

WISDOM SESSION

Service is Good for the Body and Soul

“People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, then they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” - Nelson Mandela

Service fulfills us on many levels, beginning with my simple belief that we're born wired to care for others so service does us good. This instinct is most obvious in children, who aren't yet distracted by other demands on their time and attention. An image that went viral shows a little girl, probably about two years old, watching a politician crying on Japanese TV. She takes a tissue, goes up to the TV, and then tries to wipe away the politician's tears. Such things go viral because we recognize - and perhaps miss - the little girl's compassion for another person, even a stranger.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, then they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” Just as Mandela believed people were born to love but taught to hate, monks believe that we are born to serve, but the distractions of the external world make us forget our purpose. We need to reconnect with that instinct in order to feel like life has meaning.

I have already touched on Joseph Campbell's concept of the mythic hero's journey. It is a formula describing the steps that a hero goes through when he embarks on an adventure, encounters trials and obstacles, and returns victorious. One of the key elements of the hero's journey is one we often overlook - the last stage, which Campbell called “return with elixir.” The hero's journey isn't fulfilled until he makes it home safely and shares what he has gained (the elixir) with others. The idea of service is woven into a classic story structure as a key part of a happy ending.

Seane Corn is living out the hero's journey. She made her name as a teacher of yoga asana. She was (and still is) a marquee teacher at yoga conferences and festivals around the world, but at one point in her career as a yoga teacher, she realized that with her platform, she could make an even more meaningful impact in the world, so she shifted her focus to serving at-risk communities.

Corn decided to try bringing breath and meditation techniques to those in need, starting with kids who'd been sexually exploited. Then she grew her practice into working with other people society deems as outcasts, such as prostitutes and drug addicts. From that vantage point, she reached back into the yoga community to cofound Off the Mat, Into the World, a nonprofit that links yoga with activism. As dedicated as she is to service, Corn maintains that she gets more than she gives. “Find me someone who has gone to the darkest parts of their own character where they were so close to their own self-destruction and found a way to get up and out of it, and I will bow on my knees to you...You're my teacher.”

As Corn found, service gives back to us.

Studies show that when we pursue “compassionate goals - those aimed at helping others or otherwise helping to

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make the world a better place – we’re less likely to have symptoms of anxiety and depression than when we focus on improving or protecting our own status or reputation. The act of giving to others activates the pleasure center of our brain. It’s win-win-win. This may be why those who help others tend to live longer, be healthier, and have a better overall sense of well-being.

Monks believe that the pillar of service makes our lives better in many ways.

- Service connects us. When you serve, it’s hard to be lonely. In most scenarios, you have to go out into the world to help other people.
- Service amplifies gratitude. Service gives you a broad view of all that you have.
- Service increases compassion. When you serve, you see that the world needs what you have to offer.
- Service builds self-esteem. Helping others tells you that you’re making a difference in the world. You have a sense of meaning and purpose.

The ashram is designed around the intention to serve, and it’s easier to live with that as your highest intention when everyone around you is on board. A life of service is far more challenging in the modern world, and we can’t all follow the monks’ 24/7 model, but the monk practice shows us why and how we should adopt a service mindset.

- *Think Like a Monk*

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various form.” – 1 Peter 4:10

SML - Service is the Direct Path to a Meaningful Life

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David Trent believes that wisdom comes from continually seeking to learn and grow through relationships and reading, which leads to personal development. In an effort to inspire learning in others, David Trent sends out weekly Wisdom Sessions. He recommends purchasing and reading any book source used in these Wisdom Sessions.