

ĀS'RAMA DHARMA IN MODERN WORLD

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Abstract: The concept of four *Ās'ramas* as successive stages in the life of an individual is a unique feature of *vaidika* society. The Ashrama Dharma was an ideal social system based on certain vedic ideals and philosophical notions. Its principal aim is to inculcate *vaidika* values in society to uphold the *vaidika* concept of *Dharma*, as they pursue the chief aims of human life, namely *Dharma* (religion), *Artha* (wealth), *Kāma* (pleasures) and *Mokṣa* (salvation), in the course of their journey upon earth, without neglecting their obligatory duties and without sacrificing their spiritual ideals and human values. Here discussed how to fit the four stages of human life to be a perfect for any life style and in any age. It can be as useful today as it was thousands of years ago.

Keywords: Vedic, *Ās'rama*, *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Mokṣa*, Modern Society, self-realisation

Introduction: *Ās'rama dharma* is the *Vedic* system about the Goals of life, Social divisions and Stages of life and one is encouraged to strive for a balance and harmony of all the four goals and never to neglect one in favor of the others. This is the basis for the ideal *Varna-Ās'rama Dharma* a four graded system of life in which the society is divided into four social groups (*varṇa*) according to one's natural talents & propensities. The *Brāhmaṇa*, the *ksatriya*, the *Vaiśya* and the *Sūdra*. The ideal life span of the individual is divided into four stages; *Brahmacārin*, *Grihastha*, *Vānaprasthin* and a eunuciate (*sannyāsin*). The Brahman are expected to pass through all four stages. *Kshatriyas* pass through the first three, *Vaiśyas* have the first two and the *Sūdras* have only one stage - that of marriage. Since the other three, viz., *brahmacarya*, *Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa* were centered around the *Gārhaṣṭhya* as their beneficiary. These are the general recommendations but in practice there are many exceptions as well.

The concept of four *Ās'ramas* as successive stages in the life of an individual is a unique feature of *vaidika* society. The *Vedic dharma* originally upheld the concept of 'Ek-*Ās'rama*' or one *Ās'rama* for the rest of one's life based on one's most dominant goal or aspirations. Of the four, the life of a householder was considered to be the most appropriate and auspicious. However as time went by, the *Dharmasāstras* found favour with the idea of four *Ās'rama* as the successive stages in the lives of twice born castes whereby one could live life in accordance with one's goals and aspirations and also preserve the institutions of family, caste and society. It

was probably an attempt to preserve vedic society by discouraging people from abandoning their homes and family responsibilities at a very young age in their lives and becoming ascetics. Its principal aim is to inculcate *vaidika* values in society to uphold the *vaidika* concept of *Dharma*, as they pursue the chief aims of human life, namely *Dharma* (religion), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (pleasures) and *Moksha* (salvation), in the course of their journey upon earth, without neglecting their obligatory duties and without sacrificing their spiritual ideals and human values. Also in Seventh *Skandha* of *Srimad Bhagavata purana*¹, we have a more detailed analysis of *Ās'rama dharma*, which *Narada* recounts to *Yudhishthira* in the context of his question concerning the birth of *Prahlada*, ending with *Narasimha avatara* due to the activities of *Hiranyaksha* and *Hiranyakashipu*, two children born to *Kashyapa* and *Diti* under queer circumstances. *Narada's* instruction to *Yudhishthira* was especially on the *Dharmas* to be followed in the all adhering to *Ashrama* system of life.

Four Ās'ramas : According to the *Hindu*² view of life, the entire life span can be divided into *four ashramas*: *Brahmacharya*, *Garhasthya*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sannyasa*. During each stage, one is enjoined upon to achieve a goal specific to that stage and at the same time one has to prepare for the next stage and the goal related to it. Thereafter, one enters the state of *Sannyasa* and devotes one's time solely to self-realisation.

Vedic scriptures talk of four prime endeavours of life — *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*—that constitute the basic driving force for fulfilment of the fundamental needs of human beings. *Dharma* is the source of origin for the evolution of human values. Assets (*Artha*) and desires (*Kama*) provides the basic support for worldly enjoyment. *Moksha*, on the other hand, is the central point for self-realisation, after getting rid of physical and mental bondage. Each *Ashrama* has its limitations. There is need to change one's thinking in accordance with the requirements of every *Ās'rama*. Otherwise, in the prevailing conditions and circumstances, confrontation is inevitable. Every *Ās'rama* is like a railway junction, where for every train to arrive at the right track and platform, a change of point is required before hand.

Brahmacarya: *Brahmacarya* is the first stage in the life of a person on the path of the Vedic dharma. It usually begins with his initiation (*Upanayana*) ceremony that marks his new birth as a twice born. *Brahmacarya* means activity concerning *Brahman*. Technically speaking anyone who is in pursuit of *Brahman* or on the path of *Brahma* is a *Brahmacharin*. However, in ancient India it was used to denote a student who was receiving specialized knowledge and vocational training from a teacher about his caste based occupation and practiced celibacy and self restraint

during the course of his education, in order to conserve his energies and remain focused on his immediate goal of mastering his subjects. The students practiced celibacy and self restraint as a part of their obligatory learning, following the example of *Brahma*, the creator god, who was associated with the qualities of celibacy and chastity and who expressed Vedas first at the eve of every creation

Secondly, they lived in the company of a *Ācārya* who was regarded as *Brahman* in human form. Since in either case they followed the ideals of *Brahma* or *Brahman*, they were referred to as *Brahmacharins*, followers of *Brahma*. The life of a *Brahmacharin* followed a pattern as prescribed in the law books and represented the highest virtues one could cultivate at a very young age. After the initiation ceremony, the students stayed with their *Ācārya* for several years, acquiring knowledge in various branches of education, under his close supervision. During this period they were kept fully segregated from their families and were not allowed to contact or visit their homes. With the initiation ceremony, the *Ācārya* assumed the role of a parent and filled their absence. He was both mentor and a parent figure, whose word was final and whose authority was unquestionable. The students were at his mercy. He would give them knowledge, if he was impressed with their conduct and behaviour and grasping ability. Else, they would spend years, doing menial work in his household, hardly receiving his attention. *Manusmṛti*,³ prescribes a maximum period of 9 to 36 years for the stage of *Brahmacarya* or until a student perfects his studies. During this long period, the students were called upon to lead very austere and disciplined lives, as a part of their learning process, since what they received was considered to be a secret knowledge which entailed a great responsibility on their part in using it for the welfare of all. Following is a summary of the code of conduct prescribed by the Hindu law books for a *Brahmacharin*. With some exceptions, these rules were followed by students belonging to all the three upper castes.

First, a *Acharya* or *Preceptor* is the image of *Brahman*. So a student should show complete reverence and obedience to his teacher all the time. In the presence of his *Ācārya*, he should never show any sign of disrespect or carelessness. He should respect not only his *Ācārya* but his entire family irrespective of whether they are younger or older than him and whether they are male or female. A student should usually select a learned *Brahmana* as his teacher, but in times of distress he may learn from a teacher who is not a *Brāhmana*.

Secondly, everyday he should take a bath and purify himself and offer oblations of water to gods, sages, ancestors and spirits and pour fuel into the sacred fire. He should study the Holy Scriptures and recite the verses till he gains complete mastery over them.

Thirdly, A student is not allowed to cook his own food. It is his duty to go out every day and beg for food, only from the people of merit, who are knowledgeable in the Vedas, who are morally righteous, who are not related to him through his mother or father and those who have not committed mortal sins.

Fourthly, He should be very strict in practicing self restraint. He should abstain from honey, meat, perfumes, garlands, spices, women and foods that are acidic. He should never anoint his body, use sandals or an umbrella. He should also refrain from singing, dancing and playing musical instruments. He should stay away from the female members of the teacher's household and keep as much distance as possible from them.

Fifthly, He should cultivate virtues by controlling his sensual desires, anger and greed. He should practice humility and restraint in speech, behaving like an idiot even if he is wise. He should avoid causing injury to living creatures and should not participate in vices such as gambling, idle disputes, backbiting, lying, looking at and touching women and hurting others.

Sixthly, He should always sleep alone and never waste his manhood. Manu declared that he who voluntarily wasted his manhood, broke his vow.

The stage of *Brahmacarya* was spent almost entirely in the *Gurukulas*. Its purpose was mastery of the Vedas and other scriptures and acquiring the knowledge of Brahman, through cultivation of virtues, practices of restraint of the mind and the body. The curriculum varied from caste to caste, but the emphasis on the code of conduct and the relationship between the students and their *Ācārya* were guided by the same principles. Practice of celibacy was central to the life of a student, because it was the most difficult thing to do and success in that area denoted complete mastery in self-control. Besides, sublimation of sexual energy was considered essential to develop the faculties of the mind in a student such as memory and comprehension and make him worthy of higher learning. After successful completion of their education, by mastering either all the Vedas or at least one of them, the students were permitted by their *Ācārya* to leave and return to their homes. The student's return to home was usually marked with a *Samabartana* ceremony in which he presented to his master with a *Guru Dakṣiṇā* such as a field, gold, a cow, a horse, a parasol and shoes, a seat, grain, (even) vegetables, or whatever was pleasing to the teacher.

Gārhasṭhya : The stage of *Grhastā*⁴ begins when a student returns home after successful completion of his education, without breaking rules, and takes a ritual bath. The ritual bath marks the beginning of his life as a *Snataka*, which marks the period of transition from a student to a responsible young adult, ready to take full responsibilities as a householder. In ancient times the *Snataka Brahmanas*, who just completed their education but were not yet married or initiated into household duties, enjoyed good reputation. They were respected for their knowledge and purity and enjoyed free passage from one place to place and even between territories that belonged to different rulers who were mutually hostile. Hence the spies and kings often went in the guise of a *Snataka Brahmana* to gather sensitive information or escape from close scrutiny. The *Snataka* phase lasted till marriage, after which one took up the responsibilities of a householder and spent his energies in performing obligatory duties. The life of a householder as the best of all the *Ās'ramas* as it supports those in the other three *ashram*. It is also considered important to the continuation of the vedic *Dharma*, *Varnās'rama Dharma* and caste based occupations. The following duties are prescribed for a householder.

He should perform various daily, monthly and annual sacrifices as prescribed in the law books with utmost sincerity. The daily sacrifices are five in number, *Brahmayajna*, *Devayajna*, *Pitruyajna*, *Bhutayajna* and *Manusyayajna*. *Brahmayajna* is sacrifice to *Brahman*. Also known as *Ahuta*, it consists of teaching and study of the Vedas, recitation of the Vedas and contemplation and worship of *Brahman*. *Devayajna* is sacrifice to gods. Also known as *huta*, it consists of offering burnt oblations to gods. *Pitruyajna* is sacrifice to ancestors. Also known as *Prasita*, it consists of offering food and water called *Tarpana* to the departed souls. *Bhutayajna* is a sacrifice to the animals. Also known as *Prahuta*, it consists of offering bali or sacrificial food to the animals and insects. *Manusyayajna* is a sacrifice to the human beings. Also known as *Brahmyahuta*, it hospitable treatment of the guests and making an offering in the digestive fire of a *Brahmana*. In addition to the five sacrifices, he should also make offerings of food everyday to various gods and goddesses~ ghosts and goblins, dogs, and to poor people as prescribed in the *Dharmashastras*. He should give alms to ascetics and students, who cannot cook food for themselves due to the obligations of their religious duties.

He should also make sacrificial offerings to fire at the beginning and end of the day and in the night. He should eat whatever that remains after making all the offerings and honouring all the gods and ancestors.

He should make monthly offerings to his ancestors during which he should also honour the invited guests by offering them food. In addition he should also perform sacrifices at certain times during a year. The sacrifices are part of one's religious obligation. Under no circumstances should they be performed to cultivate friendships or enhance one's social standing

In order to discharge his obligatory duties as a householder, he should accumulate property by engaging himself in occupations that are prescribed for his caste, with as little pain as possible to others. He should live honestly and virtuously. He should stay away from forbidden occupations, restrain his senses and detach himself from sensual pleasures. He should not acquire wealth that would interfere with the study of the Vedas. His dress, speech, and thoughts should be in conformity with his age, his occupation, his wealth, his sacred learning, and his race.

He should keep his hair, nails, and beard clipped, wear white garments and keep himself pure. He should always be engaged in studying the Veda and similar acts that are conducive to his welfare. He should show respect towards the teacher who initiated him, or who explained the Veda, his father and mother, or any other *Guru*, cows, *Brahmanas* and men performing austerities. During the performance of these duties, he should look after his wife and keep her happy and she in turn should support him in the discharge of his obligatory duties, remaining patient, self-controlled and never doing anything that might displease him, whether he was alive or dead.

The life of a householder places enormous responsibility on people, making them work for their temporal and spiritual goals, without sacrificing their higher aims and without succumbing to the temptations of materialistic life, living in a society that regards personal possession as a mark of one's success and achievement. It is like walking on a perilous path, where the chances of faltering are higher and the consequences of karmic sin greater. The *Bhagavadgītā*, therefore, rightly advises people to perform their obligatory duties with a sense of sacrifice and as an offering to God, accepting Him as the Real Doer and without seeking the fruit of their actions.

Vānaprastha, : according to *Manusmṛti*,

"Grihasthastu yada pas'yed abali-palitatmanah

*Apatyasya chapatyam tada vānaprastham samācaret."*⁵

—when a householder sees his wrinkled skin, white hair, and grandsons, it is time for him to retire into a forest, to begin a life of detachment and gradual withdrawal from the distractions and attractions of the external world, either by entrusting his children to his wife, after making provision for their sustenance, or accompanied by her, leaving behind all his possessions. Technically this

is the stage of retirement. What distinguishes him from a *Sanyasin*/renouncer is his use of sacrificial fire, which he carries along with him into the forest, and his performance of the five daily sacrifices. During this phase, he is advised to practice austerities and remain celibate. The life of a forest dweller is difficult and challenging because it makes a great demand on the part of an individual, who is accustomed to a certain way of life and comforts, to make necessary adjustments in order to fit himself into a life of hardship and suffering. The *Vānaprastha*, lives in his mind, in his thought, and not in his actions. In earlier stages, actions contributed a lot to the conservation of energy and the fulfilment of the duties of life, but now thought itself is enough, and one contemplates by gathering up all one's energies on the great aim of life. 'The *Vānaprastha* contemplates not merely the world of people but the very elements that control all life. It is a higher meditation which is *Upasana* on the whole of creation—manifestation of God as this world'⁶. The following rules are prescribed for a forest dweller.

He may live in a dwelling place of a hermitage and should continue to make the five daily sacrifices as in the householder's stage, using various kinds of pure food fit for ascetics, or with herbs, roots, and fruit.

He should *Paridhana* (wear) a skin or a tattered garment~ bathe in the evening or in the morning~ and always wear his hair in braids. The hair on his body, his beard, and his nails should remain unclipped. He is also expected to train himself physically and mentally by various exercises.

Sannyas: The last and final *Ashrama* is known as *Sanyasa*, in which one is advised to live like a mendicant or an ascetic, renouncing everything, including the sacrificial fire and the five daily sacrifices. Especially renouncing of *Dehātma-Buddhi*, that is knowledge of *Upahita-Bramha*. It is difficult to say when exactly the *Vānaprastha*, ends and the *Sanyāsa* begins spiritually because a person is advised to transform himself gradually from a forest dweller into a full fledged ascetic by increasing his austerities and making them harsher and harsher to the point where he becomes indifferent to the vicissitudes of life. However what distinguishes the two phases is the use of fire. A person who enters the phase of *Sanyasa* is advised to perform a special ceremony and withdraw the sacrificial fire into himself so that he himself becomes an embodiment of fire that manifests itself as a radiant spiritual energy (*tapas*). During this phase a *Sanyas'i* is advised to become completely detached from all worldly activities and possession and become a wanderer, subsisting on alms, controlling himself and not hurting any animal. He should beg only once in a day, in a place where no kitchens smoke is seen, and subsist on meagre food, just to keep himself alive. By eating little, and by standing and sitting in solitude, he is advised to restrain

his senses from the sense objects. By the restraining his senses, by the destruction of love and hatred, and by abstaining from injuring the creatures, he should make himself fit for immortality.

He should contemplate upon death, transmigration of men, conditions of after life, and possibilities of future lives and so on. By deep meditation, he has to recognize the subtle nature of the supreme Soul and its presence in all beings, both the highest and the lowest. He should conduct himself in such a way that no harm is done to other beings, either intentionally or unintentionally. According to *Manusmṛiti*, “By not injuring any creatures, by detaching the senses from objects of enjoyment, by the rites prescribed in the Veda, and by rigorously practicing austerities,”⁸ he has to overcome the dualities of life, such as pain and pleasure, love and hatred, joy and sorrow and attain freedom from the circle of births and deaths.

The *Sannyasin* is the apex of energy conservation and meditation, and it has nothing to do with shaving one’s head or wearing a particular cloth, which are only social requirements that have been imposed upon individuals for keeping abreast with the circumstances of present living.

Reflection in modern world: From the birth of a child into this world onwards, there is a graduated building up of personality through conservation of energy at different levels of being. It is emphasised in the *Manusmṛiti*,⁹ that life is not meant for enjoyment, it is meant for working vigorously for the attainment of freedom. It is not that the *Sannyasin* is an old man, the *Grihastha* is youthful, and the *Brahmachari* is a little boy, these ideas must be cast aside. These stages are all forms of operation of the mind in various degrees of perfection. We rise from perfection to perfection. Every stage is a stage of perfection—only, one is a miniature form of it, another is a wider form of it, and it goes on enlarging its circle until it becomes total perfection. Now a day, we can see, how a person can observe these four stages in the present day world. *Brahmacharya* (As Student), Study and acquire some degree, skill or expertise in some field that is in harmony with your inner disposition. *Grihasthsharama* (As a householder), Marry, rear children, perform your responsibilities towards your parents, wife, children, relations, friends, organization, society and world in general. Treat all life as sacred and be philanthropic. *Vanaprastha* (As a retiree), Evaluate and review what you have done so far. Have you completed your obligatory duties towards you family and relations? Are you in a position to slowdown, to withdraw and spend more time in mentally satisfying and spiritually uplifting tasks? Remember *Vanaprastha* is not an escape but a kind of obligatory retirement for a higher cause. Lastly *Sanyasa* (The last phase), This is the phase of complete withdrawal. You have seen it all. You have enjoyed your life.

It is time you sit and relax, you reminisce, and look at life as if in a film and draw into yourself your attention and your thoughts. It is time to wake up the God in you¹⁰.

At the present day, *Ashramas* can't be exactly lived according to the details of the ancient rules above. Situation and condition is changed. But they may be revived in spirit, in which case they would greatly improve modern life.

Conclusion: The *Ashrama Dharma* was an ideal social system based on certain vedic ideals and philosophical notions. If we set aside the caste based prejudices and elements of orthodoxy referred in the law books and look afresh at the overall concept and the broader framework of life it envisages from a spiritual, moral and social point of view, we find the four stages of human life to be a perfect fit for any life style and in any age. It can be as useful today as it was thousands of years ago. In western societies, it is common for old people to work well into their 70s in order to support their life style. Governments are forced to spend huge amounts of money on social security and in providing health care for the old and the retired. In the eastern societies young people, caught up in the wheels of economic development, are accused of failing moral standards and ignoring their parents. Part of the problem stems from the fact that people want to extend their lives as householders and do not want to withdraw from material life or reduce their necessities or control their desires. They cannot overcome their attachment with the attractions of life or the comforts it seems to offer. In *Vanaprastha Ashrama*, dharma acts as the guiding force in one's life towards renunciation and/or higher spirituality. Since the resources are limited and the population is constantly increasing, any system can only support as many people it is designed to. So, if we are unable to maintain the socio-economic values, the resources will decrease and degenerate. If people refuse to retire and new people keep adding up, it would put severe strain upon our resources and bring our socio-economic system to a grinding halt. The grave issues in the US healthcare system are one good example of this crisis. If people withdraw from professional life after a certain age and engage themselves in activities for social welfare, reducing their personal wants and desires and contemplating upon higher spiritual ideals, it would do a great deal of good to society in the long run.

In the *Grihastha Ashrama*, the householder is to discharge all his duties and debts according to *Dharma*. *Artha*, is to be obtained for satisfying *Kama* (*will behind each and every action*), with righteous manner, according to *Dharma*. It is only under the aegis of *Dharma* that one may properly enjoy worldly life, earn money and other assets, and, can take care of the family as a social unit and its welfare. Performance of various duties by a householder requires full support

from family and society — that is why *Manu* considered the *Grihastha Ashrama* to be the central force to hold up other three *Ashrama*. To quote –

“*Yatha Vayum Samasritya Variante Sarvajantavah;*
Tatha Grhastham-Asritya Variante sarva Asramah.”¹¹

Moksha (salvation) is the ultimate goal of life though this may not be desirable for all. Now a day's few people, who maintain above mention activities as per four *Ashramas*, take care of as long as they live and also carry forward a healthy family lifestyle from generation to generation. *Moksha* is a state of desirelessness and has been defined in different ways. Those having spiritual aspiration from their chosen organization where their spiritual quest can flourish. When such activities are performed without attachment the aspirant will achieve unconditional joy, which is absolutely inner, which is traditionally known as *Nishchreyas* or *Abhyudaya*. Also some of them try to use their knowledge and experience in activities benefiting society at large scale without seeking personal profit. Such selfless motivation gives them immense 'inner' joy and peace. According to *Tulasidas*, where there is Divinity, there are no desires, and, Divinity seems to be unapproachable where there are desires. Thus, a life devoid of worldly desires and spiritually developed opens up the way to salvation. This indeed is the import of the *Ashrama* system in today's context. Experience it, and chant the following universal prayer day and night; you will feel inwardly happy. May all be happy and lead a life free from disease and devoid of worries; may fortune always smile on all, and none come to any harm or suffer from any sorrow or misfortune.

‘*Sarve bhavantu sukhina, sarve santu nirāmaya,*
sarve bhadrani pashayantu, maa kashchid-dukkhabhavbhaveta’¹²

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