



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

July 2015 Contemplation:
Understanding Yoga — Understanding Life #7

A Beautiful Life

By Swami Nirmalananda & Vidyadevi Stillman

The road map of life described by the sages is like a pin drop on your cell phone. Understanding your stage of life while you are in it gives you a better understanding of where you are and where you are going, as well as why. Last month's article described your first two stages, brahmacharya and grihastha, student and householder. Now we explore your last two stages more fully: vanaprastha (retirement) and sannyasa (renunciant). Each focuses on one of the last two goals of life: pleasure and liberation.

Pleasure is your goal in vanaprastha, which literally means "forest dweller." You want quiet, peaceful and beautiful surroundings. Some people move to the vana: forest or mountains, or even the beach; others make their garden incredibly beautiful so they can enjoy sitting in it with a book and glass of iced tea. You're retired, living a quiet life, devoting your time to things you enjoy. You have stepped back from the hustle and bustle and can finally focus on the third goal of life, kama (pleasure).

While your life may be very busy, it's full of the things you have chosen, not things that are required of you. Dharma (responsibilities) and artha (finances) have been mostly fulfilled, dharma having been the theme of brahmacharya and artha the theme of grihastha. A retiree wakes up in the morning and thinks, "What do I want to do today?" As a householder, you used to think, "What do I have to do today?"

You might say, "Oh, I feel like staying home, but I promised to do this thing for someone." Then you have the freedom to cancel or reschedule without feeling bad. If you were still working, you would suit up and show up. Now you are more spontaneous, you get to follow your impulses. You have time to do crafts, music or even study a new subject, whether formally or informally. You might choose to do more yoga; while it is a spiritual activity, it is also pleasurable.

The other goals of life are still part of your life. You still fulfill dharma, keeping up with family events, caring for your home and voting. You may get more involved in politics or environmental causes, volunteering and doing good works in the world. Yet you decide when and how much, not like when you have a job. Vidyadevi says, "Someone told me she quit volunteering on a church committee that was frustrating her, saying, 'I am retired. I don't need the stress.'"

Artha: whether you have plenty of money or have to live frugally, this is the time to dedicate your funds to things that give you pleasure. You also have more time for spiritual pursuits (moksha), but you are doing it because you enjoy it. This stage of life is playtime. Don't feel guilty about it. People who are still working hard for their basic 40 years or more are looking forward to playtime. You get to embrace it.

Around the age of 84, sannyasa naturally develops. Renunciation is a path to the fourth goal of life — moksha, liberation. Indicators of genuine renunciation are that you have no fear, no anger, no excitement, no preferences and even no interest in possessions anymore (though you usually have the possessions necessary for the continuance of life). You are free from neediness, have no agenda or script that you or other people should be following and enjoy being free from reactivity. Technically, you do react to everything that happens, but with only one reaction — a welcoming and loving acceptance that is full of joy, even in the tough stuff.

This may sound like "flatline," losing the highs and lows of life. Actually your flatline lifts to the highest level, higher than the highs in your previous life stages. A sannyasi grows into "stitha praj-na," the state of steady knowingness, also called "svaroopavidya" or "sahaja samadhi." This is moksha, the fruit of the process named sannyasa, renunciation. Swami Nirmalananda describes how Baba explained this state:

Even if such a one were to open her eyes, her inner absorption would not be disturbed. On closing her eyes, her inner state would not be enhanced. Even if she were to speak, her silence would not be broken; falling silent, her silence would not be enhanced.

Unfortunately, most people think renunciation is leaving or pushing things and people away; actually that is properly named "rejection" and "abandonment." These are not spiritual attainments! They are emotional reactions which often occur in earlier life stages. True renunciation is when you accept the

difficult situations and people, with your eyes fully open and your heart fully open, yet your mind is turning inward to find its fulfillment in its own source.

There are two types of sannyasis: initiated sannyasis (like Swami Nirmalananda) and elders (those who age into sannyasa). For both types, their goal is liberation, though the other goals continue to be a part of life until the end of life:

The dharma (responsibility) of a sanyasi is pursue Truth and ultimately to embody the goal Artha (finances) are still a part of life, though elders often have a nest egg or family to care for them, while initiated sannyasis usually have their worldly needs provided by others.

Both types of sannyasis still laugh, enjoy chocolate, like sunshine and enjoy other people's company. They don't pursue kama (pleasure) as a pathway to happiness because their happiness comes from the inner source.

In the transition periods between stages, you experience confusion for a couple of years. From brahmacharya to grihastha, when you get out of school and get your first job, at first you ask, "I work 50 weeks a year? A workday is 8-10 hours a day! Really?" Then you get the hang of it.

Moving from grihastha to vanaprastha, suddenly you have so much free time. What do you do with it? You might even think, "Maybe I should consult or pick up a part-time job." Once you get used to all the free time, you wouldn't trade it for anything!

From vanaprastha to sannyasa, you can be confused because you are used to playing with your friends, going places and doing things purely for fun. It can take a while to figure out that you are being drawn inward, especially if you don't have the teachings to help you understand yourself.

Another common confusion arises for many yogis: they feel they are in sannyasa while they are still householders. They experience the great yearning, which compels them to do a lot of yogic practices, as well as to cultivate a yogic perspective on their life. The bottom line is: if you are a householder and have family and work responsibilities as well as a home full of possessions, you are not in sannyasa. Another examples is that if you decide to get rid of stuff, but everything you pick up has memories attached to it, so you may want to keep it or make sure it gets a good home, you are not a sannyasi.

You are not a sannyasi if you tell the people around you, "I don't want to watch this football game with you. It is not spiritual." Don't beat people up with your spirituality! If you were truly sannyasi, you would watch the game with them, serving them by sharing the time with them. That feeling that you don't want to be there means you haven't yet renounced your desire to separate yourself from others, nor your desire to choose your own pleasurable activities. Sannyasa is when you know, "If no one was home, I would mediate, but they are home, so I am going to sit with them." Sannyasa is renunciation, not rejection and not abandonment.

The good news is that you don't have to be a sannyasi in order to become Self-Realized! Neither do you have to be initiated as a sannyasi, nor do you have to wait until you age into it. Swamiji says, "My Baba often taught about the householder-saints in yoga. You can become Self-Realized today, in the life you are living. You have my permission and my blessing."

A few of you will want to know that initiated sannyasa is accessible, because a swami can make another swami. Nirmalananda has announced that she is going to establish a spiritual order. There will be avenues that support you dedicating your life to the highest purpose — as a sannyasi, a householder, a student or a retiree.

How do you weave your spirituality into the stage you currently inhabit? You begin with accepting the stage you are in. Nirmalananda says, "The bottom line is: Be Here Now."

You can focus on "Be," which is the ultimate mystical knowingness of who you are.

Or you can focus on "Now," a popular way of pointing you toward your own spiritual essence.

But you also have to focus on "Here." You are in the stage of life that you are in. Enjoy it.

Live a spiritual life and progressively deepen your spiritual practices. This is a beautiful life.

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