



May 2015 Contemplation:
Understanding Yoga — Understanding Life #5

Life's Four Stages

by Swami Nirmalananda & Rukmini Abbruzzi

Do you know that, right now, you are in an ashram? You may not live in the physical building of Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram in Downingtown PA, but “ashram” also means stage of life. It is something you occupy, something you live in. According to the ancient sages there are four ashramas, four stages of life:

brahmacharya = student

grihastha = householder

vanaprastha = retiree

sannyasa = renunciant

The sages described how a human life functions in different ways: we've looked at the goals and now we're looking at the stages. You begin as a student; the focus of the brahmacharya stage is learning. Acharya means a knower of Brahman – the highest. In ancient times the educational process was focused on the knowing of the Divine. Of course, children are natural learners; by the time you're two years old you have learned half of everything you'll learn in your entire life!

The brahmacharya stage continues through your years of education, different lengths of time for different people. You can return to this stage, like Rukmini's friend who went back to college after her kids were grown. Or you may have done so to train as a yoga teacher and therapist. How wonderful to be a student again, with that particular joy, excitement and receptivity of mind that makes you able to learn. It is a highly revered and treasured stage of life.

When you finish your schooling, you get a job or create a family, or both. Now you're in the householder stage, grihastha: *hastha* means hand, and *gri-* means grabbing or holding on to things. Householders handle things: they are focused on acquiring things in the world and getting things done. They make the world happen. As a Householder you support the students until their education is complete. You support the elders plus you support the organizations you believe in, like an Ashram or a homeless shelter or an elephant sanctuary. This is a very busy, very active, fulfilling time of life, where you not only acquire things for your own use, but you make a tremendous contribution to society. In the West, most people are in this stage into their sixties.

Then you retire. Vanaprastha literally means forest dweller. While you may not run off to a cabin in the woods, many choose to downsize or simplify and get rid of excess possessions. Now your focus is on pleasures: having the free time to do all the things you didn't get to do when you were a householder. Rukmini describes, “My parents went on cruises each year, visiting Alaska, Italy and the Bahamas, all places they couldn't go to when they had children at home.” You might start yoga or needlework, or play golf or embark on volunteer work. Retirement is an active stage of life, but your focus is not on money anymore; it's on having lots of free time and filling it with pleasurable pursuits.

Eventually you reach a point where, sure, you could go on another cruise or play another game of golf, but — why? Your interest in the things that brought you so much pleasure wanes. You're naturally shifting into the fourth stage of life, called sannyasa, which means renunciate. The word may be familiar because it is the sannyasa ceremony that qualifies someone as a swami, who takes formal vows of renunciation.

The West doesn't have a model for sannyasa but if you live long enough, it happens naturally. The things you used to actively pursue, because they gave you so much pleasure, are not so interesting anymore. The external world doesn't have the same appeal. You begin to focus inward; you're ready to discover who you are. Swami Nirmalananda remembers a favorite aunt who said, “I don't go out much anymore. Even the ocean view from my living room doesn't interest me much. I sit and watch

the light. It keeps changing all day long!” She wasn’t a swami, but she was now focused primarily on her inner experience.

Sannyasa does not hold the copyright on spiritual development. You can pursue the deeper knowing of your svaroopā, your own Self as Consciousness-Itself, in any stage of life, though you probably cannot focus on it. Life must be lived, so each of the stages asserts itself and your spirituality takes the back seat through the first three stages. In sannyasa, it becomes the most important thing.

Some people focus on this stage much earlier. Swamiji is an example. While she raised her kids, opened and ran a yoga studio and fulfilled her family dharma, these things never held a strong interest for her. She was a natural sannyasi, even living as a renunciant for over 30 years while doing those things, and only recently was initiated as a swami. You don’t even have to be initiated or gain the title in order to turn your focus toward your own Self.

The yearning for your Self can come up at any time. *Svaroopā*® yoga is designed to cultivate your yearning as well as fulfill it. Swamiji says, “You can know the Self regardless of your age and stage of life. You can still do what you do, but you can be who you really are while you’re doing it.”

We will describe more detail about the stages of life in the next few months. You can see how the sages teach you about life. They are not telling you how your life should be. They are not giving you a yardstick you have to measure up to. Instead, they are showing you how life really works. This bird’s eye view of what you’ve been doing all along helps you understand your own life a little better. It helps you, in whatever stage you currently reside, to be more present in it, engage in it and embrace it from the fullness of your own being. This is the yoga of life.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON “UNDERSTANDING YOGA — UNDERSTANDING LIFE,” OUR CONTEMPLATION THEME FOR 2015, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN AND RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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