

Sanyasa & Samsara: When the Twain Meet

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RIGHT from the earliest Vedic times, sanyasa (renunciation of the world) and samsara (enjoyment of life) have been in conflict. Some Rishis thought spiritual progress is impossible without giving up samsara altogether. Some thought it is impossible to give up samsara altogether and it has to be reconciled with in some way in some degree.

There has been confusion all along. A disciple asked his guru: Is it necessary that one should give up samsara for spiritual pursuit? The guru returned: If it is not necessary, why should all those great sages have walked out on samsara and gone into the forest? Are they fools? When another disciple put the same question to the same guru the answer was: If it is necessary, how come the likes of Janaka were pursuing Realisation while staying put in samsara? Are they fools? The guru meant to say: It is up to you. You must choose your way in accordance with your tastes and temperament.

Those who went by absolute sanyasa or hard suppression of senses had their problems. Sage Vishwamitra, it is well known, fell for Menaka. The later Rishis



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thought it best to reconcile sanyasa and samsara in some way rather than putting them into conflict. They gave samsara its minimal due without letting it come in the way of their spiritual pursuit. They married and put up skeletal samsaras in their parnashtalas with their cows and disciples. Sensual enjoyment was never in their mind. Most of the time they were deep in meditation and most of their wakeful hours were filled with studies, rituals and teaching. A Rishi's wife was called Rishipatni. She was helpful to her husband in his spiritual pursuit and never came in the way, and she herself was engaged in her own spiritual pursuit and tapas. Spirituality was the bond between man and wife and not carnality. There are beautiful pictures of such Rishi-samsaras all over the spiritual lore.

Occasionally, though, they fell for the senses. The senses had to be paid their due at least once in a long while. There is an interesting, insightful and enchanting picture in the Rig Veda (1-179) which shows how a Rishi couple fall for their senses and then pick up their tapas

with added vigour. The translation cannot fetch the full beauty and nuances but the import is clear.

Rishipatnai Lopamudra once wakes up to Desire. She says to herself: "I am emancipated because of my tapas at dawn for years. Old age is taking the beauty off my limbs. I say, in this stage man must possess woman (purviraham.... patnir vrishano jagamyuh)".

What if the man doesn't come to possess the woman? Her thought gets on like this. "The Rishis of yore, who kept to celibacy and truth, kept their vow of truth along with the learned. They too lived with their spouses. They do so even today. They didn't go to their spouses as they had taken a vow of celibacy. I think, therefore, if the man doesn't come to her, she must go to him (ye chidni... patnirvrishabhi-rjagamyuh)".

So she went to her man, Rishi Agastya, and they scaled the heights of carnal bliss. Lopamudra speaks from those heights. "We two didn't strive in vain. The gods who are in the form of senses keep us. Had we not taken on our tapas

with interest, the senses would have felled us with infirmity. Now we foil all the forces in the world. In this world we will win many wars together. With mutual regard we will render joy unto each other as the couple (na mrisha shrantam..... mithunavabhyajava)".

From the peak she continues her reverie: "I am a tapaswini. I have no desires. How come this lust seizes me? Did it come from my man who studies Vedas and checks lust? Or is it the gift of the advent of the spring? Though, I, Lopamudra, am a tapaswini who has discarded all pleasures, still I go to my man. I love being with him (nadasya marudhatah...dhavati shwasantam)".

It is now over and now she is sort of remorseful. She is a tapaswini and yet she fell for desire. Says she: "I pray to the Lord whom I have drunk in: Forgive our wrongs. For man's desires are endless. (Imam nu... pulukamohi martyah)".

It is a very beautiful and absorbing picture of how a Rishi couple take on their tapas with an occasional giving in to the senses. It is an occasional carnal slip which only further strengthens their resolve to pursue the spirit with added force.