

Periodic Research

Asceticism : Its Role in Realising Global Peace (with Special Reference to Greece)

Abstract

Asceticism was a well known feature of all the ancient philosophies of the world. In this paper it has been tried to understand that what were the approach of ancient people of the world about liberating the world by the way of asceticism. It was a general idea of the all the philosophies that we are in this world due to our previous deeds whether they were good or bad. Almost all the ancient philosophies believed in the concept of rebirth or metempsychosis. It was the aim of all the men to get free from the world of illusion, and to get rid of the chain of life and death. So asceticism was a way to liberate the world by different activities.

Keywords: Global Peace, Ancient ,Ethical.

Introduction

In all the ancient philosophies there was a system regarding getting salvation through the way of austerity .We can trace this element in Indian philosophy, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, nichaeism , Pythagoreanism Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Jainism etc. All the philosophical schools given the right way to their followers to adopt the way of asceticism.

According to Encyclopedia of Religion the word asceticism is taken from the Greek noun askesis, meaning "exercise, practice, training." The Greek athlete, for example, subjected himself to systematic exercise or training in order to attain a goal of physical fitness. In time, however, the word began to assume philosophical, spiritual, and ethical implications: one could "exercise" and "train" not only the body in the pursuit of physical goal but also systematically and rigorously- the will, the mind, and the soul as to attain a more virtuous life or a higher spiritual state.

So here in this paper we will try to find out that how this ascetic concept of India given impact on the world philosophies and played a vital role in realizing global peace. There were many forms of asceticism which were present in ancient India and ancient Greece. Some of them which were common in both the countries are "austerity, chastity, celibacy, wandering, fasting, abstinence from eating- meat, etc. It was a source for them who wished to liberate from the wheel of birth, or the transmigration of souls. Asceticism is a unique feature of Indian society. And when we investigate we come to know that it was also present in the ancient Greek civilization in many forms.

Meaning and Forms of Asceticism

Asceticism is a complex of a number of traits the principal ones may be distinguished as celibacy, austerity, concentration and ecstasy. To take the last first, it should be noted that the Vedic Aryans were fond of an intoxicating drink called Soma. They could describe themselves as having become immortal and as having discovered the gods.¹ In some passages² 'Muni' is described as in ecstatic trance. During its continuance the 'muni' is described as having attained the fellowship of the deities of the air and as being able to travel with them in their course because of his miraculous powers. The following observation of Albert Schweitzer³ brings out the significance of Rgveda passages like the one referred to above for the history and development of asceticism. "In these hymns we encounter men who know they are uplifted above this world. They are the shamans and medicine men- later called Yogins- who get themselves into a state of Ecstasy through drinking the intoxicating Soma by mortification of the flesh. This consciousness of being uplifted above the world which is experienced in ecstasy is the condition determining Indian world and life negation (Samnyasa)... They regard this state of being uplifted above the world as something that only came under consideration for themselves because they possessed the capacity of attaining to community with the gods." The second element of the ascetic complex is austerity, 'tapas' etymologically means heat and significantly its practice is described in Sanskrit in terms



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Periodic Research

of the root, 'tap' to get heated. In Vedic cosmogony 'tapas' plays an important role and in Rgvedic passages it figures in connection with the creative activity of Prajapati as well as a power by itself. In the Chandogya-Upanisad (11, 23) three factors of Dharma are specified. Yojna or sacrifice is the first of them. Yojna is here identified with 'tapas'. In the same Upanisad (VIII, 5), in another context where Brahmacharya, life-long celibacy is propounded, at least two kinds of practices of austerity are specified and identified with Brahmacharya. It is asserted that what is known as "mauna", silence is brahmacharya itself. Keeping silence is well-known to be one kind of austerity. Fasting is thus another kind of austerity. In the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad⁴ (IV, 4, 22) it is stated that Brahmins described to know the Brahman is accordance with the Vedic injunctions through sacrifice through alms and gifts, and through the austerity of fasting. Knowing him one becomes as 'muni'.

Sarokin has examined the elements which according to him constitute the highest mentality in Hindu and Buddhist systems⁵. It's fulfillment through a complete mastery of all sensate needs, even to the point of annihilation of personality, can be achieved through asceticism which presents several aspects and they became afterwards more or less a feature common to all religions.

In the stage of samnyasa we see that asceticism presents several aspects viz. fasting or at least reducing the intake of food, abstention from meat and drink and pleasures of sense, total absence of sexual gratification and suppression of the sexual emotion, vow of silence, sleeping on bare ground, nakedness or making use of minimum clothing, contempt for the world and its riches.⁶

The Hindu Scriptures however do not enjoin self-infliction of pain or flagellation that was indulged in by monks in the early centuries of Christianity. It is the fashion to assert that Indians⁷ have the highest regard for asceticism and that the men whose memories they cherish as ideals of human conduct are ascetics.

The concept of Indian asceticism had four dimensions: Tapas, Vairagya, and Samnyasa and Yoga.

Tapas or austerity had two aspects. In its negative aspect it was self-mortification or self-torture. In its positive aspect it was self-control through self-training or self-discipline. Vairagya was an essential condition to cultivate non-attachment to worldly pleasures and interests leading to renunciation, tyaga or samnyasa. It was a worthy path towards the attainment of self-perfection or preparation for a spiritual life even when leading a worldly life. All schools of thought including Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism viewed extinction of desire (trana) as an essential state or discipline leading to the path of emancipation. Samnyasawas an unsocial, resource less and detached existence when all earthly ties were broken and all worldly desires given up for the final quest of the Atman. Yoga was an art of meditation which was closely connected with tapas for achievement of physical and mental powers. When Yoga was accepted as a system of philosophy, certain basic rules of ascetic practices and behavior viz. observance of Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, and Aparigraha came to be included in it. They formed a standard of holiness to be observed by Hindu

Samnyasis, Buddhist Bhikkhus and Jaina Samanas. Yoga became a technique of intellectual illumination and a means of spiritual enlightenment.⁸

In this way the above study shows the necessity of Tapas, Vairagya, and Samnyasa and Yoga as specific forms of processes and disciplines of Indian asceticism. The concept of these four disciplines and therefore of asceticism itself, have changed from time to time. Asceticism as a socio-religious institution was a barometer of social changes and needs of ancient India.

Greek Asceticism

In Greece the word Asceticism shows the meaning as training. The 'athlete' was one trained, and one might be an 'athlete' in virtue. So very early the ascetic became the spiritual athlete of church History. Two quite different conceptions mingle in the history of asceticism. One of these preserves the original meaning of discipline of the body for some ultimate purpose, as when William James urges sacrifice to God and duty as a means of training the will. The other conception distrusts the body altogether. Asceticism has then as its function not the training but the destroying of the body or the negation of its importance.

The best known type of Greek asceticism is purely philosophical, associated with no prescribed form of physical or mental discipline. On the other hand as a practical discipline, asceticism in India developed into a complex and difficult art, known in its systematic form as yoga. In Greece the body-soul dualism of Plato led naturally to the conclusion that the soul's welfare demanded subjugation of bodily appetites. Plato's attitude toward the body perhaps was influenced by Orphic beliefs that purity of soul brought escape from reincarnation. Thus he suggests, through the mouth of Sokrates, that "those who have indulged in gluttony and violence and drunkenness, and have taken no pains to avoid them, are likely to pass into the bodies of asses and other beasts of that sort." "Desire of the corporeal" cause such souls to wander about until they again become imprisoned in a mortal frame.⁹ "Each pleasure or pain nails [the soul] as with a nail to the body and rivets it on and makes it corporeal, so that it fancies the things are true which the body says are true."¹⁰ Escape from constant rebirth is only possible through "beholding that which is true and divine and not a matter of opinion," i.e. through philosophy.¹¹

The Greeks accepted certain notions of ritual purity or pollution from a very early period. To make contact with the gods, i.e. to enter a temple or perform a sacrifice, anyone desiring to do so had first to free himself of pollution. Exceptional purity was required of priests and priestesses - i.e. those persons who entered the temple regularly and handled sacred objects. According to the views of different cults the sources of ritual pollution varied widely; most were prohibition of a fairly primitive kind. The list of animals which might not be sacrificed, or of food which might not be eaten by the devotees of one or another deity, is a long one. There was a list of metals which could not be brought near to certain shrines; contact with murderers, corpses, insane persons, menstruating women or women in childbirth was taken as widely polluting. The god would take offense and withhold worshipper blessings only till the worshipper observed the prohibitions. There are many ways by which the pollution could be removed but only

Periodic Research

through specified procedures (depending on the cause) : by washings or fumigations (frequently with sulfur), or by contact with pure things like laurel or olive branches, or by pig's blood (which was allegedly capable of trapping demons).¹² Similar concepts of ritual pollution and cleansing-although differing in specific methods and in the items forbidden-may be found in the ritualistic portions of the Indian Vedas or the Laws of Manu.

Both in ancient India and in classical Greece an act widely regarded as polluting was sexual intercourse. It was demanded in many Greek cults that the participants in divine worship be chaste. Thus in some cases virgins and youths performed cult ceremonies, or priests and worshippers had to abstain from sexual activity for a specified time-period before and during worship services. Chaste priests and priestesses served the great virgin goddesses, Athena and Artemis. Participants in the Eleusinian mysteries were required to avoid sexual acts during the process of initiation.¹³ The Pythagorean brotherhood permitted sexual relations only for purposes of procreation.¹⁴ But on the whole, continence plays a much smaller role in Greek than in Indian religion of the same period. Judging from the references to saints and sages in early Indian literature, Indian holy men frequently practiced a severe asceticism which included life-long sexual abstinence. By contrast, the Greek type of religious chastity was usually temporary in nature. None of the Greek cults regarded permanent celibacy as an ideal mode of existence. From the remotest times, both in India and Greece, the opinion was widespread that the sexual act is polluting even in wedlock, and that sexual intercourse constitutes an impediment to holiness.¹⁵

Contacts

It has been discussed that how the contacts of two great civilizations were possible in ancient time. These facts bear testimony to the fact that an interchange of the philosophical ideas was possible from both the sides.

J.W. Sedlar states the very generalized resemblance between the Brahman of the *Upanishads* and the arche of the Greeks testifies rather to the universality of human experience than to any likelihood of direct Indian Influence upon Greece. But when we study about the contacts we come to the conclusion that it was the emergence of Achaemenian Empire, of which the Greeks living in the colonized cities of Ionia and the Indians living in the region around Indus were integral parts, we have the first definite proof of Greeks knowledge of India. With Alexander's expedition began the important stage of Greek writings on India. He had been a disciple of the great master of knowledge and among the officers who accompanied him to India; some were distinguished for their literary and scientific achievements. Alexander's companions were the first Westerners to encounter the Indian sages, thus establishing the tradition of recognizing India's fame as a land of philosophers. There are two topics in which one is very important where Onesikritos statements have been recorded in considerable details, that are his meeting with Gymnosophists.

Giving an account of this meeting Onesikritos stated that he had seen fifteen ascetics in different postures - standing, sitting or lying naked motionless and enduring the unbearable heat of the sun. One of

these Sophists was Kalanos who later accompanied the king as far as Persia and died in accordance with his ancestral custom, being placed upon a pyre and burned. The oldest and wisest among them according to Onesikritos was Mandanis.

Who were the gymnosophists or naked sages of Taxila? Their ideas and teachings, as known to us through Onesikritos, are common in Indian thought. So far as their ascetic practices are concerned, there were many sects than in India performing such practices.¹⁶ The nakedness too, although more prominent among the Jainas, was not restricted to them. The Vatarasana Muni mentioned in the Rgveda lived naked.¹⁷ Besides Jainas, the Uttaradhyayanasutra also mentioned the naked sects of Mrgacarika, Uddandaka, and the Ajivikas¹⁸. Vassiliades thinks that it is more likely that the naked ascetics formed a part of an early sect of SaivaNagas. In the Jabala Upanishads (6) the ascetic is advised to live naked as he was born and the Paramahansa Upanishad (2 and 4) mentions space to be the clothing of the paramahansas.¹⁹

Greek Pythagoreanism

We may say that Pythagoras himself taught transmigration, and may also be safely credited with the complex of ideas with which transmigration is bound up: the doctrine that the human soul is immortal, that it owes its immortality to its essential kinship with the divine universal soul, and that it may hope to return to its divine source when purified. This circumstance has naturally suggested the possibility that the ideas of ethical metempsychosis originated in India and spread thence to Greece. The fairly exceptional occurrence of this idea in Greece, combined with the Greeks' own conviction that it was a foreign concept, clearly suggests that metempsychosis was not native to Greece.²⁰

We may conclude about Pythagoras in the words of Rawlinson, 'It is more likely that Pythagoras was influenced by India than by Egypt. Almost all the theories, religious, philosophical and mathematical taught by the Pythagoreans, were known in India in the sixth century B.C., and the Pythagoreans, like the Jains and Buddhists, refrained from the destruction of life and eating meat and regarded, certain vegetables such as beans as taboo.'²¹

Gnosticism

There are many resemblances between Gnosticism and the ideas of the *Upanishads* mainly the Brahman atman doctrine. The Gnostic light-spark (or pneuma) and the Upanisadic atman are both defined as the inmost-self of the human being. They are similarly treated as identical in substance with the supreme Power of the universe, i.e. with the Gnostic God or the Upanisadic Brahman. Each light-spark constitutes a portion of the heavenly light; each atman is in essence identical with Brahman, the World-Self. With this all, in both Gnosticism and the *Upanishads*, knowledge of this identity is similar to salvation.

According to Sedlar²² there is a great likelihood for Gnostic system to have been influenced by Samkhya, he adds that no single Indian system can be considered as its complete counterpart; rather it has analogies with many, namely, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Samkhya* and *Buddhism*.

Periodic Research

Neoplatonism

The cradle of Neo-Platonism was not the quiet university town of Athens, but the great manufacturing city of Alexandria which was at that time not only a great intellectual centre but also the place where East and West rubbed their shoulders, where the wisdom of Asia was in high repute and where men of wisdom like Phil stratus expressed the highest veneration for the learning of the Indians and even went to India to consult the Brahmanas.²³

Like the Upanisadic philosophy Neo-Platonism believes in the technique of entering into spiritual consciousness. Through Meditation we can free the soul from its subjection to the body and attain union with the Divine. In order to attain this union we must strip everything of the body until the vision is attained. We must abstract from the body, from the soul, from sense perceptions, appetites and emotions, and from even the intellect with its duality. Then the soul touches and gazes on the supreme light. In this account we may see a replica of the Indian theory of contemplation.

In the presence of these historical data we may conclude that Indian thought might have played a great part in the development of the doctrines of Neo-Platonism, and that Neo-Platonism might be the result of the religious syncretism which arose from the conquests of Alexander the Great and the undertakings of the Roman Empire.

Manichaeism

The teachings of Manichaeism can be explained in this way that was a most important example of Gnosticism. Central in the Manichaeism teaching was dualism, that the world itself, and all creatures, was part of a battle between the good, represented by God, and the bad, the darkness, represented by a power driven by envy and lust.²⁴

As a major component of this faith, Indian religion unquestionably influenced the Hellenistic world. No doubt when Mani went to India, the frame-work of his thought was already Gnostic; his revelations were complete. But the mission to India could only have confirmed his world negating attitudes. Probably it was here that he found the model for his Elect, who practiced a degree of asceticism till than not known in the Hellenistic world to any great extent. His elect, those filthy and ragged wanderers, with never-cut nails and wild hair, emancipated of body and pallid of countenance, oblivious to personal health or danger, and enduring the most fearful privations, but terribly in dread of sexuality and of doing harm to animals. Like Indian ascetics, the Manichaeism. Elect did not work, but spent their time praying and preaching, meditating and weeping over the world's sins. Possibly the conception of the Bodhisattva, the enlightened but compassionate holy man, attracted him also. The fact that Mani acknowledged the Buddha as one of his three spiritual predecessors may well be due to his Indian journey.

In any event, the motivations behind classical Greek asceticism almost certainly have nothing to do with any wish to renounce the world as such or to mortify the flesh in the interest of holiness. Such impulses were common to Indian ascetics and later to Christian anchorites and monks, but- despite Plato's advice to cultivate soul over body- foreign to the Greek lifestyle in classical age.

Geographical and racial factors in the development have exposed the population of Persia, India and Egypt to a long succession of oppressive tyrannies by physically superior, but often mentally and spiritually inferior, races (Mongol, Muhammad an, English). For the religions of despondency or even despair the Orient has hence become the breeding-ground. Although fasting and mortification are forbidden in the Avesta, and a great many of the alleged evidences for a primitive asceticism are evidences that in Persia will not stand a critical investigation, yet Mani and the very prohibitions of asceticism are evidences that in Persia as well as in India and Egypt spiritual suffering gave rise to a pantheistic world- view, with despair and asceticism as characteristic features. This asceticism has many forms which are those of world-flight, the hermit life, the mortification of the body by unnatural inhibitions of all its desires. The most imperative of these was the sexual impulse, and hence, as it was also linked with the continuance of a hated existence, the mortification of this impulse became primary. It was a little bit different from Indian asceticism. As Indian religion became fully selfconscious in Buddhism and Jainism, it deliberately opposed the ascetic to the legal, and the life of contemplation to rituals and sacrifice, and democracy to caste-aristocracy.

Christianity

Very early in its history the transformation of Christianity from a life to a philosophy of life began. The marks of this change are already upon several of the New Testament books where the influence of Philo and Alexandrian Judaism is marked. Thus Judaism with which the Christian Church found herself dealing was often not that of the Old Testament, but a Hellenistic Judaism whose thought was based no longer on the ethical monotheism of 8th cent prophecy, but on Greek dualism. This distorted the whole conception of the relation of the body to the purpose of the kingdom; but the distortion was not realized because the faith in a catastrophic introduction of a new age seemed in itself to minimize the importance of existing world. Upon this distortion grew up the conception of world flight; and the asceticism of the purest Oriental character was linked with the life of the church. The so-called therapeutic, described as a Jewish monastic order, probably never existed, but the invention reflects the ideals of the highest holiness of certain circles profoundly influenced by Hellenized Christianity. As might be expected, it was in the Oriental Churches that the most negative type of asceticism flourished. Egypt becomes the home of men and women fleeing from the world to find in ascetic solitude the holiness they longed for. The attitude of St. Paul to marriage had nothing fundamentally ascetic in the Oriental sense. In opposition to Marcion, however, Tertullian protests⁹¹, and he was not the only one to do so, against the rising tide of ascetic denial of marriage, urging that Christian liberty must be preserved. Thus in Egypt and Africa world-flight and ascetic fasting and an un-Christian and un-Pauline celibacy came more and more to mark the ecclesiastical development. It culminated in the world-flight of Paul of Thebes, whose retreat to the desert was, however, only the logic of the transposition of Christian values effected by Cyprian and Origen. Manichaeism and Gnosticism had really

Periodic Research

conquered, and opposed with true instinct by the church, had yet forced upon the church the dualistic Oriental conception of life. And logic went to the fullest extent in the hermit seclusion and the absolute isolation of the individual, as in the case of Antony and Simeon Stylites. The grouping of the priests of the workshop of Serapis is sometimes regarded as the model for what now sprang up as a modification of this hermit isolation. The monastery was at first a mere group of hermits gathered about some conspicuous example, or banded together for mutual protection. To such groups Pachomius (285-345) gave a set of rules, and monastic asceticism was formally foisted upon the early Catholic Church. Then, as persecution began lessen, and martyrdom become rarer and rarer, the enthusiasm that found vent in this last evidence of zeal and sincerity began to express itself in ascetic practices. The spiritual athlete proved his constancy by self inflicted deprivations

It may be said that the negative, contemplative, mystic type of asceticism had its largest development in the Oriental Greek Church. From the time of Pachomius and Antony the contemplative withdrawal from life into the desert was indeed bound up with extraordinary limitation of diet, etc. but the life of contemplation was the end sought by these fasting. The bodily exercises remain in the late conception of Greek asceticism a means to the contemplative self-abstraction. This is seen clearly in the rules of Pachomius and their subsequent development. The influence of Origen and of the Neo-Platonic conceptions on the Oriental Church, as it ceased to be intellectually quick, was to emphasize dogma and details of ritual on the basis of an extreme literalism in the use of Scripture. This ritual development was excessive, and the monastery reflected the most primitive type, an aggregate of hermit cells. It was only when, in 988, the Russian organization education called out the best in the monastic development that it exhibited any signs of life and growth. Yet asceticism in the true sense of the term was overlaid by formalism and ritual. The negative conception of holiness was even forgotten amidst the mass of superstitious externalism.

Conclusion

Now after having this survey of ascetic idea in Greece and India we will throw some light in its role in realizing global peace. As we all know that in this world all the people are becoming materialistic .And wants to have so many things in their possession. But asceticism spread its main focus on liberating the world and its riches to get rid of the chain of life and death. It gave emphasis on austerity, being away from possessions, leaving home and material world, to be unite with god and to get rid of transmigration of soul. So in this way this thought of asceticism was far away from having any kind of powers and kingdoms. So if people will not worry about these things there will be no war and battles and the world will become peaceful and by the way of asceticism it can realize global peace.

When we are using the word global it becomes a broad way of thinking and this idea of asceticism was spread in India In Greece and then to rest of the world and become global .We have seen here that all the philosophical schools followed the way of asceticism and they were providing a system to their followers which was based on getting salvation by the way of

austerity and the final goal of the life was to liberate the world and to get rid the chain of life and death. So the people were started realizing that the materialistic life will not lead them to the final goal of life which was getting salvation and only a way which can lead them to the final goal will be good for them. The idea of asceticism was one of them and ascetics started a life of non violence, vegetarian, less possessions, giving away all the materialistic things, living in solitude, doing meditation, focusing on liberating from the world. In this way these practices prepared a ground for realizing global peace. so we may conclude that asceticism was playing a vital role in realizing global peace.

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