



INTERPRETATION OF THE ASCETIC IDEAL IN HINDU RELIGIOUS SOURCES

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the phenomenon of asceticism in Hinduism on the basis of ancient sacred texts. It examines the formation and development of the ascetic ideal in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Sannyasa Upanishads, as well as epic and Puranic literature. The study highlights the role of asceticism in Hindu religious thought, its interpretation as a primary means of attaining moksha, and its close connection with the four aims of life (kama, artha, dharma, and moksha) and the system of the four ashramas. The article explores the content of the stages of brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, and sannyasa, and analyzes classifications of ascetics such as parivrajaka, bhikshu, yati, yogin, paramahansa, turiyatita, and avadhuta on the basis of primary sources. Furthermore, key concepts central to ascetic practice tapas, yoga, and states of ecstasy are interpreted from religious and philosophical perspectives.*

Keywords: *Hinduism, asceticism, tapas, Upanishads, Vedas, sannyasa, parivrajaka, paramahansa, turiyatita, avadhuta, yoga, moksha, ashrama system, ecstasy.*

INTRODUCTION

In Hinduism, which is regarded as one of the religious–philosophical traditions, asceticism is viewed as the sole means of acquiring supernatural power and attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) (Radhakrishnan, 1951:90–96). Ascetic practice was considered superior even to sacrificial rituals and was attributed with supernatural potency. According to Hindu myths, not only humans but even gods ascended to the heavens through asceticism. At the highest stage of asceticism ecstasy (from the Greek meaning “to step outside oneself,” referring in religious-mystical experience to a temporary transcendence or disruption of ordinary states of consciousness) Hindus perceived an inexhaustible, hidden, supernatural power (Eliade, 1969:102–115). This power influenced not only ascetics but also deities.

Asceticism was regarded as “the only path to liberating the soul, bound to the body, from the chain of rebirth.” The primary function of asceticism was to gradually free the individual from the material world and from attachment to the self. Its secondary function was to negate the value of external worldly pleasures surrounding the individual and to break the inclination toward personal worldly life within the human being (Mukhamedov, 2025:127–132). As a result of the widespread ascetic ethos in Hinduism, it is observed that Brahmin families often chose an ascetic way of life, distancing themselves from society.

According to the fundamental metaphysical concepts of Hinduism, human life has four principal aims (Āśrama System, 1993:1–25):

1. **Kama** – the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment.
2. **Artha** – social and economic activity.
3. **Dharma** – virtue and moral duty.
4. **Moksha** – liberation from the material world.

These four fundamental aims of human life are closely connected with four stages of life (*ashramas*):

1. **Brahmacharin** – the stage of studentship.
2. **Grihastha** – the stage of the householder.
3. **Vanaprastha** – the forest-dweller or hermit.
4. **Sannyasi** – the ascetic stage (complete renunciation of worldly life).

The stage of **brahmacharya** (studentship) begins for boys belonging to the higher castes between the ages of eight and twelve (Flood, 1996:62–65). After being initiated into studentship through a special religious rite, the child lived in the house of his teacher (*acharya* or *guru*) and received education while unquestioningly obeying the teacher’s instructions. This period typically lasted about ten years. However, if the teacher wished the student to engage in deeper study of sacred texts and religious rituals, this stage could be extended until the age of thirty-six.

The core education consisted of studying the Vedas, codes of conduct, and family religious rituals. Strict sexual purity was required of the student, and the term *brahmachari* gradually came to be used in the sense of “chastity” (sexual abstinence). Upon completion of education, a special purification rite known as *snana* (sacred bathing) was performed. After this, the *guru* received gifts from the student’s family, and the young man returned home to begin the stage of household life, *grihastha*.

The *grihastha* (householder) stage begins with marriage. A married person undertakes the fulfillment of his “debts” to the gods and ancestors (Michaels, 2004:131–134). His primary obligations include the daily performance of domestic sacrificial rituals based on the Vedas (*pancha-yajna*) and the begetting of sons, who in turn are responsible for performing rites dedicated to the spirits of their parents.

After fulfilling these “debts” and upon reaching old age, an individual may voluntarily proceed to the third stage, *vanaprastha*. This stage literally means “going toward the forest.” At this point, the person withdraws from active worldly life and devotes himself to spiritual pursuits such as the study of the Vedas, meditation, and ascetic practices. The requirements of this stage are extremely strict; for example, sitting near fire during extreme heat, remaining without shelter during the rainy season, or wearing wet clothing in winter were prescribed practices. Nevertheless, this stage does not yet constitute complete asceticism, since the *vanaprastha* maintains the sacred fire in his dwelling, continues Vedic rituals, and prepares his own food. He does not completely sever ties with his family but observes sexual continence (Zimmer, 1951:168–172).

The fourth and final stage, *sannyasa*, involves total renunciation of the world. At this stage, an individual abandons family and property and becomes a wandering ascetic, possessing only a sacred cord, an alms bowl, and a water vessel (Olivelle, 1992:3–10). From this point onward, the sole aim of the *sannyasi* is to attain liberation (*moksha*). The *sannyasi* does not remain for long in cities or villages but survives through alms while traveling from place to place.

In practice, however, only a very small number of individuals advance to the stages of *vanaprastha* or *sannyasa*; most prefer to spend the remainder of their lives within the family.

The *Rigveda* mentions several categories of ascetics (Griffith, 1896:118–121):

1. **Yati** – one who practices self-restraint.
2. **Keshin** – the long-haired ascetic.
3. **Muni** – one who observes silence.
4. **Vritya** – individuals who have taken vows or made sacred commitments.

During the Vedic period and early Brahmanism, ascetics did not primarily focus on physical suffering or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. These notions became central aims for later generations of ascetics.

Ascetics lived either in solitude or in communities and subsisted on roots or food obtained through alms. They were not permitted to spend the night in the same place twice or to receive alms more than once from the same person. Their only possessions were an alms bowl, a staff, and clothing. In certain traditions, the ascetic's sole "possession" was considered to be his own body, which was regarded as a "heap of impurity" or even "equivalent to a corpse."

Complete renunciation of the world (*maha-vairagya*) leads to the realization that the human "I" (ego) is not the true self, but rather the higher Self *Atman* which is identical with *Brahman* (the World Spirit). Among the methods for achieving this realization, the most important is yoga, which includes:

1. **Pranayama** – disciplines of breath control;
2. **Pratyahara** – control and withdrawal of the senses;
3. **Dhyana** – deep contemplation (meditation).

The most important sources on Brahmanical asceticism are the *Sannyasa Upanishads*. These texts classify ascetics according to their modes of life:

1. **Muni** – those who observe silence;
2. **Parivrajaka** – wandering ascetics;
3. **Yati** – practitioners of self-restraint;
4. **Bhikshu** – mendicants;
5. **Sannyasi** – those who have completely renounced worldly life;

6. **Yogin** – those striving for union with *Brahman*. Among them, those who attain this goal are known as *jivanmuktas* (liberated while still alive) or *brahmavids* (knowers of Brahman);

7. **Tapasvin** – practitioners of intense spiritual effort;
8. **Tridandin** – ascetics carrying three staffs;
9. **Ekadandin** – ascetics carrying a single staff.

The earliest Upanishads distinguish four main types of ascetics:

1. **Kutichaka**;
2. **Bahudaka**;
3. **Hamsa**;
4. **Paramahamsa**.

The last category is internally divided into two groups: **Turiyatita** and **Avadhuta**, both of whom belong to the category of *jivanmuktas*, that is, those liberated during their lifetime (Olivelle, 1992:95–110).

The highest category of monks is that of the **paramahamsas**, who attain salvation through realizing the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman*. The principal differences among various monastic orders are manifested in practices of purification, shaving or retaining hair and beard, clothing, dietary rules, forehead marks (for example, a single vertical line for *kutichakas* and three horizontal lines for *bahudakas*), and other attributes such as the sacred thread, waist cloth, and staff. They also differ in their mastery of Vedic knowledge, modes of dwelling, and patterns of movement: *kutichakas* live in huts, *bahudakas* in sacred places, while *hamsas* and *paramahamsas* do not accept any permanent shelter.

Food is regarded not merely as a biological necessity but as one of the key elements of spiritual purification. Consequently, numerous detailed rules exist regarding the type and source of food, as well as the time, place, and manner in which it is consumed. For instance, monks are forbidden to eat food prepared for ritual ceremonies, since they have renounced ritual practices. Food given without being requested is considered superior to food obtained through begging. The manner of receiving food also carries symbolic significance: into the alms bowl, into the hand (as a symbol of renunciation), or directly into the mouth, which is considered the “purest” part of the body.

Among the external attributes of monks are the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*), the topknot (*shikha*), and the staff (*danda*). The sacred thread symbolizes knowledge of *Atman*, while the *shikha* represents supreme knowledge (*jnana*). *Paramahamsas* carry a single bamboo staff (*ekadanda*), symbolizing ultimate knowledge. **Turiyatitas** those who have attained a state beyond even the fourth level of consciousness (*turiya*), an absolute state transcending all conditions and especially **avadhutas**, who are completely free from social, religious, and ritual constraints, reject all attributes and clothing altogether. For them, only spiritual energy embodied within a minimal physical form remains.

In the *Sannyasa Upanishads*, a distinction is made between seekers of knowledge and monks who have realized *Brahman*; the latter are described as being “naked as at birth” or “wrapped in rays of light.”

The earliest information on monasticism in Hinduism is found in the *Rigveda*. In the hymn known as the *Keshin Sukta*, long-haired naked ascetics *keshins* are described as having taken vows of silence, being “clothed in air,” “covered with ashes,” and existing in a state of ecstasy in which they are said to “fly with the help of the wind.”

Another hymn of the *Rigveda* states that the seven Vedic *rishis* (chanters of the Vedas) attained “direct realization of truth,” which they achieved through *tapas*. *Tapas* is one of the most important spiritual-practical concepts in Hinduism. Derived from Sanskrit, the term literally means “to heat,” “to burn,” or “to generate inner heat.” Originally, it referred to the heat produced in sacrificial rituals; later, it became associated with asceticism, yoga, practices of self-restraint, and even self-mortification.

Tapas represents the path to liberation through the “burning away” of the ego and dependence on sensory desires (Radhakrishnan, 1953:38–41). It includes the following practices:

- celibacy;
- voluntary fasting;
- observance of silence;
- bodily austerities.

Ancient Indian texts provide detailed descriptions of the lives of ascetics and establish precise rules for them. The right to become a monk (*sannyasi*) belonged exclusively to Brahmins, who could renounce the world only after completing the stage of household life and fulfilling their duties toward the gods, ancestors, family, and society. Only then would they abandon property and home, live by alms, and devote themselves entirely to a life dedicated to liberation.

The ideal of monasticism is most fully articulated in the *Sannyasa Upanishads*. These texts describe the ritual of renunciation, the six types of *sannyasis*, and the regulations governing their conduct, diet, clothing, and places of residence.

As early as the sixth–fifth centuries BCE, numerous homeless ascetics existed in India. They lived in solitude in forests or traveled constantly, dedicating their lives to union with *Brahman* and the attainment of liberation.

Unlike Christianity and some other religions, where renunciants typically live communally in monasteries or hermitages, Hindu ascetics generally live alone or in small groups in forests and wander through cities and villages, gathering in one place only during the monsoon season. This tradition has been preserved to the present day.

Until the eighth century prior to the emergence of the first Shaivite monasteries many Hindu ascetics had no permanent shelter or fixed residence. It should be emphasized that ascetics have played an exceptionally important role in the history of Hindu spirituality. Through their way of life, they embodied religious ideals and values and preserved them over centuries. Frequently, they became founders of new religious movements and schools: for example, Jina Mahavira founded Jainism; the Buddha Shakyamuni engaged in ascetic practices; the Ajivika movement originated with the ascetic Makkhali Gosala; and many founders of religious-philosophical schools were themselves ascetics.

In the rigidly stratified and hierarchical structure of Hindu society, ascetics have always occupied and continue to occupy a highly distinctive position. Although they renounce society and personal interests, paradoxically they hold a special status within it. For ordinary believers, ascetics are regarded as supreme religious teachers and spiritual guides, and through their lives they demonstrate the transcendence of the spirit over the transient nature of the world.

Lay followers consider it their duty to provide ascetics with food, clothing, and shelter, and at times offer even greater donations. Historically, wealthy Jain and Buddhist patrons donated gardens and shelters for monks during the monsoon season. The presence of ascetics has consistently been perceived as a sign of spiritual purity for the regions in which they reside.

In conclusion, within the framework of general ascetic traditions rooted in ancient Indian sources, various currents and directions emerged. Although they differ in their religious doctrines and practical methods, their ultimate goal remained the same: to attain liberation as swiftly as possible.

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