

Sanyasa or Formal Renunciation

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A. Is Sanyasa necessary?

According to Adi Sankara, as he argues in Chandokya Upanishad, formal sanyasa is a must for traversing the last lap of journey to moksha. No doubt, there are stories of Maharashtrian saints like Tukaram, etc. who were only householders. In almost all these cases, we can only presume that the other person has been liberated. Nobody can say whether somebody is liberated or not. As such, unless somebody comes back after moksha, to tell us that he attained moksha without taking sanyas, we can never say whether anyone attained moksha or not?

Once when Bhagwan Ramana was asked whether he could pick out the liberated ones from a big crowd of people, he answered in the negative. This is perhaps because for a liberated soul everybody else is ever liberated and, being bound or and being liberated, is only a delusion. Even otherwise, if one is to follow the rules of sanyasa properly, the disciplines prescribed there will definitely be helpful in getting one's liberation. When one is completely after the realisation, one cannot understand why one should at all hesitate to take up sanyas. The very hesitation to take up sanyas shows that either the man is not fully mature or some attachment somewhere holds him back. Personally speaking, I feel that it is always better to have sanyas [monkhood] in order to enable a person to develop his vairagya [dispassion].

Even though the Upanishads talk of a few Brahmadevinis like Gargi who had a good knowledge of the Brahman, nowhere it is mentioned that those ladies ever got liberation in the woman's body; and if they have had liberation, they would not have accepted defeat by Yagyavalkya [BrihadAranya Upanishad]. In Jainism, they clearly declare that women are not entitled for liberation unless they are born again as men. In spite of it, out of their twenty four Theerthangkaras, one of them was a woman. This is contradictory to their theory of the women's ineligibility for liberation.

Even though the scriptures never sanctioned it, in recent times, people like late Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh [Divine Life Society] had given sanyas to a number of women of both Indian and foreign nationality. So many other sanyasis have followed suit.

My own feeling is that if women are well versed in Vedas and its six limbs, like the phonetics and they have got absolute dispassion [vairagya] accompanied by a deep longing for the Ultimate Reality or the Atman or the Brahman, they should be given sanyas. Even if they don't get moksha in this birth, it would form the basis for the samskara for the next birth.

B. What is Sanyasa or Formal Renunciation?

Sanyasa is the final stage in a man's life in order to get liberation. When a Guru has accepted to give Sanyas, one should read all the rules and regulations which govern Sanyas. The various rules are all given in a summarised form in a book known as "Yati Dharma Sanghrah" by Vishveshwar Bharati. In this book, they have quoted from the various smruties like Narada Parivrajaka Upanishad, Yagyavalkya Smrutie, Harita Smrutie, Atri Smrutie, etc.

The day previous to taking sanyas, one should observe complete fasting. On that day, you should spend the entire night either doing Gayatri jap or reading some puranas like Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc. He should not think or read anything worldly. Early in the morning, he should take ritual bath in any of the sacred rivers like the Ganges, Cauveri river, etc. and have his head shaved except for a small tufted off hair. After taking bath three times, he should leave off his clothings in the river and raising his hand above the shoulders should take the vows known as preshya mantra. Only when this preshya mantra is done, one becomes a sanyasi. The beauty of the preshya mantra is that the first mantra guarantees that nobody need have any fear from him as he would not harm anybody. Leaving off his clothes, and fully naked, he should come and do prostrations to the Guru along with the specific mantra when the latter will give him a staff, ochre colored clothes and a kamandalu. The one who takes the staff [danda] is called a dandi sanyasi. If he throws him back into the river with the same mantra, with which he took them, he is called a

Paramahansa. Only a Brahmin is entitled to take the danda [staff] and subsequently a Paramahansa. A man who has reached a high state of consciousness is also called a Paramahansa.

C. Jeevanmuktas

By doing Sadhana, the one who reaches a higher state of consciousness or Jeevanmuktas, the people who have reached the highest state of realization, are classified into four categories.

- The first category is called as “The Knower of Brahman” – a Brahma-Vid.
- The second one is called a “Better knower of Brahman” – Brahma-Vid-vara.
- The third one is called “Brahma-Vid-Variya”, the ‘one who knows Brahman best’.
- The fourth is “Brahma-vid Varishta” – the greatest knower of Brahman!

Beyond the fourth is a category, the highest category, rarely reached. Perhaps, not more than a dozen people would have been there since the inception of the entire world, who can be said to be in this category. And Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi was one of them. We would have never known that such was the case, but for the fact that Bhagavan mentioned it Himself, in a particular legal-case where he was cited as a witness. It was a case to do with Arunachaleshwara temple, where they cited Bhagavan as one who knows all the scriptures and purAnAs. Then the judges came to speak with Bhagavan and they made enquiries with him, along the following lines – “Who are you? You don’t look to be a Sanyasi, but like a sanyasi you have shaved off your head. But you are not wearing ochre robes, are you a Brahmachari? But we do not find the sign of a Brahmachari, the yajnopaveeta (sacred thread) on your shoulder. So then, to what category do you belong?”

Bhagavan pointed to a category beyond all Sanyasis. There are sanyasis like Avadhuta, Paramahansa and the like. He was beyond all these. Bhagavan said he was a Ati-varnAshrami, one who transcends all VarnAshrama i.e. all the stations in life [that of a Brahmachari, of a householder, or a Sanyasi]. He never formally took Sanyasa at any time. He was beyond all the four categories – He is a Ati-varnAshrami!

****Hari Om ****

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