

Samnyasa

The exact roots of *samnyasa* (renunciation) in the Hindu tradition have been a subject of some debate by scholars. Many scholars propose that the roots of renunciation are found in the Vedas, specifically the *Rg Veda* [For a list of conclusions linking renunciation to the Vedas, see Tiwari (1977)]. With the creation of the Upanisads (c. 8th century BCE) and the philosophy expounded in them (*Vedanta*), there was a switch in paradigm which focused not solely on the external merit provided by completing sacrificial rituals, but rather on the internal experience of individuals and the ultimate attainment of *moksa* (liberation from cyclic worldly existence). The Upanisads introduced *moksa* as the idea of *atman* (individual soul) seeking union with *Brahman* (the universal soul). *Moksa* was an individual concern, which needed no deities or intermediaries and, therefore renunciation was a release of bonds from both the indenture of society to the *brahmins* (the priestly caste) for spiritual mediation and the body (see Thapar 843-852). In Brahmanism, *samnyasa* is the fourth *asrama* (stage of life) in which the *samnaysin* (renouncer) turns his [the Vedas and Vedanta texts were most likely written by men and so reflect a male perspective, for a female perspective on renunciation, see Olivelle 84-85] or her focus away from the attainment of worldly concerns, such as *artha* (wealth) and *kama* (pleasure) to the pursuit of *moksa* (liberation) (see Rodrigues 89-94).

Introspection and the growing urbanization broke the system of control and reciprocity established by Vedic ritual, namely the payment of *daksina* (payment given to a priest so that the merit from the ritual will transfer from the priest to the patron). In theory, the idea of renunciation could negate the class system altogether, as it was the *jnana* (knowledge) motivated *karma* (action) of an individual and not status which determined salvation. In some cases this

new doctrine took a path of heterodoxy rejecting the supremacy of the Vedas. Some of the major sects which rejected the Vedas and promoted asceticism and renunciation were Jainism and Buddhism, both of which stressed that knowledge could not be given by a deity and that it must be gained by the individual (ultimately through the distancing of an individual from society in order to attain liberation). The formation of such sects caused a disruption of the power the *brahmins* held over the other classes and eventually the doctrine of renunciation was incorporated into Brahmanism as one of the four *asramas*. The *asramas* linked the *samnyasins* to a socially productive life through delineating an ideal sequence to life, each stage aiming at specific goals (see Thapar 840-848) [There is debate as to whether or not *samnyasa* was included in the original creation of the *asrama* system, for more information, see Kaelber 110-124].

The *asramas* begin with the *brahmacarya* (student life) and are followed by the *grhastha* (the householder's life), the *vanaprastha* (the retired life, also called the forest dweller stage) and the fourth and final stage in the *asrama* system is the *samnyasa* (life of complete renunciation) (see Tiwari 121.). The goals associated with the stages are *dharma* (righteousness) attributed to the student, *kama* (pleasure) and *artha* (skill, wealth) to the householder, and *moksa*, being the ultimate goal of all the stages but only being truly attainable after leaving retired life and entering *samnyasa*. In the *Asrama Upanisad*, the *asramas* are further divided into four subsections each, with the goal of each stage being to seek self through the completion of sacrifices. In the last *asrama* true liberation is found by the mendicant that abandons all perceptions of the world gathered throughout the prior stages, viewing all experiences and people (regardless of class) with lack of judgement. In this way, the *samnyasin* enacts a final sacrifice, that of her or his

worldly self and bridges the notion of sacrifice associated with the Vedas and the complete renunciation of the world elevated in Vedanta (see Olivelle 154-157).

Before the new philosophy of *moksa* and *samnyasa* had become established, *karma* (action) alone was seen to be the way to immortality. The performance of sacrificial offerings of Vedic ritual, was considered to be right action, however without the proper *jnana* (knowledge) of proper ritual action, as was known to a *brahmin* priest, ritual action was ineffective. [Texts such as the Brahmanas, Sruta Sutras, and the Dharma Sutras stress the importance of *karma* and performance of proper ritual, see Kaebler 75] By knowing Brahman, as the *brahmin* priest claimed to know, one could know all. *Moksa* and the necessary renunciation to attain it were then dependent on *jnana* (knowledge) of Brahman and the meaning of *karma* was extended to cover every action, not just the right action of sacrificial offering. This view coupled with the notion of *samsara* (the view that a person was part of a cyclic existence of death, rebirth, sorrow, and suffering) illustrated the ineffectiveness of *karma* to truly attain immortality. All actions are tied to results and are motivated by worldly desires, such as *kama* and *artha*, thus only true knowledge could motivate true actions and liberate one from the fruits of their actions (see Kaebler 73-79). *Karma*, to the enlightened one, would be nullified of its imprint as all actions would be filtered through true *jnana* in its purest sense. The knowledge of Brahman could not be gained through intellectual learning alone, it could only be fully understood through the revelation of self through deep introspection into *atman* itself. It is here that *dhyana* (meditation) becomes paramount to the person who wishes to attain *moksa*. This is evident in a passage from the *Katha Upanisad*: “This self cannot be attained by instruction nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing. It is to be attained only by the one whom he chooses. To such a one the self reveals its own nature” (see Tiwari 68).

So the task of the *samnyasin* becomes to uncover the forgotten knowledge of self through *sruti* (revelation) of self in relation as Brahma. In this way, renunciation is not of the true self; it is a renunciation of *avidya* (ignorance) of the self, and thus, the cause of errors through *karma* (actions). Renunciation is then directed to the world and its phenomena, or rather the attachment one feels toward the worldly occurrences. This philosophy seems to suggest the outright rejection of the world as a whole, however it is actually a reinterpretation of it. Brahman is the ultimate reality of the universe, so removing the falseness of the self removes the false view of the world, leaving only the absolute reality of both self and the world. Brahman as the pure world also illuminates the goals of the *asrama* system (*dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksa*) as legitimate goals provided by the world, provided that the individual does not become attached to the fruits of their actions in order to obtain them (see Tiwari 67-73, 73-85).

Accomplishment of *moksa* through self realisation can only be achieved by ridding the self of all of the passions and judgements that make up human conditioning. Realising the *atman* (self) will free the self from egoism and the desires of the self for gratification, and will also unite the *samnyasin* with all humankind as *atman* is seen to be synonymous with Brahma. In this way the *samnyasin* can turn their focus outward and love all others as one being, regardless of caste, gender, race, or any other social marker. In order to cultivate this, one must rid themselves of the illusions of the mind which give rise to ego and the latent desires which constitute emotional response to one's experiences (see Tiwari 91-97). In ridding the self of its human conditioning, the Vedanta teaches the overcoming of egoism, as do other renunciatory traditions such as Buddhism, which deny the self as being permanent. As mentioned, this also allows individuals to find their existence in the existence of all living beings. This functions to

remove the rights of the individual and still allow the person to fulfill their obligations without the satisfaction of self.

The true self is also revealed by ridding the self of *vasanaksaya* (latent desires and emotions that give rise to mental conditioning such as anger, jealousy, covetness). In other words, the *samnyasin* is expected renounce their attachment to ego and to the external phenomena of the world which prevent one from reaching liberation (see Tiwari 97-103). Within the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krisna tells Arjuna of the importance of meditation to rid the self of passions and ego, “Who puts desire aside without reserve, together with their aims, and binds the senses fast on every side, with intellect held firm, he comes to rest, keeping his mind intent upon the self, thinking of nothing; but, then if the mind should wander needlessly, he leads it back towards the jurisdiction of the self. The highest bliss awaits the taintless man whose passions are subdued, of peaceful mind, for whom all things are Brahman and nothing else” (Hodgkinson 69-70).

The renunciation of society poses some interesting concerns about the progress of society, as a person is given the freedom to leave the obligations of society and no longer is bound by the institutions set up to contain society. The importance of sacrifice in order to sustain *rta* (cosmic order) is compromised, as the *samnyasin* is expected to abandon their family ties and to discard the sacrificial string and topknot, extinguish the sacred fire [they are important symbols of the status of a *dvija* (twice born) and of ritual obligation], and give up any other material possessions that they have acquired during their life (see Rodrigues 78-80). The *samnyasin* then dons a begging bowl, a staff and an ochre robe as their only possessions and spends the remainder of their life as a vagabond, depending solely on the charity of others for food. It is in this dependency on and opposition to the goals of the *grhastha* (householder) that

highlights the connection of the *samnyasin* to society. The *samnyasin* depends on the alms given by the *grhastha* and, in exchange the *grhastha* receives the merit from helping a *samnyasin* in their holy pilgrimage, and also teachings from the *samnyasin* about the righteous path of life. The acquisition of *samnyasa* into the *asrama* system, particularly as the terminal and most noble *asrama*, affirms the *samnyasin* as a model of ideal selfless behaviour and also prevents young people from leaving their obligations prematurely (Thapar 882-890,891-900).

The requirement of the *samnyasin* to leave all accumulated wealth to their loved ones serves as a tool for the smooth transfer of wealth to kin and promotes a work ethic for Indian society which mirrors the Protestant ethic. A person should then work hard with true detachment from the fruits of their actions and yet work hard to attain the fruits for the purpose of passing them on to kin. This is an effective way of dispelling greed, ego, domination and exploitation while reinforcing commitment. As an institution, the renunciants serve to correct social problems, being that *samnyasins* are renowned for their spiritual discipline and control over their personal behaviour. *Samnyasa* serves a similar purpose to religious founders in other religions, as it unites followers in a common practice with a universal goal and makes the institution accessible to all persons. This universality can be seen through the reoccurring theme of renunciation in the popular stories of both Rama, and of the Pandavas, which are known to the majority of Indians. These stories reinforce the righteousness of renunciation, even in the life of kings. The universal goal of *samnyasa*, by recognition of the true self as manifest in all being, also warns society against murder, lying, and other actions which harm others (see Tiwari 118-126,132).

Samnyasa promotes the spiritual growth of the individual, but also allows for the individual to participate in social cohesion. Its institutionalisation through incorporation in the

Vedanta literature, helps to make the ideas of renunciation both universal and still remain a profoundly individual endeavour. *Jivanmukti* (attainment of *moksa* in one`s lifetime) is obviously a difficult goal, and must be looked at as an ideal to be attained through faith and dedication and not as a guaranteed attainment . The significance of *samnyasa* lies in the recognition of the actual possibility to reach a stage in this life in which ultimate peace is found. It becomes an enlightened view of the world and the individual as part of it (see Tiwari 111).

References and Related Reading

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Kaelber, Walter, O (1989) *Tapta Marga: Asceticism and Initiation in Vedic India*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.

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Rodrigues, Hillary P (2006) *Introducing Hinduism*. New York: Routledge.

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Tiwari, K.N (1977) *Dimensions of Renunciation in Advaita Vedanta*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

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Asceticism

Bhakti Yoga (Loving devotion as the path to liberation)

Gayatri mantra (Vedic verse to be chanted thrice daily for twice born classes)

Jati (Hereditary Occupational Caste)

Jnana Yoga (Knowledge as a path to liberation)
Karma Yoga (selfless action as a way to liberation)
Monastic renunciation
Pativrata ideal (renunciation of self for the well-being of one's husband)
Renunciation specific to Buddhism or Jainism
Rg Veda evidence of asceticism and renunciation
Rsis
Samsara (Cyclic worldly existence)
Samskaras (rites of passage)
Sraddha ritual (death ritual)
The *asrama* system (four life stages)
The *Bhagavad Gita*
Upanayana (Investiture with the sacred thread)
Upanisads
Vanaprastha (forest-dweller stage)
Varna system (class system)
Women as *sannyasin*

Helpful Related Websites

<http://www.yogavidya.com> (The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Siva Samhita* online)

<http://www.astro.uni.torun.pl/~kb/hinduism.html> (Directory of sites related to numerous Hindu topics)

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/index.htm#maha> (online versions of many texts)

<http://www.yogapoint.com> (insider views on Yoga and philosophy)

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com> (archived articles about renunciation and other topics)

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