

RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN ANCIENT INDIA

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The Life of Renunciation

Terms for "renouncers": *sannyasin*, *_ramana*, *bhikshu* (Buddhist "monk"). Renouncers did not belong to one movement. They followed a variety of unrelated doctrines.

Common features: (1) Renouncers rejected ordinary social life and social values. (2) Their religion was centered around the individual. (3) Their goal became freedom or liberation of the individual from the conditions of life.

Lifestyle characteristics:

- _ Mendicancy: the begging of cooked food from those who still lived the traditional life. Renouncers rejected "the fire," because fire was the focus both of the traditional Vedic religious sacrifice and of ordinary family life (since the cooking fire is where the family gathers for family communion and the sharing of nourishment). Hence, fire was a potent symbol of orthodox society.
- _ Homelessness: "He shall not remain two nights at one place."
- _ Renunciation of normal clothing: some renouncers dressed in rags or went naked.
- _ Celibacy: renunciation of ordinary life entailed renunciation of all the joys and comforts of ordinary interpersonal relationships.

Note that this "individualistic rejection of society" was not a life of indulgence or irresponsibility. It required discipline, courage, personal sacrifice, and even suffering. Renouncers were not "hippies": they did not espouse "love" or "peace"; they did not advocate "free love" or use of drugs; and they did not protest or denounce those who continued to live life on ordinary terms.

The Goal of "Liberation" (*moksha*)

Assumptions: Each person finds him/herself in "bondage," i.e., unable to surmount the limitations imposed on him/her by the inherent characteristics of human life, i.e., the inherent dynamics of all social life and the inherent features of one's personal reality (i.e., one cannot fully control or overcome many facts of one's body, thoughts, desires, emotions, etc.). Certain human actions (e.g., technological advances or social change) may free us from some of those restrictions, but can never grant absolute freedom from all of them, because many of them are simply inherent to life. The goal of the various Indian "paths" to liberation is total and absolute freedom, i.e. *moksha*. This ideal became **the ultimate goal of all Indian philosophies and religious traditions**, including Buddhism, Jainism, and all forms of Hinduism.

The Elements of the New World-View in Ancient India

1. A cyclical view of human life and the universe (*samsara*). Death is not the end, but merely an interruption in the cycle of rebirth. The goal of human existence is not to be sought after death, but by achieving liberation from the cycle, a liberation that must occur during life.
2. The law of *karma*. The cycle of births and deaths is not subject to "chance": there is a chain of causes and effects that determines it. Those causes exist totally within the sphere of human "action," i.e., the sphere of *karma*. The word *karma* originally referred to ritual action, but now it came to refer to ordinary action. Gradually, people came to understand that only deliberate action causes the continuation of the cycle. So the action itself came to be understood as secondary to the intention underlying the action. According to this understanding, the chief cause of *karma*, i.e., what makes a person act, is a desire for certain outcomes.