

THE SPIRITUAL SCIENTIST

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Is Manava Seva Not Madhava Seva? (Is Service to Man Not Service to God?)

Picture the sights of a child with match-stick like arms and a bloated stomach indicative of chronic malnutrition, a grief-stricken family standing besides the rubble that was their home prior to a devastating earthquake, a crippled beggar struggling to drag himself along the floor on a metropolitan railway station, piteously calling for alms and a bright-eyed young woman dejectedly contemplating the prospect of inevitable blindness due to not having money to do a cataract operation. Graphic sights of human suffering like these touch the hearts of all sensitive human beings and impel them to compassionate relief work according to their capacity. On seeing such intense suffering all around-suffering which can apparently be counteracted by material means, some people tend to think of religion and worship as an unaffordable luxury. And the idea of spending lavishly on religious worship while thousands starve to death appears to be an expression of heartless apathy of the religious for the suffering of their fellow humans.

Social service being a practical expression of natural human concern and compassion for the distressed, undoubtedly has an important place in every civilized society. However slogans like "Manava seva is Madhava seva" (Service to man is service to God) often have a covert undertone, "Religion and spirituality are unnecessary and indeed undesirable. These are anachronisms from an age of sentiment, blind faith and utopian longings, which intelligent moderns should replace with practical measures to uplift others." In bringing about a better world, can service to man replace entirely service to God? Or, even if God is not completely banished from modern human society, can service to God be kept on the backburner till service to man brings about adequate alleviation of human suffering? We will address these questions in this article by considering a widespread social problem - starvation and generalizing the principles explored therein for other problems.

THE CAUSES OF STARVATION

On seeing a starving person, an instinctive reaction is to want to give some food. This will certainly offer some immediate relief, but a thoughtful person will also ponder: "A few hours later he will be hungry again. What has brought this person to the stage of starvation? And how can that cause be permanently tackled?" Some of the sociological causes of starvation relevant to our discussion are analyzed below:

1. **Wanton living and self-destructive behavior (among the poor):**

Many people who can and do earn enough to at least make ends meet squander their hard-earned precious earnings on bad habits like smoking, drinking and drugs. It is not uncommon for a social welfare worker to meet a family that is on the streets facing starvation because the head of the family has lost everything - savings, furniture, ornaments, house, job and even health - the basis of future earning - all due to his alcoholic addiction. Regular travelers generally have the experience that many beggars refuse to accept food and want only money because they can use money to buy cigarettes. Natural disasters like earthquakes are known to be big business opportunities for alcohol peddlers because

the quake-hit people tend to use the relief money not to rehabilitate themselves, but to get intoxicated and try to forget their suffering rather than rectify it. Is providing material relief to addicted people not like pouring water into a bucket with a large hole at the bottom? No matter how much they are helped materially, their situation will not be truly ameliorated till their habits are rectified. And at a material level, national governments and international organizations have been dismally unsuccessful in averting this tragedy of self-destruction.

2. Greed and Exploitation (among the affluent):

The problem of starvation is not so much due to shortage of resources but due to mismanagement of resources. Mahatma Gandhi has stated, "There is enough in this world for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed." A study by the University of California's Division of Agriculture Science shows that by practicing the best agricultural methods now in use, the world's farmers could raise enough food to provide a meat-centered diet for a population 10 times greater than at present. And if people would be satisfied with an equally nourishing but mostly vegetarian diet, a population 30 times greater than at present could be fed. (This is because for every 16 pounds of grains fed to beef cattle, only 1 pound of meat is obtained in return) In her well-researched book *Food First*, Francis Moore Lappe points out that much of the world's best land is being misused for production of cash export crops. Both these causes of under-use or misuse of precious land resources leading ultimately to starvation are entirely due to greed among the affluent.

Starvation does indeed occur sometimes due to factors beyond human control such as abnormally low rains, but even then the impact of the natural calamity is compounded by the way humans respond to it. A study of the famines in Africa showed that on every occasion the affected nation had within its own boundaries the food resources to feed its starving citizens, but relief was intentionally withheld due to economic or political motives. The merchants wanted to hoard the grains, cause artificial inflation and earn more profit. Or the politicians wanted to deprive regions supporting the opposing politicians and thus settle old scores or gain greater strength. On some occasions the food-grains would be allowed to rot in the go-downs while people all around would be starving. Or worse still the crops would be deliberately burned or grains intentionally sunk in the oceans, while the poor all around were burning in hunger and sinking to death.

During a morning walk through a slum area, Srila Prabhupada noticed some stout people jogging down the road. He poignantly commented that in the huts people didn't get enough to eat, while the wealthy tended to overeat and were then forced to jog to decrease their weight! Consider further the following UNICEF statistics:

- To satisfy the world's sanitation and food requirements would cost only US\$13 billion - what the people of the United States and the European Union spend on perfume each year.
- Nearly one in four people, 1.3 billion - a majority of humanity - live on less than \$1 per day, while the world's 358 billionaires have assets exceeding the combined annual incomes of countries with 45 percent of the world's people.

Thus greed is one of the invisible yet universal causes of starvation. Can material welfare work counter greed? A social worker may get charity from a wealthy person and use it for offering some relief. But as long as greed impels the haves to exploit the have-nots at every level - individually, socially and globally, will the relief that social welfare offers be anything more than a drop of water in a desert?

IS MATERIAL WELFARE ENOUGH?

Taking the discussion to a more fundamental level, wouldn't it be worthwhile to specify what exactly constitutes service to man? In our context, it would refer to any activity that offers relief from human suffering. Hunger is certainly a misery and feeding the hungry is undoubtedly a service. But does regular and nutritious food-supply solve all the problems of life? If it did, then should the well-fed people not be problem-free and happy? We know from our own

experience that this is not true. Hunger is an acute problem that pushes us to immediate action, but when we are relieved of hunger there are many other problems - office tensions, family demands, relationship worries, financial concerns, social obligations, to name a few - which continue to keep us in agitation and anxiety. **Thus by feeding the hungry without offering them any spiritual help, we are not solving their problem; we are merely changing the form of their problem.** This does not mean that we should be heartless and let the hungry starve to death, rather we should recognize the limitations of material welfare and not consider spiritual solace to be redundant.

At this point a question is often raised, especially in the undeveloped and underdeveloped countries like India, "Spirituality may have its place in human society, but first we need to take care of the body, then we can worry about the soul." Focusing on material progress without paying any attention to spiritual nourishment is exactly the path followed by modern western society. Let us see what has been its result.

Modern society, buttressed by successes in science and technology, has progressed considerably in the physical welfare of humanity in fields like medicine, transportation, communication, aerospace and so on. Simultaneously the mechanistic scientific theories about the origin and purpose of the universe and life have given rise to a culture in which most people tend to reject or at least neglect the spiritual dimension of life. However whether the combination of zealous material progress and total spiritual apathy has actually made people problem-free and happy is open to question. Individually, anxiety, stress, loneliness, depression, alcoholism, drug addiction and suicide are alarmingly spiraling. Socially, moral and ethical values are being almost irreversibly eroded and divorces, childhood delinquency, mindless violence and hardcore criminality are rapidly rising. Globally, we are being increasingly haunted by the specters of terrorism and scientific - nuclear, biological or chemical - holocausts. And overall the perpetual problems of material existence - old age, disease and death - continue to crush us relentlessly, despite our much-vaunted scientific progress.

Moreover science in fields as wide-ranging as cosmology, anthropology, paleontology, sociology, psychology, biology, chemistry and physics has come up with intriguing findings. These strongly suggest that bedrock tenets of spirituality such as God and soul are very much a scientific possibility or even a reality. Certainly they are much more than just sentimental longings of an unscientific mind, as was widely thought a few decades ago.

Consequently Western society, despite its tremendous material progress, is witnessing a significant revival in spirituality. More and more people are turning to prayer, meditation and yoga to gain solace amidst reversals, conquer self-destructive habits, pacify the stressed mind, discover a deeper meaning to life and achieve fulfillment higher than that offered by inane mundane pleasures.

Thus what does an objective look at modern human society, unbiased by a modern superiority complex and bewildered by the superficial glitter of technological gadgets reveal? It shows that seeking material betterment without spiritual growth has not only not succeeded, but has also to some extent backfired. The late British historian Sir Arnold Toynbee has noted, "The cause [of the world's malady] is spiritual. We are suffering from having sold our souls to the pursuit of an objective, which is both spiritually wrong and practically unattainable. We have to reconsider our objective and change it, and until we do this, we shall not have peace either amongst ourselves or within each of us." The mistaken objective is the pursuit of materialism to the exclusion of spirituality.

THE ROOT CAUSE OF ALL SUFFERING

At this point, one may get the question, "Service to man may have its limitations. But how does service to God solve any problems? And how are these spiritual solutions practically applicable in the modern world?" In our modern times the words God and religion have acquired a lot of negative coverage and connotations. And the word spirituality, though much more politically correct and socially acceptable, is little understood, despite being widely used. The Vedic texts of ancient India give us clear answers to the fundamental questions of life such as the nature of the self, the cause of suffering and the purpose of existence. The fundamental Vedic principles agree with the essential teachings of most of

the world's major religions. Pertinent to our discussion, the Vedic texts give the most coherent and cogent analysis of the cause and the cure for suffering.

The Vedic teachings begin by unequivocally asserting that our identity is not material, but spiritual; we are eternal souls covered by temporary material bodies (Bhagavad-gita 2.13). We belong to an immortal realm, variously known as the kingdom of God or the spiritual world, where we enjoy everlasting happiness in a loving relationship with the Supreme Person, God. Known by various names such as Jehovah, Christ, Allah, Buddha and Rama in different religious traditions, God is most fully described by the name Krishna (meaning "all-attractive"). In order to enable us to fully experience the joy of love in the spiritual world, Krishna gives us free will to voluntarily choose to love and serve Him. But when we misuse our free will and desire enjoyment separate from service to Him, we are placed in the material world. Here we are given a material body, which causes us to forget our spiritual identity and offers us the sensory apparatus for interacting with the foreign material environment. Within the framework of this bodily misidentification, we seek different material relationships, experiences, possessions and positions according to our dreams and schemes. As all the souls have unlimited desires for enjoyment and the resources of this world are limited, we undergo an intense struggle for enjoyment. However being spiritual by constitution we can never become happy by gratifying our body and its extensions, just as a driver can never be nourished by fuelling his car. So irrespective of whether we succeed or not in our plans for material enjoyment, we remain mostly dissatisfied. The difference of dissatisfaction is only in the degree. And ultimately all our dreams turn into nightmares as our bodies - the very basis of all our enjoyment - are battered by disease, wrecked by old age and destroyed by death. Then based on our desires and activities we are given other suitable bodies - human or subhuman. There we continue our vain struggle for existence and enjoyment in a world of suffering and death. Thus material attempts for happiness are insubstantial - even when successful they do not offer real lasting happiness, and futile - they inevitably fail against the inexorable force of time, which deteriorates and destroys everything material. Only the souls in the human form have sufficiently evolved consciousness and intelligence to understand and remedy their terrible predicament in the material tabernacle. Therefore the Vedic texts urge intelligent humans to dedicate themselves to spiritual emancipation, a purpose far more lofty and fruitful than material well being.

In fact the Vedic texts declare that the sufferings within this world are specifically designed to give us an impetus to raise our consciousness to the spiritual plane, where we automatically re-achieve our right to eternal happiness. Thus for the errant souls who have rebelled against Krishna, this world is like a reformatory meant, not to torture them, but to teach them to return to harmony with Him. Srila Prabhupada writes, "The miseries of material existence serve to indirectly remind us of our incompatibility with matter."

WELFARE WORK— SUPERFICIAL AND SUBSTANTIAL

Imagine a welfare worker who zealously seeks to transfer a prisoner from a dark dingy dungeon (a C class prison cell) to a ventilated, clean room (a A class prison cell). Is his endeavor truly meaningful or productive? Such a change, even if successful, serves neither the purpose of the prison - reformation of the prisoners, nor the ultimate interests of the prisoner - freedom from captivity. The Vedic texts prompt us to ponder: are those offers of material betterment without spiritual elevation much different? Their efforts serve neither the purpose of the material world - rectification of the rebellious mentality of the souls, nor their own ultimate interests - freedom from the inevitable sufferings of material existence, repeated birth and death. Therefore Srila Prabhupada would often compare such efforts to the blowing of a painful festering boil; despite the temporary relief, it does no actual good.

Worse still, the Vedic texts caution us, such efforts may even be harmful. A prisoner whose due term of punishment is artificially waived may never learn his lesson; his criminal inclination may be perpetuated or even aggravated. Similarly the universal government represented by material nature puts different souls in different degrees of suffering according to their own karma - either in their present or past lives. (We can see to some extent how natural justice chastises wrongdoers. Lung and other respiratory disorders penalize smokers; liver diseases afflict alcoholics and AIDS and other STDs punish illicit sex-mongers. We may not be able to trace the causes of all the sufferings of

everyone, but humility will allow us to admit the limitations of our vision. We do not and can not know about the karmic deeds and misdeeds of anyone in his past lives. The Vedic texts give us a thorough philosophical understanding of the inherent goodness of God as our Supreme Father and the infallible benevolent nature of His jurisprudence. Therefore they assure us that anyone suffering in any way is reaping what he has himself sown earlier.) If someone put in suffering by the cosmic penal system is offered material relief without spiritual enlightenment, that relief indirectly deprives him of the opportunity for spiritual introspection and purification that the suffering offers. Further it makes him struggle on futilely for material enjoyment in ignorance of his spiritual identity, causing trouble for himself and for others.

Srila Prabhupada illustrates the pitfalls of good intentioned but uninformed welfare work through an incident in his life: Once while in Calcutta, India, he saw a neighboring lady severely chastising her daughter. On inquiry he found that the lady's son had been suffering from an intense bout of typhoid and the doctor had strictly forbidden him any oily foods. While the mother had been away shopping, her son had started fervently begging his sister to give him some pakoras (a fried item). The sister seeing her brother's intense craving had decided to fulfill his desires despite the mother's strong prohibition and had fed him a large number of pakoras. When the mother had returned she found her son's sickness greatly aggravated and had to rush him to the doctor for emergency care. She had just returned and was scolding her daughter for her whimsical and dangerous "kindness" to her brother.

Another more common example to illustrate the seriously flawed nature of material welfare work. Imagine a drunkard who is physically cured by free medical care, but whose addiction is left untreated. Isn't it quite likely that he will again ruin his improved health by getting intoxicated and thus bring suffering upon himself, trouble to his family and burden to the society at large?

The foregoing discussion is not meant to indicate that we turn a blind eye and develop a cold heart towards the sufferings of our fellow humans. The Vedic texts however urge us to not have a presumptuous and counterproductive "better-than-God" attitude in our welfare work - either unknowingly or intentionally. God being the most loving Father feels pain to see His children in pain, no matter what their transgressions may be. He creates a cosmic justice system to bring about their gradual reformation, but being much more than just a neutral judge, He also creates a mercy system to offer quick relief to sincerely repentant souls. Through His earthly representatives, the saintly devotees, He disseminates genuine spiritual knowledge. Intelligent humans, by understanding the cause of their suffering from such devotees, can voluntarily reform themselves and learn to live in loving harmony with God. Then God, out of love for them, waives their karmic punishment partly or fully according to the degree of their repentance. And ultimately God helps them to come back to their eternal home to live happily with Him forever (Bhagavad-gita 10.10-11). Therefore Vedic scriptures call upon all intelligent social workers to become agents of the Lord's compassion in doing the highest good to everyone.

MATERIAL WELL BEING FOLLOWS SPIRITUAL WELL BEING

Srila Prabhupada would tell a story to illustrate how spiritual harmony automatically leads to the topmost well being. Suppose you are the friend of a wealthy millionaire. One day you see your friend's estranged son wandering like a vagabond on the streets, drunk, disheveled, diseased, distressed and starving. Before you, somebody comes and offers him some food. He hungrily gulps down the food and continues his aimless wandering. Then someone else comes and offers him a new set of clothes. He happily wears the clothes, but still remains lost and forsaken. Then someone else gives him a few free medicines, which offer him some physical relief, but don't give any permanent solace. Then you seat him in your car, take him home, bathe and feed him and treat his ailments. When he has sobered down, you talk with him lovingly, explaining to him his father's great affection for him. Then you clarify and remove the misunderstanding that had strained his relationship with his father. And when he is ready to return back to his father, you take him back to his father's mansion where he is given the best varieties of foods, offered an entire wardrobe of clothes and attended to by a team of expert doctors. Thus his problems are permanently solved.

Srila Prabhupada would explain that all of us are beloved children of the Supreme Lord, who is the Master of the Goddess of Fortune. Therefore we are all like princes in the kingdom of God. But due to our causeless misuse of our free will, we have left the shelter of our all-loving father and are struggling for paltry pleasure in this material world, exactly like the lost son of the millionaire in the above story. Srila Prabhupada would further state that material welfare workers are like the people who offered food, clothing and medicine to the lost son, whereas the devotee is like the father's friend who took the son back to his father.

The Vedic texts assure us that harmony with God leads to well being not just in an unverifiable hereafter, but also here in this world (Bhagavad Gita 4.30-31). They remind us: what to speak of our wellbeing, our very existence is dependent on God's grace. Despite our scientific progress, we still depend on God for all our fundamental material necessities - heat, light, air, water and even food. (Despite our hard work in our sophisticated factories, all our daily food is originally manufactured in the fields, God's natural factories) When we disobey the Lord's injunctions, through material nature He withholds the supplies of life's necessities just as a father may temporarily starve his recalcitrant child in order to reform him. This can be seen in the steadily increasing natural calamities that have hit human society, as it has become increasingly materialistic and godless over the last few centuries. And when we live in harmony with God, He instructs Mother Nature to profusely supply all the necessities of life to His obedient children. Material prosperity through divine harmony is not a sentimental fantasy; God-centered human society in Vedic India offered a historical demonstration. The amazing prosperity of traditional India is well-documented in the Vedic texts themselves, by traveling medieval historians like Fa Hein and Hseun Tsang and even by modern Indologists like A L Basham. In fact the modern world's most wealthy country USA was discovered when Europeans were searching for a new ocean route to access the wealth of India.

GOODNESS AND GODLINESS

There is another way to understand how spiritual harmony leads to fulfillment of material necessities. In a God-centered society, service to God is not just an isolated activity, but an integrated culture. When people are provided enlightening spiritual education and are able to have fulfilling spiritual experiences, they naturally become free from sinful and greedy mentalities, which were analyzed earlier to be the major causes of human suffering.

Historical studies show that most of the self-destructive addictions that haunt a large percentage of the human population today were mostly unheard of in the previous ages, when people were naturally God-fearing. Therefore, except in the case of devastating natural calamities, hardly anyone would have to suffer the pangs of starvation. Almost everyone would be able to earn enough food to at least live because their physical and mental energy and money would not be uselessly dissipated in injurious indulgences. The power of spirituality to bring about transformation from self-destructive indulgence to mature self-control has been documented by modern science. Statistical surveys have shown that the religiously committed are less likely to succumb to seeking perverted pleasures. Adopting religious principles also often helps addicts to free themselves. Dr Patrick Glynn writes in his book *God: The Evidence*, "It is difficult to find a more consistent correlative of mental health, or a better insurance against self-destructive behaviors, than a strong religious faith."

Also, as discussed earlier, starvation is not so much due to a shortage of food as due to a shortage of compassion. When a reporter once asked Mother Teresa about the secret of her compassion, which enabled her to do enormous relief work for the afflicted worldwide, in response she pointed to her rosary beads, on which she offered regular prayers. Devotion to God as the Supreme Father-Mother naturally arouses compassion for all living beings as His children, as our brothers and sisters in His family and inspires one to selflessly work for their holistic upliftment. When a wealthy person is God-conscious, his compassion is not restricted to an occasional act of charity; rather his whole life becomes dedicated to helping the deprived in every possible way - materially and spiritually. And when the head of state is spiritually enlightened, he cares for all the citizens like his own children - not for political expediency,

but out of natural spiritual love. He creates the necessary socio-economic structures to provide proper gainful employment for all of them in normal situations and adequate relief during emergencies.

Sometimes people argue that, "The hand that serves is better than the hand that prays." Though catchy sounding, is the statement actually true? If a hand does not pray, it is quite unlikely to serve; rather it is most likely to exploit others. And if the person who prays is spiritually educated, then he has the potential to do the best service.

Thus godliness automatically engenders goodness; a godly person naturally has all good qualities like compassion and selflessness. But without godliness, goodness is generally non-existent and even if present it is most often incomplete. Therefore the best *manava-seva* is to engage the *manava* in *madhava-seva*. In other words, the best service to man is to re-connect him with God for his holistic (material and spiritual) well being - now and eternally. Service to man without connecting him to God is at best only temporarily beneficial. From the eternal point of view it is ultimately futile and can even be counterproductive.

ISKCON'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD

Our modern times are characterized by pathetic spiritual ignorance. Most people are so (mis)educated that they hardly ever enquire about the purpose of life. Even the few who enquire find that most so-called spiritualists are not able to provide proper answers to the fundamental questions of life. ISKCON is among the very few organizations offering coherent, cogent and comprehensive spiritual education free to everyone irrespective of caste, religion, nationality, gender, race etc. ISKCON is also offering an attractive alternative culture that is deeply spiritually meaningful and fulfilling. By propagating the non-sectarian, universal, time-tested chanting of the holy names of God, especially the maha-mantra Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, millions of people are easily, effectively and joyfully harmonizing themselves with God and thus creating the brightest possible future for themselves in the here and the hereafter. By helping people eschew from the self-destructive drives of meat-eating, intoxication, gambling and illicit sex, ISKCON is saving millions of people from immense karmic suffering in this and future lives. Empowered by spiritual knowledge, the lives of thousands of people all over the world have been transformed from confused frustration to enlightened fulfillment. And many, many more people are continuously experiencing this transformation. ISKCON also runs the world's largest vegetarian food relief program FOOD FOR LIFE, which offers free nutritious sanctified food (*prasadam*) to the needy all over the world, including in war-torn areas. This prasadam nourishes not only the body but also awakens their souls.

ISKCON's main service to the world is that it is working tirelessly at the grassroots level to help the individual return to harmony with his own true nature and with God. Thus harmonized he can find and distribute the treasure of love, peace and happiness that lies hidden in his own heart. Henry David Thoreau has commented, "For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at its root." Among the various welfare measures offered by different organizations, ISKCON's propagation of pure spiritual education and culture strikes at the root cause of all suffering and helps people to become truly happy forever.

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Dedicated to

His Divine Grace A C Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada,

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