

# Asceticism in Asia and Greece : Some Observations

## 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 weather 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. In all the ancient philosophies there was a system regarding getting salvation through the way of austerity. It was a common feature in all ancient philosophies. We can trace this element in Indian philosophy, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Manichaeism, Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Jainism etc. All the philosophical schools given the right way to their followers to adopt the way of asceticism. In the words of Gutama Buddha, "I preach asceticism as much I preach the burning away of all conditions of the heart that are evil. One who does is the true ascetic."

In all the cultures of Asia Indian Culture was leading the area and here in India the concept of Indian asceticism had four dimensions : Tapas, Vairagya, Samnyasa and Yoga.

**Keywords:** Asceticism, Greece, Cenobitic, Asia, Essenes, Therapeutae, Buddhism, Jainism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrian, Thebid, Elect.

## Introduction

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 (trnsna) as an essential state or discipline leading to the path of emancipation. Samnyasa was 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.

In this way the above study shows the necessity of Tapas, Vairagya, 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.

The areas of Egypt and Syria were very important places of the world in ancient times. They were giving way to communicate between Eastern and Western world. Here we are taking asceticism in Egypt and Syria as a established mode of life followed by hermits and ascetics for the final goal of life. Here we find many types of asceticism. Both Egyptian and Syrian asceticism in the fourth century developed out of earlier ascetic traditions in their respective locations. While the anchoritic life was equally as common in both provinces, the expression of the ascetic

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discipline, the a[skhsi", (discipline) differed between the two: Egyptian asceticism was considerably more mild than the discipline practiced by the anchorites in Syria. This was due to Egypt's severe deserts and harsh climatic conditions, forcing the ascetic to remain in his cell, where he practiced the central tenets of the a[skhsi": fasting, prayer and meditation. Syrian asceticism, in contrast, was less hindered by that province's geography and climate, which was milder and more varied. The Syrians also developed a much more rigorous body renouncing tendency than in Egypt. While many differences existed between Egyptian and Syrian asceticism, there is one fascinating similarity between the two: asceticism in both provinces was an out-growth of martyrdom, filling the vacuum created by the adoption of Christianity by the Emperors of the Late Roman Empire.

#### **Aim of the Study**

This paper is about the spread of asceticism in Asia and what was the main religion which were existing in Asia in ancient times. The focus is on Manichaeism and how it was possible to spread of asceticism to the way of it to rest of the world. There were only two Jewish groups - the Essenes and Therapeutae- engaged in any form of organized asceticism In Egypt in pre Christian and early Christian times.

The Essenes may be regarded as one of the most striking examples of monastic life outside of Christianity. Those of the Essenes who inhabited the monastery at Qumran near the Dead Sea appear to have lived in ascetic style, practicing chastity, poverty and obedience. Whether they be looked on as a sect, as a tribe or as a religious community, the Essenes (150 B.C.) offer all the principal characteristics of the cenobitic life- community of goods, practice of poverty and mortification, prayer and work, meals and religious exercise in common, silence, celibacy, etc.<sup>1</sup> But the majority of Essenes were townsmen rather than monks, though all of them observed strict canons of piety, especially as regards the Sabbath. Apparently some of them, though not all, renounced marriage.<sup>2</sup> The Qumran monastery was destroyed during the Roman-Jewish war of 66-70 A.D., and the fate of the Essenes thereafter is uncertain. It is unlikely that they had any impact upon Christian monasticism, which began only in the late 3rd century.<sup>3</sup>

The Therapeutae were contemporary with the Essenes. They abandoned families and possessions in order to live in ascetic seclusion far from the noise and commotion of cities.<sup>4</sup> Philon of Alexandria is our sole witness to their very existence. He describes them as possessed by desire for the mystic vision<sup>5</sup> and as cenobites, leading a life almost identical with that of the Christian cenobites.<sup>6</sup> They resided in a monastic community near Lake Mureotis in Egypt, where each of them lived alone in a makeshift, unembellished hut placed some distance from all the others.<sup>7</sup> Renunciation of the world, prayer, life in common in real monasteries, vigils, chants carried out by alternate choirs, the practice of fasting and other mortification- such are the chief characteristics of the life of Therapeutae.

Pachomius (C.290-346), an Egyptian monk, wrote a rule of life for monks in which he emphasized

organization and the rule of elder monks over the newly professed. The rule became popular, and the movement toward communal life was ensured.

The ascetic ideal that made Egyptian Christianity renowned throughout the Roman Empire by the end of the fourth century, and served as the prototype of Christian asceticism in the West, developed out of earlier ascetic traditions within the Roman province of Egypt. In fact, hermits could be found in Egypt prior to the anchoritic life of St. Antony. Upon hearing the gospel of Matthew, "if you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven," Antony was convinced to sell his parents' estate, recently bequeathed to him upon their death, place his sister into a convent, and settle among the hermits already living on the outskirts of his village.<sup>8</sup> Antony was the first great manifesto of the ascetic ideal--a classic of the spiritual life which was exerting its influence over the Christian world within a very few years of its writing.<sup>9</sup> St. Antony's long periods of solitude, withdrawing "to the tombs, situated some distance from the village," followed by twenty years inside a deserted Roman fortress, set the supreme example of the anchorite; he was so revered by contemporaries and future ascetics alike that "even his death had become something imitable."<sup>10</sup> Antony lived out his hermitic life in the deserts of Lower Egypt, while another contemporary ascetic named Pachomius was establishing his interpretation of the a[skhsi" known as cenobitic, or communal monasticism, in Upper Egypt. Both forms of asceticism were to have very long futures in their respective areas. But in Egypt at least, in contrast to Syrian asceticism, both anchorites and coenobites were dependent, relying on other humans in one way or another. Surviving in the harsh Egyptian desert conditions, Egyptian ascetics lived out their existence in a cell, whether in solitude, far removed from others, or alone within a community, as in coenobitic monasteries modelled after Pachomius in Upper Egypt.<sup>11</sup> It is the locus and significance of the cell that needs clarification. After a time, however, the necessities of the religious life itself led to modifications. In order to combine the personal seclusion of individuals with the common exercise of religious duties, the early hermits had an aggregation of separate cells called *laura*, to which they could retire after their communal duties had been discharged. From the union of the common life with personal solitude is derived the name cenobite (Greek *Koinos bios*, "Common life") by which a certain class of monks is distinguished.<sup>12</sup> The cell of the Egyptian ascetic defined him both in space and time, and was common to both communal and solitary ascetics. As mentioned earlier, two manifestations of asceticism arose in Egypt in the course of the third and fourth centuries, divided roughly between Upper and Lower Egypt: in the former, the cenobitic tradition founded by Pachomius (A.D. 290 - 347) at Tabennisi in the Thebaid was most common, and in the latter, the anchoritic custom of Antony.<sup>13</sup>

The region around Nitria and Scetis, about forty miles to the south, could be classified as a subset of Lower Egyptian anchoritic asceticism.<sup>14</sup> This region is more or less characteristic of groups of ascetics, where several hermits lived together, often

as disciples of an older and experienced ascetic known as an Abba. The cell in all three regions provided shelter and protection, not only from the elements, but from wild animals roaming the desert. It took many forms, ranging from ancient tombs lying deserted in the middle of the desert, to caves, in which the ascetic often competed with the animal kingdom for solitude.<sup>15</sup> But a cell need not have been a pre-existing or natural structure; often a hermit would construct his cell out of materials available in the desert, such as lean-tos made of local Nile thrushes and wood from small desert trees, as well as recycling stone from ancient structures lying vacant in the desert. Furthermore, there is evidence that ascetics sometimes pooled their efforts, hastily constructing a cell in a matter of a single day, using mud-brick, the quintessential building material for the cenobitic monasteries founded by Pachomius in the Thebaid.<sup>16</sup> But regardless of how they were built, or from what medium the cells took their shape, the cell was first and foremost the primary locus of the ascetic, defining the ascetic's utter rejection of the human world--the world defined by civilization and, subsequently, a world characterised by sin; the Egyptian ascetic, whether anchoritic, coenobitic or living with a few hermits harmoniously, (as in the region around Nitria and Scetis), was committed to his cell.

The cell was the place where almost all daily activities were played out, and where the ascetic disciplined himself in the art of obedience: work, fasting, prayer, and meditation. The work of the Egyptian ascetic varied depending on his geographical location in Egypt. In Lower Egypt, for example, simple, monotonous work was most common, including "working with his hands, weaving palm leaves" into baskets, ropes, and palm-mats.<sup>17</sup> In the regions around Nitria and Scetis, hermits worked with flax to make linen, apart from the normal ascetic tradition of rope-making.<sup>18</sup> But, evidence for ascetics working as seasonal labourers, regardless of their particular interpretation of a[skhsi", is not uncommon.<sup>19</sup> This apophthegma (a sententious answer) relating a part of Paul's life demonstrates what obedience could offer an ascetic; the idea that he could exorcise demons that were unexorcisable by Antony would have been extremely meaningful to contemporaries reading his life. Antony was always remembered as the supreme ascetic, who had accomplished the goals ascetics set out to conquer--to appear "as from some inmost shrine, initiate into the mysteries and God-Borne;" he had achieved the gospel vocation of becoming *teveio* -- 'perfect'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, through obedience, all ascetics had the ability to attain perfection, returning to the *fuvsin*, or natural state of man: the recovery of Adam's condition before the fall.

But the Egyptian ascetics held prayer as a central tenet of their day-to-day activities--it was at the heart of ascetic life in the desert. To pray ceaselessly becomes defined as the central attribute of the desert ascetics as one reads the voluminous evidence contained in *Apophthegmata and Vitae Patrum*: in fact, prayer was synonymous with being an ascetic.

## Syria

In Syria the climate was not that much harsh that much in Egypt. So here the ascetic practice were of different kind. Here ascetic believe in a angelic life and they were thought that they were different from common men. Syrian asceticism was in forms of Manichaeism, Stylites or Pillar Saints, angelic life, holy fools living in solitude, idea of martyrdom, athlete or ascetic, etc. They were doing practice of self inflicted pain, living in solitude, fasting, praying, living in different postures.

In the Persian Empire of the Sassanids, Manichaeism was born. Its founder, Mani, was born in A.D. 215 on Babylonian territory and promulgated a creed which was a blend of Zoroastrian dogmas and Gnostic teaching. It held up an ascetic ideal of celibacy, poverty, and fasting.<sup>21</sup> It emphasized the Antagonism of the two principles of light and darkness. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan states that "Manichaeism spread among all the Christian subjects in Persia who spoke Aramaic. Mani gave a large place to the teachings of Jesus, which caused him to be accepted as a Christian heresiarch. His creed, however, forbade the worship of images, disapproved the killing of animals for sacrifice, and so provoked the wrath of the Roman emperors. It became Buddhist in China and Christian in Europe."<sup>22</sup> During the Roman Empire, Manichaeism got a strong position in North Africa- St. Augustine was a Manichaean for 9 years before his conversion to Christianity.

Manichaeans considered this earth as irretrievably wicked, overrun with demons, a place of wretchedness and torment in which the soul is a stranger. Happiness is possible only beyond the grave and beyond this world. The Manichaean hymns vividly express this conception (here the soul speaks, for example):

1. Who will willingly save me from the pit of destruction, and from the dark valley where all is harshness?
2. Where all is anguish and the stab of death. Never to eternity is there safety there. It is all full of darkness and fume-filled fog.<sup>23</sup>

Who will take me up to that happy realm, so that joy shall be mine in union with all (its) inhabitants.<sup>24</sup>

As a logical consequence of this attitude, the Manichaean Elect were expected to have no interest in what Mani called "the four enterprises, on account of which men kill each other," namely (i) eating, (ii) sex, (iii) property, and (iv) war.<sup>25</sup>

Salvation, as taught by Mani, requires liberating the seed of light, the soul, from the material darkness in which it is trapped. This is achieved by strict celibacy and ascetic practices.<sup>26</sup>

The Syrian ascetics most often preferred to live in a manner unconcerned by weather, and often could be found practicing the ascetic life in the cities and villages as "holy fools." Their ascetic "chapels" took on a wide range of forms, from holes in the ground, or sealed within wooden containers, often smaller in length than the ascetic who inhabited it, to living their entire lives wandering the mountains and wilderness, exposed to all weather extremes.<sup>27</sup> There were also ascetics who chose to live the angelic life out-of-doors in the cities of Syria, such as Antioch,

Damascus and Apamaea. Their way of life, as visible eccentrics, living an other-worldly life in the midst of civilized cities, earned them the name "holy fools." These ascetics found biblical motivations for their vocations: "Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God."<sup>28</sup> The "holy fool" is always defined by his relationship to a particular community, leaving the ascetic life of the deserts and wilderness to play the fool in the wider community of the cities of the Eastern Empire, "aiming at the mortification of one's social being," by living in society, yet not of society itself, as the ascetics in the desert were in the world, yet not of it.<sup>29</sup> These city dwelling ascetics lived out their lives as beggars and prostitutes, cross dressers and perched high upon columns erected in the middle of cities within the Eastern Empire. These ascetics were pillar saints, called Stylites, who spent most of their time on the top of the pillars in order to separate themselves from the world and to mortify the flesh. St. Daniel the Stylite, for example, was not original in his endeavour, but took up the Stylite life after meeting St. Simeon face-to-face atop his Antiochine column.<sup>30</sup> Simeon the Stylite was the prototype of the Stylites' expression of asceticism, living thirty years perched on a column erected in the middle of Antioch. Simeon urged Daniel to climb up the ladder perched against the column, and "kissed him with a holy kiss and said 'stand firm and play the man . . . you must mount onto a pillar and take up my mode of life and be supported by the angels."<sup>31</sup> It was in Constantinople in A.D. 460 that Daniel, clad in Simeon's animal skin tunic, climbed his column and spent the next thirty-three years completely exposed to the elements, until his death at the age of eighty-four.<sup>32</sup> The city holy man was a stranger, standing removed from the interconnectiveness of society as a man in question of his humanness. This quality, combined with living a "super-human" life, gave these holy men, unintentionally, power within society. The Stylites and other "holy fools" living in the cities inadvertently played a very powerful role within society. The city-dwelling holy man often functioned as mediator and judge, and it was by their intervention into the patrons' lives that the village sought a sense of communal identity with the holy fool.<sup>33</sup> These ascetics played a visible role in society during Late Antiquity, but their role as living solely for God as an ascetic was never subordinated.

The evidence that points to asceticism as an out-growth of martyrdom is abundant, showing great similarity between the descriptions of ascetics and martyrs. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, as well as other chroniclers of Saints and ascetics' lives in the fourth and fifth centuries, make frequent reference to ascetics as "athletes." For example, in the Prologue of the *Historia Religiosa*, Theodoret describes all ascetics as "athletes, putting on the breastplate of righteousness, taking up the shield of faith, and receiving the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit;" all of these objects were attributes that an athlete in the fourth century would have, as he risked his life on the floor of the city's colosseum.<sup>34</sup> However, the term was being used to refer to martyrs three

centuries before by Christian apologists and early church fathers. Clement of Rome, writing in the late first century A.D., belonged to a generation of Christian fathers commonly referred to as sub-apostolic. He spoke of martyrs in this way: Let us come to an end of those ancient examples of jealous persecution, and come to the athletes of most recent times; let us take the noble examples of our generation. Through envy and jealousy the greatest and most righteous 'pillars' were persecuted and engaged in the contest unto death.<sup>35</sup>

Athanasius spoke of Antony's anchoritic life as "withdrawing to the cell, and was there daily being martyred by his conscience and doing battle in the contests of faith."<sup>36</sup> The expression of suffering took on a new form: the renunciation of the body, and self-inflicted mortification that both Egyptian and Syrian ascetics imposed upon themselves, although in differing degrees of severity. Both martyrdom and asceticism were striving for the same ideal.

Finally, the relics of dead ascetics were as highly venerated and sought after as those attributed to martyrs. The relics of martyrs were powerful and important remains of the Christians who died for the faith. "Praesentia, the physical presence of the holy, was the greatest blessing that a late-antique Christian could enjoy."<sup>37</sup> It was the presence of an invisible person that had surrendered his life to the executioner in the name of Christ as Christ himself had done on the Cross in the name of God the Father and all human beings. Relics continued to play a role in the veneration of the "new martyrs"--the austere and ascetic who had died after years of suffering and endurance in the deserts and wilderness in Egypt and Syria. The physical remains of the ascetic who lived his life in the ultimate form of Christian expression were highly sought after as a reminder of his miracles and devotion to a selfless way of life. Theodoret of Cyrrhus relates the story of James of Cyrrhestica, who, suffering from a near fatal disease, inflicted upon him after spending years absolutely exposed to the elements, was mobbed by the local villagers believing he was already dead.

Many came together from all sides to seize his body, all the men of the town, when they heard of it, hastened together, soldiers and civilians, some taking military equipment, others using whatever weapons lay to hand. . . . Forming up in close order, they fought by shooting arrows and slinging stones - not to wound, but simply to instill fear. Having thus driven them off, they placed the all-round contestant on a litter, while he was quite unconscious of what was happening -he was not even conscious of his hair being plucked out by the peasants.<sup>38</sup>

As the example illustrates, the mere thought of the ascetic's death caused great excitement among the locals, who wanted to ensure the power of his physical body for themselves. The village members living closest to him regarded his remains as a holy possession, defending their property against others equally as familiar and fond of the ascetic's holy way of life. The great haste to arrive at his body before foreigners found him insured that their village would have the holy remains, and become a place of pilgrimage within the Empire.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, the Roman Empire between the fourth and fifth centuries experienced the development of a new form of Christian piety--the rise of asceticism. Both the Provinces of Egypt and Syria were home to the ascetic discipline; yet, the outward expression of the a[skhsi" differed between the two areas. The geographical constraints and harsh desert climate severely limited the Egyptian ascetics, confining them to cells, where they practiced the ascetic discipline of fasting, prayer and meditation. Their modes of life differed from the ascetics in Syria, a province with a wide-range of geographical terrain, such as deserts, steppe-lands and mountainous areas, as well as more favourable climatic conditions. This allowed the Syrian ascetics to develop a more rigorous expression of the a[skhsi", emphasizing bodily mortification. Although Egyptian ascetics were occasionally found to self-inflict harm upon their bodies, it was nevertheless mild in contrast to the Syrians, and an exception rather than a rule.

The Syrians also aspired to live life as angels in the flesh, emulating the bodiless creatures that live in heaven.

### Conclusion

Therefore, the Roman Empire between the fourth and fifth centuries experienced the development of a new form of Christian piety--the rise of asceticism. Both the Provinces of Egypt and Syria were home to the ascetic discipline; yet, the outward expression of the a[skhsi" differed between the two areas. There was a marked contrast between ascetics in Egypt and Syria, ascetics in both provinces served as spiritual martyrs, as an out-growth of martyrdom that had ceased to play a role in Christianity after the official Imperial adoption of the religion, putting an end to the once frequent and wide-spread persecutions that claimed so many Christians in first few centuries A.D. Asceticism was truly a higher life, and an extreme expression of Christian piety, attested to by the countless men in Egypt and Syria who suffered for Christ.

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