



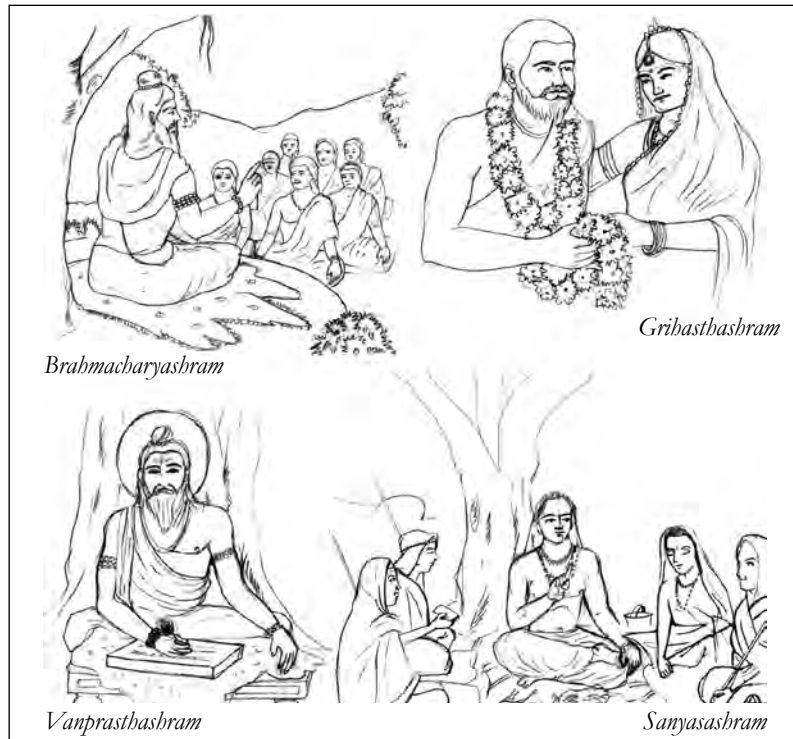
# The ideal lifestyle of four Ashrams

In childhood, we have learnt from history books, about four 'ashrams' as four stages of human life. These concepts of ashrams are useful to understand a person's duties on earth. Our own religious books have told us about four aspirations of Man namely, 'Dharm (Religion), Arth (Money), Kam (Wants) and Moksh (Salvation). First goal of Man is behaving according to the religion. Our conduct should always be moral. Second is 'earning Money' essential for living, running a family. A person should earn money honestly and sincerely. Third is Kam, (wants) to sustain his knowledge, thoughts, tradition, culture etc. through next generation. For this one should give birth to children and carry on the extension of family tree. Fourth is *moksha* which means salvation.

The concept of religion is very extensive. It has got many layers. It contains the secret of the world and spirituality. It contains earthly and other duties of man. Man has certain duties for himself and his family. Man has some duties for the society and some for the nation; some for mother earth. Thus one is bound by all such duties. Such duties are called *Kutumb dharm* (duties for family) *Shejar dharm* (duties for neighbour) *Samaj dharm* (duties for the society). *Rashtra dharm* (duties for the country) *Vasundhara dharm* (duties for the earth). Everybody has to perform their duties according to their capability. These duties are included in four ashram (stages) and *purusharthas* (goals).

It is said that every drop has the ocean in it. It means a drop of water has the qualities as that of a big river and a big ocean. A stone of salt has many particles in it. The qualities of all the particles are the same. The quality of every particle is the same as that of the salty stone. We have studied about elements in science. It is true in case of human beings also, whether a person is big or small, his goal of life is the same. All have to follow the same goal. Four stages of Man, have four goals setting direction to man. Our spiritual teachings have told us about the system of four 'ashrams', so that a person can perform his timely duties. The four ashrams are *Brahmacharyashram*, *Grihasthasram*, *Vanprasthasram* and *Sanyasashram*. Thus human life is divided into four intervals, from his life to death. It means 30% is divided into first ashram, 40% in the second and 10% in the third and the rest in *Sanyasashram*. This system has become out-dated today. In olden days, people followed this system and got its benefits.

When a baby was born, it stayed with parents till it became familiar with the surroundings. Then he or she was sent to the '*guru kul*' (teacher's place) for studying. After staying and studying for



twelve years in the *Gurukul*, the youth returned home. The period of staying with the guru is known as *Brahmacharyashram*. In the *Gurukul* students studied about 4 goals namely – *dharm*, *arth*, *karm* and *moksha*. After getting the basic knowledge, they were free to choose the subjects of their interest. The '*gurus*' gave them knowledge, useful in future life. The students got knowledge not only through the theory but also through practice and experience. Teachers gave all the knowledge, acquired from their ancestors, to the students. Case studies were used by teachers in those days. Debates and discussions were held. Students used to get the company of their teachers. Kings, ministers and others were invited in the *Gurukul*. They used to tell their experiences. Thus intellectual developments of students used to take place. At the same time students had to do all the work. They performed all kinds of works; like 'going in the jungle, cutting the wood, gathering roots, getting food, cleaning the premises, serving the teachers etc.' They were taught 'self-dependence' through it. They had to get up early in the morning and do the exercise. It used to keep them fit, fine and healthy. There was no discrimination. The children of common men studied along with the children of kings and other officials. All had to do all types of work. The feeling of brotherhood existed. We know the story of *Shrikrishna* and *Sudama*. *Shrikrishna* belonged to a king's family while *Sudama* was a poor *Brahmin* boy. Both studied at the *Gurukul* of the sage *Sandeepanee*. In short, students learnt the lessons of life along with different subjects of education. When such fully developed young men, returned to their homes, they had acquired the social and natural wisdom in true sense, to share the benefits of their knowledge and skills to the society. Here the word '*brahmacharya*' is important. Later we will discuss about it.

A youth used to enter '*grihasthasrama*' after completing his education and working in his specialized field. He would get married to a woman who would be his perfect partner in his duties. His duties included "to live ethically as husband-wife, produce children, look after them, and run the family, to serve the parents and elders, get their guidance, send the children to the *Gurukul* for studying, get the parents ready for '*sanyasashrama*' etc." Other functions of the '*grihasthasarmi*' were achieving status in the society, on the basis of knowledge, skill, hard work, helping the needy, behaving morally according to the religion, performing pujas etc. The aim of '*grihasthasrama*' was to perform duties for the society and to have stability, fame and success in life.

A person used to enter '*vanaprasthasram*', after enjoying family life, after handing over his responsibilities to the next generation.

‘*Vanaprasthasram*’ means staying in the forest. After getting retired from ‘*grihashthasrama*’ the couple used to go and stay with the sages. They used to advise and guide their children. They used to share their experiences in the ‘*grihashthasrama*’ to their children. As the railway change line and slowly goes from one line to another, likewise the heritage of one generation was transferred neatly and slowly to the next generation, slowly with a definite speed. The person in the ‘*vanprastha*’ used to act as a trustee. ‘*Vanprastha*’ to *Sanyasashram* was a big and thoughtful step.

When the sons and daughters of a person were adjusted completely in the family life, a person used to enter into *sanyasashrama* from *vanaprasthasrama*. While entering this ‘*ashram*’, their mind was free from all feelings, wishes. They had the satisfaction of living the life to the full extent. The differences disappeared. The mind is filled with the feeling of, the world is my home. The person turns spiritual, spends time in praying and worshipping God. In the last stage of life, a person doesn’t need much food and water. One needs clean air, sunlight, and closeness to the nature. Mind becomes fresh, peaceful and happy being close to nature and thoughts of God. Thus ‘good-bye’ to the world with happy, contented mind was the end of *sanyasashrama*. Once upon a time a neat good lifestyle existed in our society which included *brahmacharyashrama* – acquiring knowledge, *Grihashthasrama* – family life, *Vanaprasthasrama* – transfer of knowledge, tradition etc. *Sanyasashrama* – salvation. It was a kind of life-management. It was a way of making life meaningful, useful, enhancing the values of life for the society, country and the world. It was a well-planned tradition and people heartily followed it.

Today, what has happened? These things are taught to us as history. But they are seen through the frame of religion. We know that it is a tradition and therefore we ignore it. Time has changed. World has also changed. We feel that we should not give importance to such old tradition. Today, out of the four *ashramas*, we speak only of *grihashthasrama* and feel ourselves great in following it. Today many problems regarding life are increasing; a number of wrong things are increasing in the society. The question arises, ‘in which direction are we going and living the life? It is not always old is gold. But what happens if we turn towards the good things that existed in the olden times?’

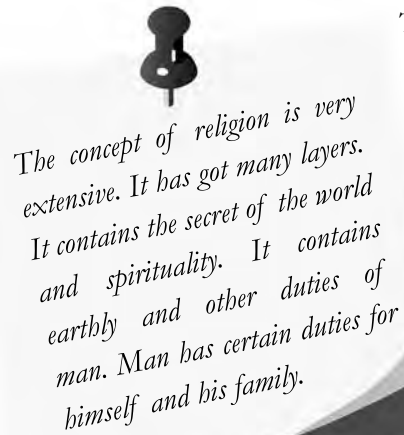
In the concept of *brahmacharyashram*, the word *brahmacharya* is important. It means no preferences. If a person has to concentrate on study, he should keep away from the things he likes i.e. attractions of certain things so education and *brahmacharya* were combined. A student if stayed away from his home, away from the earing of the parents,

without interruption of parents’ love in studies, protected from the bitter-sweet things in the family, could study properly. When children pass through the stage of adolescence, sexual feelings are developed. They feel attracted to the person of opposite sex. This attraction leads to the distraction in their studies. As they used to stay away in the *Gurukul* (the teachers’ place), there was no possibility of watching or getting attracted towards the person of opposite sex. So it was easy for them to control their feelings and study properly.

Today the situation is reversed. Children stay with parents. Parents don’t allow them to become independent. As a result children get addicted to the parents’ love and affection. They become confident yet dependent. They keep away from the society. They are not aware of their relation with the society. They feel that the opinions, thoughts and roles of their parents are important, because they don’t know about the other side. They tend to become lonely. They like to stay alone, away from the society. Today we see such picture very clearly.

Today, we see boys-girls together. Even though the schools are different, they get opportunity to mingle with each other outside the school premises. Adolescent boys and girls get attracted towards each other. They don’t pay attention to studies. The boys and girls live together under the name of ‘live-in-relationship.’ Love attraction is not our subject. But due to this their concentration breaks and they lag behind in the studies. Many students leave their education incomplete and enter, into *grihashthasrama* from *brahmacharyashrama*. A person with incomplete education cannot take the responsibilities in family life. There are conflicts, quarrels in the family and this results in a divorce. Both husband and wife are unsuccessful. Today we see such cases are increasing.

Even if this is true, today many people are seen following *grihashthasrama* in a right way. They naturally become *grihashtha* (a family man) and get entangled in that. They are engrossed in *grihashthasram* with a narrow attitude of me, my home, my family, my wife and children. Great philosopher and founder of *Vedant Academy Parthasarathy* has said that, “you work hard, do something for your family. It is O.K., but is it a final goal of your life? Can’t you give a part of the love to your neighbours’ child, who is alone and crying? Aren’t you that generous?” If you help others whole heartedly in their bad times, they will also run for your help. The feeling of mutual co-operation should be groomed. If you help your neighbours, society and country then, you are a *grihashthasrami* in real sense.



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Today, man is so much engrossed in the *grihashashrama* that he doesn't want to go to *vanaprashashrama*. A political leader on the death-bed wants to fill the form of candidature for the elections. He signs the form on the death bed itself. Once *Dharmaraj* was asked, "What does a man often forget?" He answered, "A man often forgets death."

When death comes in front of man, one is so scared that no other thought except death comes in his mind. If I am told that you are going to die in next twenty four hours, I just can't think of anything. I will forget thirst, hunger. I won't be aware of anything that I have done in my life, because we don't keep space to write the accounts of life. Retrospection in life is important, not for others but for ourselves. You can get this space in *Vanaprashashrama*. "How have we spent our life? Why did we make mistakes? If we succeed, why do we succeed?" If we come out of our active life, then we can answer such questions. We will admit our mistakes and credit of the success can be given to the partners. The next generation can be warned by showing them ups and downs of life. Thus they will be educated. But today, people live in such a way, that their name is also destroyed with them.

Today how *vanaprashashrama* is possible? Who will go in the forest leaving family and house? But we can go to an old age home located in nature by leaving our home voluntarily. We cannot leave the greed of our home, wealth etc. We can voluntarily retire from this greed and can live the life of a sage. In the olden days, even the kings also renounced everything and entered the *vanaprastha*. We are a trustee in life rather than always being the owner. We can live the rest of the life in a good old age home peacefully along with our friends sharing joy, sorrow and remembering God.

We should allow our children to have a family life of their own. We have enjoyed this joy of family life, let them enjoy now. We should come out of this cycle. Today people want to have family life again and again, like

the game of snake and ladder. It is ok for some time. Afterwards you may be refused by the people then you may become sad.

The one who properly goes through all the four ashrams (stages) is a true man according to me. Like a fly in the cow dung, if a person gets involved in *grihashashrama*, then his future welfare is difficult. He can't get the pure joy of *vanaprastha* and *sanyasashrama*. He won't get the joy of salvation. The joy of spiritual achievement is indescribable. A man who goes through the four stages acquires all the four goals of Man to be successful.

What is the importance of the *Ashrama* System today? It is important from the environment point of view. In *brahmacharyashram* a student stays in *Gurukul*, he lives in unison with nature - learns to preserve and grow it. Suppose this period is of twenty five years, every generation will give its twenty five years for this work. It will be carried forward by the next generation. Same is the case of *vanaprashashrama*. If a person enters *vanaprastha* at the age of 51, he will spend his entire life for the sake of environment. As a result, the task of preserving and improving environment will go on continuously. The problems arisen due to pollution will be reduced to some extent.

It is true that implementing the system of four *ashramas* is impossible today. Today the educational institutions from primary to higher education are clustered in cities. It is possible even today to take these institutes in the natural environment of villages; make arrangements of *Gurukul* system for the students and encourage them to join in the work of preserving the environment. Same in the case of old age homes, old age homes can be built in villages or people should go to their villages after retirement. If such things are brought into reality, the pressure on the cities will become less. Such measures can be taken. There is no need to stick the label of religion to it. The government should take lead in this task.

At last, I will tell you, our ancestors developed this life style, which included the welfare of a person, family and society. It was a well planned way of life. It included respect for others, love and concern for children. This system included healthy growth of one generation, the strong support of the second generation, neat transfer of power and the balance of environment. It showed the path leading us to the best of life style from worldly things. Why shouldn't we follow it?

