



Being In Service of All Others

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Purpose:

To learn and connect to what it means to be in service of other people and living things. Imagine where you might be able to be of service to yourself, others and the world around you.

*“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”
-Mahatma Gandhi*

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?” -Martin Luther King Jr.

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1. Introduction

1.1 What does it mean to “be in service”?

What it means to be in service will mean something different for everyone. Essentially, to be in service is to be putting your energy and intention into contributing positively to the natural world, human society and/or people around you. It is also a state of connection: those who are in conscious service of others have been able to extend their own identity, their own values beyond themselves as an individual and value offering something back to their communities. Service can be as simple as encouraging someone to share their ideas in a meeting, or as complex as a life-long commitment to ending homelessness in a region. Service is about how we practice our values and about choosing to contribute to others in our daily lives.

1.2 Being in service is in our nature.

Humans are social creatures and we evolved to be rewarded and to seek out being in service or acting lovingly towards others. This is also true for many other mammalian species, because when those species take care of their own, they survive. Why is it that we are social? Why is it that we have moral values that include protecting or sustaining the lives of others? All organisms are organized to see their own survival and wellbeing (watch [Patricia Churchland](#), unknown) for more). We have an entire internal circuitry in our body that coordinates our emotional experiences of loving action toward others. For example, when a mother has an infant, she extends her own self-care to include caring for the offspring and can experience anxiety when the infant is away from her -- an emotional message guiding her to seek safety for them. When we do something nice for someone, or when we feel love, we experience a cascade of neurochemicals that make us feel good, which is a reward response that tells us “this is good, do it again.”

These love-related neurochemicals also stimulate positive responses in our physiology, such as increased memory capacity and faster injury recovery. One recent study (Doré et al. 2017) also shows that when helping others navigate their stressful situations, we are enhancing our own emotion regulation (Psychology Today, unknown) skills, and thus, benefiting our own emotional well-being. Being in service of others not only makes us feel good thanks to evolution, it also makes us overall healthier and happier as individuals and as a collective.

Our Western culture, social structures and economy often encourage individuals or groups to act for their own advantage even if it disempowers, marginalizes or harms people and ecosystems. This individualism (different from independence) removes the responsibility to act best for people and the Earth. Individualism ignores the interconnected nature of the Earth. It prioritizes the rights of individuals or organizations to take, own or gain, even if it means destroying the health of an ecosystem or community, over the rights of an ecosystem and community to remain healthy.

If the culture and structure of a society is built to support behaviour that does not prioritize people and the planet over personal or private gain, that society becomes unsustainable and self-destructive by allowing a small number of people to thrive, while taking, owning or destroying the resources other people require to survive and thrive too. As we watch economic inequality rise and the planet deteriorate, more people are experiencing mental, emotional, physical and spiritual dis-ease and disease, in part because our body and brain were developed to seek the healthy, safe environments, which offer us life.

In this sense, that type of culture is not aligned with our nature from an evolutionary perspective: a culture of individualism and private gain contradicts our nature to be connected and thrive together.

Why is it that compassionate people who see the state of the world, the harm to human bodies and communities, the destruction of the planet, experience grief, anxiety, depression and other negative emotions? Part of the reason may be evolution. Throughout the story of our evolution, even before we became primates, we came to recognize that we depend on others of our kind and the natural world for our survival. It is in our DNA. Seeing dis-ease in our social and natural environments triggers emotions critical for survival of our species. We receive emotional signals signalling us to repair back to health, we sense danger.

It is in our nature to act consciously beyond our physical, mental and emotional self for the betterment of all beings through offering our energy to the world. Humans are not separate from nature, we are a part of nature. Our drive for the wellbeing of others can be viewed as the life force that helps Earth and its creatures flourish. We are nature desiring to protect itself and thrive.

As humans, we have an opportunity and responsibility to act for that flourishing, as other beings cannot act in the same way.

Many of the things we enjoy about lives today can be attributed to generations before us. In the same way, the generations of the future will stand on our shoulders. As we work together to create a world of compassion, service and coexistence, we build that future for the next generations. Our instincts to be in service of others is to help us survive and thrive not only today, but tomorrow.

1.3 Principles of Being in Service

- Being in service to something -- an individual, a group, a community, a cause or belief - means choosing to **offer without expectation of reciprocation**. True service is done for the sake of service in itself. This is important because when we hold expectations for reciprocation, our love and service becomes conditional. You can observe this if when doing things for others, you rely on an 'if' statement to feel good about doing it. For example, "I will only feel good if (condition), I will only offer my service if (condition), or I won't feel good unless (condition) is the outcome. Sometimes we add these conditions because we are looking for validation. For example, "I am a noble and giving person, so tell me how noble I am when I give." It is not a bad thing to identify as giving, but it can become problematic when we require the validation to feel good. This is where our giving leaves selflessness and becomes a self-oriented exchange: we give only in order to receive something back, whether it's returning the favor, praise or emotional validation. If we can give for the sake of giving with no conditions, we will have more energy and gifts to offer the world.
- Being of service is an opportunity to **contribute to our collective wellbeing on Earth, while being most aligned with our values**. When we show up in service, we are acting compassionately for what we care about. This alignment of values and action is what gives us immense fulfillment and a sense of purpose in life. When we are not acting on our values, we may experience suffering, as we notice our actions and behaviours are not aligned with our truth.
- **Practice expanding your own sense of self and identity to include all other people and lifeforms**. You can practice this in many ways. You might try people watching in a public place, or quietly observing your family or friends

while you are with them. As you do, try to see them as another version of yourself and imagine all the ways in which you are the same, including your interconnections with life and earth. Similarly, you might observe nature in this way.

- **Find a balance between your own self-interests and needs for self-care, and being in selfless service to others.** Without taking care of our personal needs and replenishing our own energy, we are limited in what energy we can offer to others, because we don't have extra energy to give. If you do not balance doing things for others with doing things for yourself, you may face burnout along the way, as many activists do. *"Our enduring sense of self-care impels us to seek balance between selfishness and selflessness"* ([Patricia Churchland](#), 2019).
- **You do not always need to be in service.** Being in service can require a great deal of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual energy. Sometimes we need to regenerate our own energy before being able to best serve others. This means you can say no, or choose not to offer the help someone needs if you recognize you can't best offer what is needed in that moment. An example may be providing emotional support for a friend, when you yourself are in need of support or time alone. Being in service also doesn't mean you need to do *everything*. Any level of service you can offer at any given moment is OK. Respect your boundaries, protect and regenerate your energy, and you will be able to give more in the long run.
- **When being in service of others:**
 - **Remove your identity from the equation, if it makes your contribution conditional.** If your identity requires validation like, "I am or want to be the one with the best ideas on my team," then it may make it difficult to genuinely want others to have the best ideas too, because if they *have* the "best" ideas, you may believe that you *don't*, which jeopardizes your identity. So while we may say we want others to have great ideas and to do amazing work, we may deep down not want it for them, if it means they might feel somehow "better" or "superior" to us. Our ideals of superiority and competition, which are deep in our Western culture, keep us from wanting others to bloom or exceed our own sense of position in the world. These individualist values can make us less available for true service to the world and limit the gifts and contributions we offer others. When we work to change those individualist values, perspectives and narratives, we become

more available to offer service, feel better doing it and create space for the people around us to reach their highest potential.

- **Look at others with love and compassion.** The more we do so, as Karmic Yogis say, “*the more we watch others from a place of love and compassion, the more we come to see their unique gifts as well as the areas where they could perhaps trust themselves to move forward.*” (The Living Yoga Blog, 2013)
- **Create space for others to step into their best self.** As others around you pursue their best self, look for any spark of it and acknowledge those parts of them as they begin to shine. A good gardener recognizes when a flower begins to grow, and acts to help it to reach its full bloom. The flower may grow on its own, but we can help nourish its growth. Your praise and acknowledgement can be the fertilizer those people in your life need to access their potential, and reaching their highest potential is good for society as a whole.
- **Don't tell others how to be better, be there to assist where they are already going.** A good gardener does not tell a flower how to grow, but assists it as it's growing at its own pace.
- **Not everyone is willing or able to accept help or service.** We must be ready to embrace help before we will receive it. Don't take it personal if someone in your life does not want, and is not making best use of your service. At the same time, notice if others continue to ask you for help, but are not respecting your time and energy to help them. It's OK to set boundaries in these types of situations, as we also want to protect our own energy so we can remain healthy and able to serve others.

1.4 Ready for service

If you are going to be in the best service of others, you must first be in the best service of ourselves. This means practicing self-care, self-love and prioritizing your well-being and self-development. Sometimes it's easier to help others or work toward a cause with passion and compassion than it is to focus on being in service to ourselves through self-love, compassion and self-healing. We need time to regenerate and rejuvenate our being when doing emotional, passion-driven changemaking work. We also need to spend time focusing on our own emotional, physical and spiritual self-development.

In fact, failing to perform self-care can negatively impact others. Say you are experiencing a negative emotion, like stress about the expectations your parents have of you to succeed in school. You find yourself at a meeting for your climate project while in this emotional state. Say there is a team member who is shy about sharing ideas and taking on tasks. At the same time, they have amazing hidden gifts and perspectives that could take the team to the next level. As that person builds the courage to speak and share, your stress kicks in and you advocate that the group not go in that direction because it feels like more pressure on you. Because you were in a stressed state, you missed an opportunity to see what potential exists in the group and an opportunity to empower someone to grow their confidence in sharing, which would have grown the group's potential as a whole. Becoming emotional when we are stressed is OK and happens to everyone. It is not wrong to feel, it is what it is. Self-care and a commitment to self-growth will help you become a version of yourself that experiences less stress, less personal barriers and more happiness and create more space for others to shine with you!

Have you ever considered where you might have an opportunity to grow emotionally or where you might be holding yourself back? When we do the work to get past our self-limiting barriers, we find peace, space and energy to create and collaborate. Our available energies to be service increases and we see more opportunities that can better our life or the lives of others, as we now have space for *giving* energy. Keep in mind that some people really need or can benefit from professional help to deal with emotional and psychological parts of us. It's OK and encouraged to always ask for the help you need. If this feels true for you, ask a professional for guidance.

These guides are meant to assist you in your own self healing and empowerment, so you can live your most authentic, healthy life. In turn, not only will you reach higher potential, but as an empowered and energized being living with purpose and clarity, you will be better prepared to be in service of others through your changemaking work and less likely to burnout over time. You will learn to access more energy in your life, rather than feeling like your energy goes out but does not come back, which happens to many changemakers who pour so much of their heart and soul, tears and sweat into their work. The process of self development is crucial for bringing about transformation in the world.

2. Practice

In this activity, you will think about the ways you can be of service to yourself, your teammates and the world. Be creative!

1. **What are some ways I can be in service of myself?** What specific things can I do to take care of myself? List as many as you would like.
2. **What are some ways I can be in service of my teammates?** What are the ways I can empower them individually or as a group to create space for them to grow? List as many as you would like.
3. **What are some ways in which I can be of service to the world as a whole?** What can I do or offer to improve the well-being of my community, society or the natural world? List as many as you would like.

2.1 A practice to carry forward in your work

As you work with teammates, or anyone else in your life, practice seeing them with compassion. Focus on the reasons you like or admire them; feel free to share your thoughts with them, too! If you start thinking about qualities you consider “lesser,” or catch yourself feeling jealous of a quality they have, suspend that for a moment and look for and acknowledge the good.

3. Dive Deeper

The links below are complementary resources for you to explore topics of interest in greater depth.

- [What Role Does “Service to Others” Play in the Evolutionary Impulse?](#) Eckhart Tolle
- Serving others - [How to become a channel for the highest good](#) - Noah Hammond Tyrell
- [Finding Your Strength By Helping Others:](#) - Andy Shirtliff - Ted talk (story about how he found strength and purpose in serving others.
- [Helping Others Makes us Happier](#) - But it matters how we do it - Elizabeth Dunn - Ted Talk
- [Quotes on being in service](#)

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