

The Spirit of Service by Nipun Mehta

[Below is a transcript of a talk delivered in February 2000, at an event hosted by AHIMSA in Berkeley.]

As I was coming today, I was trying to think of an introduction, and I realized that my voice is sort of gone (as you can probably tell) -- we had an orientation meeting over the meeting and I probably talked too much. [laughs] So, I thought of an episode in my life where I was really sick.

A few years back, I was down with 104 degree fever. I mean, I was sitting down on my sofa somewhere and that was it -- I was just sitting down since I couldn't move or do anything else. Everyone in my house happened to be out at that time and I was all by myself, stationed comfortably on the sofa. Usually, I tend not to distract myself with TV, etc. when I am sick, so I was just observing, watching myself. And all of a sudden, my mind shifted into an experience that I had, oh, a couple years before that.

Four of us, including my parents and younger brother, were taking a trip to India and were visiting a religious place of some sort. There were a bunch of temples, street merchants, fakirs and the whole bit. My parents had to buy something quickly so they left us in the car. Right as we were there, this monk appears, as if out of nowhere! And this wasn't just an ordinary looking monk; he had his own sort of makeup to give him a mystical look -- you know, a garland, white-colored powder on his face, alms-bowl in his hands, and so on. To top it all off, though, he had a little golden-colored spider on his right cheek and it was moving!

Being kids whose parents had given instructions about not talking to strangers, my brother and I looked at the monk with surprise, as if to ask, "Who is this guy?" He slowly approaches us and asks, "Can you give me some food or perhaps some money so I can buy the food?" These monks have to beg; that's how they get their food. Having been instructed by parents, we said, "No, sorry, we can't give you anything." He asked a couple times but we responded similarly. But we still chatted for a bit about what town we were from and so on and right when he was about to leave, he says, "Here, put this in your prayers, and you'll get what you want." Of course, when my parents heard about this hoky sounding episode, we chuckled the packet out the window.

But there I was ... sitting on my sofa, with 104 degree temperature, and I'm thinking about this seemingly random episode ... and all of a sudden, I started crying. It wasn't just crying; I was gushing as if there was no tomorrow. And I said to myself, "Why was I holding back?" And I said, "What do I have that I don't want to give to the guy? Here is a person, a monk, who is in the search of truth. And I had three rupees. Why didn't I give it to him?" I just had this feeling, as if he is my brother and I could give him everything. "Here, I'll give you myself. What else can I give you?" And I was

replaying this whole episode in my mind. And I said, "Here it is. Everything you want, take it. You know what? Let's call all the monks in the neighborhood, and let's have a big party at the restaurant next door." There was this overwhelming feeling of giving. There is no way that any description can do it justice.

It's like smelling an orange. I always use that metaphor. You smell an orange and you know exactly what an orange smells like. Yet if I ask you, "Tell your neighbor what an orange smells like," you can't do it. I mean you can say, "Well, it looks like a lemon," and you can make all sorts of metaphors, but you can't describe an orange, even when you know exactly what it is. Similarly with this. I know exactly what it is, but I can't describe it. I'm not even going to attempt to describe it. But it's there. And it's something for which you can't say, "Oh, well, it's sorta there, sorta not there." It's definitely there. You know when you've smelled the orange.

A bunch of us run a non-profit, ServiceSpace, and we empower other non-profits with websites. It's fully volunteer run and we do everything for free, so there's a lot of work. Many times, I'll be working at 1:00 a.m. I'm doing work, and all of a sudden, OK, 1:00 a.m. I'm tired and I could really use some sleep. So I'm thinking, all right, I want to go to sleep. Then I tell myself, you know, it's really easy to give leftovers. You take care of yourself, you take care of your surroundings, and you take care of all of your comforts, and after that comfort you say, "OK, I have everything I need," and then you give something. That's good -- it's not bad but it's still giving leftovers, right? You're not giving of yourself.

I was telling myself, "Here is your opportunity to give of yourself. You're here. Your body wants this. These are very selfish desires -- if you really want to give yourself, this is the time. Do it. This is not leftovers, because I could be sleeping, I could be comforting myself." The choices I had were either breakdown or breakthrough. And I say, "All right, that's it. I'm going to buckle down and do it." So I do it, I do it, and I go to 2:00 a.m., 3:00 a.m. ... I would've otherwise thought that I'd be tired but no! I'm feeling like Rocky, you know, 12th round, he's fighting all over the place, and there I am, after 12 rounds, there's something - it's intangible. It's something that's not there, yet it's there. You can't describe it, yet it's there. It's that whole concept of the orange metaphor. You smell the orange but you can't describe it.

So my talk was titled "Spirit of Service" and I just said that you can't describe the spirit of service, so what am I going to talk about for the next 40 minutes? [laughs] What I'm going to talk about is not the spirit of service, because you can't describe that, but what I am going to say is why are we not in the spirit of service. Why are we not in the spirit of service in this very moment? Right now. That is the question before us.

So why am I not serving others at this very instance? In other words, why am I selfish right now? I can really answer that because I have so many selfish moments and I know exactly what it is because I experience it. Take a general example: Many times I go in to work on holidays because I have to do some extra work to catch up. So one particular three-day weekend, I was at work and all of a sudden it dawned upon me that I was the only one at work. I'm here at work, and I'm saying, "What are you doing? You're doing all this stuff, and you're not getting anything in return. Why are you doing this? Are you just obsessed? Is there something wrong with you? Do you really want to be doing this? You could be out there hanging out with your friends. You could be out doing so many other things. You could watch a movie, you could do something fun, or

you could even do nothing! Whatever you want." But I wasn't doing any of this. I was at work doing all this other stuff, and I realized that it was hard. I watched myself and asked, "Why is it hard?"

Why is it so hard to give? What I came up with is that you always want something in return. You want something in return for everything you do. And when you don't get that something in return, then it hits you. Oh, yeah. Oh, this is not such a good thing. And that's hard. Even when you try to do a selfless action--by the very definition, when you're trying to do a selfless action, it's not selfless because there's effort. But there's a certain percentage of action which is selfless. Let's say even just 10 percent. So when you do a selfless action, you realize this dichotomy between selfish and selfless. It's very clear. It's in front of you. It's staring at you. You say, "Oh, yeah, OK, I can either do something which is selfish or on the other hand, do something which is selfless." These are two different things. And they're right there in front of you. This dichotomy is very clear. Whether it's just a smile or something really extravagant, a selfless action feels distinctively different from a selfish one.

So the question still is why is it so hard? And why do I always want to go after these outcomes? Why am I not content just staying here doing the things I'm doing - why do I want something in return and why do I always want to pursue something? Can I give up this pursuit? Because there are so many negative effects of it. You can see it in your daily life - when you want all these ends, you lose the beauty of the moment. Let's say you want fifty ends to happen in one particular "right" way, then all of a sudden the ten steps to each one of those ends start cluttering up your life, because then you're very busy and oh, very stressed. "I have so many things to do, such little time."

About nine months ago I was in the back room actually, talking to Ajahn Amaro and Reverend Heng Sure, and this lady comes in. Naturally, we move our attention to her and ask how she's doing. The lady doctor says, "Oh God. So busy. So many things. Oh, man, this is a really stressful time in my life." Perhaps just out of courtesy, she asks Ajahn Amaro, "So how are you doing? How is your life? You seem to be doing a lot of things." He said, "I'm active, not busy." That really struck me. He had the same amount of things, but he didn't care about the end. He was right there, right then, and there were hundreds of those moments, and there were hundreds of those things to do. And he was doing them. So he was active, he was not busy. That really struck me.

So why do people get busy? We know that you get busy and then you get stressed, and these are all negative things, so why do we do it? And why do we care so much for the outcome? Now, if you ask this question to a layman on the street, he will usually say, "Well, if you don't do it for the outcome, there's no progress." Well, OK. Is that really so? The layman typically would say, "Yeah. You wouldn't be motivated to do anything. Why would you care to do? Technology -- great. Why build websites? Just let them be. I don't need to do anything." That's the typical response, but is that really so?

Is that really true, that if we had no conflict of interest, we would not do 100 percent? If my mom, for instance, comes in in the middle of the night and she says, 2:00 o'clock, "Nipun, wake up, wake up. I know you do ServiceSpace work at this time, and today you didn't do your dishes, so go downstairs and do the dishes." If my mom told me that and let's say I even went down, I'd say "It's all living in the moment. OK, live with what you got and just enjoy doing the dishes in the middle of

the night." [laughs] That's not gonna happen ... I'm not going to be living in the moment. I'm going to be thinking, "I need to go to my bed. Now." So, I do my job haphazardly, by saying, "Let me just get this done so I can go and sleep in that nice comfortable bed that I have!"

So I had this conflict of interest, so that's why I did this. Now, what if I didn't have a conflict of interest? What reason would I have not to put in 110 percent in everything I do, wherever I go, whatever I do. I'm here and now, and that's it. This is the only reality. Right? It doesn't matter what car you drove in, because that doesn't have anything to do with this moment. This is the only reality. The past is gone. The future is a fantasy. None of it's there. This is it right here, right now. So why am I not able to enjoy the journey right? Why am I am not able to fully live in each moment?

Many of you might have heard that story about Thich Nhat Hanh; he has his monastery called Plum Village in France. One time when he was a young student, his teacher called him in to talk to him. When they were done, he walks out and as he was leaving, he leaves the door half-open, in his rush to go out. So his teacher calls him in and says, "Why didn't you close the door? I asked you to close the door when you left." And all of a sudden it hit him that when he was closing the door, he was not closing the door. He wanted to get to some other place and that is why he was not fully there. To this day, he hasn't forgotten that lesson. In fact, even to this day, people go to France just to watch him open and close the door, because he does it so completely. For him, the door is it. He is there. All his life comes down to that one point, when he's closing and opening that door. He is just closing and opening that door. That is it. He has that detachment with outcome which lets him fully experience the present.

But then everyone can ask all sorts of cynical questions about it, right? Well, if you don't care for the outcomes, how can you really get anywhere? What if you had a business and you did all this? How are you going to get anywhere? You're not going to do anything. And that's a legitimate response. But I've experienced quite to the contrary with ServiceSpace. We have nowhere to go, we have no end to pursue. We're all volunteers and we just want to give. ServiceSpace is simply our instrument of giving. But all of a sudden we realize that when we just care to enjoy the journey, when we're just doing what is in front of us, then that is it. We don't care what happens at the end. All we're living is the present moment and you end up doing 110 percent. In just nine, ten months we've done amazing things! Three hundred and fifty volunteers, two hundred non-profits served. All sorts of things. But how can you do this when you don't care for the end? [laughs]

So my question is how can you not? When you don't care for the end, you're doing 110 percent, and that is the only time when you can do something really worthwhile. But this is still hard. Right? Everyone can rationally say all these things. Yeah, well, don't worry about the end. This is not about the end, just enjoy the journey. But it's hard to do. We all want to go out and get results.

I can remember an episode where a particular volunteer team was helping a nonprofit in making a website. The nonprofit representative was very demanding but the volunteer continued to serve to the best of their abilities. The lady at the nonprofit thought that her cause was it and had all sorts of complications. But the team worked hard and finally finished the project. Then, all of a sudden [sound] after the project was over, the very next day, she chucked the site. She threw everything away!

Now, these guys, if they were truly enjoying the journey, they'd simply say, "Oh, OK, I guess our services weren't useful," because they've already gotten their reward. The reward was in the journey. But if they hadn't done that, if they said, "Yeah, I want that end. I want that particular thing to happen. I want them to benefit in this way. I want to give this type of good - I want them to have these sorts of results in the end." If you had all those expectations, then all of a sudden, oh, yeah, it's very stressful and it'll hit you for five, ten days as you try to figure out what's wrong with the lady. So this detachment has a lot of practical benefits. The detachment - it's not so much detachment - is more about fully living. That full living has a lot of benefits. First of all, you won't have all this stresses and worries. You're just living, just sort of floating through the water like a little log of wood in the sea -- rising up with the wave and coming down with the ebbs. You're just going through wherever it takes you. There's something magical about that.

So then we still have this question. Why is all this hard? Why is this very hard? Everyone can say all this stuff rationally, right? But it's very hard to implement it into our everyday actions. I asked myself the same question when I was younger [laughs]. I said, "Yeah, OK. I've read all these philosophy books. I've read all these scriptures and beliefs and dogmas. And I have everything inside of me." If someone asked me, "Yeah, why are we this?", I would sort of vomit all the stuff. "Oh, yeah, I know all the answers here. This is what the scripture says and this is what this person says and ... you floss ten times a day and do this and do that and you won't be selfish anymore." I was vomiting this information - it was a very rational understanding of it. I said, "Oh, yeah, this is what the book says, so this must be it." So I'd tell myself, "Yeah, I know all this stuff." But, in reality, a rational level understanding is nothing. Everyone knows that anger, fear, depression, jealousy, and all such things are all very negative things. Everyone knows that rationally. No doctor's going to come in and tell me, "OK, Nipun, you're a little too pumped-up. Make sure you get angry three times tomorrow." No one's going to say that. There are no good benefits of anger, and there are no benefits of all these negativities. But you still have these negativities, right? Even when we understand that rationally it's no good, but when it comes down to putting it in practice, this is just another thing. It's very hard. So what to do about it?

What we understand at a rational level is very limited. I can tell you all this stuff and you can listen to everything. But it's very limited. You need some sort of an experiential understanding, something where you realize what is wrong. It's as if you hit your head against the wall and you know -- ok, that hurts and I'm not going to do that again. In the same way we need an experiential understanding about this.

That means we need to understand the selfishness that's in us. Right? Consider this moment right now. We're acting. Every moment is of action, right? If we're selfish, maybe we're selfish right now too. So I'm talking, you're listening. Let's take my example. I'm talking. Now, before a talk, if you get nervous, what does that mean? That means you have an image in your head, and when you give a talk, you're worried about protecting, preserving, and projecting that image. You want to make sure everyone thinks of you in the same way that you think of yourself. You want to make sure that everyone gets some ideas that they have of you. And you're not sure that that will happen. That uncertainty creates this tension and nervousness. And it's a very self-centered issue. You might've heard this story about Gandhi ... he was traveling to address the whole nation of India and on his way to make the speech, an English gentleman stops him and asks, "Mr. Gandhi, what are you going to speak of today?" I can't do an English accent, but [laughs] I try. "What are

you going to speak of today?" was the question. Do you know what Gandhi's response was? He says, "I don't know. I'm not there yet." He was five minutes from the talk. He didn't know because he wasn't there. His experience of reality was very spontaneous. It wasn't planned. It wasn't some things which go in a certain order. He was just saying things as they were, as they manifested themselves in this present moment.

So that was about talking. Now, let's take listening -- all of you are listening. So what does listening imply? I'm saying all these things, but you're not listening to a word of what I'm saying! You're hearing these sound waves that I'm emitting but you're not listening to any of it. To your processing system these are sounds like blaup blap blaa. It's like that, right? Now, you take those sounds and you process it and translate it and that's what it means to you. You're only listening to your own selves! You're hearing what I'm saying, but you're only listening to your own self. If I said blaup blap blaa -- what does that mean? If I forced everybody to come up with an answer, everyone would come up with different responses. It's the same sound waves. You heard the same sound waves, but its translation is very different for everyone. So I'm saying all these things, but they mean something totally different to every individual in this room.

So we're back to our original question, right? We said why are we selfish? We really have to look at that question really deeply to understand it, not just come up with rational jargon. Why are we selfish? You can just ask somebody, "Hey, why do you go rock climbing?" "Well, it's fun. I just kinda like it." "Why do you like to read?" "Well, I just sorta kinda like." Why do you go to the movies? Why do you do drugs? Why do you draw? Why do you play music? Why do you do so many things? Right? Why do you all these things? You can ask, they will all say, "Well, I just sorta like it." If you really break it down, initially they're fun, but why are they fun? Why do we do all these things? We do them for that inner kick. We do everything for that inner kick.

Everything in our life comes down to that inner kick. "Oh, I like this 'cause it gives me this kick, and I don't like this because it does not give me that kick." Right? So all of a sudden now we start to have this good and bad, based on that kick that we get from these things. All our moods are in the same way -- I'm in a good mood if I get this inner kick from things and if I don't get it for a while, I'm in a bad mood. Or if someone gives me a negative kick, I'm in a bad mood. So all our lives, we become puppets to this inner kick. Everything we do is a reaction to all these things that are happening to us.

So this kick - why do we have this kick? I had a meeting with a CEO of a company that processes online donations last week (we were trying to build an alliance with them to help nonprofits) and he told me a very interesting thing. He says, "You have this pledge line where the donor has to check ten dollar line, twenty, thirty, fifty and then a blank line for any other amount. You know what we found in our research? People give the lowest amount." So if you say 25 as the lowest one, people will pick that one. "You know why? This is the feel-good principle," he told me. "Feel good principle? Oh?" He said, "People give that minimum amount so that they can feel good." So he says, "It's never a good idea to put that. Just have a little box, open-ended, so it's up to them to decide, because otherwise they're going to pick the lowest one." That somehow made sense to me too. Even with giving - a lot of people - you can give for that inner kick. Oh, yeah, let me give \$100,000 to something. OK, now I feel really good. My life is worth it, and all this, other stuff that I've collected and done, it's all OK because I do this. Or if you don't have money, you go out and help the homeless. Yeah, I'm

going to go out and help the homeless. Oh, that's really cool. Yeah, you know, I can go to bed today without any guilt feeling. So you go out and do this for that inner kick. You don't have to do it for that inner kick, but a lot of times we tend to do it for that inner kick. Even giving? So what's going on here?

There's another cool story actually. There's lots of cool stories. But this is a story about a monkey and a fish. A monkey is watching a river and notice a fish flowing down in the stream. Suddenly, the the monkey says, "Oh, I feel really compassionate. I think I need to go and help someone." So he decides to help the fish and says, "All right, this fish looks like it is really struggling. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to help the fish." The monkey picks up the fish and bring it to land. [laughs] Fish dies. A lot of times we think, oh, we can help, and we can do all these things - but who are you to help? You don't even know who you are. How are you going to help? You don't necessarily know.

And there's no question of ego. When you do all these things, the ego doesn't arise because you're thankful for the opportunities that come to you. If the fish comes and says, "Hey, monkey. Hey, can you hear me? Can you throw me some food?" So then the monkey doesn't say, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to help this fish." The monkey instead says, "Oh, thank you for giving me this opportunity to serve, because I'm already lost, and you're giving me this opportunity to serve." That's something great, right? For instance, with ServiceSpace, the word has spread all over the nation that we're doing free stuff. This is tens of thousands of dollars worth of services, so we get a lot of requests. It's definitely a lot of work. But the perspective is this: Oh, thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve. You're serving because you got that opportunity. You got that chance to purify yourself, to see what's going on, to see that dichotomy between selfishness and selflessness.

One of the other things we see when we see this dichotomy is the goggles. The goggles factor - I think that's what I'm going to call it - we have goggles every time we see people, we do things, we interpret ideas, we listen to talks, and we hear all these things. We have put on our goggles. We filter everything through our own biases and make judgments based on those. Now, if I don't know what those goggles are - even more basic than that, if I have green goggles on and I look at the sky, and the guy next to me says, "Hey, you know what? The sky's blue." I'm gonna say "No, I see it. The sky is green. It looks green to me. You can't tell me otherwise." The first guy says, "No, you got goggles on. You don't understand. You're not looking at it right." I'll still say, "No. The sky is green. I know it. That's how it is. That's how I see it. It can't be another way because I see it that way." But, of course, you're in this illusion. You have these goggles on and you can't see. You can't see right.

So then how do you become aware of these goggles. That's the next question, right? How do you become aware of those goggles? A very simple question with a simple answer: it's observation. You just observe and you'll see it. You say, "Oh, OK, things are great." You watch. And this tool of observation is very powerful.

At every instance - right now, later when you go to your car, before when you were coming here - we're all acting. Action -- we can't escape action. Action is there; we're doing all these actions. But instead of going after that inner kick. If we just watch it - if we're here and we're now, and we say, "OK, how is this happening?" I'm dumping all these sound waves on you, and every one of you hearing these waves and interpreting it. But as soon as you become aware of it, it means

something entirely different.

Then the whole cycle stops, right? Then we've realized that, oh yeah, I - you know, I'm hitting my head against the wall. I make up these desires and then I have cravings for them. Then I build up attachments. When I have these attachments and cravings, I have expectations. And when those expectations aren't met, I generate negativity. I feel depressed. I feel this, and I feel that. Right? So why do we do all this? I mean that's the real question. And it's simple - when you see it in front of you, you say, "Yeah, hey, I shouldn't be doing any of this. It doesn't make any sense." You say, "OK, I'll stop then," because it's no longer a rational understanding. It's no longer someone telling you rationally that, oh yeah, well, anger's all bad because this book says so. You see it yourself. You're banging your head against the wall, and it hurts. You're banging your head against the wall, it hurts. You bang it again, and it hurts. You bang it again, and it hurts. This is how it is. As soon as you see that, you say, "OK, I'm not going to bang my head against the wall because if I do, I'll be hurting." So that choice is up to you, right?

Now, right now, you know, as I already said, I'm dumping all these sound waves on you. Let's say I'm telling you something and you get really inspired, or you're listening to another talk and you get really inspired. And you're all pumped-up. I'm going to go and observe myself for the next 18 hours. I'm going to do something about this. And I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that. OK, so that's great. You do all that. And what happens the next day? Nothing. You don't have that inspiration so you go out hunting for those sound waves again. And, you know, if you've seen a movie that inspires you, you can't see it 20 times and have the same effect. The first time it's just something - so you look for different variations. You're always hunting, hunting, hunting, and it just never ends. And then there's money. People always criticize others chasing money. But you can start chasing inspiration. You can have this spiritual currency. Oh, well, I want to be in this state. I want to feel this way. I want to feel this. I want to have this and that. And it's all the same thing. Right? You're just hunting.

How many people ever say, "I have arrived. This is a moment I've been waiting for all my life," or "This is a moment that's a culmination of all my life, all my experiences and this is it. I am here." This Berkeley Buddhist monastery isn't a pit stop from doing x, y, z -- coming here and then going and doing something else. This is it. You have arrived. This is all there is to it. You have arrived. There's nowhere to go. But this is all hard to do, right?

You have to have that sense of observation. And that observation - as soon as you start to observe this process, as soon as you observe selfishness, it disappears because there's no solid foundation holding it down. So you watch it and you say, "OK, that's just stupid. I'm not going to do it anymore." As soon as you do that, that is the start of inspiration. It's not dependent on anything I'm saying. It's not dependent on anything you saw. It's nothing external. It's nothing related to any of these things. It's internal. You are there. You are living that inspiration. Wherever you go, wherever you are, whether you're in a car, you know, or you're doing ServiceSpace stuff, or you're doing something else, or you're shaking hands with a stranger, that inspiration is with you, and it does not go away from you.

It's not something that's induced. You know, "Oh, yeah, give me this drug. I'll feel this way." It's there. It's permanent. It's solid. That is true

inspiration. And that inspiration has nothing to do with going on a hundred-day meditation retreat. Or going to the Himalayas and meditating. Or going this place or that place. There's nothing wrong with those things; they're there and they may work for a lot of people, and they may inspire a lot of people in different ways. And that's fine. But the thing is you can never escape action. Whether you're meditating and doing nothing, so to say, or going out or doing all these complex activities, you're still acting. It's all action. You can't escape action. And with each action is an opportunity to learn, to observe, to come out of this process of selfishness. And as soon as you observe, the selfishness drops away, and inspiration starts to take birth. And that inspiration is something very, very simple. It's something very pure, something very genuine. And that is the spirit of service.

There's no way I can describe it. The only thing I can do is tell you why I, myself am not in that state. And that's it. Why am I not? Because I'm selfish. I have that chance for that pure, simple spirit of service in this moment, and that's all there is to it. That opportunity of inspiration lies in each action and each action can manifest the purest spirit of service. Starting right here, right now.