

Four Stages of Life

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Hinduism teaches there are four major stages of life: 1) the student, 2) the householder, 3) the forest dweller (the "retiree" from business as usual), and 4) the wise or fully enlightened person "who is not overly attached to anything and is detached from everything" and thus ready for death. I once saw these four stages represented in four stained glass windows in a Catholic Church in Bangalore, showing how central this cultural paradigm is.

Western cultures tend to recognize and honor the first two stages at best. Seeing this missing piece in our societies, I helped develop men's initiation rites, explained in *Adam's Return*, and explored the later stages of life in my book *Falling Upward*. My experience tells me that when you do not do the third and fourth stages, you actually lose both the skills and the elders to do the first and second stages too!

This is foundational to understanding the spiritual problems we are experiencing in Western religion and culture today, and probably why we now seem to have an epidemic of mental and emotional illness. It seems so many people are angry today, especially at religion itself. (Although I hope they do not waste too many years there.) They are angry because we do not honor variety, staging, interiority, or depth; but their attachment to that very anger becomes their major hindrance itself.

Hinduism at its best honors staging, timing, ripening, and maturity, and not just the zeal and fervor of the newly "born again." We see this same mature understanding in Christianity in the "mansions" of Teresa of Ávila and the "nights" of John of the Cross. But this was seldom mainline Catholicism, which taught "mortal sin" to seven-

year-olds and was quite content with elderly people living in fear of God and fear of hell. What a huge loss of potential and holiness.

In the first half of life--the student and householder stages in Hinduism--the focus is on developing an ego, a separate self. It's all about being safe and law-abiding and doing the right practices. This is as it should be. It teaches the ego necessary impulse control. The problem is when we get stuck and stay here. Unless we move toward maturity, we will miss the real purpose and meaning of our existence and become over-identified with our small "faithful" self and our practices too often become catatonic, unconscious repetition. I know Christians who attend Mass every day or read the Bible every day and are still in the kindergarten of prayer and love.

The first half of life is about building a strong container; the second half is about discovering the contents the container was meant to hold. Yet far too often, solidifying one's personal container becomes a substitute for finding the contents themselves!

The second half of life--represented by the forest dweller and the wise, enlightened person--moves the willing individual beyond the basic needs for separateness, status, and security to an awareness of their eternal, unchangeable identity as one with others and with God. Your concern becomes not so much *to have what you love*, but to *love what you have*. In the second part of life you have a great sense of freedom, no longer attached to outcomes but intimately involved in the process and relationships. You can trust that all will be well because all is held together by Love and Divine Presence.

Gateway to Silence

Moving toward love and union