I apologized.

So in my search for clues I have come upon a quote from Harold Thurman Whitman which has been extremely helpful. I keep it on my desk and reflect on it often. It keeps pulling me deeper and deeper into its meaning. It reads, *"Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

This quote takes away an enormous tension on how to serve. It solves the question of how to practice and fully participate in our lives at the same time. The quote eliminates the burden we associate with service at all, defining service as being fed by our aliveness. No longer do we have to worry about the onus of helping. For me, helping was always a weight, like forced Christmas shopping. I really did not enjoy it, but I felt an obligation, and people expected me to join in.

I once visited Mother Teresa's Dying Center in Calcutta where there were long rows of wooden beds with dying patients side by side. The dying were warm and clean, and the room, though modest and simple, was filled with caring nuns and volunteers. One of the nuns was mopping up vomit from the floor. I pulled her aside when she had finished, and asked what sustained her in her work. She looked at me and said, "What work?" I was about to reply, "You are standing here cleaning up vomit, and you ask, 'What work!'" - when I caught her eyes - they were so clear and radiant. I thought to myself, "This woman is alive." She seemed to catch my initial reaction and said, "When you change the diapers of your child, is that work?" I knew she was simply telling me how it was for her. Humbled, I just nodded.

So let us explore this quote together and see if we can understand service in light of waking up and becoming alive. The burden is off, now we just need to interpret the

good news. If we investigate this quote deeply, it might provide us with an antidote to burnout because it suggests that by serving ourselves, we serve the world. We feed the world through being fed, not through our sacrifice. Aliveness is our birthright; we deserve to be aligned with our hearts. We just have to rediscover how to do that.

Aliveness in this quotation is open to various interpretations depending upon the context in which we understand it. Synonyms for the word include wakefulness and awareness among others, but its meaning is very inexact. We all have an idea of what it means to be alive - not what we do with our aliveness like chasing after our desires or whatever - but being alive itself. No matter where we start with our definition, through investigation we penetrate to a new meaning. So part of the challenge of reflecting on this quote is to keep redefining the word, allowing its meaning to evolve beyond what we first think it to be. In one sense, it means becoming alive through understanding ourselves.

When I was an undergraduate in psychology, the focus of the school where I studied was experimental psychology, stimulus and response. One professor stood up in front of the class and said, "Stimulus and response is essentially all that you are. So put everything else aside. You are a conditioned mechanical being." This teacher, I judged, may have had a little problem with his emotional life. Although I could see a great deal of cause and effect and stimulus and response in my life, it did not feel like the complete picture. Yes, I would salivate when the lunch bell rang, but I felt alive in another way, beyond that conditioning.

I began to recognize the extent of my conditioning even more once I began Buddhist practices. Emotions, thoughts, and even consciousness itself could be experientially seen as a conditioned process. At the same time there was an intimation of something more fundamental beyond the play of conditions. That clue could be traced back through the origins of awareness itself. Awareness seems to be the ground on which conditions occur. Only something alive is subject to conditioning, so awareness is before conditioning. Since all experience is conditioned, aliveness is prior to experience itself and rests not in the mind which is the locus of experience but in the heart.

The way of the heart is to simply follow what makes us come alive back to the Source of all aliveness. We do this by discovering our interests and recovering our passion for life. We are then most alive, living aligned with the needs of our hearts in ways that nourish our spiritual growth. We become increasingly awake because our passion feeds our vitality. Service becomes a delight to the spirit!

While still a monk in Thailand, I happened to read, *Who Dies*, by Stephen Levine, and a thought came to me that I wanted to work with the dying. There was an immediate surge of energy. It was similar when I first heard the Dharma and felt the passion and energy to act upon it. In both cases, my intentions and heart were in total alignment.

We connect instantly with our passion without persuasion or coercion. We want to do it! This response is not found by seeking out what is pleasurable. Pleasure actually has nothing to do with it. Seeking out what is pleasurable interrupts the spontaneity by locating us back in our conceptual world. Pleasure drives us from one situation to another seeking more of it. The heart is the path of contentment, and its passion is based on fulfillment, what will take us home, what makes us complete.

### **A New View of Service**

We sometimes hold ourselves back from service because we define our spiritual practices in a narrow way. We may think to ourselves, "My path is not the path of service. I am a bhakti yogi, not a karma yogi." We become tied to the terminology rather than what feeds our hearts. We limit the definition of our spiritual practices to a particular set of circumstances - it is always done alone in a quiet environment. The form may be so narrowly defined that it no longer feeds the spirit.

I once read that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said she never meditated, and never wanted to. She felt it was too dry. But when Elizabeth was working with the dying, she was totally focused and intimately with the other person, learning constantly, and listening to the other and herself throughout the exchange. She was as focused as any meditator would be on the breath after an extended retreat. Elizabeth was in fact meditating, but it was through her interest in the dying that the meditation arose, not through sitting on the floor.

The truth seems to be that many of our spiritual practices are interchangeable, though we often shield ourselves from their commonality to claim a special uniqueness. Christians say they do not meditate, but many open their hearts to the voice of God; and Buddhists do not pray but often send loving thoughts to all sentient beings. We often do a disservice to ourselves and others by denying the common ground and pretending that our path is special.

The one agreed upon form which seems to have a universal basis in all traditions is serving others. Service work cuts through all those artificial divisions. Most forms of spiritual practice can be discovered within the broad term of service. If we understand the intention rather than adhere strictly to the form, service can actually be an expression of prayer, metta, or, like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, an ongoing engaged meditation as well. Service seeks its commonality from the lives it serves and not from the confines of religious traditions.

Service has a way of transforming separate spiritual practices into a spiritual life. Slowly over time, our spiritual activities start influencing the other actions in our life. Washing the dishes, dressing, cooking, eating, and showering are not separate from our prayer or meditation. Our life becomes a spiritual life, an unceasing prayer of the heart. We become less dependent upon specific practices because we are more aware of the interrelationship of all things. This understanding itself manifests as service. We no longer have to pray to access God or meditate to experience intimacy with life. Our hearts become as easily accessed through a variety of contacts and relationships as through prayer or meditation. Everything resonates with us because there is less interference between our hearts and the Source of our aliveness. We start being fed from life itself.

The evolution of our spiritual lives is often analogous to the way people die. Shortly after patients are given a terminal prognosis there is usually a period of resolution and determination. The attitude of the patients toward their disease is like the strategy of a military campaign. Finally, after a long and heroic struggle, the nature of hope changes from hope of longevity to a hope for redemption. The attitude of the patients shifts from being at war with their illness towards alleviating a lifetime of guilt. This is often their first attempt to heal themselves and not their bodies. Forgiveness is often pursued through religious or spiritual practices. The dying

struggle with their historical place in the world, whether their life has been of value. This continues until the dying begin to settle into their situation and simply live the time remaining. Gaining or adding something is no longer the issue. Now there is just being. Quality time is spent honoring connections and relationships.

As we begin our spiritual practice, we often apply the same strategy that we use for everything else, believing that hard work and discipline will lead to success. We feel anything but spiritual inside so our efforts are to overcome this deficiency. Our spiritual work is addressed with the same gaining attitude which fills our everyday intentions. We rise and fall with every pleasant and unpleasant state of mind because that is how we have learned to perceive success. Helping others from this perception soon depletes us because “we give so much.” There can never be complete fulfillment in our efforts to help others because it is our very sense of inadequacy which has led to this forced labor in the first place. We feel we have to redeem ourselves from this unworthiness, and so we do penance in the form of disciplined service.

Like the dying, our spiritual practices evolve from a philosophy of self-escape and seeking our own salvation. We begin by operating under the assumption that we are too impure to be holy. We are looking up hill, leaning into the moment through self-improvement. We serve others because it gives us a little psychological relief from our own inner poverty. We are called to serve out of our hurt rather than out of health. Working with other people becomes a way to blunt the pain of our inadequacy.

Although service may hold in check our feelings of unworthiness temporarily, it will not transform them. Doing good things for people allows us to feel the joy of connecting with something beyond ourselves, but does little towards resolving our poor sense of self-worth. People’s praise, thank-you’s, and hugs cannot touch the core of our self-beliefs. Secretly we believe that people are praising us because they do not know how unworthy we are of their flattery. It is this issue which continually colors the way we serve. As long as we judge ourselves as unworthy, burnout from service is inevitable because our efforts are directed toward filling a black hole of need.

Service work comes into maturity when we begin to understand that we are as worthy of the fruits of our efforts as our fellow human beings. It comes when there is

no deliberation over someone else's needs taking priority over our own. More fundamentally, we realize there never has been anything wrong with us. Service imparts energy because we are attending to our own growth. We are not growing to become someone different than who we already are. We are growing to understand who we are. Self-acceptance encourages the development of a deep relationship - a relationship with our own inward life.

A relationship with oneself is impossible to develop as long as there is an inward struggle to be different. If we are not content to be who we are, our attention will be on the future, who we want to become, not on the present. We will not be able to make an honest connection outwardly if we are mistrusting ourselves inwardly. Our mental world keeps interfering with our outward and inward relationships. When we mistrust other people's intentions and feel unsafe with intimacy, fear rules our relationships. Unless we develop total self-acceptance, we will lack inward trust and have no accessible safe harbor. To relate means to join hearts, and service work emerges from that union. It begins through our willingness to move beyond our self-imposed limitations and risk the fear of being hurt.

Most of our mental difficulties were generated through a multitude of relationships with other people, and it is through relationships that these problems can be most easily accessed and resolved. If we are willing to learn from our reactions to others, we can begin to increase the scope and breadth of our affection. Service work provides the perfect medium to begin this process. Service is in essence connecting with other living beings. All of our self-defenses will intrude upon our relationships unless we are vigilant. Our job is to recognize their appearance and step through these mental barriers to discover the intimacy inherent in the contact.

I remember living in a forest monastery of Thailand, feeling very free and unbound. Since I did not speak Thai, I was left alone by most of the monks. When other westerners occasionally came to the monastery, my heart would often slam shut and I would think to myself, "What is he doing here!" In the beginning it felt like an invasion of my solitude, but over time, I began to use these intrusions to learn about my resistance to others. My reactivity was a cue to pay attention. I began to understand my need to protect my aloneness and how my freedom was dependent



upon conditions. It was through others that I was able to learn more about myself. This understanding would not have come if I had remained untouched and isolated.

Service moves us from self-protection to inclusion of others, from self-defense to joy. It is the movement to a process mentality. We begin to recognize that a life lived between grasping and avoiding is circular and meaningless. It ultimately leads nowhere except to pain. What now becomes meaningful is the experience of being alive, the quality of our life. It is not whether we have something or not but how we are relating to what we do have.

It dawns on us that our spiritual practices have always followed the direction of our self-beliefs. We have been selecting practices which reinforce our separation because we believe our predicament is true. If we want to know where we are in relationship to freedom, observe how we practice. That attitude is our only bondage. When our view changes, so does our spiritual orientation. We see unity, not distance. We do not have to struggle with life anymore. It calls forth our joy.

From this new view, we are interested in connecting with the movement of life and not halting or retaining that movement. Relationships, not objects become the focus. This understanding begins to break down the boundaries between self and other. Service becomes a way to further that understanding. When the heart yearns for fulfillment and completion, it will not get sidetracked by a stationary gain. When we are attuned to that yearning, every boundary becomes an obstruction and a source of pain and discomfort. Effort is made toward understanding the obstruction rather than self-improvement. Service work feeds us because we are always growing in our relationship to what is being served. This can only occur when we hold ourselves in as high esteem as the thing we are serving. It is work among equals.

Action from self-deficiency is very different than action from passion. Working from our passion requires the recognition that we are deserving of our joy. It is a path of growth, not drudgery, and everything is there to help us along the way. The Buddha said, "The spiritual journey is a path from happiness to greater happiness." Service work is this pilgrimage.

## **Recovering our Passion**

One of the central purposes of spiritual practice is to understand how we forget who we really are by losing contact with our experience. In meditation, for instance, we learn how mental concepts distort reality. We learn to see through this deceptive view and return to the aliveness within our breath, body sensations, and mind again and again. However, when we get up off the pillow and engage in our everyday activities, we seem to get lost very quickly. Often our meditation seems to have little effect on the rest of our lives.

The age old question of how to maintain our practice throughout our daily activities has plagued practitioners from all traditions. We try to maintain the form of practice we learned in solitude, but it too easily dies once our activity increases. It can be difficult to return our attention back to this moment when we do not care about what we are doing. If, however, we could find an activity which would engage our focus, spiritual practice would feel more natural and less like hard labor. Right effort would come from the situation itself through our intrinsic inclinations and interests.

All of us have areas of life which draw our attention, make us feel more connected, and feed our need to grow. Hospice work serves that function for me. When I disrobed and began involving myself with the dying, after an initial period of adjustment, I felt that I had not missed a step on my spiritual journey. The texture of the path had changed, but not the direction or the intensity. I am sure some of the older monks frowned and thought, "His ignorance is guiding him now. He is just giving into his impurities." But working with the dying was simply a substitute for intense retreating, one passion for another. It served the same function as sitting on my pillow by focusing my attention and providing an endless object for inquiry.

My hospice work is merely a metaphor for passion itself. Aliveness has no definitive expression. We could do anything and serve. If it feeds us, it **will** feed the world. We sometimes feel we do not deserve to be fed. We may feel it is selfish to follow our interests, as if we should be out there where the action is, where the problems are, not hunching over a microscope or gazing at the stars. But the world is more connected than that. The world is crying out for all of its aliveness, not for a specific activity. Every act we do affects every other. Opening our hearts through whatever means is uniquely ours will make us come alive and serve the greater good.

The simple question is: What makes us come alive? Regardless of what it is, if it interests us, there is focus and absorption in the activity. If we are also willing to learn while we are engaged in the activity then all of the ingredients for spiritual growth are present. There is no need to go anywhere or do anything other than this. One of my teachers, Ajahn Buddhadasa, would sit all day long in front of his cabin greeting people as they came. He carved his home out of the natural surroundings of the forest because that is where his heart dwelled. When questioned about his spiritual practice he would say, "My attention is developed naturally through the things I love."

We first have to understand where our interests lie within our chosen lifestyle. Think for a moment why we chose to do whatever work we are now doing. Think back before the financial incentives, prestige, and social status became our primary focus. If we are a physician or carpenter, why did we choose that profession? - a lawyer or psychologist, what was it that originally excited us? For some, our expression of service work may not be directly connected with people at all. We might be a computer programmer or an artist. Whatever our work or hobby, if we can rekindle that passion, our life and meditation will begin coming together.

One way to follow our passion back to the Source of our aliveness is to generalize that interest out beyond the specifics. We strip our personal interest back until the common source of all interests are revealed. For instance, if we love animals, we first access that love with the animals we own, then we move the love beyond our animals to all animals, then to all sentient beings, and finally to all life. The love and understanding will follow the passion, and we will be able to embrace all of life through the affection we feel for our own cat or dog.

Another way to access the Source is to investigate the object of our interest through the multiple layers which appear to separate us from it. What is this? Where do my interest really lie? How can I get closer to it? This is the journey through our conceptual minds into our hearts. We want to unite with our caring. We sense that our freedom lies within our love. So these questions arise spontaneously from the heart as a way to bridge that distance. To open our senses to the aliveness within

these questions, is to come to a profound understanding of the nature of love itself and to arrive at the Source of love.

It takes focus to constantly clear away all the inducements which cloud our passion. Wealth and other incentives can easily divert us from our heart's direction. We cannot grab our interests and pocket the change if we expect our passion to continue to serve us. We falter when we assert ownership over our aliveness. Ownership is claimed by taking a personal stake in the outcome, and when that is done, we thwart our aliveness and stagnate in our work. One hospice worker mentioned that he has to renew his commitment to open his heart to every patient he serves. No matter how dysfunctional the family system is, he meets them where they are knowing it is their journey and not his. With that orientation he steps out of his mind and into his heart, and it is his deep connection in the realm of the heart that feeds his passion back into life.

I remember the process of writing a book on death and dying. It was the first time I had attempted such a venture and began from the enthusiasm of expressing my own interests. At first it was not even conceived of as a book, rather as a way of remembering the many people whose stories had filled my years of hospice work. I loved doing it and would hurry home after work to continue the process. I was being fed by the writing. Then a friend read the stories and felt they should be published sensing that they could offer guidance for others. When I heard this, my attitude shifted, and I assumed ownership. I would write a book to help others. But now the project became labor intensive. I was less interested in writing and more in finishing and publishing the manuscript. I labored over the chapters, trying to get them just right for other people's reading. My original interest in remembering and writing my memories for the sheer joy of it had been subverted.

The fact that a book was created out of the labor is not the point. The greater good is served through our aliveness. When we superimpose our mental desires upon the deep passions of the heart, we not only lose our individual path, we also undermine the natural course of life. The point is whether we operate within the natural law and harmony of the universe as directed by our hearts, or whether we respond to other factors which lead us astray.

## Helping and Serving

Often the shift from helping to serving is only an attitude deep. I have a friend who worked as a waitress while putting herself through college. She disliked the work and complained about it often. One day she and I were talking and I asked her what she wanted to do after she received her degree. She said she wanted to serve people. We both laughed because it was instantly obvious that in essence waitressing was service work. We talked about how to serve her customers. For the next two weeks she attempted to bring a service attitude to her work by making eye contact with her patrons and working from the relationship. She served the food rather than filling orders. She said it totally changed the way she perceived her job.

The difference between serving and helping is the difference between being alive or being depleted. Helping is based on sacrifice, not strength. It has motive and labor associated with it. Its intention is self-enhancement at the expense of someone less fortunate. The helper's reward is in perceiving that he or she is better off than the person being helped. Help is for the disadvantaged.

Subliminally we can pass on a message of inequality to those we help, diminishing them as human beings. We can hold those we help to a fixed perspective and refuse to allow them to grow beyond their need for us. If they grew, we lose our desire to provide a service. We become as dependent upon them as they are on us because we want to be needed to allay our feelings of inadequacy.

With our needs so tied to the helping situation, the relationship between helper and helped becomes very confused. The more we give, the more we need to give. The person being helped must remain needy as we attempt to foster our sense of self-worthiness through service to them. Success is impossible and failure through burnout is inevitable.

It is our minds and not our hearts which perceive inequality in another. Our hearts reveal what we have in common through the bond of caring. Love sets no limits and harbors no judgment. When we serve we are meeting and connecting through a reciprocal affection and not through comparison and evaluation. We think how

fortunate we are to be doing what we are doing because there is such delight in the work. We are being served as much as those we serve.

When there is profound connection, there is mutual appreciation. Connecting with our aliveness through service is about being in contact with our caring, our affection. Our aliveness becomes like the arrow of a compass, always pointing in the direction of service. How could it be otherwise? Service comes from the perception that we are not isolated beings. The yearning which calls us to service comes from the truth of our inseparability. The joy we feel as we serve is the joy of sharing within that truth. It is the joy of our common aliveness.

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