

## Chapter 3. The Four Stages of Life

Q. In this cosmos, which is the human body, what is the best *dharma* to follow? Which stage of life (*asrama*) is most conducive for that *dharma*? How many stages of life are there in all?

A. There are four stages of life. If you know about them, you can yourselves decide which stage of life you are to fulfil, examining your own achievement, progress, and aptitude. The four stages are: spiritual student (*brahmacharya*), householder (*grihastha*), forest dweller (*vanaprastha*), and renunciant (*sanyasa*).

Q. Different explanations are given by different people for the word spiritual studentship 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 haven't become householders are entitled to be called spiritual students. 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 don't look at or listen to light or merely entertaining stuff, who pursue good taste, who don't yield to joy or grief, who keep their minds, intelligence and self-consciousness in good trim by unremitting contemplation of the universal, eternal Supreme principle (*Brahma-thathwa*) —only such deserve the name spiritual student.

Q. What exactly does householder mean?

A. Being married and living with spouse and children do not constitute householdership, 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. One must be aware of the rights of elders and the obligations of juniors; one has to be full of sympathy and willingness to help; one should treat all those who are dependent on one with loving kindness; one must grow wiser with each new experience of the world; one should acquaint oneself with the scriptures (*sastras*) and be alert to do righteous works (*dharma*) and avoid injustice; one must foster and protect one's spouse and children with a sense of responsibility; one has to trample down the eight egotisms, 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*, wealth (*artha*), desire (*kama*), and freedom (*moksha*), with no pride in material possessions though one might have them in large measure; utilising a portion of the day in the service of others; with no designs against any other household, deserving the trust of one's spouse and having a trusted spouse, each understanding the other and having full faith in the other —such are the ways in which the householder manifests.

Q. What, then, does forest dweller mean?

A. At that stage, one feels that all dualities are untrue and baseless. One gives up all desires, drops all attachment to the world, dislikes living in crowded places, and is anxious to achieve victory through repetition of a mantra. So, one leads a life of austerity, eating only uncooked food, mostly fruits and leaves, and in moderation; moves in the company of sages and great teachers; listens to their teachings; and moves unfalteringly on the path of realising the Lord.

The forest dweller must get their spouse's approval when moving out into solitude for a life of spiritual practice, and they must also make sufficient provision for the children. If the spouse is willing to accompany, the two must take the spiritual journey together. They must henceforth live as brother and sister, and not as husband and

wife. Provided this new relationship is maintained, life in the home also can be transformed into a forest-dweller's life. On the other hand, if the old way of life is continued, life in the forest does not constitute forest dwelling.

Forest dwellers must not stay in the residences of married people. They must observe the vows prescribed for each season of the year. They have to brave the rain, sun, and cold during the seasons. They must be vigilant against being drawn toward physical pleasures by fickleness of the mind. They must seek and find pleasure only in contemplation of the Lord and in dwelling upon His glory.

Q. What does renunciation (*sanyasa*) mean?

A. Renunciation is above and beyond all promptings of sensual or objective pleasure. The renunciate deals with contemplation of the Lord as the very breath of life, an essential necessity always and at all places for sheer existence itself. The renunciate derives joy only from this contemplation and knows that wealth and kinship, affection and attachment are all momentary and liable to decline and end. The renunciate discards the external reminders even of caste status and ritual sacraments like the sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana*). The renunciate wears the ochre robe of the mendicant, doesn't live in populous places; lives on whatever little food they get; doesn't decry the place where there is no food; doesn't eat twice in the same place or sleep two days in succession in the same place; even conquers the temptation to sleep and eat; cares little for the rigours of the seasons; and is ever joyful and happy in the company of the Lord, who is invoked by meditation.

Q. Nowadays, many ochre-robed people move about as renunciates. 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 isn't possible to say that all are like that.

Q. Many, though renunciates, establish ashrams and get themselves established in worldly affairs and possessions and struggle for worldly pomp and power. What is to be said of these?

A. For genuine renunciation 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 ashram is an obstacle in the path. I need not tell you by what name such renunciates are to be called. I can only say that they don't deserve the name *renunciate*.

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 that is 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 renunciates cast their eyes on wealth, whatever the motive, it is harmful for their spiritual progress. They should throw all such tasks on some trustworthy devotee and be only unconcerned witnesses. Their duty is to see that the people who seek support or shelter are assured of spiritual help, not to help the hermitage (ashram) to rise and prosper.

The flames of desire to make the ashram grow will rise into the bonfire of self-seeking egotism and burn out all that is commendable in the renunciate, especially, their *Atmic* bliss (*Atma-ananda*). The fire will destroy not merely the renunciate but also those dependent on the renunciate for guidance. The feelings of "I" and "mine" are such destruction-causing sparks. People must attach themselves to guides who are devoid of these. But once the ashram becomes the prime factor, the so-called "guide" has to become attached to people! It should be the other

way. The guide must not be dependent on the world; the guide must be free from all dependence. That is the mark of the renunciate (*sanyasi*).