

Chapter 11. Life Stages and Castes

Q. Swami! Of the four life stages (*asramas*) —student, householder, forest dweller, and renunciant —which is basically important?

A. Just as all living things are dependent on the life-giving breath, so all life stages are dependent on the householder. The householder provides food and drink to the rest and fosters them, promotes the study of the *Vedas*, and guards the scriptures. So the householder stage is the most important. In the scriptures (*sruthis*), in the *Narada-parivrajaka Upanishad*, and in the *Manu Dharma Sastra*, it is declared that the householder who strictly adheres to the *dharma* of their life stage is worthy of the greatest respect.

Q. But Swami, some people say that the renunciant is superior to the householder; how far is this correct?

A. Whatever the stage of life, if the person follows the *dharma* laid down for that stage, carries it out in practice, and steadfastly yearns for liberation, that person can get it. There is no doubt. To win knowledge of the true Self (*Atma-jnana*), one need not prefer this stage of life to that; all are capable of securing it. There is no superior or inferior. It is only conduct and character that can be labeled as superior and inferior.

A. Swami! They say that the householder stage binds, but the student and the renunciant stages liberate. How did that opinion arise?

A. I don't agree with that. Why, the one who earns money by lawful means, who honours his guests, who serves and pleases others, that one attains liberation along with those learned in the scriptures (*sastras*) and those who are well established in the fundamental philosophy of the spirit.

No one can cross the ocean of birth and death just because they are a renunciant or student. High ancestry, attainments in asceticism, the status of a monk, profound scholarship —by themselves, these won't help. There must also be faithful and steady pursuit of one's own duty, study of the scriptures, like the *Veda* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, and a disciplined spiritual life of repetition of the name and meditation.

Q. Swami! What virtues should people in each stage of life (*asrama*) cultivate in order to be saved?

A. Ten virtues together comprise the basic *dharma* of the aspirants: compassion, non-stealing, intelligence, spiritual learning, truth, control of the senses, purity, patience, contentment, and non-anger. All people must cultivate these ten, whatever their stage of life. They are enough to save you, wherever you are. And if one has not acquired them, life is a waste, whatever the stage of life. The daily routine of life is the essential thing, and it should reflect these ten qualities. This is the very thing that Lord Krishna told Arjuna in reply to his question.

Q. Swami, you said that Arjuna asked this same question about the importance of renunciation of the fruits of action (*nishkama-karma*) observed with the ten conditions. What did Krishna reply?

A. Krishna said, "The highest stage of liberation that is attained by adepts of the *yoga* of wisdom (*jnana-yoga*) is also attained by those who are adepts at the *yoga* of renunciation of the fruits of action; both yield the same result. Know that this is the truth. There is no difference in this between householder and the renunciant (*sanyasi*).

What is needed is unremitting practice and sincere endeavour. This requires renouncing desire, giving up egotism and the sense of possession, even discarding active thinking and single-pointed contemplation of the Supreme Universal Eternal Principle (*Brahma-thathwa*). For one who has achieved this, there is no grief, because there is no shade of ignorance. The wise one who has won this height can never be deluded by the false and the

temporary. Even if at the last moment of life one is able to realise this wisdom (*jnana*), one is certain to be liberated from the cycle of birth and death.”

Q. Then why were these castes (*varnas*) established?

A. They relate to the physical aspect; they don't affect the spiritual aspect at all. They indicate physical make-up. Of course, “physical” includes the intellect, the subconscious mind (*chittha*), the inner instrument (*anthah-karana*), etc. Unless these are trained and regulated, the *Atmic dharma* cannot be understood. Race, religion, *dharma* are all to help in regulating and sublimating the instincts and impulses. That is why wise people accepted and honoured these. The *Atma* is truth (*sath*), awareness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*)—those are its nature, if somehow it has to be indicated. This can be realised only by purifying the heart, mind, and intellect of people.

People who have that purity, whatever their caste or stage of life, can attain liberation (*moksha*); that is what the scriptures (*sastras*) declare. A person who is beset by attachment to some and hatred toward others, even in the solitude of the jungle, will meet only evil. Even if one is leading the householder life in the midst of the family, if one has achieved victory over the senses one is a real ascetic. Engaged in action (*karma*) that is not condemned, one is entitled to become a wise person (*jnani*). For one who is unattached, the home is a hermitage. Then, even by means of progeny, of activity, of riches, and of holy sacrifices (*yajna*), oblations (*yaga*), and similar rituals, liberation can be achieved.

What is wanted for liberation is just freedom from the impurity of attachment. Attachment is the bondage.