

## The Genius of the Four Aims and Four Stages of Life

One of the fundamental teachings of the Vedic way of life is the four aims and stages of life. The significant thing about this teaching is that the ancients did not feel that there was something fundamentally wrong with life, which we have to conquer or change. Rather, they looked at life the way it is and understood its fundamental purpose for the human being.

Thus the four aims and the four stages was their interpretation of life based on how things are and how the human being should live. It was based upon their knowledge that One alone is, that there is nothing here except that One alone in expression. The first aim of the human being should be, therefore, to live in harmony with that One alone, with that fact, not go against it, not act as if we are separate individual entities who can do what they want and it doesn't have an effect on the whole.

Therefore, the first aim was to live according to *dharma*. *Dharma* is based upon what is, the oneness of all things. But then, does life have a still greater purpose than living according to the fact that One alone is? They said, yes! Be freed from any idea of separation at all. Base your life on that knowledge that One alone is, but don't leave this life without it being your full realization. Be fully liberated from the falsehood of separation. Thus the final aim of life was *mokṣa* or liberation.

The two other aims were very practical. While here, you should seek to earn wealth, because you should pay your own way. You shouldn't expect someone else to support you. You also have certain desires built into you, certain urges that are necessary for the functioning of this world. Those should be expressed, but always in the light of *dharma* and *mokṣa*. Thus they gave the four aims of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*.

Then they observed something very interesting about our span of life. They said that ideally we should live a hundred years, and they divided those hundred years into four natural quarters: the student stage, the householder stage, the retired stage and renunciate stage. The interesting thing is that the way that they described the purpose of these stages fits into observed facts about life.

When we are born we have to be looked after, we are helpless. When we die, if we live a hundred years, it is likely we are going to have to be

looked after towards the end. Therefore, life was to be understood in that light. We were meant for the first half of our life to be extremely active in this world, to, in a sense, conquer the world, to accomplish our legitimate aims and ends. But then, when that has been done, gradually we are meant to unwind, to know that our end is going back to where we came from, totally leaving this world behind. The difference was that we were to leave this world as divine beings, not as human beings. We may have been born ignorant of the knowledge of our own self; we are meant to leave this world fully aware of our own self.

Thus the four aims and the four stages. The key is the switch from *grihastha* life to retired life. After having worked for 50 years to make our name and place in the world, the most difficult choice that we have is to start leaving it all behind just when we have reached our peak. But it is needed because we have put so much effort into the world during *grihastha*, it takes an equal amount of time during retired life to unwind and let it go.

Why is this necessary? Because *sannyās* is not meant to be an aggressive period of our life. It is meant to be a total letting go of all our ideas, of abandoning the *dharma* of the mind in order to find the higher *dharma* of our own Self. Unless we have rid ourselves of the aggressiveness of *grihastha* during the retired stage, we won't be able to properly enter into *sannyās* which is a continuous letting go, letting go, letting go of what is not ourselves, so that we can rest in what has always been there, our true Self.