

**Satsang with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati**  
**Arsha Vidya Gurukulam**  
**More on Duty (2 of 3)**

*Question*

When does a student know he is ready for the life of a *grhastha*?

*Answer*

The human life was traditionally divided into four equal parts of 25 years each, consisting of *bramacharya*, *grhastha*, *vanaprastha*, and *sannyāsa*. A student would go to a teacher at the age of eight, and live with him for 12 years or more to complete his study. At the end of the study, the student was fully trained to perform all the rituals and take on responsibilities, at which point, he was eligible to become a householder. You can enter the life of a householder when you feel that you are ready to accept the responsibility of having a family. You then have the maturity to establish, cultivate, and maintain the relationship with your spouse. Your education is complete and you are financially independent. Marriage does not automatically take place merely because one is of age, say, 25 years old.

Marriage, like anything else, should be a response to a specific need. The human being has many needs: a biological urge, an emotional need, and a need for companionship, sharing, and caring. In order to fulfill these needs, you have to make a commitment and take the responsibility of married life. Yes, marriage indeed involves a big commitment and that commitment will be worthwhile only if it fulfills your needs. It is a very beautiful life of growth, including spiritual growth. Only when you make the commitment after fully understanding what is involved in marriage, is it fine. Otherwise, if people plunge into marriage quite unprepared and without knowing what it entails, they are disappointed; the marriage then becomes very difficult and leads to conflicts and strife. Thus, one should be aware of what married life involves and its benefits. We must ask ourselves, what do I stand to gain? What are my responsibilities and commitments? One should be clear about these issues before taking up the life of a *grhastha*.

*Question*

How does a householder prepare for retirement when he is so engrossed and immersed in his household work?

### *Answer*

A householder's life is, in fact, a spiritual life. Just because one is active and engaged in fulfilling one's responsibilities it does not mean that he or she is not a spiritual person. To live a life of commitment, responsibility, and values is a spiritual life; it is a preparation that will progressively help you develop a love for worship, prayer, and Self-knowledge.

It is a good idea to set some time apart from your activities even as a householder. You cannot wait until retirement. It should be done everyday. Even on a busy day, spend half an hour or an hour on prayer, meditation, or the study of the scriptures. Spend a little extra time once a week, and some extra time once a month, and some more time once a year. For example, you could perhaps spend one hour everyday, or maybe half a day every week, one day each month, and, perhaps one week each year. It is a matter of priority. If I understand that I have to prepare myself for a life of retirement in which I should have a mind, which essentially abides in itself, I am going to require some preparation. A life of values, commitment, and responsibility itself is a very good form of preparation; in addition, take some time out for solitude everyday. If you cannot get one hour at a stretch, maybe two sessions of half an hour each. But do take the time to be with yourself. Devote that time to prayers, or the study of the scriptures; then, the mind develops an interest in the study of the scriptures. Therefore, we should cultivate an interest in the study of the scriptures, prayers, or meditation. If you do that before you retire, that interest will sustain you during your retirement. Do cultivate these interests so that you can be with yourself. In a busy life, you have many other people, whereas, in retirement, you are essentially with yourself; and for that, you should have cultivated some interest which can keep you with yourself.

### *Question*

Can you explain 'vanaprastha' according to the Vedic tradition, and the role of vanaprastha in today's society?

### *Answer*

In the Vedic tradition, there are four stages of life: *brahmacarya*, the life of a student; *grhastha*, the life of a householder; *vanaprastha*, the life of a forest dweller or hermit, and *sannyāsa*, the life of a renunciate. Corresponding to each of these four life-stages, there are four sections in the Vedas: the *samhita*, which is memorized and recited by the students; the *brāhmaṇa* which explains the rituals

and provides a code of conduct for the householders; the *aranyaka*, which describes various forms of worship and meditation for the forest-dwellers, and the Upanishads, which are pursued by the renunciates.

Traditionally, a retired couple would go and live in *vana* or a forest and continue their prayers. The husband and the wife live together, but as friends. While they used to perform various fire rituals as householders, now, they perform prayers mentally. Having performed the rituals as householders, they have gained a relative steadiness of the mind, which allows them to perform these rituals mentally. It is called *upāsana* or meditation. In short, the life of a *vanaprastha* is a life of prayer, worship, and the study of the scriptures. Perhaps, in those days, they even used to go out for *bhiksha*.

Nowadays, you can stay at home and ask for *bhiksha* from your children. You can live a life of solitude depending upon your conditions and preferences, or you can have a separate room in your home for yourself. As far as possible, minimize your role and involvement in the running of the household and in other social activities. Your social responsibilities are over and therefore, there is no need to attend marriages and other social functions; or at the least, you should minimize these activities. Thus, in this third stage of life, you can study, meditate, or contemplate. Your life should be centered on God in terms of prayers, study, and chanting. You should be in the company of other like-minded people. If circumstances permit, go to places like *gurukulams* or ashrams, and spend your time familiarizing yourself with the Vedantic teaching. In fact you should expose yourself to Vedantic teaching even before retirement. In your life as an active householder, make some time for it and begin to enjoy the life of solitude. We can't abruptly go from an active and busy life as a householder to that of a solitary retired person. This attitude of mind has to be cultivated gradually so that you gain sufficient composure and comfort with yourself to be able to live such a life. Thus, the preparation for *vanaprastha*, a retired lifestyle, should begin much earlier.

### *Question*

You said that one gradually moves from the second to the third stage of life. What about the other transitions? Is each transition gradual or are there any abrupt changes?

### *Answer*

The life of a householder is basically meant for gaining emotional maturity. If two persons continue to live together, they have to grow in maturity. There is no other choice. It is like bullocks pulling a cart. When one bullock is new and is teamed with an older and more experienced bullock, the new bullock has to go along with it and get trained. Similarly, marriage leaves us no choice; if you make a commitment, you cannot drop out and, therefore, you have to grow. Every stage of life is meant for growth. The life of a householder is meant for growth in terms of emotional maturity. We learn to be accommodative, giving, and accepting. Our own likes and dislikes are slowly let go in order to nurture and nourish the relationship. A relationship can be nurtured and nourished only when both the individuals are willing to let go. If they both hold on to their individual likes and dislikes, it is very difficult to nurture the relationship. Let go of your likes and dislikes when they come in the way of your relationship. You can retain your individuality, your preferences, and your likes and dislikes only if they do not come in the way of the relationship. Thus, one gains sufficient maturity in living the life of a householder.

It is not easy to live a life of solitude, prayers, and study. It is not that you are ready for the third stage just because you are 60 or 65 years old. For that, you must be fairly introverted, your mind should enjoy a reasonable amount of composure, and you must develop a love for studying the scriptures. Emotional maturity will bring about that kind of love and foster those values so that you are happy to retire and devote yourself to a life of study, contemplation, and prayers. Only if you had prepared yourself throughout your life as a householder can you be ready for the third stage. Therefore, it is not an abrupt change. It is a process of growth all along.

The four stages of life really correspond to the four stages of spiritual maturity. Each of the four stages of life is prescribed to facilitate the process of spiritual growth. The progress from one stage to the next is gradual, not abrupt.

### *Question*

When one retires, one can live a life of solitude and contemplate. How about the important task of offering our service to the less privileged in society? Does Hinduism stress that as part of our living?

### *Answer*

Serving the less privileged in the society is usually done by a householder. One of the *yajñas* prescribed for the householder is to serve the needy. Therefore, giving charity, feeding, and serving are part of a householder's life. This kind of activity is what brings about emotional growth in a householder. Only after having finished all these duties does one enter the life of a *vanaprastha*. If a person feels that he needs to serve the less privileged, he should do it and continue to lead an active life. It is not that just because you retire from your professional life you have to live a life of isolation or solitude. You can continue with other activities, if you wish. It just means that your active life continues. If at some point in time you feel that you have done enough and are ready to retire, you can pursue the life of retirement. The idea is that you should someday become a *vanaprastha* and live a life of solitude, meditation, prayers, and study. There is no end to what we can do for the world. We should do as much as we can. At the same time, we have to respect our own needs. It is quite alright to attend to your own spiritual needs<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcribed by Gautam, Jaya Kannan, and Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.