

Sannyasa and Consecrated Life

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S*annyasa* in India and consecrated life in Christianity represent lives of renunciation in two different traditions. Though both have a common aim that is liberation, the ways and methods adopted by them are different. *Sannyasa* in the Indian tradition, in general, is a life of total renunciation after going through student life (*Brahmacharya*), householder's life (*Grihastha*) and life in the forest (*Vanaprashtha*). These three stages of life are a preparation for *sannyasa*. Whereas consecrated life in the Christian tradition doesn't require these preparatory stages, because the seeker heavily depends on God's grace and it is a divine call. However, a Christian consecrated person in India may draw inspiration from *sannyasa* so that the consecrated life may become more relevant to the Indian context.

1. Origin of Asceticism in India

There are different opinions among scholars regarding the origin of asceticism in India, the earliest signs can be seen in the Indus Valley Civilization. The characteristics of the three-faced deity and, the priest-king concentrating on the tip of his nose and other miniature statues indicate the familiarity of the people of Indus Valley with ascetical practices and meditation as early as 2500 BC. Some other scholars suggest that the Rg Vedic *Munisukta* 10.136, as a reliable source of the origin of asceticism in India. Asceticism

originated in India as an ‘individual phenomenon’ and it consists of “a complex number of traits viz. celibacy, austerity, concentration and ecstasy.” There are references to *muni*, *yogi*, *sannyasi*, *kesin* etc., in the Vedas. *Vratyas* (wandering almsmen) in the Vedas could be the prototype of *sannyasa* of the later years.

2. Asceticism in Buddhism

Bhikkhus, *Samanas*, *Yatis*, *Sannyasins* and *brahmanas* are the terms used in the Buddha and Jaina tradition for ascetics. For attaining the supreme goal, *Nibbana* ‘family men go from home to homelessness.’ The wandering almsmen (*bhikkhu*) of the early times of Buddhism started living in primitive settlements which were called *av-*

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asa or *arama*. There is a reference to a wandering Ascetic Potthapada with a following of three thousand wandering ascetics in the *Potthapadasutta of Dighanikaya* (No. IX.406 p. 125). Buddha, to a question by King Ajathasattu of Magadha, on the merit of being a *sramana* or *brahmana* said, “When he has thus become a *samana*, he practises self-restraint in accordance with the fundamental precepts. He attains mindfulness and clearness of comprehension.” (*Samannaphala Sutta of Digha Nikaya*. No. 193).

4. Sannyasa in the Upanishad

A *sanyasin* or a monk is expected to reach perfection and total detachment in life. Austere life style has been the hallmark of *sannyasa*. This will enable the seeker to develop detachment to actions and result of actions. During the time

of the major Upanishads (700-550 B C) renunciation (*tyaga*) became the focus of the Upanishadic search for the knowledge about Brahman. Seventeen out of the 108 Upanishads deal with the concept *sannyasa* in terms like *bhiksu* (one who lives on alms), *sannyasin* (one who has completely renounced the world), *parivrajaka* (one who wanders around without a home), *avadhuta* (mystic who is beyond ego-consciousness) and *paramahansa* (one who practises spiritual discernment, superswan).

4. *Sannyasa* in the Hindu Literature

Family life, according to the *Dharmasastras* is the highest form of life. Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* explains the four stages of life as eternally determined based on the three Vedas. Kautilya allows a man beyond the age of copulation, after distributing the wealth he acquired among his sons and wife, to become an ascetic (*A S II. 30-31*). According to *Vaikhyanasadharmaprasna* Brahmins alone were allowed to become *sannyasi*. However, Manu extended it to the twice born (*Dvija*, whose sacrament of initiation is regarded as a second or spiritual birth).

Vyasa in the *Mahabharata* refers to *varnasramadharma* in Ch. XIII. In the *Uma-Maheshwarasamvada* Siva tells Uma the characteristics of a *vanaprastha* as “yogic postures and penances, rituals and vows, shaving of the head, yellow robes, and adherence to the path of good” (*Mbha XIII. 141*). Meditation is the highest power of yogins. Bhagavad Gita does not specifically speak about *sannyasa* as a state of life. Gita does not agree with various methods of self-torture as a means of liberation because they are demonic practices.

In the *Ramayana* hermits, *munis* and *risis* through austere practices acquired yogic powers like intuition (Ram

VII.9.19, seeing things in the faraway places (Ram I.84; Sage Gautama), getting divine eye, ability to see past present and future, (Ram I.3.4.6.7; Valmiki). *Virasana* was a common posture adopted for meditation, (Manu VII.10.4. Manu was of the opinion that one should enter *sannyasa* when one's hair turned grey and that too having passed through the three stages or *ashramas* in their respective order, (Manu VI.2, 33). Only a *brahmana* is entitled to enter the fourth *ashrama* i.e., *sannyasa*. A *sannyasi* is allowed to possess only three things i.e., a seven knotted bamboo stick, a gourd full of water, and an antelope's skin. Patanjali systematized the science of yoga in eight steps based on ethical values, physical mental discipline, and control of senses leading to concentration, meditation and finally *samadhi*. Yoga's focus is on spiritual enlightenment and experience of supreme bliss. *Tapas* is one of the means of knowing Brahman (Br. Up. IV.4.22).

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Ramana Maharshi's message to Paul Brunton reveals the essence of *sannyasa* in Indian tradition, “The true self is imperishable; therefore, when a man finds it, he finds happiness which does not come to an end... know first that ‘I’ and then you shall know the truth. To know all except the knower is but ignorance.”¹

5. Christian Consecrated Life in India

Most of the Christian religious congregations both men and women, follow western model of religious life which is rather alien to Indian masses. Our life style, dress code and imposing institutional structures alienate the ordinary people from us. It is indeed a very encouraging sign that many of the religious congregations realizing these limitations are reinterpreting their constitutions and adapting themselves to Indian context. There are a number of consecrated people and ashrams following the Indian Christian *Sannyasa* tradition in India today.

Consecrated life as a form of ascetical life is the participation of the 'communion of life' in the church as a means to perfection following the example of Jesus who 'humbled himself, becoming obedient to death' to do the will of the Father. Throughout the history of consecrated life in the Church, the eremitical and coenobitical aspects were always present but in varying proportions. Voluntary celibacy was a clear sign of a person's being committed to an eremitical or a coenobitical way of life.

6. Origin of Monasticism in the Church

Antony of Egypt, a solitary monk (c 251-356), Athanasius, Bishop and acetic (c 295 -373) and Pachomius, founder of organized monastic communities (292-346) were shining examples of ascetic life in the early centuries of Christianity. Basil the Great (c.330-79) the founder of Eastern Monasticism, provided the basis for the Rule still followed by religious in the Eastern Church. This Rule is called Asceticon, and consists of questions asked by devout persons and answers given by Basil on monastic life during his travels. Monasticism in the west is inspired by St. Benedict of Nursia

(c.480-c.550). Monastic life is a search of God in the Church through the practise of charity, humility and hope experiencing the guidance of the spirit in prayer and self- sacrifice. Basil in his letters elaborately dealt with monastic life in solitude which became a source of inspiration for Benedict in his book *Rule of Benedict*.²

7. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)

He was one who read the signs of the time responded by placing religious life outside the monastic mould. His attempt was how to further the Kingdom of God and assist in the mission of the Church in the world. The Council of Trent (1545-63) spoke of religious life as superior to marriage. The documents of Vatican II insist on the universal call to holiness. The *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, call for a return to the sources or Christian life and to the original inspiration and an adjustment to the changed conditions of today.

8. The Desert Fathers

Living in solitude and prayer with total dependence on God, they play a vital role in the ‘wilderness spirituality’ in the Church. Consecrated life in the Church is a call into the wilderness and total dependence on God. The vast majority of the consecrated people live in the world actively involved in the struggles and problems of the people. But there is a small minority of consecrated people who follow the spirit of the desert, hermit, and wilderness traditions.

Swami Abhiksiktananda speaks about *sannyasa* as the most precious treasure of Indian spiritual tradition from which the Christians in India learn a lot. Vatican Council II exhorted the members of the Church to “acknowledge,

preserve and promote whatever good things, spiritual and moral as well as the socio-cultural values found among them' (N.A.no 2). *Perfectae Caritatis* encouraged Christians in different countries to integrate the ascetic and cultural aspects into Christian religious life.

9. Need for Integration

There was a felt need in the Indian Church to integrate the ideals of Indian *sannyasa* into the

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consecrated life in the Church. This desire of the church was clearly articulated in the national seminar on Church in India held in 1969. During the inaugural address of the All India Seminar on Church in India Today, Cardinal Pignedoli, the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, stressed the need for Indian Christian *sannyasa*. We live among the Hindu and Buddhist *sannyasa* tradition where the monks are respected as the embodiment of wisdom and detachment.

In 1950 Swami Parama-arupi Ananda and Abhikshik-tananda started Saccidananda ashram in Santivanam, Trichy, which encouraged others to start Christian ashrams in India. Abhikshiktananda was of the opinion that *sannyasa* and monasticism are the meeting point of the Church in India and the Indian religions. *Sannyasa* reveals the greatness and depth of India's spiritual heritage through men who renounced everything in search of God experience. He felt that *sannyasa* would be the appropriate starting point of inculturation and adaptation in India. The Women's section of the Catholic

Religious of India in their annual meeting in Bangalore in 1976 advised its members in India to integrate the positive elements from *sannyasa*.

10. Insights from Sannyasa for Consecrated life in India

a. Renunciation

Renunciation is the core of *sannyasa* in the Indian tradition. According to Ramana Maharshi, renunciation is not discarding the external things, but of ego. A *sannyasi* may experience equanimity of heart; dualities of life will not disturb his equilibrium any more. Jesus wanted his disciples to renounce everything and follow him. Our religious dress more than being a symbol of simplicity and renunciation functions as a sign of separation and superiority. Ordinary people feel distanced from the consecrated people.

b. Relevance of Religious Vows

Chastity enables a person to remain pure in mind and body, vow of obedience helps a person to completely empty one's ego and poverty increases the complete dependence on God. Whatever happens, a *sannyasi* is happy always. In Hinduism *brahmacharya* is the highest spiritual value, it is walking with *brahman*. Both in Hinduism and Christianity *brahmacharya* is union with God and love of humans.

c. Austere Life Style

Severe ascetical practices of unimaginable intensity have been associated with *sannyasa* in India. *Sannyasis* endure extreme ascetical practices in order to progress in spiritual life. "In summer let him expose himself to the heat of five fires, during the rainy season live under the open sky, and in

winter be dressed in wet clothes, thus gradually increasing the rigour of his austerities” (Manu VI. 23).

d. *Meditation*

Meditation is the foundation on which a *sannyasi* builds his spiritual life. Manu says, “By deep meditation let him recognise the subtle nature of the supreme Soul, and its presence in all

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organisms, both the highest and the lowest.” (Manu VI.65). Through meditation one can attain indescribable benefits (Manu VI.73). Vat II in its decree on the relationship with non-Christian religions, acknowledged the contemplative aspect of Hinduism, ascetical practices and deep meditation and loving trusting flight towards God. (N. A. no. 2).

e. *Role of a Guru*

Guru is the one who dispels the darkness in the mind of the disciple. In the Indian tradition guru is equated with Brahman, one who has realized Brahman. He is an enlightened person like Buddha. An enlightened guru will practise whatever he/she teaches. We in the consecrated life need enlightened gurus who are capable of guiding others to God. A genuine teacher will easily know the inner life of the disciple and guide him/her accordingly.

Conclusion

Consecrated life in India will undergo unprecedented changes in the future; already the process is going on. The economic prosperity in the country, influence of secular

ideologies, availability of enormous opportunities outside for better life, absence of inspiring models in the religious life, reluctance of religious congregations to read the signs of time and translate them into practical life, unwillingness of young people to go through rigorous and austere life, intolerance towards being challenged, lack of credibility and will for formators to care-front those who are in formation are some of the factors that will impact consecrated life in the coming years. As a result houses that are built on solid foundation will survive and others will face turbulent times. In this struggle for survival some of the congregations and individuals will compromise with the core values which will be equally disastrous in the long run. Alternate models of consecrated life will emerge. Indian *sannyasa* is a great tradition which still continues to exercise tremendous influence on the life and values of the people India. In spite of all the limitations, as Abhikshiktananda says, *sannyasa* is the appropriate partner to reinvent and reinvigorate consecrated life in India.

Let me conclude with the words of Abhikshiktananda, a genuine seeker from Europe who integrated the Christian monastic ideals and Indian *sannyasa* in the right spirit, “By assuming this central institution of religious in India (*sannyasa*), purifying and transforming and in a way transubstantiating it, the church will realize the most important step towards the integration of India’s spiritual riches as a whole.”³

Notes

1. Brunton, Paul. *A Search in Secret India*. New York: S. Weiser, 1981, p. 146.
2. See Chittister, Joan. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* the Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series. New York: Crossroad, 1992.
3. Abhikshiktananda. “Christian Sannyasis,” *Clergy Monthly Supplement*. IV (1958) p. 107.