

7. The Shopping Bag Project

Various service activities were mentioned here All these are good acts, no doubt. But whatever is done, however useful or demonstrative, it is the spirit behind the service that matters. Sathya Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Speaks VII, Chapter 52, 291.

Almost every time we buy something, a store clerk puts it into a bag. On shopping days, in the supermarket, a family may be given two, three, even ten bags —whatever they need. And there's usually a choice: paper or plastic. What a wonderful convenience! Technology has come a long way to give us such a convenience for nothing!

But is there a cost? How were those bags made? What happens to the bags afterward? Does using a bag if you don't really need it hurt or help the Earth? Are they really free?

The truth of the matter is that bags are made from wood or petroleum (a non-renewable resource) and it takes additional energy to change that wood or petroleum into bags. Then, although some of the bags may be reused once or twice and recycled, the majority are simply thrown out, creating more garbage for our Earth to deal with. And you can be sure that you are paying for the bags in increased prices. So what looks like a great convenience is not so great!

In America, if we used only one less bag per person per month, that would be 3 *billion* fewer bags each year. We have read that it takes one 15–20-year-old tree to make the paper for only 700 grocery bags. So in a year, over 4 million such trees could be saved!

There is a wonderful alternative to using paper or plastic shopping bags. Buy a few cloth bags, take them with you whenever you go shopping and use them over and over and over again! Let's give a little bit more detail on this idea.

What to do

1. Buy several cloth bags. If you shop by car, keep a few bags in your car. If you shop by foot, hang them near your front door. Whenever you go shopping, try to remember to take the cloth bags with you. Use them instead of the bags offered to you by the store.

2. Suppose you have no cloth bag with you when you shop. If the items you buy are few enough and small enough, tell the clerk "I don't need a bag, thank you." and take the items without a bag. Usually, the clerk will be grateful.

3. If you must take a bag offered to you by the clerk, then take a paper rather than a plastic bag. Paper is made from wood, it can be recycled and it is biodegradable. Plastic is made from petroleum, is harder to recycle and generally is not biodegradable. It lasts just about forever.

4. Recycle the bags that you do take.

5. Don't be fanatical; be moderate and balanced. If you forget a cloth bag one day, or if you really need the bag a salesperson offers you for another purpose later on, use the paper bag!

6. Use the bags that you do accumulate for your trash baskets so that you don't have to buy plastic bags. Save money and energy.

Go a step further

Supermarkets provide small, clear plastic bags for fresh fruits and vegetables. They usually pile up in a drawer in the kitchen and are finally thrown out or recycled. To use fewer bags, keep several clean, used, clear plastic bags in your cloth bag and reuse them. Even better, buy fruits and vegetables loose and don't use these bags at all!

Be immersed in the Lord

The true devotee, said Swami in a discourse printed in *Sanathana Sarathi*, September 1993, *is immersed in the Lord all the time and performs all actions as offerings to the Lord.* But it is difficult for us to remember Swami at all times, in the midst of our daily actions and thoughts. It takes years of constant practice.

You can use the shopping bag as a reminder. When you remember to take a shopping bag with you, let that be a signal to remind you that you are helping the Earth, turn your thoughts to Swami, offer this small act to Him and begin repeating His name. When the cashier asks whether you want “paper or plastic”, let that also be a signal: Tell the cashier that you have your own bags, think of Swami and begin repeating His name.

Tip

Satha Sai Baba has said, “*Do not depend upon others for doing your work, like attending to your personal wants. Do them yourself; that is real freedom.*” (*Sathya Sai Speaks I*, Chap. 2, p. 21). You can put this maxim into action in a small way in the supermarket by packing your own bags. The people behind you and the cashier will be grateful for your speeding up the process.

Sai story

V.K. Narasimhan, the longtime editor of *Sanathana Sarathi*, said the following in a talk to overseas devotees in February 1994: Swami teaches that we should each do what we can for ourselves. He sets the example by washing His own clothes and cleaning His own bathroom. He sends His clothes out for ironing.