

Satsanga with Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Bhaja Govindam – Verse 14

Now the disciples are presenting their observations, and each one has something interesting to say.

जटिलो मुण्डी लुञ्छितकेशः काषायाम्बरबहुकृतवेषः ।

पश्यन्नपि च न पश्यति मूढः उदरनिमित्तं बहुकृतवेषः ॥

jaṭילו muṇḍī luñchitakeśaḥ kāṣāyāmbarabahukṛtaveṣaḥ,
paśyannapi cana paśyati mūḍhaḥ udaranimittam bahukṛtaveṣaḥ.

One ascetic with matted hair, one with shaven head, one with hair plucked out one by one, one in ocre robes – all these are distracted ones who, though seeing, do not see. These are different disguises are only for their living.

Many different traditions

There are different traditions in India, and a variety of *sādhus* or renunciates and ascetics such as Jains or Bauddhās. *Jaṭīlaḥ* are those who have matted locks. *Muṇḍī* are those who shave their head. *Luñchitakeśaḥ* are those who, like the Jain monks, pluck out their hair one by one. Jain monks are known for their severe austerties and penances because that is their belief.

The kind of *sādhana* or penance that a person follows will always depend upon how they perceive life, how they perceive bondage and, therefore, how they perceive liberation. The Jain monks believe that the self or *ātmā* is under the weight of the dust of *karma*. Past actions result in a very subtle dust-like thing, which sticks to the *ātmā* or the self, and therefore the self, under the weight of the *karma*, is under this world, the lowest world. What you have to do is release the self from the dust of *karma* and, therefore, these monks are constantly performing very severe penances.

Kāṣāyāmbara are those that wear ocre robes. In India, the *sādhus* wear different kinds of robes. There are those who wear white robes, those who wear ocre robes, others who wear yellow, and yet others, who wear red. There are also those who wear some other colors. There is a large variety of *paramparās*, each with a different variety of robes. Ocre is not the predominant color. *Bahukṛtaveṣaḥ* refers to these ascetics who wear a variety of costumes or robes.

Symbolism of orange, shaving off the head, and matted locks

Why do some wear these orange robes? Orange is the color of fire, and fire stands for renunciation. We invoke different dieties in the fire when we perform the *yāga*, and make offerings or oblations. Fire is where we renounce things or offer things, and so fire stands for renunciation. Therefore, the one who has renounced the pleasures of the world wears robes of this color.

Why do we shave our head? It is because hair represents attachment and beauty. Generally, a person is highly attached to hair, and we spend significant amounts of time over our hair during the day. Shaving off the hair is, again, a manner of renouncing the various attachments. Then why do some have matted locks? Keeping one's hair groomed represents attachment and they have given that up. What about those who pluck the hair as a mark of austerity? This denotes a deliberate form of suffering pain.

Why do we find forms of self-mortification in India? It is not self-mortification, but self-purification. There is a deliberate self-denial called *vrata* or *tapas*, austerity, that is performed to increase one's will power and also deliberately deny oneself pleasures, in order to grow out of them. Thus people wear these robes and undertake to perform these various things.

These symbols signify the renunciate's commitment

It may be argued that if you are an ascetic, the renuciation is in the mind and not present outwardly. That is true. It is the mind which should wear the orange color. Yet, the robes always act as a reminder that I am a renunciate. Therefore, they signify a commitment to certain values of life: renunciation, commitment to austerity, and commitment to the pursuit of knowledge. Every time I see the robe, I am reminded of it. That is why young children around the age of eight are given the *yajñopavīta*, which has three threads. The three threads stand for the three deities, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. You are the worshipper of these dieties, and it stands for the commitment to worship, it stands for the commitment to certain rituals that they perform.

Renunciates are respected for their commitment

In India, sometimes, there is a fascination for becoming a *sādhu*, because *sādhus* are respected. They are respected not for their dress, but for what they are. But based on the robes that he is wearing, we give him the benefit of the doubt, and respect the costume. Ultimately, the respect for the person gets

translated into a respect for the costume. Thus, whoever wears the costume also earns our respect. We prostrate to him, serve him, and do all kinds of things. This is part of the tradition. The Mundakopaniṣad [3-1-10] says, *tasmādātmaññāri hyarcayet bhūtikāmaḥ*, one who is desirous of *bhūti* or *vibhūti*, prosperity, may he worship the wise man. One who is desirous of knowledge should worship him, of course, but even one who is desirous of prosperity or wealth should serve him.

The reason why the *mahātmās* or ascetics are served by the society is because the society looks up to them. Behind that service, there is also a little desire that I may gain their favor and, therefore, my problem will be solved. So we touch the feet of the learned people, because we get some grace. That is why some *sādhus* are hesitant to let people touch their feet because every time someone touches their feet, a little bit of *punya* goes away. These are all beliefs. When people have grown in this belief, these things are ingrained in the personality. When we see a *sādhu*, habitually, we will always offer a salutation. Thus, the robes are put on because they represent a certain commitment.

Some take up renunciation for physical sustenance

In this verse, however, the teacher is presenting the observation of an unfortunate fact that some people don these robes not because they are committed to what the robe stands for, but merely for the sake of the belly, *udaranimittam bahukṛtaveśaḥ*. *Udaram* is the belly. *Udaranimittam* is for the sake of the belly. *Bahukṛtaveśaḥ* means the many disguises that are taken up for the sake of physical sustenance.

In India, you can be assured of food if you wear these robes. Wherever you go, *bhikṣa* will definitely be given to you. It is the privilege of the *sādhu* to go and beg for alms. It is not called begging; it is called *bhikṣa*. The householders who live a life of activity and of pleasures, know how difficult it is to renounce the pleasures, understand the value of renunciation, and consider it their privilege to support *sādhus* because there is a value for knowledge, there is a value for austerity, and there is a value for renunciation. There is great respect for the one who has renounced.

Today, in India, there are hundreds of refugees from Bangladesh and they find it very convenient to wear this kind of clothes. In Rishikesh, we find so many *sādhus* because of the *anna-kṣetras*, or the public feeding places. The *sādhus* have the privilege of going there and getting their *bhikṣa*. To get the food, all you

have to do is wear these clothes. Many people do that. It is very difficult to tell a true *sādhu* from one who is merely wearing these clothes for the sake of food. Thus, *udaranimittam bahukṛtaveśaḥ*. For the sake of the belly, so many disguises are taken up. How sad it is!

Sometimes, one finds it very convenient to wear this kind of a robe as a means of escaping life also, and be assured of sustenance without having to assume responsibility. It is possible, though not very common.

Even though some may know the value of renunciation, they do not follow it

Paśyannapi cana paśyati mūḍhaḥ. Look at this *mūḍhaḥ*, the deluded fellow. *Paśyannapi*, even though he sees, *na paśyati*, he does not see. He sees himself wearing the robes, and he also understands what the robes stand for. Very often, when people prostrate to him or serve him, he realizes why people are doing that. Again and again, he realizes or sees exactly what his commitment should be, or exactly what the values of his life should be. Even then, he does not follow them, *paśyannapi cana paśyati mūḍhaḥ udaranimittam bahukṛtaveśaḥ*. The other day someone told me, “Swamiji, look at all these *sādhus*. This *sādhu* in India committed a theft!” I said, “A *sādhu* will never commit a theft. A thief can appear as a *sādhu*, but a real *sādhu* will never commit theft.”

Some sincere renunciates are distracted

It may also be possible that one may sincerely take up renunciation, but after having taken up the robe find it rather difficult to sustain those values, and therefore, get distracted again. When that happens, his life and the values that he is living are not compatible with the robes that he is wearing. Therefore, there is a split between what he appears to be and what he is. Then he should really give up wearing the robes. If he does not, it follows that it is merely for his sustenance that he remains a *sādhu*. This kind of *sādhu* must have been there. Imagine, if they were there at that time, then, what to talk of today?

This may even be an observation about a seeker who sincerely took up these robes, but may have become distracted along the way because he did not prepare himself. You should understand that before we enter any *āśrama*, or before we take up any commitment, there must be some preparation or maturity to accompany that. Even entering the role of a householder is a big responsibility, and calls for a great deal of maturity. We believe that just because a boy has grown to the age of 25 or so, or a girl is of the age of 22 or so, that they should be married. Mere age should not be the criterion. When a person gets

married, one should realize that it signifies a commitment and comes with a responsibility. A lot of maturity is called for. Similarly, when you become a *vānaprastha*, another level of maturity is called for. When you become a *sannyāsī*, yet another level of maturity is called for.

Sannyāsa means *samyak nyāsaḥ* or proper renunciation. You may outwardly give up things, but if you have not given them up inwardly, they remain with you and continue to bother you. They continue to harrass you. Sometimes, out of some kind of a fascination or some kind of an *āvega* or impulse, somebody may take up *sannyāsa*. But then, adequate inner maturity is not acquired and then he is harrassed by his past *samskāras*. It is possible that on the way he may get distracted. Therefore, he may not be capable of living the values that he wanted to live. Such a person is perhaps addressed in this verse. *Mūḍhaḥ*, oh lost one, or oh distracted one, understand why you have put on these clothes. How do you fail to see the values by which you should be living, or the objectives with which you have taken up this life? Otherwise, wearing these clothes continue to be merely for the sake of the belly, *udaram*¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.