

## Philosophy of Helping

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Note: Everything I say below is only my “current” opinion, which is based on my own experiences and observations thus far. – *Swami Devanand*

### How does one go about “helping” others?

Most religions recommend “helping others” as the noblest activity. Here is my take on helping and how to go about helping.

1. **The world can do fine without your help.** This is really my fundamental belief which drives all my philosophy about “helping”. Of course, this does not mean that I do not believe in helping, but rather it means that I should not help with the goal of “making a difference”. Again, I am not implying that helping does not make a difference; indeed the human world would have serious problems if people did not help each other. I am simply stating that my own mindset when I go about “trying to help” is not about “making a difference”; I do it because “I want to” or because “it makes me feel good” or because “it gives meaning to my life”. This principle that “the world is just fine without my help” allows me to “help” without desperation, expectation (of rewards and/or results), and unhealthy emotional involvement.
2. **Help should not mean pampering:** In many cases our help can actually turn out to be a sort of pampering. We get over-enthusiastic in our altruistic passion and try to help when help is not needed. Parents or elders do this all the time to young ones – when a kid falters they immediately rush to help, when, really the kid is quite capable of recovering on its own. This is true in several other situations. I try to pause for a little while when I get an impulse to help, and check if the intended recipient really needs my help. Such “non-help” can in fact be more helpful in the long run.
3. **Help should not mean interference:** In many cases our help can actually turn out to be interference. We get over-enthusiastic in our altruistic passion and create problems instead of helping. A classic example is when two people are interacting and appear to be having difficulties in their communication or understanding of things. We are tempted to jump in and “help” by solving their problem for them. More often than not, such help becomes interference and worsens the problem. My strategy, once again, is to pause for a while and let the concerned parties sort things out by themselves. In most cases, they indeed do, and everything is then fine. It is better not to interject at all unless you are asked to, or until matters go out of hand – becoming violent or dangerous in some way.
4. **Help when it *might* make a difference.** This may seem to contradict my very basic principle stated in #1 above. Well, it doesn’t! I am not *expecting* to make a difference, but

rather evaluating whether there is a chance (possibility) of making a difference. I suppose there is no contradiction. In *passive* helping (i.e. helping only when someone asks for your help) there is always a good chance that your help *might* make a difference. For example, when a beggar approaches you, there is a good chance that he really needs your help – in this case your cash. Of course, it is a different matter whether the kind of help asked of you (cash in the beggar’s case) is something you want to or can afford to give.

5. Encouraging people to solve their problems themselves is indeed a better way to help.
6. **Active help is the most enjoyable.** I mentioned passive help above which I define as “help given when it is asked for”. Active help, on the other hand, is offered without being asked. In this mode, you get to decide what kind of help you want to offer, and then go out looking for people who might benefit from such help. For example, if I like to teach math and want to help people that are deficient in math, I would advertise my services as a “math teacher” and teach anyone that might be interested. I think such *active* help is the most enjoyable because you get to do what you really like doing and in the process help someone. But, it can also be the most inefficient and frustrating because few may care for what you want to offer! In the case of “math teaching” indeed very few in this world really want to learn math! They may want simply to pass the grade or get some certificate in math, and it is really up to you – the math teacher – if that is the kind of help you want to offer.
7. **Help without the expectation of appreciation or gratitude.** I have already made this point in #1 above, but it begs further emphasis. If the whole point of helping is to “feel good” or “do something meaningful” (which is my personal view) it is best not to depend on appreciation or gratitude. It may or may not arrive. Since you don’t expect it, it will make no difference to your happiness and you will continue helping merrily without any cynicism.
8. **Get good at helping.** Once you determine in what ways you would like to help (as in “active helping” above), you should try to build your skills and/or resources accordingly so that your help is more likely to be effective and meaningful. Taking the “math teacher” example further, it behooves upon you to be good at math (and at teaching math) if you want your students to benefit. If you want to help by simply giving away money, it makes all the sense for you to continue making money because that will improve your ability to give away. There are excellent books and Internet resources that will help you become an effective helper. Reading autobiographies of the great helpers of the world is also a great means to get insights into the whole business of helping.

So, I am not against helping after all, right? ☺

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