

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Description of Varṇāśrama-dharma

As related in this chapter, Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa explained to Uddhava the duties of the vānaprastha and sannyāsa orders and the religious practices proper to each of these levels of advancement.

One who is taking to the vānaprastha stage of life should leave his wife at home in the care of his sons, or else take her along, and with a peaceful mind spend the third quarter of his life in the forest. He should accept as his food whatever bulbs, fruits, roots and so on that grow in the forest, taking sometimes grains cooked by fire and sometimes fruits ripened by time. Furthermore, he should take as his garments tree bark, grass, leaves or the skin of a deer. It is prescribed that he should perform austerities by not cutting his hair, beard, or nails. Nor should he make any special attempt to remove dirt from his limbs. He should bathe three times daily in cold water and sleep upon the ground. During the hot season he should stand beneath the fearsome heat of the sun with fires blazing on four sides. During the rainy season he should stand in the midst of the downpour of rain, and during the cold winter he should submerge himself in water up to his neck. He is absolutely forbidden to clean his teeth, to store food that he has collected at one time to eat at another time, and to worship the Supreme Lord with the flesh of animals. If he can maintain those severe practices for the remainder of his life, the vānaprastha will achieve the Tapoloka planet.

The fourth quarter of life is meant for sannyāsa. One should develop complete detachment from attaining residence on different planets, up to even Brahmaloḥa. Such wishes for material elevation are due to desire for the fruits of material activity. When one recognizes that endeavors to achieve residence on the higher planets ultimately award only suffering, then it is enjoined that one should take to sannyāsa in a spirit of renunciation. The process of accepting sannyāsa involves worshiping the Lord with sacrifice, giving everything one possesses in charity to the priests and establishing within one's own heart the various sacrificial fires. For a sannyāsī, association with women or even the sight of women is more undesirable than taking poison. Except in emergencies, the sannyāsī should never wear more clothing than a loincloth or some simple covering over his loincloth. He should carry no more than his staff and waterpot.

Giving up all violence to living creatures, he should become subdued in the functions of his body, mind and speech. He should remain detached and fixed on the self and travel alone to such pure places as the mountains, rivers and forests. Thus engaged, he should remember the Supreme Personality of Godhead and dwell in a place that is fearless and not heavily populated. He should take his alms each day at seven homes chosen at random from those of the members of the four social classes, avoiding only the homes of those who are cursed or fallen. With a pure heart he should offer to the Supreme Personality of Godhead whatever food he has collected and take the mahā-prasādam remnants. In this way he should always be mindful that hankering for sense gratification is bondage and that engaging the objects of the senses in the service of Lord Mādhava is liberation. If one lacks knowledge and renunciation, or continues to be troubled by the unconquered six enemies headed by lust and the all-powerful senses, or if one accepts the tridaṇḍa renounced order simply for the purpose of carrying out a livelihood, then he will achieve as his result only the killing of his own soul.

A paramahansa is not under the control of injunctions and prohibitions. He is a devotee of the Supreme Lord, detached from external sense gratification and completely free from desire for even such subtle gratificatory goals as liberation. He is expert in discrimination and, just like a simple child, is free from concepts of pride and insult. Although actually competent, he wanders about like a dull person, and although most learned, he engages himself like an insane fool in incoherent speech. Although actually fixed in the Vedas, he behaves in an unordered fashion. He tolerates the evil words of others and never shows contempt for anyone else. He avoids acting as an enemy or vainly indulging in argument. He sees the Supreme Personality of Godhead in all creatures and also all living beings within the Supreme Personality of Godhead. In order to keep his body alive for performing worship of the Lord, he accepts whatever excellent or inferior food, clothing and bedding he can obtain without endeavor. Although he has to make some effort to find food for maintaining his body, he does not become joyful when he finds something, nor does he become depressed when not finding anything. The Supreme Lord Himself, although not at all subject to the Vedic orders and prohibitions, by His own free will executes various prescribed duties; similarly the paramahansa, even while on the platform of freedom from subjugation to Vedic rules and prohibitions, carries out various duties.

Because his perception of dualities has become completely eradicated by transcendental knowledge, which is focused on the Supreme Lord, he obtains upon the demise of his material body the liberation known as *sārṣṭi*, in which one becomes equal in opulence with the Lord.

The person who desires his own best interest should take shelter of a bona fide spiritual master. Filling his mind with faith, keeping free from enviousness and remaining fixed in devotion, the disciple should serve the spiritual master, whom he should regard as nondifferent from the Supreme Lord. For a *brahmacārī*, the primary duty is service to the spiritual master. The main duties for a householder are protection of living beings and sacrifice, for a *vānaprastha* austerities, and for a *sannyāsī* self-control and nonviolence. Celibacy (practiced by householders at all times except once a month when the wife is fertile), penance, cleanliness, self-satisfaction, friendship with all living beings and above all worship of the Supreme Personality of Godhead are duties meant for every *jīva* soul. One acquires firm devotion for the Supreme Lord by always rendering service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead through one's own particular prescribed duty, by not engaging in the worship of any other personalities, and also by thinking of all creatures as the place of residence of the Supreme Personality of Godhead in His form as the Supersoul. The followers of the *karma-kāṇḍa* section of the Vedas can attain the planets of the forefathers and so on by their ritualistic activities, but if they become endowed with devotion for the Supreme Lord, then by these same activities they can achieve the supreme stage of liberation.

Text 1:

The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: One who desires to adopt the third order of life, *vānaprastha*, should enter the forest with a peaceful mind, leaving his wife with his mature sons, or else taking her along with him.

Text 2:

Having adopted the *vānaprastha* order of life, one should arrange one's sustenance by eating uncontaminated bulbs, roots and fruits that grow in the forest. One may dress oneself with tree bark, grass, leaves or animal skins.

Text 3:

The vānaprastha should not groom the hair on his head, body or face, should not manicure his nails, should not pass stool and urine at irregular times and should not make a special endeavor for dental hygiene. He should be content to take bath in water three times daily and should sleep on the ground.

Text 4:

Thus engaged as a vānaprastha, one should execute penance during the hottest summer days by subjecting oneself to burning fires on four sides and the blazing sun overhead; during the rainy season one should remain outside, subjecting oneself to torrents of rain; and in the freezing winter one should remain submerged in water up to one's neck.

Text 5:

One may eat foodstuffs prepared with fire, such as grains, or fruits ripened by time. One may grind one's food with mortar and stone or with one's own teeth.

Text 6:

The vānaprastha should personally collect whatever he requires for his bodily maintenance, carefully considering the time, place and his own capacity. He should never collect provisions for the future.

Text 7:

One who has accepted the vānaprastha order of life should perform seasonal sacrifices by offering oblations of caru and sacrificial cakes prepared from rice and other grains found in the forest. The vānaprastha, however, may never offer animal sacrifices to Me, even those sacrifices mentioned in the Vedas.

Text 8:

The vānaprastha should perform the agnihotra, darśa and paurṇamāsa sacrifices, as he did while in the gr̥hastha-āśrama. He should also perform the vows and sacrifices of cāturmāsya, since all of these rituals are enjoined for the vānaprastha-āśrama by expert knowers of the Vedas.

Text 9:

The saintly vānaprastha, practicing severe penances and accepting only the bare necessities of life, becomes so emaciated that he appears to be

mere skin and bones. Thus worshiping Me through severe penances, he goes to the Maharloka planet and then directly achieves Me.

Text 10:

One who with long endeavor executes this painful but exalted penance, which awards ultimate liberation, simply to achieve insignificant sense gratification must be considered the greatest fool.

Text 11:

If the vānaprastha is overtaken by old age and because of his trembling body is no longer able to execute his prescribed duties, he should place the sacrificial fire within his heart by meditation. Then, fixing his mind on Me, he should enter into the fire and give up his body.

Text 12:

If the vānaprastha, understanding that even promotion to Brahmaloka is a miserable situation, develops complete detachment from all possible results of fruitive activities, then he may take the sannyāsa order of life.

Text 13:

Having worshiped Me according to scriptural injunctions and having given all one's property to the sacrificial priest, one should place the fire sacrifice within oneself. Thus, with the mind completely detached, one should enter the sannyāsa order of life.

Text 14:

“This man taking sannyāsa is going to surpass us and go back home, back to Godhead.” Thus thinking, the demigods create stumbling blocks on the path of the sannyāsī by appearing before him in the shape of his former wife or other women and attractive objects. But the sannyāsī should pay the demigods and their manifestations no heed.

Text 15:

If the sannyāsī desires to wear something besides a mere kaupīna, he may use another cloth around his waist and hips to cover the kaupīna. Otherwise, if there is no emergency, he should not accept anything besides his daṇḍa and waterpot.

Text 16:

A saintly person should step or place his foot on the ground only after verifying with his eyes that there are no living creatures, such as insects, who might be injured by his foot. He should drink water only after filtering it through a portion of his cloth, and he should speak only words that possess the purity of truth. Similarly, he should perform only those activities his mind has carefully ascertained to be pure.

Text 17:

One who has not accepted the three internal disciplines of avoiding useless speech, avoiding useless activities and controlling the life air can never be considered a *sannyāsī* merely because of his carrying bamboo rods.

Text 18:

Rejecting those houses that are polluted and untouchable, one should approach without previous calculation seven houses and be satisfied with that which is obtained there by begging. According to necessity, one may approach each of the four occupational orders of society.

Text 19:

Taking the food gathered through begging, one should leave the populated areas and go to a reservoir of water in a secluded place. There, having taken a bath and washed one's hands thoroughly, one should distribute portions of the food to others who may request it. One should do this without speaking. Then, having thoroughly cleansed the remnants, one should eat everything on one's plate, leaving nothing for future consumption.

Text 20:

Without any material attachment, with senses fully controlled, remaining enthusiastic, and satisfied in realization of the Supreme Lord and his own self, the saintly person should travel about the earth alone. Having equal vision everywhere, he should be steady on the spiritual platform.

Text 21:

Dwelling in a safe and solitary place, his mind purified by constant thought of Me, the sage should concentrate on the soul alone, realizing it to be nondifferent from Me.

Text 22:

By steady knowledge a sage should clearly ascertain the nature of the soul's bondage and liberation. Bondage occurs when the senses are deviated to sense gratification, and complete control of the senses constitutes liberation.

Text 23:

Therefore, completely controlling the five senses and the mind by Kṛṣṇa consciousness, a sage, having experienced spiritual bliss within the self, should live detached from insignificant material sense gratification.

Text 24:

The sage should travel in sanctified places, by flowing rivers and within the solitude of mountains and forests. He should enter the cities, towns and pasturing grounds and approach ordinary working men only to beg his bare sustenance.

Text 25:

One in the vānaprastha order of life should always practice taking charity from others, for one is thereby freed from illusion and quickly becomes perfect in spiritual life. Indeed, one who subsists on food grains obtained in such a humble manner purifies his existence.

Text 26:

One should never see as ultimate reality those material things which obviously will perish. With consciousness free from material attachment, one should retire from all activities meant for material progress in this life and the next.

Text 27:

One should logically consider the universe, which is situated within the Lord, and one's own material body, which is composed of mind, speech and life air, to be ultimately products of the Lord's illusory energy. Thus situated in the self, one should give up one's faith in these things and should never again make them the object of one's meditation.

Text 28:

A learned transcendentalist dedicated to the cultivation of knowledge and thus detached from external objects, or My devotee who is detached even from desire for liberation — both neglect those duties based on external rituals or paraphernalia. Thus their conduct is beyond the range of rules and regulations.

Text 29:

Although most wise, the paramahansa should enjoy life like a child, oblivious to honor and dishonor; although most expert, he should behave like a stunted, incompetent person; although most learned, he should speak like an insane person; and although a scholar learned in Vedic regulations, he should behave in an unrestricted manner.

Text 30:

A devotee should never engage in the fruitive rituals mentioned in the karma-kāṇḍa section of the Vedas, nor should he become atheistic, acting or speaking in opposition to Vedic injunctions. Similarly, he should never speak like a mere logician or skeptic or take any side whatsoever in useless arguments.

Text 31:

A saintly person should never let others frighten or disturb him and, similarly, should never frighten or disturb other people. He should tolerate the insults of others and should never himself belittle anyone. He should never create hostility with anyone for the sake of the material body, for he would thus be no better than an animal.

Text 32:

The one Supreme Lord is situated within all material bodies and within everyone's soul. Just as the moon is reflected in innumerable reservoirs of water, the Supreme Lord, although one, is present within everyone. Thus every material body is ultimately composed of the energy of the one Supreme Lord.

Text 33:

If at times one does not obtain proper food one should not be depressed, and when one obtains sumptuous food one should not rejoice. Being fixed in determination, one should understand both situations to be under the control of God.

Text 34:

If required, one should endeavor to get sufficient foodstuffs, because it is always necessary and proper to maintain one's health. When the senses, mind and life air are fit, one can contemplate spiritual truth, and by understanding the truth one is liberated.

Text 35:

A sage should accept the food, clothing and bedding — be they of excellent or inferior quality — that come of their own accord.

Text 36:

Just as I, the Supreme Lord, execute regulative duties by My own free will, similarly, one who has realized knowledge of Me should maintain general cleanliness, purify his hands with water, take bath and execute other regulative duties not by force but by his own free will.

Text 37:

A realized soul no longer sees anything as separate from Me, for his realized knowledge of Me has destroyed such illusory perception. Since the material body and mind were previously accustomed to this kind of perception, it may sometimes appear to recur; but at the time of death the self-realized soul achieves opulences equal to Mine.

Text 38:

One who is detached from sense gratification, knowing its result to be miserable, and who desires spiritual perfection, but who has not seriously analyzed the process for obtaining Me, should approach a bona fide and learned spiritual master.

Text 39:

Until a devotee has clearly realized spiritual knowledge, he should continue with great faith and respect and without envy to render personal service to the guru, who is nondifferent from Me.

Texts 40-41:

One who has not controlled the six forms of illusion [lust, anger, greed, excitement, false pride and intoxication], whose intelligence, the leader of the senses, is extremely attached to material things, who is bereft of

knowledge and detachment, who adopts the sannyāsa order of life to make a living, who denies the worshipable demigods, his own self and the Supreme Lord within himself, thus ruining all religious principles, and who is still infected by material contamination, is deviated and lost both in this life and the next.

Text 42:

The main religious duties of a sannyāsī are equanimity and nonviolence, whereas for the vānaprastha austerity and philosophical understanding of the difference between the body and soul are prominent. The main duties of a householder are to give shelter to all living entities and perform sacrifices, and the brahmacārī is mainly engaged in serving the spiritual master.

Text 43:

A householder may approach his wife for sex only at the time prescribed for begetting children. Otherwise, the householder should practice celibacy, austerity, cleanliness of mind and body, satisfaction in his natural position, and friendship toward all living entities. Worship of Me is to be practiced by all human beings, regardless of social or occupational divisions.

Text 44:

One who worships Me by his prescribed duty, having no other object of worship, and who remains conscious of Me as present in all living entities, achieves unflinching devotional service unto Me.

Text 45:

My dear Uddhava, I am the Supreme Lord of all worlds, and I create and destroy this universe, being its ultimate cause. I am thus the Absolute Truth, and one who worships Me with unfailing devotional service comes to Me.

Text 46:

Thus, one who has purified his existence by execution of his prescribed duties, who fully understands My supreme position and who is endowed with scriptural and realized knowledge, very soon achieves Me.

Text 47:

Those who are followers of this varṇāśrama system accept religious principles according to authorized traditions of proper conduct. When such varṇāśrama duties are dedicated to Me in loving service, they award the supreme perfection of life.

Text 48:

My dear saintly Uddhava, I have now described to you, just as you inquired, the means by which My devotee, perfectly engaged in his prescribed duty, can come back to Me, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.