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Why self-help doesn't work

Most self-help starts with a wrong idea: that the 'I' we live with is real, permanent, and worth defending.

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Every bookstore one goes to today will have at least one aisle full of books that say essentially the same thing: "You can fix yourself." The self-help industry is full of quick-fix mantras and five-step success models. They all share one simple belief: that the "self" is broken and can be fixed with the right technique.



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But before we try to "help" the self, shouldn't we first question, "What is this self that we're trying to help?"

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stories to survive: "I'm not enough," "I need to get better," "I need to become something." So it looks for aid, not to get rid of these false beliefs, but to make them easier to deal with.

That's why self-help feels good but is actually empty. It shows you how to reach your goals faster and how to win the race that is making you tired. It cleans the cage, but it doesn't unlock the door. The main point of its flowery language is simple: You're unhappy because your needs aren't being met, so meet them.

But getting what you want isn't the same as fulfilling yourself. You can acquire everything you desire a hundred times and still experience the same restless feeling within. The ego likes to call its pleasures "growth" and its distractions "healing." That's how the trick keeps going on.

The self-help sector essentially promises more work, more fixing, and more chasing. It advises you how to attract, how to manifest, and how to make the most of what you have. But it doesn't expect you to see and understand what the self is truly like: how it moves, reacts, fears, and asks for everything. That simple act of honest observation is the start of real change.

The reality is difficult but freeing: you don't have to 'improve' yourself, you only need to understand yourself. You don't need to put anything extra on; you need rather to identify the pre-existing bondages. What remains then is not a "better" version of yourself, but a dissolution of the self.

Real self-help isn't about getting better; it's about understanding. It's not about picking up new habits; it's about getting rid of false identities. It doesn't start with ambition; it starts with honesty.

So, the next time you pick up a self-help book, ask yourself if you really want to heal or just hide. What's needed is not another method, but the courage to see who it is that needs help at all.

(Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and teacher of global wisdom literature, founder of the PrashantAdvait Foundation, and bestselling author who brings timeless insight to urgent modern questions.)

(Disclaimer: The views expressed above are the author's own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of DH.)



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