Asrama and Dharma

—in Explanation of the Life of Śākyamuni as Āśramika—

Esho Yamaguchi

Āśrama may be, as you know, explained in various ways, but in this treatise its applicable extension would be confined to these four religious stages of human life, as the sacred books like the Dharma-śāstra tell us: brahma-cāraṇī, grha-stha, vanaprastha and saṁnyāsaṁ.

These four stages of āśrama have very important religious significance beyond an article of a code like the Manu-Smṛti, and are even indispensable stages of human life through which man should accomplish his ultimate ideal life, even though sometimes these stages seem to be, first of all, for the brahmaṇa in the caste (varga) and are in accord with importance of the brahmaṇa in the sacred books. But in its profound sense, āśrama means properly these stages through which man should walk to complete his ultimate ideal.

If we hope to live as man all our lives, we should proceed to take off our lives on āśrama, and become āśramika. Indeed we can not accept this prerequisite for us as such at once, but when we ask ourselves “What is man?”, “How should we then live?”, āśrama will be of very important significance in our lives. According to its proper meaning, āśramika should go through these four stages to accomplish man’s own life: firstly, brahma-cāraṇi as a scholar who devotes oneself to learning and discipline, secondly, grha-stha as a layman who is a citizen being in duty bound to do for his society, thirdly, vanaprastha as a sage who lives in a lonely woods and is busy in solving the problem of immortality and completing the eternal life, fourthly, saṁnyāsaṁ as an itinerant monk who is a king of cosmopolitan preacher going about various countries. The former two stages correspond to preparing ones to be a good adult and citizen. The latter two stages show the periods to be delivered from worldly existence, become a cosmopolitan preacher, and complete immor-
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tality leading all countries on the earth.

We can scarcely find out in our daily thinking such an idea as we may divide the human life into these four parts. But we are able to distinguish them only in a long history of Buddhism. In asrama, therefore, Indian thought as a universal and humanistic way of life might appear along with Buddhism. It is certainly doubtful, on one side, whether may we interpret Buddhism in such a way, or not. On the other side, we can positively set forth these radical questions about an ideal humanism: “What is man, then?”, “What ideal can we live all our lives along with?”

There are, in fact, various distinctions among us: high and low in social positions, rich and poor in wealth, wise and fool in intelligence. These distinctions will also continue to be at work even in modern democratic societies. Keeping these distinctions in mind we have to consider the nature of man, and we shall be able to gain the solution of it. In a word, distinctions would exist in the world not because of our spiritual aspect, but because political and economical elements make distinction one from another among us.

From the point of view of asrama, no distinction should be among us, and man would always pursue his original equality persistently to live upon it. Four stages of asrama show us modus vivendi based on equality.

Bibliographically speaking, asrama seems to model itself upon the brāhmaṇa of the caste (varṇa) and show us its way of life. Āśrama, however, would be better interpreted in a wider sense, I think. Concerning saṁsāra, the human life could be here estimated more equally than in the case of discriminations of the caste. Man, therefore, could be worn his proper clothes by saṁsāra, and discriminations in the caste would perhaps shade away. Where had he been, before man was born? Where will he have been, after man has gone? If we fail to question the eternal world before our birth and the world to come, and are indifferent to the world as a mere ephemeral human life, we would idle away our fundamental task to take the life serious as sine qua non. According to the idea of saṁsāra, we should have the extravagant past before our birth. Where and what were we doing, immeasurably past? The past before our birth might, in fact, keep being intact, but we have the past, the
present and the future. The present is inevitable consequence of the past. The present is a starting point for the future as well. It is the present to determine the way to be in the life beyond.

Sometimes we prefer to dispute about the world before our parents' birth, as a Chinese set phrase "before the parents were not born yet" says, rather than the fact that we were born by our parents. This is a natural human inclination in case we urge to know the unknown past before our parents were not born yet. In the same way, we want to feel for the world to come in our death. The existence of parents does not usually come into our mind, but it was, is, and will be an undoubted natural fact for us. And we also hardly question about the future life. In both cases we could not help feeling that something great and fearful dawns upon us.

Generally speaking, our present existence is predetermined by our past deeds, and present deeds foretell our future existence. This fatal operation of deeds in life is called karman by name. The so-called saṁsāra accords with all consequences of karman. Karman, or saṁsāra is not merely a kind of universal and cosmological force, but also, especially in mankind, has a unique sense of historical and moral value. Both karman and saṁsāra show us human life with its proper shades in the past, the present and the future sub specie aeternitatis. They can tell us either the world beyond human life or the underworld. Man, therefore, sometimes can transcend his own existence to ascend to the heaven of "Sow virtue, and the harvest will be virtue" thanks to dharma. And sometimes he, on the contrary, may fall into the hell of "Sow evil and reap evil" by adharma. Accordingly dharma means, as ancient Indian sages said, a right moral merit, while adharma does a fatal evil. Which genre does our present existence belong to, then? To understand this critical point, we look upon both the world before birth and one after death. We can, therefore, allow to admit ourselves these three kingdoms: the heavenly kingdom, the terrestrial and the bestial. Saṁsāra is completed in circular motion by travelling through these kingdoms one by one. The true existence of man should, however, urge to liberate itself from these rings of saṁsāra. Our acknowledgment of the law of áśrama (stage in a brāhmaṇa's life) makes us possible to liberate
ourselves from them.

This idea of āśrama was already established in the early Upaniṣad. It played, as the satṭha devamanusānam said, a leading part in the terrestrial kingdom as well as in the heavenly.

Before the Upaniṣad literature any individual thinker was scarcely found to be in flower. With the Upaniṣad some individual thinker began to offer his original thought. A status of thinker was open not merely to the brahmana-caste, but also to the other castes, e. g. the kṣatriya. Among them there were Janaka, King of Videha, and Ajātaśatru, King of Kāśī. They took active parts as “Teacher” (Master), sometimes much as one of the brahmana-caste, sometimes more than him. It is remarkable that some teachers (masters) of the śudra, also, were hard at work.

What is the nature of the satṭha devamanusānam as such? It is to become not only an instructor for leaders of the world in economical and political fields, but a preacher of wisdom, of his own accord, as well who travels through the world showing the way of life to live peacefully for ever and a day. There is nobody except the satṭha devamanusānam in the world who is able to go beyond limitations of the caste and preach such a wisdom. It is only possible for the preacher to be able to listen to it, because the problem of wisdom transcends terrestrial problems of the caste.

To illustrate this we can quote a dialogue between Yājñavalkya, Upaniṣadian sage, and King Janaka, from the Upaniṣad. It tells us that circumstances in detail which King Janaka did not only complete his life as a man of the highest real power of the world, but liberated himself from the throne completely and yearned to learn wisdom urgently to be delivered from his station of a king.

Janaka, Emperor of Videha, rose from his lounge and approaching Yājñavalkya said, ‘Salutations to you, Yājñavalkya, please teach me.’ Yājñavalkya replied, ‘As one wishing to go a long distance, O Emperor, should secure a chariot or a boat, so have you fully equipped your mind with so many secret names (of Brahman). You are likewise respected and wealthy, and you have learnt the Vedas and heard the Upaniṣads. Where then will you go when you
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are separated from this body? ‘I do not know, sir, where I shall go.’ ‘Then I will tell you where you will go.’ ‘Tell me, sir.’

In the dialogue between them Yājñavalkya lays stress on the law of āśrama, especially, on the way of life mentioned in the third vānaprastha (the period of forest) and the fourth saṅnyāsin (the period of an itinerant monk), of āśrama.

Even King Janaka was a mere layman (grhastha), although he was the ruler of Videha and a man of an incomparable power as far as he held his head high in political and economical fields. He as a ruler was not enough either to complete his own life, or to be the satthā devamanusānam. He, therefore, asks Yājñavalkya to answer that eternal law which will be imperishable after death at all.

At this it is remarkable that Yājñavalkya seems to have found the law of āśrama as an immovable fact in his own life. He had, as you know, two wives, Maitreyī, Brahmanc thinker and Sanscrit scholar, and Kātyāyanī, wise housewife. One day Yājñavalkya said to Maitreyī when starting for his new life as follows: ‘O Maitreyī, my dear, I am going to renounce this life for monasticism. Allow me to finish between you and Katyayani Threupon Maitreyī said, Sir, if indeed this whole earth full of wealth be mine, shall I be immortal through that, or not? No, replied Yājñavalkya, ‘your life will be just like that of people who possess plenty of things, but there is no hope of immortality through wealth.’ Then Maitreyī said, ‘What shall I do with that which will not make me immortal? Tell me, sir, of that alone which you know.’

In the above-mentioned, Mrs. Maitreyī asks Yājñavalkya some urgent solutions for her life rather than everyday requests as a wife. What she asks him willingly therein means her serious consciousness of a kind of eternal and imperishable law, that is, citta-utpāda (conversion), or bodhicitta-utpāda (perfect enlightenment). This may accord with Yājñavalkya’s remarks on the imperishable for Lady Gargī in the following dialogue.

She (Gargī) said, ‘By what, O Yājñavalkya, is that pervaded which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be?’ He (Yājñavalkya) said, ‘That,
O Gārgī, which is above heaven and below the earth, which is this heaven and earth as well as between them, and which they say was, is and will be, is pervaded by the unmanifested ether alone. 'By what is the unmanifested ether pervaded?' 'O Gārgī, the knowers of Brahman say, this Immutable (Brahman) is that. It is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long, neither red colour nor oiliness, neither shadow nor darkness, neither air nor ether, unattached, neither savour nor odour, without eyes or ears, without the vocal organ or mind, non-luminous, without the vital force or mouth, not a measure, and without interior or exterior. It does not eat anything, nor is it eaten by anybody.

Under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, the sun and moon are held in their positions; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, heaven and earth maintain their positions; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, moments, Muhūrtas, days and nights, fortnights, months, seasons and years are held in their respective places; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, some rivers flow eastward from the White Mountains, others flowing westward continue in that dissection, and still others keep to their respective courses; under the mighty rule of this Immutable, O Gārgī, men praise those that give, the gods depend on the sacrificer, and the manes on independent offerings.

He, O Gārgī, who in this world, without knowing this Immutable, offers oblations in the fire, performs sacrifices and undergoes austerities even for many thousand years, finds all such but perishable; he, O Gārgī, who departs from this world without knowing this Immutable, is miserable. But he, O Gārgī, who departs from this world after knowing this Immutable, is a knower of Brahman.

This Immutable, O Gārgī, is never seen but is the Witness; It is never heard, but is the Hearer; It is never thought, but is the Thinker; It is never known, but is the Knower. There is no other witness but This, no other hearer but This, no other thinker but This, no other knower but This. By this Immutable, O Gārgī, is the (unmanifested) ether pervaded.'

The imperishable that penetrates and makes all things in the universe is just
the genius of true Brahmán, and the ātman itself as well as our human selves. Both Mrs. Maitreyí and Yājñavalkya seem to partake of the problem of ātman as well. She would, therefore, offer the serious question of it to him, while he should answer her in taking his farewell of her as follows: 'You have been my beloved, and you have magnified what is after my heart. If you wish, my dear, I will explain it to you. As I explain it, meditate. It is not for the sake of the husband, my dear, that is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the wife, my dear, that she is loved, but for one's own sake that she is loved.—The Self, my dear Maitreyí, should be realised—should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. When the Self, my dear, is realised by being heard of, reflected on and meditated upon, all this is known'.

This tells us Yājñavalkya’s irresistible yearning after the one and only imperishable ātman and his unmovable affirmation of it. We may compare his attitude to the ātman with Platonic Eros. It is important that Yājñavalkya would have traced stages of āśrama one by one to be delivered himself from saṁsāra (the circle of transmigration) as āśramika. In other words, he could start from the stage of gr̄hastha for the other one of agr̄hastha. He also confirms his attitude to the ātman in his following preaching to King Janaka:

'The ancient sages, it is said, did not desire children (thinking), “What shall we achieve through children, we who have attained this Self, this world.” They, it is said, renounced their desire for sons, for wealth and for the worlds, and lived a mendicant’s life. That which is the desire for sons is the desire for wealth, and that which is the desire for wealth is the desire for worlds, for both these are but desires'.

'I give you, sir, the empire of Videha, and myself too with it, to wait upon you'.
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be about to start for the stage of āgrhastra from the stage of grhastra to
live the life of āśrama by Yājñavalkya’s influence as well as Mrs. Maitreyi’s.

The life of Śākyamuni, founder of Buddhism, as a whole, thereupon, seems
to be one of āśramika. We cannot, however, regard Śākyamuni as āśramika
by nature at once, for the image of Śākyamuni as āśramika has not always
accepted as well-informed. But Śākyamuni joined the priesthood seeking after
truth to attain Buddhahood, and then became a leader of layman saṅgha. For
Śākyamuni, saṅgha would have been, I think, a promised land open to Bud-
dhism as the law of equality for all mankind.

2) Cf. Brhadāran’yaka-Upaniṣad, 4, 5, 1ff.
4) Cf. Brhadāran’yaka-Upaniṣad, 4, 5, 5f.

Cf. F. M. Müller, The Upanishad (SBE, V. XV), 1900; P. Deussen, Sechzig
Upanishad’s des Vada, 1905; R. E. Hume, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads,

INDEX TO PROF. N. TSUJI’S
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