

## Sannyasa and Society.

By Swami Hansananda.

“Do you think Buddha would have missed the light, had he taken his wife and child along with him?”—was asked by the first officer on board the ship he was travelling in to an Indian returning home from England. The question had proved too corrosive to the Indian, who passed his verdict against *Sannyāsa* about two years after. We have nothing to do with the writer’s personal opinion. He is free to think as he pleases. But is *Sannyāsa* lifeless, perverted, “unnatural”?

Whether Buddha would have missed the light or not, had he taken his wife and child along with him, nobody is in a position to say. But it is a fact that he found them a drag on his life and life’s mission and left them behind him to attain Truth. And the

highest spiritual personalities, who are known to history, are Sannyāsīs. All these cases cannot be mere chance occurrences. Though it might be galling to some, there seems to be a necessity for the acceptance of *Sannyāsa* for the realization of the highest spiritual truths and their broadcasting.

Take one crucial instance. A man living with his wife and children wants to realize God, to see Him face to face. What relation will he have with his dear ones? Will he give part of his love to them, lest he be called partial to his God and cruel to his wife and children? Or will he pour down all his love to Him, keeping nothing for himself and others? The lukewarm will no doubt prefer the former, for he is wise enough not to forego the

tangible love and sweetness for a vague abstraction which might turn out at last to be a mere will-o'-the-wisp. But there is a hopeless class of men to whose mind this division of love does not occur—the very idea is painful to them. We call this latter class, the class with one-pointed devotion, the better type of men. It is they alone who are able to realize God. For this God-realization is not a matter of joke. It requires the concentrated energy of a man for years together, if not for many lives. So during this period of practice or *Sādhana* the man will have little connection with his wife and children, which amounts to *Sannyāsa*, with this little difference that the man who has not formally renounced the world enjoys the advantages of family life without working for it like other members, whereas the man who has formally renounced it has accepted the disadvantages of a life where all material comforts are extremely uncertain. *Sannyāsa*, whether formal or informal, is a necessity for the realization of God. What relation should exist between himself and his family after God-realization, we leave to the man who has realized God to answer. For then his actions are directed, not by any social “ought”, but by a divine “ought”, about whose dictates neither we nor the England-returned writer has any direct knowledge.

Does *Sannyāsa* make life narrow, dry, and “lifeless”? The writer has no quarrel with those who renounce after, what he seems to say, living a married life for a considerable number of years. So we leave their case out of consideration. Now let us see if the life of the

unmarried *Sannyāsī* answers such a description. People do not renounce soon after being born. The age of renunciation at modern times can safely be taken to be somewhere between 20 and 30. What experience, worth having, of the world can escape from a pure youth of that age? Worldly experience surely does not depend on the number of years lived in the world? Certainly a youth of this age misses one thing—the chance to “harmonize the relation of man and woman, surely the most pressing problem of all times.” “The meaning of man’s existence,” says the writer, “can only be discovered through the life of woman and *vice versa*.” The writer means to say that womanhood is identical with wifehood, and that motherhood and sisterhood are just superfluous additions. Ultimately it leads to this, that sex with all its attendants is a necessary element in the perfection of humanity, that the divinity of man is hopelessly dependent on carnality. Those who think of man as nothing more than an animal may take this view of him. To us man is the inextinguishable divine spark whose full blaze has no necessary connection with sex; if it has any, it is of the nature of an inverse ratio. How long does sex as such remain in life? And, when it is no more, what is the difference between a wife and a sister or mother or daughter? This life of, say, twenty to thirty years is but a passing cloud in the clear sky, yielding to sunshine again as before. The ultimate relation between man and woman, any unbiassed precise analysis will reveal, is sonship and motherhood. Every woman is the Madonna; every man, the Christ. This

life of twenty to thirty years, when man swerves from this ideal, is but a concession to his weakness. It is the wildest perversity of the age to dress up weakness as real strength.

If this be so, any youth of twenty or thirty has enough experience of woman,—the real nature of woman. In fact, woman has built his body and mind and has made him what he is and what he will be. He is largely a creation of her thinking, feeling and willing, and needs no further schooling by any one else to learn her nature of his relation with her—everything else leads him to unlearn it, the precious lesson that he so joyfully and whole-heartedly learnt with every suck of mother's breast.

Having learnt of the world what is really worth learning, it is but proper that the best part of youth should be devoted to the discovery of the ultimate Truth. The proper time for the search of God is that period of our life when the body and the mind are in the full vigour of youth. To give to the Lord our old age, our weak and worn-out body and mind, to give the dregs to the Lord after having drunk the wine! Gift indeed!

Again, whose life is narrow? His who has experience of worldly life as well as of the life of absolute freedom, roaming fearlessly in hills and jungles and in strange societies without being of them? Or his who knows only of one phase of life, the life of society, and feels suffocation when he has to lead a lonely life with no eyes looking at him and no ears to catch his words?

Whose is a 'lifeless' life? Of the free one or the drugging slave? Whose is a "perverted, unnatural" one? Of the man who has broken the fetters of a narrow family and has accepted the whole world as his own? Or of the man who has made the narrow family circle narrower still for him by drawing an inner circle of his wife and children as distinguished from those of his brothers and other members of his family? Who is narrow? He who views this world from innumerable points of view? Or he who cannot view it but from his own single angle of vision? "Nothing like leather" might be a just pride for a leather-merchant, who earns his livelihood from it. But there are other things beside leather. To men living in society throughout their lives it might be the only thing, it might be the only criterion of truth; but to those who have tasted of the fruits of society and have gone beyond it, have got an inkling of the vaster life behind the screen, this standard of society is but a poor measuring rod—the distance of the remotest stars should be measured in "light-years".

To enable one to realize the transcendental truth in its pristine glory *Sannyāsa* is necessary, and the best time for it is the best part of our life, *i.e.*, youth. The search of the transcendental truth is the most arduous, though the most worthy, task of life, which requires the greatest amount of energy, which youth alone can supply. The institution of *Sannyāsa*, like the institution of marriage, has, no doubt, lost much of its glory. But neither the ideal nor the attempt is wrong. It is the general

impairment of human strength that is responsible for many of the ills of both married and *Sannyāsa* life. It will not do to blame the one and praise the other; neither of them is what they should be.

Then, again, there are two kinds of *Sannyāsis*, the anchorites and the cœnobites. The writer of the article concerned has nothing but praise for the ancient ideal, which is undoubtedly anchoritic in character. And what is an anchorite? The man whose all energy and devotion are directed solely to his God and who has nothing to do with society. If the ancient *Āśrama-Dharma*, which the writer supports with a religious zeal, is to be revived, society is to feed not merely 60,00,000 mouths, which he grudges, but will have to maintain at least ten times that number. And this for no tangible results. For, this individual God-realization even in great numbers the writer does not consider to be worth the expenditure. Nay, the ideal, too, he does not seem to favour; or else why should he find it difficult to answer the first official's question? What, then, has prompted him to support the fourth *Āśramitic Sannyāsa*? Is it because it does good to the man who undergoes the *Āśrama* training one after another, no matter whether society gains in the bargain or not? If the peculiar method and ideal of an anchorite are called in question and if it does not pay society, why should it maintain it for the sake of fun? And, if the ideal and the method (of realizing God by shutting oneself in a cell) be approved and ungrudgingly paid for, why should the unnecessary

questions of age and loss to society be raised? If God-realization be the end of life and if the anchorite's method be one of the means leading to it, society ought not to grudge it. But that it does grudge shows that it does not care so much for the salvation of its individuals as for the material (one might include the moral, too,) gain it can possibly derive from them. So it seems rather strange that the writer should go to support anchoritism. But anchoritism is fast dying out and perhaps this fact has impelled him to support it. There is a chivalry in upholding a dying cause.

Cœnobitic monks, however, stand on a different ground. Without taking the responsibility of the antiquarian upon ourselves, we might say that Buddha and Śankara made this cœnobitism prominent in the land. And they are the two great preachers of *Māyāvāda* who taught that the world is *Māyā* or *really* non-existent, and at the same time engaged men, their *Sannyāsi* disciples, in doing good to the world for the uplift of others as well as for working out their own salvation through the purification of their heart and mind through such selfless works. Cœnobitic monks, following the true "middle path", combined in themselves the good sides of both the householders and the anchorites. They devoted themselves to the realization of God not only in His transcendental aspect but also as He is immanent in the universe; preserved, improved, and propagated the culture of the land; and brought help, comfort, and solace to the doors of the busy people, with a worshipful heart. It was these *Māyāvādi* cœnobitic monks who inspired arts and

sciences and harnessed them in the service of religion, and, what is all the more curious, gave birth to idolatry so-called. This happy combination of work and worship in a selfless band of youths did immense good to the country for several centuries, after which, no doubt, the ideal was lowered and, in many cases, even lost sight of. And, when it is remembered that it is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, we can well imagine the results of the degradation of the sublimest ideals in some quarters. But, then, great and holy personalities have all along been born throughout these centuries, who have added greater and newer forces to this institution of *Sannyāsa* and moulded it in a way to answer best the new modern tendencies and purposes of mankind.

No, its maintenance is not a burden to society, but a veritable blessing. It is not yet fully organized, and, perhaps, not yet fully alive to its own importance and real place in a larger and wider society in future. It will take time, as all organizations on Indian soil do. But what little this institution of cœnobitic *Sannyāsa* does at present in its disorganized condition is quite commensurate with the cost society bears, or has to bear, for its maintenance.

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The above is a direct reply to an article bearing the same caption published in the July number of the "Kalyāṇa-Kalpataru." We do not as a general rule publish articles of a controversial nature in the "Kalyāṇa-Kalpataru"; but, as some of the observations contained in the previous article were rather of a

sweeping nature, though made in all sincerity and in good spirit, we felt it obligatory on us to publish a reply to the same and thus allow the other side also to be represented before the readers. We have, however, no intention to prolong the controversy any further and take leave to close it here. We would therefore humbly request that no one should take the trouble of sending any more articles bearing on this controversy.

No one will disagree with Swami Hansananda when he says that *Sannyāsa* is necessary for God-realization. Of course, opinions differ as to what the form of this *Sannyāsa* should be. If one has formally renounced all connection with the world, but his mind still clings to worldly enjoyments, he cannot be said to have truly renounced the world. On the other hand, one who continues to lead the life of a householder, but whose mind is detached from the world like a lotus-leaf remaining in water though unaffected by it, is a real *Sannyāsī*, even though he has not formally renounced the world. Thus it would appear that mental dissociation from the world is what is necessary for attaining love of God. This is the type of *Sannyāsa* preached in the *Gītā*, although the *Gītā* has nowhere opposed formal renunciation, which is helpful to mental dissociation and is therefore commendable.

One-pointed attention and single-minded devotion is necessary to enable one to attain the object of his desire. This is as true of worldly things as of transcendental objects. One must withdraw his mind from everything else and

concentrate it on the one object which he seeks to attain. All other considerations have to be subordinated to that supreme ideal, if not set aside altogether. This is specially true in the case of God who represents the sum-total of all such ideals and is much more besides. To attain Him, therefore, requires the concentrated energy of a whole life-time, nay, of a successive number of lives. "In the end of a series of lives one is blessed with saving knowledge and thereby comes unto Me",\* says the Lord in the *Bhagavadgītā*. The extreme difficulty of God-realization is acknowledged by the Lord Himself when He says:—

"Among thousands of men scarce one striveth for perfection; of the successful strivers scarce one knoweth Me in essence."†

Thus it will be clear how much more essential and necessary it is to cultivate single-minded devotion to God in order to attain Him and that is why the necessity of the same has been repeatedly inculcated in the *Gītā*.

It cannot be gainsaid that in household life it is not ordinarily possible to devote such one-pointed attention to practices conducive to God-realization, as a householder has got so many other

things to attend to, which constantly distract his mind and do not allow him to fix his attention solely on God. But what is more essential is an insatiable craving for God-realization, a तीव्र सुसुखा or passionate desire of liberation as it is called in Vedāntic terminology, without which formal renunciation of the world, which the word *Sannyāsa* in modern usage signifies, will have no meaning. That is why our Śāstras have laid so much stress on *Vairāgya* or dispassion as being the essential condition or passport for entering the life of *Sannyāsa*. Those who renounce the world without obtaining this passport do not fulfil the essential condition laid down in the Śāstras for entering the order of *Sannyāsa*.

Real and natural *Sannyāsa* is that which follows in the wake of genuine *Vairāgya* or Dispassion,—when one finds the family a real drag on his life and life's mission, to quote the words of Swami Hansananda, and leaves them behind to attain Truth, as did Buddha and Śankara and numerous other Sannyāsīs of the ancient and modern times, and it is such Sannyāsīs of whom it can be said with justification that they were the highest spiritual personalities known to history. For this type of Sannyāsīs there are no hard and fast rules as to when and at what stage of their life they should enter the order of *Sannyāsa*. For them the Śāstras say: 'यदहरेव विस्जेत् तदहरेव प्रब्रजेत् ।' (One should take orders the very day one feels the urge in the shape of dispassion or disgust for worldly enjoyments).

In the ordinary case, however, the Śāstras lay down that a householder

\* बहुनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते ।  
( VII. 19 )

Vide also  
अनेकजन्मसंसिद्धस्ततो याति परां गतिम् ।  
( VI. 45 )

† मनुष्याणां सहस्रेषु कश्चिद्यतति सिद्धये ।  
यततामपि सिद्धानां कश्चिन्मां वेत्ति तत्त्वतः ॥  
( VII. 3 )

who has completed the full period of married life and begotten and brought up children and has got a grown up son to look after the household affairs should first enter the *Vānaprastha* stage, which is preparatory to *Sannyāsa* and in which one is required to practise austere penance along with his wife and lead a life of stern discipline, bodily as well as mental. It is after completing the *Vānaprastha* stage that one is enjoined to enter the life of a *Sannyāsī*. Unfortunately, at present, the whole system of *Varṇāśrama* has degenerated

and nobody cares to follow the injunctions of the Śāstras in regard to the duties and responsibilities attaching to each stage. Our revered Swamiji is therefore right when he says that the *Gr̥hastha Āśrama* in its present form is no better than *Sannyāsa* and we have no reason to denounce the institution of *Sannyāsa* alone. We thus appreciate the points of view of both of our respected and revered contributors and humbly advise our readers to study both the cases and judge for themselves which point of view appeals to them better.

—Editor.

