

A Guide to Service in American Sathya Sai Baba Centers



In the spiritual path, the first step is selfless service. [1]

Introduction

This Guide, which may be obtained from the *Sathya Sai Book Center of America*, is intended to help members of Sathya Sai Baba Centers understand selfless service and put it into practice. It has four chapters.

- Chapter 1 introduces Sathya Sai Baba's teachings on service and explains why we should consider service as a major spiritual activity.
- Chapter 2 discusses how the service program of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization is administered and introduces some policies regarding service.
- Chapter 3 gives information on organizing and maintaining service projects within the Centers.
- Chapter 4 provides information on service projects being performed in Centers.

Quotes from Sathya Sai Baba appear in italics or are displayed in indented-paragraph form.

Love all, adore all, serve all [2].

Table of Contents

- Introduction, 1
- Table of contents, 2
- Baba's teachings on service, 3
 - 1.1 Service and the Sai Organization, 3
 - 1.2 What is selfless service? 4
 - 1.3 Selfless service is a self-serving activity, 5
 - 1.4 Our attitude when doing service, 6
 - 1.5 Service and repetition of the Name of God, 7
- 2. Administration and policies, 8
- 3. Organizing and carrying out service projects, 11
- 4. Service projects, 15
 - 4.1 Feeding the hungry, 15
 - 4.2 Visiting hospitals, 18
 - 4.3 Visiting nursing homes, 18
 - 4.4 Serving within the Center, 19
 - 4.5 Interesting group projects, 20
 - 4.6 Volunteer organizations in your community, 21
- References, 22

Put love into practice through service. [3]

Chapter 1

Baba's teachings on service

In our Sai Centers, selfless service is just as important a spiritual activity as devotional singing. The purpose of this chapter is to explain why. As a start, we can see that Sathya Sai Baba Himself spends His life in service.

You should follow Swami, the leader. This is because, from morning to night, Swami performs even the smallest task Himself; and all His work is for the good of the world. It is in this context that I often say, "My Life is My Message." [4]

Avatars of God are engaged in service; that is why Avatars come. Hence, when you offer service to mankind, the Avatar is pleased and you can win grace. [5]

1.1 Service and the Sai Organization

The members of our Organization must be ready and eager to help students, the sick, and the poor. Feel that this is work that pleases Me . . . Spend your days and years in activities that help those in dire need, and thus make this human existence of yours worthwhile and fruitful. [6]

Let me tell you that nothing is impossible if an organized society is set on achieving it. Even liberation from material entanglement can be won through serving and promoting the progress of society. Through the sense of unity, the willingness to sacrifice, and the softness of compassion, all objects can be gained. So, the Sathya Sai Organization must move forward with hearty enthusiasm in the field of service to society. [7]

But don't limit your service to Center activities. Make service a lifetime activity, which begins with your family. Service to those in need, performed with a loving attitude, while recognizing the Divinity in those we are helping, and done selflessly is an example of Sai selfless service, whether it is done at home, at work, or alone. The foundation of Sai service is always spiritual. While these examples of Sai selfless service may not be tallied in a report that the National Service Coordinator may be required to develop, they can be true experiences of Sai service.

The first lesson of service has to be learned in the family circle itself. [8]

I do not attach any value to the turning of rosaries by hands that know no help. [9] Do not keep yourself apart, intent on your own salvation through meditation; instead, move among your sisters looking for opportunities to be of help, with the Name of God on your tongue and the Form of God before the mind's eye. [10]

Service is a lifetime program; it knows no rest or respite. This body has been given to you so that you may devote its strength and skills to the service of brother-man. Serve man until you see God in all men; then, what you do will be elevated to worship. [11]

1.2 What is selfless service?

Americans do an amazing amount of volunteering. But Baba says that there is a difference between conventional social service and selfless service. This difference has nothing to do with the service itself — in fact, Baba says that *service to the community is the highest service*. [12] Rather, the difference lies in the attitude with which the service is carried out. Selfless service has a spiritual foundation.

It may be valuable and frequently necessary for Sai devotees to work alongside other volunteers and staff of the social service programs that offer assistance and provide the facilities that the service recipients need (such as a homeless shelter funded by a government agency or a church). However, Sai devotees are cautioned against too much enmeshment with non-Sai devotee volunteers during the service. While other volunteers may have noble and altruistic reasons to serve the needy, Sai devotees are expressing devotion to God by serving His children. By interacting with other volunteers too much, and especially by planning service interventions with the community service agency staff or management, Sai devotees risk losing sight of the profound spiritual activity in which they are engaged.

Many do such things now as "social service" and not as a spiritual exercise, in a full-hearted manner; spirituality is not found in the activity. [13] Service is primarily spiritual discipline. [14]

What exactly is selfless service? It is the very essence of devotion, the very breath of a devotee, his very nature. It springs from the actual experience of the devotee, an experience that convinces that all beings are God's children, that all bodies are altars where God is installed, that all places are His residences. [15]

The spiritual exercise of service is quite distinct. In service, you devote all your energy and attention to the task at hand, for it is a dedicated task. You forget your body and ignore its demands. You set aside your individuality and its prestige and perquisites. You pluck your ego by its roots and cast it away. You give up your status, your conceit, your name and form and all that they demand from others. This process makes the mind pure. [16]

1.3 Selfless service is a self-serving activity

Baba makes it clear that the service we do is for our own sake. Naturally, we want to help others, but the real value of the service lies in what it does for us — provided we do it with the right attitude: as a spiritual discipline. Selfless service helps us to:

- Control and purify the mind
- Put a ceiling on our desires
- Erase our karmic burden
- Remove the ego
- Bring love into our lives
- Experience the Unity of all
- Become aware of the God within all
- Win the Grace of God

You are doing service for you own sake. You are engaged in service in order to become aware of the Divine Spirit in you, in order that you may discard the allurements of your ego, in order to know yourself and to get the answer to the question that torments you, namely, “Who am I.” You do not serve others, you serve yourself; you do not serve the world, you serve your own interest. [17]

Constant work in loving service to others covers the seeds of past sinful and harmful actions, so that they die away and do not grow into a new round of misery. [18] Service is the best spiritual exercise for eliminating the nefarious pull of the mind towards desires. [19]

To remove the evil of egoism, service is the most efficient instrument. [20] How is this possible? By saturating service with love, work can be transformed into worship. When it is offered to God, it gets sanctified as worship. This makes it free from ego. It is also freed from the earthly desire for success and the earthly fear of failure. [21]

When a devotee seeks with humility and purity to give service and love to My creatures who are in need of such selfless service, as his beloved brothers and sisters, as the blessed manifestations of My Immanence, then in fulfillment of my role as Sathya Sai, I descend to help, accompany, and carry that yogi. I am always near such a yogi to guide him and to shower My love on his life. [22]

So, service helps our worldly self. But there is another sense in which selfless service is a self-serving activity: We serve the One God that is within us all, the supreme, absolute SELF.

The core of the spiritual discipline of service is to see everyone as yourself and yourself in everyone. [23] You are not doing service to others, you are doing service to yourselves, to the God in you, the God who is equally present in others. [24]

All waves are on the same sea, are from the same sea, are the same sea. Service teaches you to be firm in this knowledge. [25] Service will also impress the Unity of all mankind on the person doing service. [26] Service can instill more intensely than any other activity the sense of the basic ONE. ... There can be no higher austerity, nothing more rewarding. [27]

1.4. Our attitude when doing service

God will not ask when and where you did service; he will ask what your motives and intentions were. [28] The attitudes of mutual help and selfless service develop the “humanness” of man and help unfold the Divinity latent in him. [29]

Our attitude during a service activity determines whether the service helps us grow spiritually. Service performed with a sense of pride or superiority may help the person we are serving, but it does not help us.

Do not pollute your service with the poison of pride. [30] Feel that you are serving yourself, curbing the ego. [31] Engage in humble service and egoism will fade away. [32]

Also, service should be performed without expectations for results.

Do not serve for the sake of reward; serve because you are urged by Love. [33] Service is its own reward. [34] Do not worry about the result. Help as much as you can, as efficiently as you can, as silently as you can, and as lovingly as you can; leave the rest to God, who gave you a chance to serve. [35]

Do not believe that you can by means of selfless service reform or reshape the world. You may or may not. That does not matter. The real value of seva, its most visible result, is that it reforms you, reshapes you. [36]

Sometimes, members try to do what they want to do rather than what needs to be done. They may perceive some task as more important and others as “less desirable”. For example, some would rather serve the food than pick it up from supermarkets and bakeries or clean up afterwards. This attitude is counter-productive, and a more positive approach is better.

Do not consider any act of service as demeaning. Sweeping the streets, for example, is not below your dignity. Do you not sweep the floor at home, do you not scrub and wash off dirt? [37] Serve people with no thought of high or low; no service is high, no service is low, each act of service is equal in the eye of the Lord. It is the readiness, the joy, the efficiency, the skill with which you rush to do it that matters. [38]

Feeling they know better how to do certain things, some people continually critique during the service. This is the wrong approach; do what has to be done willingly, whatever it is, and bring up your constructive criticisms afterward, when the service is being discussed in preparation for the next activity.

How can you shorten a line drawn on a blackboard without touching it? The answer is simple: draw a longer line under it. The line above will automatically get shorter. This is how you must use your critical faculty: stay silent and try to do better by showing how things should be done. This is constructive. [39]

1.5 Service and repetition of the Name

We worship God in different ways —prayer, meditation, devotional singing, repeating His name, selfless service, and so on. All of these ways are helpful to us, and to different degrees at different times for different people. Sathya Sai Baba Himself emphasizes different forms of worship from time to time. However, two forms of worship seem to stand out in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings: service and repetition of a Name of God. These two spiritual disciplines reinforce each other, one being an outer activity, of the world, and the other being an inner activity that helps us continuously to remember that God is resident in all beings. *Heads in the forest, hands in society.* [40]

Service is the best form of worship, [41] the highest spiritual discipline, [42] the essence of devotion. [43] The bliss you receive through service cannot be gotten through any other activity. [44] Service is more fruitful than repetition of the Name, meditation, or sacrifice. [45] There is no morality higher than truth, no prayer more fruitful than service. [46]

Repetition of the Name is the easiest and quickest spiritual discipline, [47] the key to the treasure of bliss, [48] the means of liberation in this age. [49] It is enough to give you all the results of every type of spiritual discipline. [50]

You must be engaged in constant repetition of the Name of God, so that you remain a true servant of God while claiming to serve man, or rather, so that you may see in man the God that is his real nature. [51]

So move among your sisters looking for opportunities to be of help, with the Name of God on your tongue and the Form of God before the mind's eye. [10]

Chapter 2

Administration and Policies

Service by example is best of all. [52]

Selfless service should be an important spiritual program of every Center. Service Coordinators work toward this goal.

Do not seek to exercise authority over others; seek chances to be useful to them.
[53]

The Center Service Coordinator is responsible for starting, sustaining, and promoting service activities in the Center. Aspects of the job may be delegated to others, but the Service Coordinator is ultimately responsible to the Center President for maintaining a good service program. The Service Coordinator works closely with the President, so that the service program forms an integral part of the Center activities and provides an opportunity for all devotees to serve. The Service Coordinator turns to the Regional Service Coordinator for assistance and advice.

Each Center should have ongoing service projects in which members participate. In small Centers, this may not be possible at first. But, with some effort, after a time it will succeed.

In carrying out their duties, Service Coordinators should:

- Organize orientation sessions for new members, to inform them of the concept of selfless service as a spiritual discipline.
- Periodically organize a study circle on selfless service, to discuss the concept and exchange ideas.
- Organize training sessions, if the service project requires it.
- Keep the service spirit and service opportunities on the minds of the members. For example, provide a quote in the Center's monthly calendar of events. Or, periodically, ask members to share with others their experiences doing service.

The Regional Service Coordinator provides advice to the Center Service Coordinators, acts as liaison between the Center Service Coordinators, and organizes regional service meetings. A regional one-day meeting on service might involve only the Service Coordinators, or it might be a more general one-day retreat/conference, with emphasis on service, that is open to all members.

The National Service Coordinator communicates regularly with the Regional Service Coordinators, coordinates service activities of an inter-regional nature, provides liaison between the regional Service Coordinators and the Central Council, and advises the Central Council on matters of service.

The rest of this chapter discusses matters of policy.

Strive for unity and harmony

The sole object of the Organization is the consciousness of unity. [54]

Treat any feeling of hatred, clash of opinions, or envy among members as a sin. [55] Whenever any slight misunderstanding arises, set it right among yourselves, exercising love and tolerance. [56]

We sometimes expect Centers to function perfectly, with everyone in perfect, loving harmony. After all, if we believe in Sai and His teachings, why should we have arguments? However, few devotees are so spiritually advanced! Disagreements of one form or another do arise, at the personal level. They are just part of the “sandpaper” wearing away our ego, and suitably facing them can help us grow spiritually.

Unity and harmony should be considered most important in all service activities. Face disagreements honestly, thoughtfully, lovingly, and with the understanding that different viewpoints can have equal validity. Remember, the process of solving a disagreement is often more important than the actual solution. Being harmonious about what you do is just as important as doing it. Surrender the difficulties to God and try to communicate clearly and lovingly to all.

Provide consistent service

The leader of the project should be aware that people sometimes are not able to fulfill their commitments—they forget, other problems crop up that need immediate attention, etc. But if the Center has made a commitment to provide a service, it should do so. The leader must be prepared for such eventualities and have alternative plans ready. And, if a member fails in their duty, forgive them and give them another chance.

Serve, don't advertise

Do not imagine that your task is to propagate Sai and speak of Sathya Sai and His message. That is not right. [57]

Our purpose is to do service as a spiritual activity. It is not our purpose to publicize Sathya Sai Baba. At some point during a service project, you may be asked what group you belong to. It is appropriate to mention the Sathya Sai Baba Organization. When questioned further, depending on your feelings and how the conversation goes, simply say that we are a service organization, or say that we are a spiritual group that believes in the one God who is the basis of all religions, or go into more detail about the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba.

Don't pressure members into service

Office bearers in this Organization are leaders who bear the brunt themselves, guides who walk along the path they wish others to take. They shall not command or punish, they can only persuade and advise. [58]

Members who decline to participate should not be criticized. They may quietly be doing much more individual service than any other member, they may have too many other commitments with their family or their work, or they may simply not be ready to spend much time on group service. Do not judge the commitment of others. *What do you know, says Baba, of the inner working of another's mind?* [59]

Those who criticize others for not taking part in service activities are probably themselves not deriving joy from service but are seeing it as a burden. When others see the joy that you derive from service, they will also want to participate.

It is appropriate to invite members and non-members alike to join in service activities. Those who do agree to participate in an activity should take the commitment seriously, as they would a regular job. Yes, there will be times when you might not be able to appear, but the reasons should not be trivial.

Handle money as little as possible

*Fund collection is as much opposed to this movement as fire is to water. [60]
Money is fundamentally fraught with danger and harm. [61] It is the root cause of
all misunderstandings and factions; keep it in the background and give it the least
importance. [62]*

The Sai organization tries to have as little as possible to do with money. The following story illustrates how this can be done. As a service, a devotee wanted to give the Center money to pay for the flowers that were placed on the altar each week. After some discussion, she decided to bring the flowers and arrange them on the altar herself. This solution had two benefits. First, no money changed hands between devotees. Second, the devotee was able to do a real service, requiring her time and skill in picking out and arranging flowers, instead of simply giving money.

As much as possible, then, let those performing a service deal with the money aspect themselves.

Some service projects do require money. For example, if the project is to feed 100 people, it may be advantageous to pool resources and buy the food all at once. In such cases, Baba gives us an admonition and tells us how to handle money.

Let only members contribute. [63]

Estimate beforehand what the expense will be Keep a locked box with a slit on the lid in an inner room. Let everyone go in alone and deposit in the box whatever they feel they can. They can come away without depositing anything; they have the freedom to do so; there is no compulsion If there is some surplus, keep it for another occasion Do not have lists, appeals, receipt books, and all the cumbersome complexities of fund collection campaigns Do it in this quiet and sacred manner, suited to the holy objective you have. [64]

Chapter 3

Organizing and carrying out service projects

Constantly enthuse and educate members to engage in the spiritual discipline of service. [65]

Starting a new service project

A service project should be started only after the Center has investigated the situation thoroughly and has enough commitments from members to carry it out. This means having an initial meeting to talk over the idea, then exploring possibilities, perhaps in connection with some volunteer organization, planning, and finally meeting to make a commitment. This may take several weeks or months. Some points to consider are given below.

- What are the needs of the community?
- What are the interests and skills of the Center members?
- Does the project emphasize teamwork, cooperation, and harmony, rather than special skills and tasks that only a few can perform?
- What commitment is there from the Center members? Are they willing to commit to one activity per month, or several hours per week?

It is better to start with a small project and then expand it as the Center gains experience, rather than start big and have to stop. Consistency and commitment is important. If we say we will carry out a project, then we should carry it out. It is also better to stay with one project for a time, rather than continually jump from one to another. Finally, remember that

Service should satisfy a local need, solve a local difficulty. [66]

A service project may be performed entirely under the auspices of the Center. Many Centers, however, decide to help a social or religious organization instead. For example, the Center could regularly assist the Salvation Army or a church group in feeding the needy. Both methods of service are equally useful as a spiritual discipline.

Periodically examining a project

Prior to beginning a new Sai service project, it is advisable that the center devotees, under guidance of the Center Service Coordinator, engage in a feasibility discussion to review the proposed service project. Key items to address may include (but not be limited to):

- Is there a need for this service in the community?
- Do we have the resources and commitment to provide the service?
- Will we need special training?
- How long will this project last?
- What are the legal liability issues, and resolutions?

- How will we remind ourselves that this is more than a community service project? It is a Sai selfless service project with a spiritual foundation.

During an ongoing service project, periodic review may be helpful. Items to address may include:

- Are we providing what we committed to provide?
- Is there still a need for this service project?
- How can we make the service more valuable to those we are serving?
- How are we reminding ourselves that this is more than a community service project? It is a Sai selfless service project with a spiritual foundation.

After a service project is completed, it is advisable that the Sai devotees who provided the service meet to have a session to discuss the project and share what they received from the experience of serving. They may also give constructive criticism for improving upon it if they choose to repeat the project. Everyone who participated should have a chance to provide input, and the leaders should realize that others may have good ideas. Recognize those who have participated. The goal of a discussion is to make the service project more effective and to develop unity among the members of the Center. A decision by consensus is preferable to a vote that has one side winning and another losing. Always keep in mind Baba's message that the *sole object of the Organization is the consciousness of unity*. [54]

Joint service projects

The units of the Sai Organization have to exemplify and promote the unity in diversity taught by the ancient wisdom. [67] Above all, cultivate unity and brotherhood. [68]

A unique partnership and spirit of cooperation has developed among the Centers in our city through our joint service projects. [A Sai devotee]

In cities or counties with two or more Sai Centers, sharing service projects can develop an effective spirit of cooperation. This allows larger, long-range service projects to be undertaken. It also allows members of smaller Centers to take part in more substantial efforts, without feeling overwhelmed. And it increases the chance of finding volunteers to fill in when one person has to be absent during an ongoing service project.

Joint efforts in American Sai Centers have created a great deal of continuing communication and sharing. Service coordinators are in constant communication. Everyone generally welcomes and invites everyone else to join in the projects, and Baba's goal of unity becomes more a reality.

Individual service projects

The most important thing I have discovered in doing service is that if you feel strongly prompted to do a service project, do it! Even if you have to do it alone. Eventually others will come to help —one person's strong commitment will motivate others. [A Sai devotee]

Members of a Center may be involved in individual service, as well as (or instead of) group service projects. The service activity need not be connected with the Center. Some prefer working alone or performing service activities that can be done only by one person. Individual service

may be done more quietly, in a private setting, and may be less ego inflating. Try it both ways, and see what works best for you.

There are hundreds of possible individual service activities. The only limit is your imagination. Pray to Baba to send you a service project that best fits your skills and that will best promote your spiritual development —and then be on the lookout for it, for you can't tell beforehand how it will be shown to you!

Direct service toward removal of physical distress, alleviation of mental agony, and fulfillment of spiritual yearning. [69]

The table below lists a few individual service projects being performed by Sai devotees throughout the country.

Individual service projects being carried out by Sai devotees

Send care packages to native American elders who are in need
Assist in schools
Record for or read to the blind
Volunteer at conference for the visually impaired
Help in adult literacy programs
Teach English to non-English speakers
Work with the United Way agency
Drive for “meals on wheels” and similar programs
Hospicare or Hospice care
Suicide prevention programs
Red Cross disaster training
Work in free clinics
Serve on Board of Directors of the county council on aging
Volunteer for the Friendly Visitors for the Aging Program
Volunteer fireman
School aide or volunteer
Feed and clothe the homeless
Call the elderly and shut-ins weekly (or more often)

Selfless service for children and teenagers

Children are precious treasures; our task is to rear them to become devoted servants of God. [70] Children must grow up in an atmosphere of reverence, devotion, mutual service, and cooperation. [71] The ideal of service must be inculcated in the hearts of the students. [72]

Service is as beneficial for children as it is for adults. Through service, children, too, can develop love and compassion and can become aware that God is within us all.

The Education program of your Center has the task of teaching children about service and organizing service projects for them, as part of the Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) program. If you have questions concerning service for children, see your Education Coordinator.

Children can be included in regular service projects. For example, the elderly—in nursing facilities or their own houses—are delighted with the presence of children. Of course, some service projects will not be appropriate for children, and discrimination is required. For example, service activities that require contact with possible drug addicts or situations that might frighten children would be inappropriate.

Teenagers may have difficulty with a Sai program that consists only of devotional singing, meditation, and study circle. Teenagers want more action and relevancy. So some parents have difficulty keeping their children involved in Sai activities. Service can be the program that “turns the teenager on” and maintains their interest. In one Center, the young adults do service three times a month and have their own study circle in the fourth week.

Start children in selfless service when they are young; teach them the value of selfless service; and give them more and more opportunities and responsibilities in service programs as they grow into teenagers and young adults.

Chapter 4

Service projects

4.1 Feeding the hungry

The best service is giving a thirsty man a cup of water, and the best time is when he is thirsty. [73] The best type of service is feeding the hungry. [74] Set aside a handful of rice every day while cooking, as an offering to God; each week, feed a few hungry people with it. [75]

Before we started serving food in the shelter on Sunday mornings, violence was the norm. The shelter director told us that, since we began sharing food, there is no violence. [A Sai devotee]

Feeding the hungry is one of the most popular forms of service in Sai Centers. This can take many forms, some of which are given below in order of increasing responsibility and work.

- Bring (vegetarian) canned goods and sacks of food to your Center for later distribution to a service agency.
- Arrange food baskets and deliver them to shut-ins.
- Help another organization (e.g. the Salvation Army) prepare food, serve food, and clean up afterward.
- Make and distribute packages of food —sandwiches, fruit, cookies, etc., through established agencies experienced with providing food for the needy.
- Take full responsibility for preparing and serving a meal to the homeless.

What your Center will do in terms of feeding the hungry depends on the size of your Center and the time that your members can allot to it. The service may be performed on holidays, monthly, or weekly. In the beginning, start slowly and gain experience and confidence. You must be able to fulfill your commitment in a consistent manner. Periodic evaluation of the service activity is useful; needs may change, and your resources could be better utilized in some other activity.

Quotes from devotees: serving the hungry

A personal touch and compassion are developed after some visits.

Since our meals are home-cooked, the people feel that we care.

The sight of us brings smiles to their otherwise grim faces.

They really love the soup; it's nourishing and homemade.

Volunteering at a local service organization is a good way to start. Your Center can then learn about the service activity and gain experience without having to bear the full responsibility right from the beginning. When helping another organization, follow their guidelines and rules scrupulously, instead of trying to impose your own preferences.

For example, if you decide to help an organization that serves meat, then assist them without complaining or attempting to change their habits. However, in an activity performed solely by the Sai Center, serve vegetarian food.

Safe Food Preparation and Handling

Many communities require permits for those preparing food. For example, all workers in a restaurant may need to have a “food handler's permit”. The permit provides assurance that the person understands the principles of safe food preparation. Some areas have “good Samaritan laws”, which exempt the preparation and serving of free food from the need for permits. Check with local officials if your Center will be in charge of a food project.

If your service project consists of helping another agency that has experience in feeding the hungry, then there is no need to worry; they will know the rules.

In any case, if we are preparing and serving food for many people, then we have a responsibility to learn the principles of safe food preparation and storage.

Do involve children when possible, in both the preparation of and the serving of the food. It is a wonderful experience for them. But make sure they are well supervised, and read the box above on safe food handling.

Special tips on feeding the hungry

- Treat the people you are serving as your guests. Be friendly. Talk to them, both during the meal and afterward.
- Serve them food that you yourself would eat. Then find out whether they liked it. In our zeal to make it healthy, we may be making it tasteless or strange. Yes, serve healthful food, but make sure people can eat it.
- If delivering to shut-ins, ask them each time what they would like the next time; get them anything special that they need, if you can.
- Over a period of time, you may be able to develop a list of restaurants, bakeries, and supermarkets that will give you leftover food for feeding the hungry. This is a great way to lessen the waste in our society, as long as you ensure that the food is fresh and healthy.
- Wholesale stores sell food more cheaply, in bulk—from vegetables to fully prepared frozen deserts to cookie mixes for baking.
- Several mornings a week, one Center takes bananas and orange juice or hot cocoa to the laborers on the streets who are looking for jobs.
- Serving food on the street to the homeless is discouraged by shelters because the goal should be to get the homeless back in the shelters where they can be guided and helped to get out of the homeless stage.

Service at holiday time

Sai is in everyone, so all deserve your reverence and service. [76]

Holidays can be joyous occasions—for those with enough food, clothing, and shelter. For the poor, hungry, destitute, or lonely, holidays can be sad and depressing. We can lift our own spirits as well as the spirits of the people we serve by doing a bit more on holidays. Here are some examples.

Examples of food prepared
Pizza
Burritos
Vegetarian casseroles
Beans of various sorts
Homemade carrot juice
Vegetarian chili with rice
Diced baked potatoes are a big hit
Pancakes, with fruit, coffee, milk
Cheese or peanut butter sandwiches
Watermelons are a big hit in the summer
Spaghetti with sauce, garlic bread, salad
Homemade pies – rhubarb, pumpkin, apple
Hard-boiled eggs, bananas, apples, cookies
Black-eyed peas/chick peas/mixed vegetables
Chili (perhaps with vegetable protein or tofu)
Baked ziti/lasagna/spaghetti/macaroni and cheese
Dish with barley, eggplant, and spices is well received

1. Provide Christmas cards and stamps for those in nursing homes. Help them write the cards if they so desire (some people may welcome the chance to dictate a letter).
2. Adopt a family at Christmas. Provide them not only with food but also with clothes, new or used toys for the kids, Christmas gifts for all the members of the family, and your time. Contact the family ahead of time and find out what they need or want.
3. Make Christmas cards for shut-ins.
4. Stay in touch throughout the year with a family you adopt at Christmas, and help them out when they need it.
5. Add a special touch that helps express or celebrate a holiday. For example, have Easter baskets ready for the children at Easter, decorate the room for the fourth of July, give people small pumpkins to take home on Thanksgiving, have flowers for the women on mother's day, and have Valentine's cards written for everyone on Valentine's day. Decorate the tables with tablecloths, flowers, and candles for the occasion.
6. At Christmas, one Center gave a present of socks and ski caps to everyone they fed.
7. Go Christmas caroling at homes for the elderly --and bring some cookies.
8. Decorate a shelter for the homeless or an elderly home for the holiday.
9. One Center provides little homemade “favors” for 100 food trays at the local soup kitchen on every national holiday. Examples: a brownie and a loving poem on Thanksgiving, heart-shaped cookies on Valentine's day, and colored Easter eggs on Easter.

4.2 Visiting hospitals

... going to hospitals and serving the patients who are in the wards—in such acts of service, the members of the Sai Organization must take an active part. [77]

You too should keep God in your mind as the pacesetter, whether you are serving patients in hospitals or cleaning drains in the streets. That is the highest form of spiritual exercise. [78]

Hospitals generally have volunteer programs, which provide varied opportunities for service. Usually, there is an Auxiliary that coordinates volunteers. Volunteers serve at the reception, in admissions, and in the gift shop. They provide clerical help and assist nurses on the floor. In some cases, they serve as liaison between the family and the operating room, helping the family through the ordeal.

Volunteers usually take a training program to prepare them with the skills necessary for the tasks.

Some hospitals have long-term patients, who long to see a friendly face and have someone to talk to. Bring flowers, magazines, and a smile.

Associated with the hospital may be a hospice program to help the terminally ill and their families, by giving the family some relief from the responsibility of caring for the dying patient. An extensive training program in issues related to death and dying is usually required of volunteers in the program.

4.3. Visiting nursing homes

Handle the old and infirm as you would a rare flower or a costly fruit. [79]

In our western culture, the elderly tend to be neglected. We don't have large family groups living together, so when caring for the elderly gets to be a burden, we place them in nursing homes. There, they can be neglected and feel bored and lonely. So the nursing home is a good place to do service.

Visit the same nursing home regularly, for the residents look forward to talking to the same people. Let the children in your Center participate fully in this service. The residents usually enjoy children, and it is also a good experience for the children.

Visits to nursing homes often involve singing with the residents. However, more personal attention can be uplifting. For example, find out beforehand which residents have birthdays that month and make the visit a birthday party for them. Provide a birthday cake and other refreshments, decorate the place with balloons, sing happy birthday to them, and give them a small gift of something they need (toilet articles, etc.).

Check with the nursing home before you go to see whether they allow food to be brought in; some don't. In providing refreshments, remember that the elderly often have dietary restrictions. Watch out especially for diabetics. We tend to provide too much food that is filled with sugar, such as cakes or cookies. Provide an alternative that has no sugar. Provide wholesome fruit (e.g. bananas) that people can keep in their room if they don't want to eat immediately.

Many residents of nursing homes are disabled and have to be fed. Don't bring food that is rough and difficult to swallow.

Provide real personal attention. Each devotee could “adopt” a person to talk to at each visit. Help people write letters —provide writing materials, postcards, etc., but also write as they dictate, if necessary (at Christmas, bring cards). Help make phone calls.

Here are some other possibilities:

- If it is appropriate, take some residents on an outing —e.g. a picnic, a trip to a museum, bowling, plays.
- Play bingo or other games.
- Let Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) children play musical instruments and sing simple songs.

Quotes from devotees: visiting nursing homes

Just two weeks ago, we were told by the nurses on duty that the music and singing has physically gotten some withdrawn patients to smile and become receptive.

Residents said that without our help, they wouldn't have sent cards to loved ones because of their inability to write or get cards and postage.

The elderly look forward to meeting the children and enjoy their company. They don't like us to leave, and they ask us to come again.

We've discovered that the residents just want love and the feeling of being cared for; it's enough just to talk to and comfort them.

One elderly, bedridden lady told me that no one else came to her room to spend time with her.

The staff members tell us that the residents sleep better after our visit.

4.4 Serving within the Center

Service of Sai and service of Sai devotees is the same. When you serve Sai devotees, because they are Sai devotees you see the Sai in them, you seek to please the Sai in them, you revere the Sai in them. [80]

Come what may, do not give up this organization. Consider this organization as your life breath. This is real service. [81]

There is much service to be done within a Center itself —keeping devotional songbooks up to date, keeping the meeting place clean, preparing the altar (if there is one), bringing and arranging flowers, leading study circles, preparing and distributing a monthly calendar, and so on. All these activities, carried out with the right attitude, constitute selfless service.

Don't forget the personal aspect. Just because Center members are devotees, don't assume that trouble does not enter their lives. If someone fails to show up for several weeks, find out why, give them a call, and help them if they are in distress. If someone is in the hospital, visit them, just as you would a close friend or relative.

4.5 Interesting group projects

Service should satisfy a local need, solve a local difficulty; don't just imitate. [66]

In this section, we list interesting projects being done by Sai Centers in the U.S.

- 1. Garden project.** Two different Centers grow vegetables (one on two acres of land) and give them to charities.
- 2. Flowers.** Flowers from a devotee's garden are arranged for nursing homes and a woman's shelter.
- 3. Stuffed animals.** Several Centers make bears, rabbits, and hearts for children in hospitals, women's shelters, and ambulance services.
- 4. Adopt a family.** With the help of local social groups, 4 or 5 families are “adopted” and supplied with new clothes, toys, and food at Christmas and Thanksgiving.
- 5. Help victims of home fire.** This was a spur-of-the-moment project of a Center. They were able to supply a family with clothes, food, utensils, and appliances.
- 6. Service to animals.** One person volunteers at a home for homeless cats.
- 7. Help the elderly.** In association with a local social agency, apartments are winterized, refurbished, cleaned, and repaired.
- 8. Help the homeless.** In association with a local social agency, apartments are repaired and cleaned.
- 9. Blankets.** One Center kept 60 police cars supplied with homemade blankets (about 5 per week were made), which the police give to children in accidents. Another Center made dolls and teddy bears.
- 10. Blankets and clothing.** One devotee gathers blankets and clothing on a regular basis from churches and delivers them to various social agencies.
- 11. New immigrants.** Clothe and feed newly immigrated people.
- 12. Gather clothes.** One devotee wrote letters to all her neighbors about her Sai Center's used-clothing project (without mentioning the Center or Sathya Sai Baba) and received a huge response.
- 13. Adopt-a-highway program.** One Center keeps a two-mile section of highway clean.
- 14. Staff a shelter.** One Center looks after shelter residents at night. They serve food, pass out clothing and blankets, and maintain order.
- 15. Help the blind.** One devotee volunteered at a conference for the blind and visually impaired. Others read for the blind.
- 16. Magazines.** One Center donates up-to-date issues of popular magazines to a hospital.
- 17. Remodel houses.** Help those in need paint or remodel their houses.
- 18. Make Christmas cards for shut-ins.**

4.6. Volunteer organizations

Service to the community is the highest service. [12]

Your Center, or you as an individual, may want to do service through some other volunteer organization in your community. Many communities have a “volunteer center” or an “information and referral center”, which maintains a database of human service organizations and community resources. Generally, this organization has a list of agencies that are looking for volunteer help. The local Chamber of Commerce or United Way can usually tell you the name of this organization or can itself give you information about volunteering.

In any community, many areas need help —alcohol/substance abuse, animal care, youth, mental health, women's services, family health, education, libraries, the handicapped and mentally retarded, disaster relief, housing/home repair, refugee assistance, mediation, nature/environment, prison programs, the elderly, and so on. So find your Center's or your own individual niche, and satisfy a local need. Just remember that the kind of service is not as important as the attitude with which it is performed. Make your service a spiritual exercise.

The table below lists some organizations and agencies that generally use volunteers.

Some Organizations and Agencies

AIDS Work	Literacy Volunteers
Alcoholism Council	Lung Association
Arthritis Action Committee	Meals on wheels
Boy Scouts	Mental Health Association
Cancer Society	Rape Crisis
Cooperative Extension/4H	Red Cross
Family/Children's services	Refugee Assistance Program
FISH	Religious organizations
FOODNET	Salvation Army
Girl Scouts	Senior Citizens
Habitat for Humanity	Social agencies
HEADSTART	Suicide Prevention
Heart Association	United Way
Hospicare	Volunteer Fireman
Hospital Auxiliary	YMCA or YWCA
Libraries	Youth Development

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