

# Hindu Asceticism

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Hindu asceticism is far older than Christian asceticism, which flourished among the fourth and fifth century Egyptian Desert Fathers. Yet any Christian interested in asceticism can immediately recognize himself in Hindu asceticism, seeing his own ideals, beliefs, and practices reflected in it in a most striking and illuminating way.

There are four to five million Hindu ascetics—known as *sadhus*—in India today. (Hartsuiker, website). The ideal *sadhu* begins young and continues for his entire life as a renouncer of the world, of his home, his family, normative society, and of his former life and lifestyle. He is a life-long celibate, renounces secular work and employment, his parents and family of origin, marriage and procreation, and spends his entire life in the service of the deity, in meditation, prayer, and religious and ascetical practices, eating plain vegetarian food, normally only once a day, and living from the alms of the householder faithful, who seek his prayers, blessing, and spiritual advice.

At his initiation, a *sadhu* makes a total break with his past, shaves his head and face, changes his way of dressing, renouncing secular clothing, and henceforth wears robes, usually of bright orange color, or goes naked or nearly naked, wearing only a scanty loin cloth. He changes his name and does not reveal his birth name or speak of his former life. His fellow *sadhus* (renouncers) become his new family (Hausner 2007). At his initiation, he conducts his own funeral, dying to his former self, identity, occupation, family, relatives, and way of life. He never returns to his natal home. In fact, “before taking ascetic *diksa* [initiation], a Shankara *Sannyasin* [ascetic] disciple must cut all remaining ties to his family of orientation by performing death ceremonies for his parents” (Miller 1996 [1976]:85). One *sadhu* said that he saw a man die of grief over the death of his son. “I was shaken by the death of my friend and became convinced that attachment to one’s family ultimately leads to grief. Consequently I broke all ties with my family and renounced worldly affairs to become a *sannyasin*” (Miller 1996 [1976]:84). He no longer visits his family.

A famous Christian *sadhu*, Swami Abhishiktananda, never returned home after becoming a *sannyasin*, in fact he never even returned to his home country (France), although he had many opportunities and invitations to do so. “Perhaps behind all the high-sounding reasons that I give for refusing and arguing against any possibility of returning there,” he said, “is my fear of not being able to bear it emotionally, and the great difficulty I would have afterwards in taking up my ‘role’ again” (Du Boulay 2005:191).

At the initiation rite of Ram Puri, a knowledgeable American *sadhu* in India, his new guru said to him, “‘You must make a serious commitment. You must offer your life

to the sacrifice of knowledge. You must leave the world of your birth, the material world, and enter the spiritual world of yogis and renunciates. You must leave all your baggage behind (Rampuri 554) ... Do you commit your life to the knowledge of God? To the knowledge of Self? (689) ... Will you return to your village and abandon this guru/disciple tradition?' Hari Puri Baba asked me sternly. No, I answered him three times, as he asked me three times. I knew that I could never return to my life in California" (697). Now, forty years later, Ram Puri is still a *sadhu* in India today. A striking example of *sadhu* renunciation of family and former life is the well-known contemporary *sadhu*, Swami Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who lives in a hermitage (*kutir*) in his *ashram* in India. He is fifty-four years old. When his mother recently died, "he was not physically present at his mother's funeral ceremony, though everyone claims that his presence was palpable" (Kakar).

Concerning the renouncer life, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (Gurudeva) says, "Know it with a certainty beyond question that the path of renunciation is life's most grand and glorious path, and the singular path for those seeking life's ultimate realization of God ... True renunciation may not be achieved by those in the world" (2007:107). A householder cannot achieve the same level or degree of renunciation as a *sadhu* who has renounced everything: home, marriage, family, and worldly pleasures. "Know too that renunciation is not merely an attitude, a mental posture which can be equally assumed by the householder and the renunciate," says Gurudeva. "Our scriptures proclaim that a false concept ... The two paths—householder and renunciate—are distinct in their *dharmas* and attainments, affirming that a true renunciation may not be achieved by those in the world even by virtue of a genuine attitude of detachment ... Only the *sannyasin* [ascetic] can truly repudiate the world of illusion and proclaim the truth which others may see but which will always elude them" (*Holy Order of Sannyasa*).

This is a key point for Christian ascetics as well. We cannot help but admire Gurudeva's clear statement on the difference between the householder and the renouncer life and his affirmation of the spiritual superiority of the renouncer life. Truly, a life that renounces all pleasures and entertainments to live only for God with all one's heart is the highest form of human life. To be convinced of this, I believe, is essential to the renewal of religious, celibate, monastic, ascetical, contemplative, and apostolic life today. This conviction may, in fact, be the key to this renewal.

One *sadhu* said, "A *sadhu*'s whole life is *puja* (worship), but a householder must set aside time to remember God. The householder has many other concerns" (Gross 1992:111). The *sadhu*'s whole life consists of religious and ascetical practices which are accompanied by the recitation of mantras. The mantra is what makes all he does worship and directs it to God. "The *sadhus* stress that the guru-mantra or the name of God must be repeated while doing austerities or any other ritual act. Without this, they affirm that rituals are empty and meaningless; all ascetic practice must be oriented and offered to God through the use of mantras" (Gross 1992:353).

The ascetic is one who turns his back on the world's pleasures to turn his face fully toward God. "He alone may be considered qualified to seek the absolute who has discrimination, whose mind is turned away from all enjoyments," writes Gurudeva (*Order of Sannyasa*). The Indian Jesuit theologian and professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, Fr. Mariasusai Dhavamony, S.J., writes, "*Bhakti* [devotion] means intensive and single-minded love of God ... The more a man becomes detached from the

objects of the senses, the more he becomes devoted to God and grows in the love of God. *Bhakti* is given only to pure souls who are uncontaminated by the world so that they might be able to love God and have a single aim, namely, to have the mind entirely fixed upon the Lord” (Dhavamony 1999:124).

This is an important reason for Hindu asceticism—to free oneself of all else, especially sensual and worldly enjoyments, in order to be totally devoted to God with all one’s heart, mind, body, and time. This is close indeed to the first and most important commandment of Jesus, to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). It is the ascetic who does this in the most radical and literal way.

Another way of putting this is that we are to choose the good rather than the pleasant, as one Hindu writer puts it (Badlani 2008:858). The pleasant is what gives us pleasure in a worldly sense. The good is the right and best thing to do. The ascetic chooses the good rather than the pleasant. This is well summed up by Fr. Dhavamony. “The reason for renunciation in Hindu spirituality is evident. One who runs after pleasure suffers; one who renounces desires becomes happy. Desire is the cause of suffering; renunciation of worldly pleasures is the highest kind of purity” (1999:107).

The highest life is one that renounces worldly pleasures in order to choose the highest good, namely, the wholehearted, single-minded pursuit of God alone with undivided attention. This is what the Hindu ascetic seeks to do. It is also the goal of Christian asceticism.

The *sadhu* ideal is a life of wandering about alone, focused on God, in renunciation of all things. Staying in one place can lead to developing relationships, especially with women, which is the destruction of the ascetical life. Some *sadhus*, however, are sedentary, living in solitary places, in caves, in deserted temples, in the jungle, or in the forest, eating leaves, fruits, roots, and whatever grows wild. Others live in *ashrams*, which are monastic communities. Some abandon all clothing as part of their renunciation of all things. Others wear only a scanty loin cloth. Their wandering, their dress in orange robes or naked or nearly naked, their one-meal-a-day diet of plain vegetarian food, their renunciation of family, home, marriage, and all forms of secular employment and work all mark them off as renouncing normative society for the sake of an alternative way of life, the ascetic life, the *sadhu* life. Although they may wander about alone, they nonetheless belong to a new family, that of their fellow renouncers (Hausner 2007). They are everywhere held in honor by devout lay householders, who support them with their alms in return for their blessing. Just seeing them and paying them homage is considered a blessing by the lay householder faithful.

The ancient Upanishads have much to say about this way of life, and modern *sadhus* seek to follow these ideals as best they can. The Upanishads say: “A sage should leave his native land right after he has renounced. He shall live far away from his own” (*Maitreya Upanishad* 2.3.2, Olivelle 1992:162). “In this manner having abandoned little by little all attachments ... he abides in Brahman alone” (*Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad* 145, Olivelle 1992:179). “Seeking perfection let him wander alone at all times without a companion. For he realizes that a solitary man ... attains perfection” (Ibid., Olivelle 1992:179).

Plain food is important for *sadhus*. “You can’t do without food, but you can do without taste,” said one *sadhu* (Hausner 2007:175). Anthropologist Sondra Hausner says, “Many renouncers I met ate only one meal a day” (2007:175). They seek their interest

and their delight only in God, not in tasty meals or worldly pleasures or entertainments. This is an important aspect of *sadhu* renunciation, as it also is of Christian asceticism.

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