

ASCETICISM

In traditional Hindu life, there are four stages which a Hindu would, theoretically, complete in order to acquire the greatest chance of attaining the ultimate goal of *moksa* (liberation). These stages include the *sisya* (student) stage, the *grhasta* (householder) stage, the *vanaprastha* (forest-dweller) stage and the *samnyasin* (renouncer stage). This last stage of the *samnyasin* is one of total renunciation of social and material things. It would typically be this time in one's life when one would dedicate oneself entirely to attaining *moksa*, particularly by engaging in specific practices. One such set of practice that these renouncers would often adopt was asceticism. However, it is important to note that ascetic practices are not limited to the *samnyasins*. Many laypeople also practice forms of asceticism, such as Vrata [On Vrata and the Pativrata Ideal, see Rodrigues 2005: 160-167], to achieve higher objectives. Nevertheless, in general, the asceticism practiced by renouncers is usually more concentrated and intensely followed. This essay will be focusing mostly on the asceticism of the *samnyasin*. Therefore, any reference to asceticism or ascetic practices will refer to the customs of the standard *samnyasin*, unless otherwise stated. To go into great detail of all the differentiations and variations of ascetic practices would probably construct a small book. I can only give a brief background, explain the practices that are most widely used, and give the example of a famous ascetic who has contributed to modernization of the practice.

Before discussing the particularities and practices of asceticism, it is important to look at the background and origin of this practice. According to David M. Miller and Dorothy C. Wertz, in their book *Hindu Monastic Life*, the word "ascetic" is a translation into the word *sadhu*, which actually translates as "holy man" (Miller and Wertz 2), a term often used to describe a renouncer. This can give us an idea of what the literary origin is, but to discern the actual foundation of the

practice is quite a bit harder. As Patrick Olivelle informs us in his translation of the Samnyasa Upanisads, there are many theories about where the practice of asceticism originated (Olivelle 19-22). He breaks these down into two main theories: that asceticism is a development of the Vedic tradition, and that asceticism is a newer practice than the traditional Vedic religion which “challenged and transformed the Vedic religion” (Olivelle 20). Olivelle sides with the assertion that ascetic practices did not develop out of the old Vedic tradition, but that they are a recent custom which tested and criticized the old Vedic ways. Even so, Olivelle states clearly that ascetic practices could not have appeared out of nowhere and says that “[he does] not subscribe to the view put forward by some scholars that ascetic modes of life were non-Aryan in origin” (Olivelle 21). Olivelle suggests that, even though asceticism has close ties with sacrificial religion and even though the Vedic religion set the conditions in which asceticism is set, asceticism acts as an original element that challenged some of the old Vedic traditions, such as sacrificial theology.

With this brief background of asceticism we can begin to discuss what asceticism really is. To become an ascetic means to give up completely, as mentioned before, social and material things. The ascetic is then meant to meditate and concentrate on attaining the final goal of *moksa*. Since ascetics do not have anything at all, except perhaps a begging bowl and a staff, they rely totally on the lay community to provide for them food and sometimes clothes and shelter. As Vail F. Lise says in his article “Unlike a Fool, He Is Not Defiled: Ascetic Purity and Ethics in the Samnyasa Upanisads”: “ascetics are told to remain in solitude as much as possible, meditating and dis-identifying with their bodies. Nonetheless, Upanisadic passages about the virtues and behaviour proposed for *samnyasis* are unexpectedly rich in ethical reflection” (Lise 374). Lise is commenting on how, although ascetics are prescribed to not care about any worldly thing, they

are taught to be moral, just, and wise among other men. Lise explains this further by saying that “the liberated renouncer is a master of silence, quite patient, and wise in matters of Brahman” (395). In response to this, a question that might arise is: how would one know about these rigorous ascetic practices and ways? The answer is in the Samnyasa Upanisads which “provide a basis in Vedic revelation for the institution of renunciation (*samnyasa*) and for the rules and practices associated with that state” (Olivelle 5). Therefore, the Samnyasa Upanisads are used as a guideline as how to live the life of the holy man. These Upanisads have been studied rigorously and elaborated on as the practice of asceticism grows and popularizes. Nonetheless, one of the only ways to fully understand true asceticism is to watch and learn from a genuine ascetic. It is important to remember that the customs mentioned are the typical routines practiced by Hindu ascetics. There are many people who do not follow the *samnyasin* path quite so rigorously and there are those take it to the extreme.

There have been many significant Hindu ascetics in the Indian history; for example, Mahatma Gandhi who helped India fight for independence from Britain [For additional information on Mahatma Gandhi see Robinson and Rodrigues (2006) pg 160; and Rodrigues (2005) pg 47-48, 422-424, and 249-250]. In their article “Karma Samnyasa: Sarkar’s reconceptualization of Indian asceticism” Shaman Hatley and Sohail Inayatullah discuss the life of the *guru* (teacher) Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar. Sarkar was a Tantric [On Tantrism see Robinson and Rodrigues (2006) pg 158-159] teacher who lived in the 20th century and who revolutionized Hindu asceticism. Hatley and Inayatullah go into detail about what Sarkar thought that asceticism really was, as they say, “the ascetic stands as a critic of society – not merely a post modern literary critic but one that questions the basis of current society by attempting to transform it” (Hatley and Inayatullah 14). In this way, Sarkar is saying that asceticism is not only about the physical state of renunciation, but also about the exercise of

proper mental ethics. The article also emphasizes how Sarkar's studies did not hold much interest in the traditional ways of Hinduism, but wanted to transform the religion by using asceticism to "eliminate elements based in social custom (such as *asrama*) and myth" (Hatley and Inayatullah 14). By studying Sarkar, Hatley and Inayatullah have introduced an interesting, modern, way to look at the practice of asceticism.

Overall, the practice of asceticism is a broad topic with a rich history and development. Ascetic practices have been used to help change and develop the Vedic Hindu tradition. Even the concept of the *samnyasin* has become increasingly revolutionized as more people become interested in these ascetic ways. This practice has, recently, even travelled to the West. Westerners are becoming increasingly interested in Hindu practices. Many books on ascetic practices such as meditation, renunciation, and cleansing of the mind now line the shelves of Western bookstores.

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Article written by Jahliele Paquin (April 2006) who is solely responsible for its content.