Advancing through Lifeâ□□s Four Stages
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Applying the wisdom of ashrama dharma lends dignity and increasing purpose to every decade of life, but requires some new thinking

B Y S A T G U R U B O D H I N A T H A V E Y L A N S W A M I

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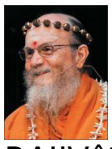


RAJIVâ□□S LONDON CLASSMATES are a raucous bunch of teenagers, flush with vigor, carefree and oblivious to future responsibilities. They see him as a stodgy fellowâ□□smart, handsome, likeableâ□□but missing out on the fun. â□□Youâ□□re only young once!â□□ Jeremy chides, â□□Why not party with us?â□□ Rajiv lives in a different world, having learned from his parents that life is measured in four stages, and that we reincarnate again and againâ□□so we are young many, many times! He saves his energies for the important stuff, building his knowledge and character in preparation for the family stage, which he will enter in his twenties. Disinterested in fooling around, he hopes to win the hand of a cultured girl with whom to share this lifetime and bring children into the world. Rajiv even looks forward to his elder years when, having fulfilled his duties, he will withdraw into his soul nature, the eternal Rajiv, seeking God Realization as he lives out this earthly tenure. Rajiv is convinced that each phase of life has a natural purpose, and that each is more rewarding than the last. For now, he chooses to study as hard as he can, and play a little in between.

Rajivâ□□s plan is founded on Hindu tradition which divides an individualâ□□s lifespan into four stages, or ashramas. This division, called ashrama dharma, is the natural expression and maturing of the body, mind and emotions through four progressive stages. It was developed millennia ago and detailed in scriptures known as the Dharma Shastras, highlighting the fact that our duties differ greatly as we progress from youth, to adulthood, senior years and old age. The Maitri Upanishad states: â□□Pursuit of the duties of the stage of life to which each one belongsâ□□that, verily, is the rule! Others are like branches of a stem. With this, one tends upwards; otherwise, downwards.â□□

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, in The Hindu View of Life, summarizes: â□□The four stagesâ□□of brahmacharya, or the period of training, grihastha, or the period of work for the world as a householder, vanaprastha, or the period of retreat for the loosening of the social bonds, and sannyasa, or the period of renunciation and expectant awaiting of freedomâ□□indicate that life is a pilgrimage to the eternal life through different stages.â□□

This paradigm is as important and precious now as it was a thousand years ago, shared by all Hindus, regardless of caste or gender. However, the ancient descriptions may not translate perfectly to our modern life. Society has changed too much from how it was in Vedic times in India. For example, it would not work for all 50-year-olds to take up the life of a forest hermit, begging for their food. That would not be accepted by 21st century society. In some countries forest hermits would end up in jail as homeless vagrants or trespassers, hungry ones at that. A certain amount of reinterpretation is needed to allow contemporary Hindus to utilize the wisdom of this natural evolution of life. As a starting point, letâ□□s review the traditional descriptions.

The first stage, or ashrama, is brahmacharyaâ□□student lifeâ□□and those in this ashrama are called brahmacharins, â□□those of divine comportment.â□□ It was usually a period of twelve years, from age seven or eight to age 19 or 20. The student lived in his guruâ□□s home and learned scriptures, philosophy, science and logic. He was also taught how to conduct the Vedic fire ceremony. The brahmacharin was expected to follow a strict code of conduct, including celibacy, speaking the truth, gentleness in speech, physical austerities such as cold-water baths and eating sparingly at night. Serving the teacher and participating in the household duties were as much a part of his life as formal learning.

The second stage is householder life, grihastha dharma, and those in this ashrama are called grihasthins. After returning to his family home, the student was expected to marry and raise a family, earning well by righteous means to provide for his wife and children, support his parents and give generously to charity. His religious duties included scriptural study and performing a daily Vedic fire ceremony in the home.

The third stage is vanaprasthaâ□□hermit lifeâ□□and those in this ashrama are called vanaprasthins, â□□forest dwellers.â□□ Generally around the age of 50 or 55, after the birth of grandchildren, the Shastras explain, the householder is expected to hand over the responsibilities of the family to his children and retire to the forest. He may take his wife if she is willing to share his life of austerities or leave her with his sons. He is to continue the daily fire ceremony, observe continence and devote himself to contemplation on God, all to prepare himself for lifeâ□□s final phase.

The fourth stage defined in scripture is sannyasaâ□□renunciate lifeâ□□and those in this ashrama are called sannyasins. When the forest recluse felt enough inner strength to totally renounce all possessions and lead the life of an itinerant monk, he would embrace sannyasa, after entrusting his wife to the care of the children. In this stage he was to move about constantly from place to place, begging his food and devoting himself to japa, meditation, worship of his Deity and contemplation of scriptures.

Looking next at how these ancient descriptions of the ashramas can be updated to better apply in contemporary society, my guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, considered that in modern times each ashrama is a 24-year period, applying equally to men and women: brahmacharya being the first 24 years of life; grihastha extending from age 24 to 48; vanaprastha from age 48 to 72; and sannyasa from age 72 onward.

The goals of brahmacharya remain the same today, but some of the details may no longer apply, such as living in the home of oneâ□□s teacher. Intense learning is still the main focus. Ideally, one acquires training in the profession he or she will follow in adult life. On the religious side, the basics of Hinduism are to be learned, along with memorizing mantras and conducting a puja in the home shrine, a practice that has largely replaced the Vedic fire ceremony in modern times. Students should be taught self-discipline, celibacy and other positive character qualities.

The descriptions of the grihastha ashrama also stand the test of time. The main focus is on marriage, bearing and raising children, serving society through oneâ□□s career, earning income, taking care of elders and being charitable. Daily puja is conducted in the home, which ideally the entire family attends. Today the grihasthin is the primary teacher of Hinduism to his or her children, a duty the guru fulfilled in ancient times. This ashrama is a busy time of engagement in the world while advancing oneâ□□s family and profession.

It is in defining the vanaprastha stage that need arises to rethink the old definitions. Becoming a forest dweller at age 48 is not an option for most people. Instead, my guru described this as a natural time to help and guide the younger generations as an advisor and elder. Brahmacharins and grihasthins can actively seek out the advice of vanaprasthins and draw on and benefit from their years of experience. For example, many Hindus in this age group mentor youth through community programs, teach Hinduism to children, serve on the boards of trustees or committees of temples, or fulfill leadership roles in secular nonprofit organizations. This is a time of giving back to the community what one has learned, while slowly retiring from professional and public life.

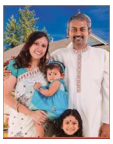
The parameters of the sannyasa ashrama have also widened. A small percentage of modern Hindus follow the model of taking up sannyasa after retirement, renouncing the world and wandering among the thousands of sadhus and sannyasins of India, many of whom took up the mendicant path in their 20s and 30s. This pattern of elders taking up sannyasa is okay for single people, widows and widowers, and it still works in parts of India where society honors and cares for such holy men and women. But in most areas of the world, it is neither accepted nor understood.

A number of Hindus turning age 72 have asked me what they should do differently in the years ahead. My advice is to simply intensify whatever religious practices they are already observing. If you perform a daily puja for 30 minutes, increase it to an hour. If you meditate daily for half an hour, increase it to an hour. If you go on pilgrimage for two weeks once a year, increase it to a month. Once these changes have become a firm habit, one would naturally be inclined to devote even more time to religious practices. After age 72, as the physical forces wane, is the time to turn within and withdraw from worldly involvement.

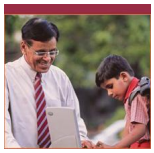
My guru gave this helpful description of the third and fourth ashramas for modern times: â□□It is during the latter stages of life that family devotees have the opportunity to intensify their sadhana and give back to society of their experience, their knowledge and their wisdom gained through the first two ashramas. The vanaprastha ashrama, age 48 to 72, is a very important stage of life, because that is the time when you can inspire excellence in the brahmacharya students and in the families, to see that their life goes along as it should. Later, the sannyasa ashrama, beginning at 72, is the time to enjoy and deepen whatever realizations you have had along the way.â□□

Four dynamic stages:
1) As a student, gaining knowledge in math, science and other fields;
2) supporting and raising a family;
3) as a grandparent, semi-retired, devoting more time to religious pursuits and community programs while guiding oneâ□□s offspring and their children;
4) as the physical forces wane, withdrawing more and more into religious practices.

1. Student, age 12â□□24
Brahmacharya Ashrama



2. Householder, age 24â□□48
Grihastha Ashrama



3. Senior Advisor, age 48â□□72
Vanaprastha Ashrama

4. Religious Devotion, age 72 & onward
Sannyasa Ashrama