

Suffering and the Healing Power of Faith

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The effects of faith and altruism - *upkar* - are an intriguing phenomenon; serving and helping others profoundly heal the physical and mental ailments of the helpers. Even though, foundations of altruism lie in the religion, all helpers, irrespective of their religious inclination or the religion of those being helped experience the healing effects. Further, the atheists benefit equally. Not surprisingly, all Sikh institutions of altruism are open to all.

Like a faith, the altruism seems to have almost magical effects on health; the effects are beyond what is immediately apparent on the basis of the cause and effect relationship. Besides the benefits to the needy being serviced, the effects of altruism on the helpers are magnetic in drawing into fold people of a large variety of interests and temperaments. The societal benefit is that to help others becomes a popular and satisfying pastime among loads of healthy and sick alike. No wonder that there are countless volunteers and volunteer organizations that are engaged in efforts to make life better for other people.

Humanitarianism

The Sikh society was founded to benefit whole humanity and serving others is its one belief that truly benefits the whole society. Once people become involved in the helping acts, often through religious organizations, the strong benefits they experience motivate them to continue helping others all the more. Their compassion grows for others including strangers, and their own health benefits accordingly. Further, unlike the health benefits of such other activities, as exercise, the helping others holds the power to affect not only the health of the individual but also the health of our entire tension-ridden society. The Sikhs find altruism as a universal motivator.

What appeals to me is that altruism is an opportunity to test the potency of the Sikh society. We can test the validity of the Guru's teachings in actual life scenes through the practice of altruism. To obtain the proof we are able to use the world at large to serve as our laboratory for experiments on human behavior that can reveal the meaning of the one basic act of the Sikh faith. Let me explain.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib taught us centuries ago that a regular practice of altruism is very healthy for the body and the mind of people who practice it. It is now being proven true from actual data that altruism actually benefits individuals who practice it and certainly those being helped. Even five centuries after Guru Nanak, we can review thousands of case histories, which will show that helping other profoundly and positively affected health of the helper. It even extends to nation. One can read research in many nations that showed how people involved with others were likely to be healthier than those who led isolated lives. All of these data scientifically verifiable and predictable from the teachings of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

It is now well accepted that people while helping others experience reduction in their own ailments. I know this personally through watching and talking to numerous volunteers in my own Sikh community and then in reading about others in published literature.

To start with, the volunteering individuals are known to begin recognizing inner sensation of pleasure and well being immediately following practices of altruism. Then they benefit beyond experiencing the inner pleasures; they frequently attest to being physically healed of their many ailments. Among the ailments that are healed are included, for example, cancer, heart diseases, degenerative diseases as arthritis and diabetes, and mental illnesses such as depression and psychosis. In addition, while the serving volunteers feel pleasure sensations physically, spiritually they feel connected to the Creator, elated and realized. This is all documented in the Sikh annals and the publications of other societies. Let me illustrate it through a verse from Guru Arjun.

ਬਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਪਰਉਪਕਾਰ ਉਮਾਹਾ ॥

barahm gi-aanee par-upkaar omaahaa.

The God-conscious people delight and feel elated in doing good deeds to others.

Outside of Sikh communities, there are numerous national and international organizations of all religions engaged in promoting and in practicing altruism. Let me take some examples from the review of Allen Luke in his book, Healing Power of Doing Good.

Nancy Jameson, director of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program reported a study conducted in USA in 1976. She demonstrated that a large number of people over sixty were volunteering in hospitals, clinics, schools and other service programs or institutions. Obviously, it helped the institutions being served a great deal. However, it was more significant to find that in 98 percent of the facilities she surveyed, the physical and mental health of the volunteers working there had improved considerably. Similarly, a worker by the name of Peggy, was reported to work with volunteers in many towns and cities like the town of Woodsfield, Ohio, New York City, Los Angeles and others. While engaged in serving, she conducted an in-depth phone interviews with helpers in every region of the USA. Her findings also showed that there were numerous volunteers working in those places and there existed a vast potential for the good of both, the world they were serving and the individuals being engaged in serving.

Luke quotes many testimonials from the volunteer administrators in various areas in USA who supervised volunteers and then wrote or spoke not only of their own experience but also of a larger picture. For example, Belva Green of Allen County Cancer Society in Fort Wayne, Indiana said: "We see it daily. We have several hundred volunteers who perform a great variety of services willingly and cheerfully. They seem to live longer and fuller lives than the folks occupied only with inner concerns." Dick Bullock, a community educator in Carthage, Missouri, commented: "Once volunteers feel the 'life enrichment' of helping, they get 'hooked'. Yvonne C. Oakley, chairman of volunteers, American Red Cross, Pompano, California, commented of her own experience: "The relationship of altruism to health should be apparent to all thinking people."

