

In the Sanatana Dharma, *seva* is an important concept articulating the idea of selfless voluntary service without the prospect of material gain. *Seva* is an altruistic way to promote the common good for all. As Mahatma Gandhi puts it, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” By humbly committing oneself to the welfare of others, one can find the virtue within them. The concept of *seva* can be found expressed in different languages and religions in many different forms. Expressed in Samskritam *kāryātmaka seva*, *bhāvanātmaka seva*, *gyānātmaka seva*, and *dānam* are a few ways to preform *seva*. By taking part in these different forms of *seva*, not only do we make the world a better place but we also make ourselves better people.

Kāryātmaka Seva

Kāryātmaka *seva* is a way of doing *seva* through action. This can be anything from volunteering at the local blood and bone marrow drive at your mandir, to helping an elderly or disabled person cross the street. In both situations, you are conducting a good deed that is benefiting the society. Kāryātmaka *seva* often yields more empirical results. For instance, one can see how volunteering to organize books at the local library can make a person’s experience at the library easier. When people have a less painstaking and more enjoyable experience, people will be content and happy. Happiness is very contagious. Consequently, the one act of kāryātmaka *seva* will spread content. This is how even one act of *seva* benefits the society at large.

Kāryātmaka *seva* can also be done as a group to benefit the community. For example, keeping your mandir clean is a task that can be more effective through collaboration. To teach *seva* at a recently concluded Samskriti Shibhiram, at the Sri Bhaktha Anjaneya Temple, the organizers had the participants perform *seva* through action by cleaning the mandir. By assigning different tasks to different groups and through teamwork, the *seva* was done very thoroughly. In this way, when people participate in kāryātmaka *seva*, whether individually or as a group, they can make the world a better place through action.

Bhāvanātmaka Seva

Bhāvana means emotion or thought. Bhāvanātmaka *seva* means *seva* through emotional support or positive emotion. An example of bhāvanātmaka *seva* would be spending time at a hospital and showing compassion to the patients. Another example of bhāvanātmaka *seva* would be going to an elderly home and simply speaking with the elderly. This show of emotion can brighten their day. Providing a positive outlook will often encourage others to do the same.

In bhāvanātmaka *seva*, two ways to show emotion are sympathy and empathy. In certain situations, where showing empathy may not be possible showing sympathy will be the case. By showing sympathy or empathy, the person will see that you are understanding. Understanding is the first step. Then comes encouragement. This will provide emotional support to people in need of it. By performing this selfless service, bhāvanātmaka *seva* can be just as fruitful as kāryātmaka *seva*.

Gyānātmaka Seva

Gyānātmaka seva is seva through knowledge. This is where selfless service is done through passing on knowledge. A guru passing on knowledge to a shishya (student) is one example. Tutoring underprivileged students in mathematics, science, or any other area of expertise is a way of doing gyānātmaka seva that can make a big difference in the world. I have done gyānātmaka seva by teaching Samskritam at a Samskriti shibhiram at the Sri Bhaktha Anjaneya Temple. By doing this, I was passing on my knowledge of Samskritam to other students who wanted to learn. Nonprofit organizations such as Samskrita Bharathi which are dedicated to spreading knowledge are all examples of gyānātmaka seva in action.

In our Samskriti, knowledge has always been passed down through gyānātmaka seva at teaching centers called gurukulam. The break in this tradition has caused various aspects of knowledge to be lost. A lot of gyānātmaka seva is required to recover and propagate that lost knowledge. Sciences, art forms, ayurvedic medicine, and other such knowledge should not be limited to certain a group but should instead be available to those who seek this knowledge. As Dalai Lama (1357-1419) the high lama of Tibetan Buddhism put it, “Share your knowledge. It’s a way to achieve immortality.” By sharing your knowledge you will live on forever through it. Gyānātmaka seva is passing on knowledge, educating the uneducated, making the illiterate literate, and vanquishing ignorance to make a well-rounded world.

Dānam:

Dānam is a Samskritam word conveying the idea of giving and philanthropy. A subhashitam in Samskritam “*hastasya bhushanam dānam*” defines dānam, and not bangles or other jewelry, as the ornament of the hand. Dānam is giving to the poor, the needy, and other charitable causes. Dānam can be made in many forms such as food, money, clothing and shelter. Ways to conduct this form of seva would be to organize a soup kitchen, donate to the needy, participate in food and clothing drives, and donating to the temple. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, an organization which contributes to charitable causes, is a great example of seva through dānam. Blood and bone marrow drives are also a form of dānam. There is a sukthi, *jīvane yāvat ādānam syāt pradānam tato adikham*” which means, “In life what we donate should exceed what we receive.”

Kāryātmaka seva, bhāvanātmaka seva, gyānātmaka seva, dānam - the possibilities for seva are endless and so are the benefits for the individual and the society. Sage Vyasa summarized the vast knowledge contained in the eighteen purānas in to two moral precepts: rendering service (seva) to others is merit and harassing them is evil.

*astadashapurānānam sāram vyasena keerthitam
paropakaraha punyāya pāpaya parapeedanam*

This is why the essence of the Sanatana Dharma is ‘*serving mankind is serving the God*’.
Naraseva Nārāyana Seva