

## CHAPTER III

### THE FOUR ASRAMAS

- Q. In this cosmos which is the human body, what is the best *Dharma* to follow? Which *Asrama* is most conducive for that Dharma? How many Asramas are there in all?
- A. There are four Asramas in all. If you know about them, you can yourselves decide which Asrama you are to fulfil, examining your own achievement, progress and aptitude. *Brahmacharya*, *Grihastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa* are the four Asramas.
- Q. Different explanations are given by different persons for the word, Brahmacharya and the stage it denotes. I wish to know from you the real significance of that stage.
- A. Very well. It is believed that all who have not become

Grihasthas are entitled to be called Brahmacharis. This is very wrong. Only those who keep their minds away from the delusions of the world, who are constantly engaged in the thought of God, who do not see or hear light or merely entertaining stuff, who pursue good taste, who do not yield to joy or grief, who keep their minds, intelligence and self-consciousness in good trim by unremitting contemplation of the *Brahma Thathwa*—only such deserve the name, Brahmachari.

Q. What exactly does Grihastha mean?

A. Being married and living with the wife and children do not constitute Grihastha asrama as most people think. Without giving up the duties assigned to one's caste and status, the person has to treat all with equal consideration—kinsmen as well as others. He must be aware of the rights of the elders and the obligations of juniors. He has to be full of sympathy and willingness to help. He should treat with loving kindness all those who are dependent on him. He must grow wiser with each new experience of the world. He should acquaint himself with the Sastras and be alert to do Dharma and avoid Adharma. He must foster and protect his wife and children with a sense of responsibility. He has to trample down the Eight Egoisms, the conceit that develops from family, wealth, character, personal beauty, youth, scholarship,

native place and even accomplishments in austerity. Conscious of the four goals of Dharma, *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (desire) and *Moksha* (Self-realisation), with no pride in material possessions though he might have them in large measure; utilising a portion of the day in the service of others; with no designs against any other household, himself deserving the trust of his wife and having a trusted wife, each understanding the other and having full faith in the other; such are the ways in which the Grihastha manifests.

Q. What, then, does Vanaprastha mean?

A. At that stage, man feels that all dualities are untrue and baseless. He gives up all desires; drops all attachment to the world; dislikes living in crowded places; is anxious to achieve victory through *Manthra-japa* and so leads a life of austerity, eating only uncooked food, mostly fruits and leaves, in moderation; moves in the company of sages and maharishis; listens to their teachings and moves unfalteringly on the path of realising the Lord. The Vanaprastha must get the approval of his wife when he moves out into solitude for the life of Sadhana and he must make sufficient provision for his children also. If however the wife is willing to accompany him, he has to take her on his spiritual journey. They must henceforward live as brother and sister and not as husband and wife. Provided this new relationship is

maintained, life in the home too can be transformed into Vanaprastha. On the other hand, if the old life is continued, life in the forest does not constitute Vanaprastha. The Vanaprastha must not stay in the residences of married people. He must observe the vows prescribed for each season of the year. He has to brave the rain, the sun and the cold during the seasons. He must be vigilant against being drawn towards physical pleasures by fickleness of the mind. He must seek and find pleasure only in the contemplation of the Lord and in dwelling upon his Glory.

Q. What does Sanyasa mean?

A. Sanyasa is above and beyond all promptings of sensual or objective pleasure. The Sanyasi deals with the contemplation of the Lord as the very breath of his life, an essential necessity always and at all places for sheer existence itself. He derives joy only from this contemplation. He knows that wealth and kinship, affection and attachment are all momentary and liable to decline and end. He discards the external reminders of even caste status and *samskaaras* (purificatory acts) like *Upanayanam* (initiation into Gayatri Mantra). He wears the ochre robe of the mendicant. He does not live in populous places. He lives on whatever little food he gets. He does not decry the place where he does not get food. He does not eat

twice in the same place or sleep two days in succession in the same place. He even conquers the temptation to sleep and eat. He cares little for the rigours of the seasons. He is ever joyful and happy in the company of the Lord whom he invokes by his *Dhyaana* (meditation).

Q. Nowadays, there are many ochre-robed people moving about as Sanyasis. Are they all equipped with the disciplines mentioned by you now?

A. There is, of course, no paucity of people who are so equipped. But it is not possible to say that all are like that.

Q. There are many who, though Sanyasis, establish Ashrams and get themselves established in worldly affairs and worldly possessions and struggle for worldly pomp and power. What is to be said of these?

A. For genuine Sanyasa and for detachment from all mental agitations, institutions like the Ashrams you mention are great handicaps. For those who should give up all purposeful effort, the effort for the upkeep and progress of the Ashrama is an obstacle in the path. I need not tell you by what name such Sanyasis are to be called. I can only say, they do not deserve the name, Sanyasi.

Q. Swami, how can the growth of the Ashrams, which help people like us to know the means of Liberation,

be a bondage? And how can Ashrams get on without money? I hope it is not wrong to accept help, voluntarily offered.

- A. My dear fellow! It is theft if the lock is broken and valuables are taken away, or if they are removed through an opening made in the wall. It is theft if by soft words in open daylight a person persuades you to part with your valuables. If a Sanyasi casts his eyes on wealth, whatever the motive, it is harmful for his spiritual progress. He should throw all such tasks on some trustworthy devotee and be an unconcerned witness only. His duty is to see that the persons who seek *Aasraya* (Succour) are assured of spiritual help, not to help the Ashram to rise and prosper. The flames of desire to make the Ashram grow will rise into the bonfire of self-seeking egoism and burn out all that is commendable in the Sanyasi, especially, his *Atmananda*. The fire will destroy not merely the Sanyasi, but also those dependent on him for guidance. The feeling “I” and “Mine” are such destruction-causing sparks. Man must attach himself to guides who are devoid of these. But once the Ashram becomes the prime factor, the so-called “guide” has to attach himself to men! It should be the other way. He must not be dependent on the world. He must be free from all dependence. That is the mark of the Sanyasi.