

ASHRAMAS AS PERMANENT FORMS OF ASCETICISM

The Hindu view of man is that here in the world he is a combination of two principles, the *atman* and the non-*atman*, including *buddhi*, understanding, *manas*, mind, *indriya*, sense-powers and *ahamkāra*, the separative ego-sense. The *atman* is uncreated and immortal, *cit*, which we will render into English as consciousness distinguishing it from the mental intelligence. The supreme Reality in Hinduism is also *Atman*. A few western writers on Hinduism mistakenly think that according to Hinduism the individual *atman* and the supreme *Atman* are one and identical. It is true that one extreme school in Hinduism asserts the identity of the individual *atman* and the absolute *Atman*, thus rendering the individuality of the unreal in the last analysis. There are the systems of realistic absolutism, like Kashmir Shaivism or the Shakta branch of Tantra, which believe in the identity of the individual and the universal or supreme *Atman* without however pronouncing the former unreal. Individuality is the result of a self-imposed limitation of the Absolute and when the limitation is removed the individual *atman* realises itself as the Absolute. It is to be noted that apart from these two views of the relation between the individual *atman* and the Absolute, all other schools of Hinduism believe in the reality of the individual *atman* and its distinction from the Absolute Self. But what must be noted is that the nature of both the individual self and the Absolute Self, is the same. Both are *cit*, supraintellectual consciousness, uncreated, immortal and free from all the characteristics of the physical, vital, intellectual and egoistic aspects of man's empirical existence and life in the world. Some writers have missed this point and have emphasized the identity between the individual self and the Absolute Self which is only one of the trends in Hinduism but have not noted the idea of the sameness of the nature and substance of *atman* and *Atman* and their distinctions as realities.

Despite the implicit belief in the Divine character of the individual self Hinduism does not lose sight of the fact that man is a combination of the *atman* and the non-*atman*. Given this situation, the ethics of Hinduism looks upon man not as pure spirit primarily, but as a complex being constituted by the physical, the vital, the mental and intellectual and the separative ego principles. This last principle is a temporary and constructed device of Prakriti, the unconscious executive force which evolves the world out of itself. All institutions of Hinduism are designed to enable man to lead his life in such a manner that he can progressively realise that the truest principle in him is the *atman* which in the theistic or absolutist theistic systems includes the realisation of the *ātman's* relationship with the Divine. But whatever the metaphysical position of a particular school, its view of the ethical life of man is the same as that of any other school. The three primary institutions of Hindu ethics are the four orders of society—miscalled castes—the four ends of life and the four *āshramas* or stages of life. This article is a brief outline of the Hindu teaching on the *āshramas* and attempts to show how the scheme of the four stages of life is designed to enable a man to fulfil himself as a human being, a seeker of spiritual liberation and, finally, as a spiritually liberated person who while being human outwardly is yet superhuman in his consciousness.

The first stage is that of the Brahmacharin, one who walks with Brahma. The Brahmachari is primarily a student whose sole duty is to study. He studies not only for intellectual training and to learn a useful vocational art but also to undergo moral probation. The most important training of the Brahmacharin is moral because control and purification of the will constitutes the basis for the right kind of intellectual growth. After the *upmayana* ceremony, the Brahmacharin goes to live with the teacher's family and is put in his charge. *Upmayana* ceremony is designed to give the youth a second birth the moral opening leading on to spiritual life. As a student, the twice-born has to live a simple life, hard though not harsh because he is intended to be strong and healthy. This requires him to eschew a soft and luxurious life. Rising before sunrise, his ablutions over, he does *sambhya* the Worship of the meeting point of day and night, and if he fails to rise before the sun is up on the horizon he has to fast during the day, and perform *japa*, chanting of the sacred name of God or *the mantra* he has been given. Begging of food is one of the duties of the Brahmacharin and is intended to generate humility in the student.

What he gets from begging he places at the disposal of the teacher and takes only a portion assigned to him willingly, and cheerfully.¹ One of the moral disciplines required of the student is that he should honour his food and eat it without scorn. He should be pleased and glad at seeing it, and welcome it. The psychological reason is that food that is honoured gives strength and nervous energy and that if it is eaten with contempt and scorn it destroys growth.

The student should engage in study, whether or not directed by his teacher, and also in doing service to his *guru*.² Sunset is another hour of the day when he should worship till the stars appear in the sky. Only after that he is permitted to take the second meal. Instructed to be temperate in matters of eating, he is enjoined not to eat between the two meals. Manu says that over-eating is unhealthy, robs one of longevity, heaven and merit and meets with the disapproval of everybody. Therefore the student should avoid it.³

Frugality, simplicity, toughness were qualities to be developed as a moral obligation. Wine, meat, perfumes, garlands, tasty food, relations with woman, and acid food, were all prohibited to the student; he was also required to desist from causing injury to sentient creatures. The use of shoes and umbrellas, application of collyrium to the eyes were prohibited; abstention from lust, anger, greed, dancing, singing and playing on musical instruments was enjoined. He was not to indulge in dice-playing, gossip, slander, falsehood, staring at women and striking others. He had to sleep alone and keep strictly to the vow of celibacy. The control of the senses was the main moral training of the Brahmacharin and celibacy the foundation of this discipline. The retaining, the purifying and the strengthening of the seat are part of the basic discipline because these are indispensable to physical and moral health. It is not suggested that one should not use the senses but that one should not be under their spell. One should be the ruler and not be ruled by the senses. Once this mastery has been attained, the senses can be freely used and utilised for all purposes for the achievement of which they are primarily meant.

1. *Manusmriti* II, 54-55.

2. *Ibid.*, II, 191.

3. *Ibid.*, III, 57.

After the Brahmacharin finishes his intellectual and moral training, he enters the state of the householder, *garhasthya*. The householder raises a family, serves his parents and society. Though his primary responsibility is the care of his own family, his obligations include the service of his fellowmen in every way possible. The psychological objectivity and soundness of Hindu ethical thinkers is also evident from the injunction that the householder should serve the society after assuring that his family is taken care of. As is only right, the women in the family enjoyed high respect and esteem in Hindu society. Respect was due to them from fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law, who cherish their own welfare: The Gods are pleased where women are honoured, and all rites are barren of fruit where women are not given their due honour; where the female relatives grieve, the family quickly perishes and a family where they do not grieve always prospers.⁴ Contended relations between husband and wife assures happiness.⁵ Manu says that the four *āshramas* spring from the householder, (VI, 87). Thus the householder is the very basis of the Aryan Society, indeed all the other orders are supported by the householder even as all creatures are supported by air.⁶ He is described as the best by the *Vedas*, according to Manu III, 89-90. One of his duties is the accumulation of wealth and the equally important task of distributing it rightly. Hospitality is one of his chief moral obligations in which he must never fail. In the household of good people grass and water and earth and a kind word are never lacking.⁷ Hospitality extends not only to Brahmanas and immediate relatives but also to servants, and it is only after feeding them that a man and his wife should eat; however, the needs of brides, infants, the sick and the pregnant women are to be met first.⁸

The performance of fifteen daily sacrifices to the seers, gods, ancestors, human beings and all living creatures is another of the householder's chief duty. The Brahmana is enjoined to continue his Vedic studies and not to follow any occupation which makes that impossible; he is also to undertake only that kind of work

4. *Ibid.*, III, 55-57.

5. *Ibid.*, III, 60.

6. *Ibid.*, III, 77.

7. *Ibid.*, III, 101.

8. *Ibid.*, III, 114-116.

which does not harm anyone.⁹ Thus, hospitality, industry, truth, honesty, generosity, charity, maintaining purity in matters of food and clean living are the specific virtues of the householder. As long as he gives alms, there is no restriction enjoying wealth and comfort.

One last word about the state of the householder, Manu says that after studying the Vedas, the Brahmacharin should enter the household order without abandoning *brahmacharya*, i.e. celibacy, in this context. *Brahmacharya* does not necessarily mean celibacy, though it is the basic and most important discipline during the student period.

In the householder's state it means devotion to one woman, one's married wife. The discipline of sense control is assumed to have been perfected during the previous state and the householder is expected not to be a slave to his natural urges and impulses. And yet for the continuity of the line, which is a bounden duty and to fulfil natural and not evil desire for paternity and maternity, the necessary relations to achieve this are not only allowed but thought to be good. Thus *brahmacharya* continues throughout the householder's state and even later. Motherhood is a worthy vocation and unless a woman is right from her youth bent upon leading a spiritual life, she is encouraged to look forward to being a mother, to shower her love on her children, to raise them in love and affection, to look after their physical and moral health and to initiate them in the life of *dharma*. When the householder starts to have grey hair and wrinkles on his face and has had a grandson, he resorts to the forest. His wife may stay behind with her children or may accompany her husband who goes to the forest carrying his sacrificial fire and sacrificial equipments. His primary business now is to take his mind off the transitory values of this life and concentrate on the attainment of spiritual liberation. Sacrifice, study, asceticism and compassion to all are now the principles of his life. He should have self-control, be friendly, composed and always give but not receive, and be compassionate to all beings.¹⁰ The householder continues to do his five daily sacrifices and others as well like the *agnihotra*, which are to be performed on new or full moon nights. He does not, however, cut himself off from the life around him and become

9. *Ibid.*, III, 2.

10. *Ibid.*, VI, 8.

a self-centred recluse. On the other hand, he continues to serve his fellows and cosmic nature by prayer and the performance of sacrifices.

The time soon comes for him to renounce all and have no other aim but spiritual liberation. The householder offers no sacrifice any longer; he has given all his property away, lives alone under a tree for shelter and his daily existence is dedicated to meditation and contemplation.¹¹ Now the man is a *sannyasi*, one who has entered the state of *sannyasa* (renunciation). He wishes neither for death nor for life but awaits the judgement of time, like a servant for his wages. Purity becomes a total pre-occupation with him: he is to set his feet purified and guided by sight, drink water strained through a piece of cloth, speak words purified by truth and do deeds purified, that is, enlightened by reason. Harsh language he must endure, insult he must not heap on anyone, and knowing that his body is perishable he should take care not to make an enemy of anyone. He returns not anger for anger but blesses when cursed; he utters not falsehoods scattered at the seven gates, i.e. he must not indulge in speech evincing desire for the shadowy objects of the five outer senses and the mind and the senses. The *sannyasi* rejoices in the supreme self alone; he is seated above *udasina*; shuns all desires and ambitions and egoism; abstains from all sensuous pleasures; has himself for his friend and he wanders here on this earth, his whole thought concentrated on *moksha*, spiritual liberation.¹²

It should be noted that it was only very rarely that a Brahmacharin was allowed to bypass the stages of the householder and the forest-dweller and enter directly the stage of the renouncer. Along with the four *āshramas*, mention must be made of the four ends of life, namely, righteousness, interest, fulfilment of desire and liberation: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha*. *Dharma* of course is all life. Righteousness is the basic end of life. But on the basis of that, interest and desire are to be pursued and achieved, this can be done only in the state of a householder. Hindu psychological ethics do not believe either in doing violence to nature or showing indulgence to it indiscriminately. Control of natural impulses and urges and their progressive refinement and purification resulting in a complete

11. *Ibid.*, VI, 43.

12. *Ibid.*, VI, 45-49.

mastery of them is the moral progression recommended by Hinduism. Neither money nor sex is evil, but over-indulgence in the pursuit of them is morally disastrous and even physically destructive. A hierarchy of values, along with a gradation of disciplines, is the ethical standpoint of Hinduism. The supreme value *mukti*, spiritual liberation, is supra-ethical in the sense that it is only after ridding one's nature of evil impulses, after the correcting of the wayward will, after developing the natural tendency to goodness and other interests in man, that a man can ever think of trying to achieve self-knowledge, the saving experience and realisation of oneself as true *atman*, uncreated, undying, pure, perfect.

The relation of the man who has attained self-realization and union with God and with his fellows is an important question that must be discussed, albeit briefly. From what has been said above, the false impression may be formed that an *atmajnani*, a man who has attained direct knowledge of his spiritual self is shut up in his own extraordinarily satisfying experience and does not care for his fellow human beings. The answer is truly subtle. First it is quite true that such a man does not take any personal initiative, even to help those around him who need succour. From the Hindu point of view, *ahamkāra*, the separate ego-sense, is not an abiding reality but a temporal device of *prakṛiti*, the lower unconscious and mechanical nature. Its function is to persuade the self to identify falsely with what it is not, namely, with the body, life and mind. And also to separate the self from the supreme Self, in whatever relationship the two may stand. The ego is necessary for man's progress as a human being till he comes to the stage when he is ready to seek self-knowledge. After he has realised the nature of the true self he is no longer subject to the ego and does not need it. At this stage he does not and cannot have any personal will, separate from that of God. If he chooses to develop another aspect of spiritual life, namely, that of being an instrument of the divine and a channel of God's creative will, he accepts the working of that supreme will in and through him. So though not having any egoistic personal will and initiative he is yet engaged in doing good to all creatures, *sarvabhūtabhiteratah*. In fact, the realisation of the self implies a state of being from which compassion and charity flow spontaneously, and a spiritually realised man does not need to try to be kind, sympathetic and charitable. The Hindu idea is that a Yogi who may or may not be a *sannyasi* in the technical sense of the

word, is a dynamo of spiritual force. It is through him and the likes of him that the force of God, who sustains the world, operates. The spiritual mystic's very presence in the world assures its maintenance and progress. A true *sannyasi*, as the Gita puts it, is one who has renounced desire for and attachment to transient values and not necessarily one who has physically renounced the world and all worldly concerns. Work as such does not cling to man and bind him to an existence in ignorance in which state one does not know his true self. It is desire, thirst as a Buddhist would put it, that binds a man to the fruits of action and to the cycle of mortal existence, which is a series of births and deaths.

Thus self-realisation and service of God in man are not only contradictory but the two sides of the same state of existence in which a man is free from the human state and yet capable of helping mankind in its trials and tribulations, shed the light of knowledge on its murky path and bring into the troubled waters of its existence the bliss of the glory that is the Divine.