

Chapter VIII

The Householder Stage

The stages of life (*asramas*) regulating man's life are four: student, householder, forest dweller, and renunciate (*brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, and sanyasa*). They are all based on the householder stage of life. That is the chief stage, because the householder fosters the other three. The householder is the most important of all.

Just as all living beings depend upon air for their existence, the other three stages are dependent on the householder. Householders not only feed and clothe the others, they also provide facilities for the study of the *Vedas*. Manu, in his texts on *dharma* (*Dharma Sastras*), has emphasized this point very clearly. He has declared that householders also attain liberation; only they must follow strictly the *dharma* laid down for their stage of life. There is no doubt that everyone who adheres to the *dharma* of their stage of life, no matter which stage it is, will attain liberation.

All four stages lead to liberation

In the Manu texts (*Manusmriti*), in the Narada ascetic *Upanishad* (*Parivrajaka Upanishad*) and other such texts, it is mentioned that in some instances the householder who adheres to *dharma* is reckoned as the highest type of person, while in other texts it is laid down that only sages who have renounced everything deserve worship. Therefore, doubt may arise whether one can adopt the householder stage of life, which is the base and support of all, or whether one has to take up the universally honoured stage of renunciate, the inward path of detachment (*nivritti*). There is an intimate relation between the worship-worthy householder and the saintly sage (*paramahansa*). So, to whichever stage of life you may belong, you do no wrong. All four stages will lead you to liberation (*moksha*) if you follow strictly the *dharma* as laid down for each and devote yourself steadfastly to your uplift. Each stage is important at that stage; the conduct of the individual, their practice, that is the essential test. If one is engaged in good conduct, every stage is holy and commendable. That is the judgment of the scriptures (*sastras*).

Those who are endowed with the knowledge of the *Atma* as their basic truth do cross the ocean of birth and death and without doubt attain liberation. On the other hand, those who are ignorant of the vows and rites prescribed for them, as well as those who have not studied the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Gita* but satisfy themselves with mere external purity and show, will surely suffer grief.

The rites and vows prescribed for daily adherence (*nithya-anustana*) are very important among the disciplines. They are the highest austerity (*tapas*), the highest *dharma*. Have you noted what the *Gita*, the essence of all *Upanishads*, has to say on this point? Those who are ever active in the spiritual field, in whatever stage of life they may be, whatever their caste, they attain the Lord. Manu also says, “They are endowed with the highest wisdom (*vijnana*).” The person who is free from all desire, who has not even the slightest inclination to possess or enjoy the sensory world, who has no trace of egotism or property, who is ever in the bliss of Brahman-consciousness, who is far from any tinge of sorrow; that person is established in supreme joy and peace. At least, one who is fixed at the last moment in the knowledge of their basic nature, which is Brahman, can successfully merge in That, beyond doubt.

The stage of the “person of steady wisdom (*sthithaprajna*)” is quite natural for such people. The constant feeling “I am *Brahman* (*aham Brahmasmi*)” is the panacea for all ills. Liberation comes through this “I am *Brahman*” idea itself. The real duty is to cultivate that feeling and enter into that experience. The ignoramus (*a-jnani*) who is moved by the inert (*jada*) principle, believes that the body is himself! The *pundit* who is capable of a little ratiocination and enquiry feels that the individual soul (*jivi*) in the body is “I”. But the wise ones who can see the *an-Atma* as separate from the *Atma* know that the truth is “I am *Brahman*”, and they don’t stray from that conviction.

Castes like *brahmin*, colours like white and black, stages of life like student, etc. —these are physical conditions and not the characteristics of the *Atma*. They are conditioned by time and place. They belong to this world of bondage and are governed by reasons related to this world. They are ordained by the divine will for the orderly functioning of the world. They have to be observed by everyone who is bound by worldly limitations. For those who are untouched by the limitations and extensions, that is to say, who are beyond worldly ties, they are unimportant. That is why people who are ever engaged in the contemplation of *Brahman* (*Brahma-nishta*), those who have grasped the basic reality, do not observe them so much! They are not bound to caste; they see everything as the basic reality itself. How then can they pay attention to what is called caste? But until that stage is reached, you have to follow the rules of caste and stage of life without exception. This is the *dharma* for the body-conscious.

Adhere strictly to *dharma*

The great sages who grasped the divine *dharma* (*Atmadharma*) declared that being, awareness, and bliss (*sat*, *chit*, and *ananda*) are the basic characteristics of the Self. Therefore, those great wise ones (*vijnanis*) can be said to have attained Brahman, which is being-awareness-bliss Itself. For liberation, clearness of vision to see the *Atma* is enough; that is the essential thing, not caste or colour.

How to get that clear vision? The answer is through the practice of *dharma*, the *dharma* that is conditioned by caste and stage of life! *Dharma* enables the *Atma* to be realized, without any mist or fog hiding it from view. The practice of *dharma* fills you with experience; through that experience, truth is established; the truth reveals clearly, and the vision grants liberation. People who are free from such inner encumbrances hiding the *Atma* may belong to any caste or stage of life; that does not matter; they do attain liberation. This mental purity (*anthahkarana suddhi*) is what the scriptures extol when they speak of salvation.

Those who have attachment and hatred, even if they dwell in the forest, cannot escape harm. Those who have conquered the senses, even if they are householders, can be ascetics (*tapasvis*). If engaged in acts that are not harmful or condemned, they are entitled to be called spiritually wise people (*jnanis*). The home is the hermitage (*thapovana*) for attaining non-attachment. Liberation cannot be won by progeny, charity, riches, sacrificial rites (*vajna*), or *yoga*; what is wanted for liberation is the cleansing of the self.

In order to decide what is right action and wrong, the scriptures alone are the authority, whatever the stage of life. People who have the realization of Brahman as the goal and who seek to realize their own real reality (*swaswarupa*) will succeed in removing the veil of ignorance and know themselves as Brahman. Attention fixed on one's *Atma* — that is the means of liberation.

Understanding this lesson of the *Vedas*, practising the principles of living laid down for the particular stage of one's life, anyone, whatever the caste, can attain the highest stage (*paramapadha*). If there is the will and strength to adhere strictly to *dharma*, if there are no difficulties in acquiring wisdom (*jnana*), one can remain a householder and yet be liberated, without entering the stage of renunciation.

Kingly sages like King Janaka, Aswapathi, and Dilipa reached the goal while continuing in the householder stage; while in that stage, they struggled and succeeded in removing all obstacles that hindered the winning of the grace of the Lord; they had as the goal the Godhead they wanted to reach. Therefore, do not doubt it; the stage of householder is no hindrance.

Harmony in the household

Moved by the desire to cross this ocean of worldly existence (*samsara*), the husband and wife must both have harmony of mind. The resolution to reach the goal must be equally strong and steady in both. Otherwise, renunciation is the refuge! See, even the midday sun is associated with His consort, shadow (*chaya*); the sixteen-fractioned moon is closely associated with the cool rays of light, acting like nectar. The mistress of the home must be bright, patient, calm, and good and must have all the virtues; then, the home will shine and be a home of victory in the spiritual field also.

There is no rule that people should become renunciates and flee when they meet with difficulties in the spiritual field at home. It can never be fruitful for the husband to become a renunciate without full approval of his wife. The best that he can do is to leave home with his wife and be a forest-dweller (*vanaprastha*), adhering to the *dharma* of that new stage. If there are children who need attention and care, even forest-dwelling at that stage is not favoured by the scriptures.

One has to make the children independent of one's care and then leave them to themselves. The scriptures (*sastras*) therefore require that a person has to be in the householder stage till the age of 48, whether it is favourable or not. One has to be in it and struggle to perform one's duty (*swa-dharma*), without hindrance. If hindrances come, dedicate them too to the Lord, take them quietly as His play (*leela*) and as His plan; that is the way to follow the householder discipline, the path for both men and women.