

CHAPTER XI

ASRAMAS AND VARNAS

- Q. Swami, of the four Asramas, the Brahmacharya, the Grihastha, the Vanaprastha and the Sanyasa, which is basically important?
- A. As all living things are dependent on the *Pranavayu* (life-giving breath), so are all Asramas dependent on the Grihastha. It is he who provides food and drink to the rest and fosters them. He promotes the study of the Vedas; he guards the scriptures. So, the Grihastha asrama is the most important. In the Sruthis, the Narada Parivrajakopanishad and in the Manu Dharma Sastra, it is declared that the Grihastha who strictly adheres to his Asrama Dharma is worthy of the greatest respect.
- Q. But Swami, some people say that the Sanyasi is superior to the Grihastha; how far is this correct?

- A. Whatever be the Asrama, if the person follows the Dharma laid down for that stage and carries it out in practice and steadfastly yearns for Liberation, he can get it; there is no doubt. To win Atma Jnana, one need not prefer this Asrama to that. All are capable of securing it. There is no superior or inferior. It is only conduct and character that can be labelled as superior and inferior.
- Q. Swami! They say that the Grihastha asrama binds while Brahmacharya and Sanyasa liberate. How did that opinion arise?
- A. I will not agree with that. Why, he who earns money by lawful means, he who honours his guests, who serves and pleases his fellowmen, attains liberation along with those learned in the Sastras and those who are well established in the fundamental philosophy of the Spirit. No one can cross the ocean of birth and death because he is a Sanyasi or Brahmachari. High ancestry, attainments in asceticism, the status of a monk, profound scholarship—nothing will help, by itself. There must also be the faithful and steady pursuit of *Swadharma*, the study of the scriptures, like the Veda or the Bhagawad Geetha, and a disciplined spiritual life of Japam and Dhyanam.
- Q. Swami! What virtues should persons in each of these four Asramas cultivate, in order that they may be saved?

- A. There are ten virtues which together comprise the basic Dharma of the aspirants: *Daya* (charity, compassion), *Astheya* (non-stealing), *Dhee* (discrimination), *Vidya*, *Sathya*, *Indriyanirgaha* (control of senses), *Soucha* (inner and outer cleanliness), *Kshama* (patience and fortitude), *Dhrithi* (steadfastness) and *Akrodha* (no anger). These ten all persons must cultivate, whatever their Asrama may be. They are enough to save you, wherever you are; and if one has not acquired them, his life is a waste, whatever be his Asrama. The daily routine of his life is the essential thing and it should reflect these ten qualities. It is this very thing that Lord Krishna told Arjuna, in reply to his question.
- Q. Swami, you said that this same question about the importance of Nithya Karma observed with the ten conditions was asked by Arjuna. What was the reply that Krishna gave?
- A. Krishna said: “The highest stage of liberation that is attained by *Sankhyayogis* (those on path of knowledge), adepts at Jnana Yoga, is also attained by those who are adepts at *Nishkama Karma* (renunciation of fruits of action) *Yoga*. Both yield the selfsame result. Know that this is the Truth. There is no difference in this between the Grihastha and the Sanyasi. What is needed is unremitting practice and sincere endeavour. This requires the renouncing of desire, the giving up of egoism and the sense of

possession, even the discarding of active thinking and single-pointed contemplation of the Brahma Thatwa. For one who has achieved this, there is no grief, for there is no shade of ignorance. The wise man who has won this height can never be deluded by the false and the temporary. Even if at the last moment of his life one is able to realise this Jnana, he is certain to be liberated from the cycle of birth and death.”

Q. Then why were these castes, these Varnas, established?

A. They relate to the physical aspect of man. They cannot affect the spiritual aspect at all. They indicate physical make-up. Of course, “physical” includes the intellect, the mind, the Chiththa, the Antahkarana, etc. Unless these are trained and regulated, the Atma Dharma cannot be understood. *Jaathi* (class), *matha* (school of learning), dharma are all to help in regulating and sublimating the instincts and impulses of man. That is the reason why wise men accepted and honoured these. The Atma is Sath, Chith and Ananda; those are its nature, if somehow it has to be indicated. This can be realised only by purifying the heart, mind and intellect of man. Persons who have that purity, whatever their Varna or Asrama, can attain Moksha; that is what the Sastras declare. When a person is beset by attachment to some and hatred towards others even in the solitude of the jungle, he will meet only

evil. Even if one is leading the Grihastha life in the midst of the family, if he has achieved victory over the senses he is a real *Thapasvi*. Engaged in Karma that is not condemned, he is entitled to become a Jnani. For one who is unattached, the home is a hermitage. Then, even by means of progeny, of activity, of riches and of Yajna, Yaga and similar rituals, Liberation can be achieved. What is wanted for Liberation is just freedom from the impurity of attachment. Attachment is the bondage.