

## EDITORIAL

The search for the light and still more light has found varied expressions in the lives of religiously-awakened souls in all world religions. They instil into the hearts of their followers an ultimate concern, which unsettles their natural human complacency in their self-sufficiency. The dawn of this disquietude is often accompanied by a strong resolve to detach oneself from the world and to purify oneself through ascetical practices. So many and diverse are the self-purificatory rites practised by men from time immemorial for the expiation of their sins and the proper ordering of their life-course on earth, that a comprehensive study of these constitutes a major theme in the field of comparative study of religions.

The commonly accepted idea, however, that monastic life i.e. life in *āshrams*, can be regarded as asceticism *par excellence* prompted us to devote this number to the theme of Ashrams and Ascetics. In Indian literature the term *āshrama* is understood both as a dwelling place for a seeker of perfection and a state of life. Thus in the Indian context, *āshrams* were associated with asceticism or spiritual purification. The *āshrama*, in its most common sense, stands for a small unit consisting of Guru (teacher), and a few disciples living in a temporary shelter. The inmates of these *āshrams* were not necessarily monks or *sannyasis*. The early Hindu sages following the Law of Manu and its subsequent tradition, entered into *sannyasa*, the fourth *āshrama* in life and usually led a wandering (*parivrajaka*) life.

But as the most perfect form of asceticism, *sannyasa* is sometimes regarded as a form that transcends all the four *āshrams* of a person: *brahmachāri*—a student; *grhastha*—a householder; *vanaprastha*—a person living in retirement in the forest; and *sannyasi*—a wanderer. According to the well-established tradition of the Hindu Community, the *sannyasa* can be undertaken only late in life after having fulfilled all debts to gods, ancestors, guests, wife and children. But *sannyasa*, understood as a spiritual endeavour, is a life-long project, and it is not a state into which one is naturally drawn during the declining years of one's life. He may or may not have a dwelling-place. Even if because of the changing conditions of the present day society the *sannyasis* of our times give up

mendicancy and the life of perpetual wandering, the ideal of *sannyasashrama* (world-renouncing) would remain as the most important element of religious asceticism in Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity.

The three characteristic features of Hindu ethics are the four orders of society, the four ends of life and the four *āshramas* or stages of life. Dr. Arabinda Basu, in his introductory article, gives a brief outline of the Hindu teaching on the *āshramas* and through a careful analysis shows how the scheme of the four stages of life is a permanent form of asceticism designed to enable a man to fulfil himself as a human being, namely a seeker of spiritual liberation.

The value of the age old scheme of *āshramas* to the Christian monastic life in India is examined by Bede Griffiths of Shantivanam. The success in relating these two religious experiences consists in grasping intuitively *Brahman* as the principle of all being in its identity with the *Atman* as the principle of all knowing. Hence the main task of a Christian monk or contemplative in India, according to the author, is to enter into the intuition of the Upanishads, to understand Hindu doctrine as it were from within.

Like the Upanishads, the *Dharmasastras* were equally influential in shaping the minds and patterns of every day life of the people. The fact is, the Law Books which prescribe the rules of conduct will not have a binding force unless there is some foundation or sanction for their observance. This motive could arise either from the religious belief or the philosophical conviction one has already developed. Dr. Kadankavil in his article argues that the unchallenged belief in the truth of the life-vision and creation account presented by *Manusmṛti* and other Law Books is the secret behind the binding force of their prescriptions.

Like every other human institution, religions also undergo change in their encounter with other religions and cultures. Thus the Ramakrishna Movement came up as an "integration process", as an auto-corrective impulse from within Hinduism. Swami Bhajanananda, a member of Ramakrishna Ashram, Bangalore, gives a vivid account of the charismatic features of Ramakrishna monasticism and shows why it believes in the equality of all religions. The monks of the Ramakrishna Ashram study the Bible, the Buddhist scriptures, the works of Christian mystics, and Sufis, and try to popularize the universal principles of all religions.

The idea of community (*sangha*) is very central to Buddhism. Buddhist monasteries and monks have established a distinct form of monastic life. They differ in their detail from country to country. S.K. Ramachandra Rao in his article offers a detailed account of the outlook on Monastic life in Tibetan Buddhism. Being tantric (ritualistic) in Tibetan Buddhism, the various practices in a monastery are given more importance than the classification of the theories.

In the "Survey of the Christian experiments in Ashram life", Dr. Van Bergen selects for examination a few pioneer and representative attempts made both by Catholics and Protestants. Dr. Bergen is sympathetic towards the views of many of these pioneers who believed that Christianity can find a place in Hindu India only if it accepts the ideal of homeless existence which Hinduism advocates. Whether this homeless existence can be organised in an *Ashram*-life or whether it should be minimal in structure is a matter which time alone can decide.

In fine, the spiritual enrichment achieved through the various stages of life (*āshramas*) and the self-renunciation is the goal of asceticism and in fact, every dynamic religion aims at it through ever new ascetical practices. Hence any account of these will always remain incomplete.

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