THE FOURTH STAGE:
A HINDU'S QUEST FOR RELEASE

Film Guide
by Paul L. Kuepferle

Contemporary South Asia Film Series
University of Wisconsin
Professor Joseph W. Elder, Executive Producer
Center for South Asia
203 Ingraham Hall
1155 Observatory Drive
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI 53706

Please Forward Questions and Comments To:

Dr. Paul L. Kuepferle, President
TVKC - The Visual Knowledge Corporation
PO Box 404; Mendham, NJ 07945; USA
Telephone (201) 543-2000
Telex: 6502617268 MCI
Fax: (201) 543-2000

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1 SYNOPSIS OF "THE FOURTH STAGE"

Our film accompanies retired newspaper editor, E.R. Seturam, as he wrestles with the decision whether or not to abandon all of his possessions and become a wandering sannyasin in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. He’s recently retired and is at an age when orthodox men traditionally have begun preparation for the fourth stage of life as a sannyasin. As he says, "It is one thing to be an arm-chair philosopher and quite another to experience these truths for yourself. Now that I have some time at my disposal, I’m going on a quest for that experience."

We follow Seturam to the Deccan Herald office where he tells old friends: "If there’s one thing that I’ve learned from 35 years of journalism, it’s that no two men will report a single event in the same way. All truth of this world is only relatively real. But now at 64, I feel the need to seek for a different kind of truth, which is more abiding, more real. Old age is not the end; it can be a new beginning."

We are present when Seturam discusses his proposal with his wife and daughters during a meal. They are anxious and opposed to his idea. "What about my fate, your children’s fate? If this is how you think, you should have never married.", says his wife.

Eminent lawyer S.L. Simha gives us insight into the legal implications of sannyasa. He outlines a recent decision in the Andhra Pradesh High Court and explains, "It’s a virtual cutting away from your former family and starting a new life. It’s as if you are reborn."

We journey by rail, bus and boat to Sringeri monastery, in Chikmagalur district of Karnataka, about 180 miles or twelve hours northwest of the city, Bangalore. Narration explains Seturam’s background, the history of the Sringeri Monastery and its founder Shankara, and describes the present pontiff or Shankarcharya. A former engineer who spent two years walking the 1500 miles from the Himalayas, Swami Sarvanubhava, tells us about becoming a sannyasin and his aims in meditative practices. We also view the teaching activities in the monastery. We see dozens of disciples prostrate themselves before the pontiff, out of respect for the divine power he represents.

Although members of different castes are often expected to follow different rules according to their social status, a man who becomes a sannyasin has no caste as he lives outside the mainstream of Hindu society. We follow a sannyasin on his morning begging rounds and learn how difficult the process actually can be.

Narration explains that the ultimate goal of Hinduism is moksha or liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth to which all humans are condemned. Moksha is achieved by knowing the true nature of reality. Once we see our nature as spirit rather than just as body, we realize that the true identity of ourselves and the world is one. In a rare interview, the Senior Shankarcharya of Sringeri Monastery explains the main points of Advaita philosophy. The philosophy contends that an individual has the capacity to transform himself through the self-knowledge produced by meditation. It is unique within the spectrum of Hindu or Brahminical thought because it is non-devotional and even "non-theistic" because it does not require the intervention of a god in order to affect liberation for the individual. This philosophic position has elements in common with the pre-Christian gnostic schools of philosophy and religion in ancient Greece.

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1 The spelling of Sanskrit words is problematic. This Film Guide is intended for general student use. We have used simplified spellings based on pronunciation rather than standard diacritical marks.
Filming in Sringeri took place during the year’s most important ceremony, Navaratri. This film shows rare footage from inside the Sharda temple of the nine day Navaratri rituals. Here narration gives us information on the history and practices of the Advaita Vedanta ascetic tradition.

After the ceremony’s rituals, Seturam meets with the Swami who is the Senior pontiff’s selected successor. They discuss the personal qualifications necessary to receive initiation into sannyasa. "Have you got the desire to earn money? Have you still some desire to accomplish things in this world?" asks the Swami. "It has been overcome," says Seturam. "Really? Have you attachment to your wife and children? If you are certain that you have no attachments, then you are fit to take sannyasa. But you must decide whether your mind has reached that stage of maturity," explains the Swami.

After a brief progress report to the camera, Seturam sets off on the next leg of his journey, a train trip to Banaras, possibly the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Because Banaras is the “holiest Hindu city”, there is a popular belief that whoever dies there attains moksha.

Worried over his family’s charges that taking sannyasa is very selfish, Seturam seeks guidance from a Swami, a sannyasin who was formerly a High Court judge in Delhi. "Judge Swami" tells Seturam that taking sannyasa is the most unselfish act a man can make and the highest ideal to which man can aspire because it helps to uplift humanity in general. "The major goal of taking sannyasa is to remove the fear of death." Once we stop acting from private and selfish standpoints, we act for the benefit for all mankind, not just ourselves.

Seturam reflects on his journey once again after meeting with Swami Gangananda who explains that his own attachment to his family vanished the moment he put on his ochre robes. Seturam wonders if it can be that easy.

Narration explains that the world is an illusion, according to Advaita philosophy, in the sense that it is ultimately unreal - there is a deeper, spiritual reality described by mystics as pure consciousness. It is the glimpses of that experience in moments of calm that provide Seturam with the strength to carry on in his search.

We witness the rare initiation of a sannyasin that includes the ritual performance of his own death ceremony. The initiate first symbolically burns himself on his funeral pyre using an effigy made of wheat. He then performs an atonement for all his previous misdeeds and for those of his ancestors. Next he is shaved, ritually bathed and given ochre robes. At the end of the ceremony he is given a sacred mantra, secret words to meditate upon. The man he was several hours before no longer exists. The finality of the ceremony hits home, and Seturam questions whether he will have the conviction to go through with it.

The missing piece in the puzzle, suggests to Seturam, is the right guru. Seturam meets Swami Maheshananda who studied philosophy and science at Harvard before returning to India to become a sannyasin at age thirty-three. "You must not rely upon any individual but on your own intellectual certitude." After becoming at well versed in the philosophy, one must begin a serious discipline of meditation so that "there is an integrity between what you know, what you feel, and how you act." Seturam’s journey has just begun; so Swami Maheshananda advises: "It is never wrong to be late, but it is always wrong to be early in taking sannyasa."

As Seturam starts home, he summarizes what he has learned and recognizes his attachment to his family and their needs. "Maybe one day I will find a resolution and be ready for the leap."
2 TRANSCRIPT

2.1 SETURAM OUTLINES THE GOAL OF HIS QUEST

Mr. E. R. Seturam: [Voice Over]
Every morning on my way to work I used to watch the passing show from a safe distance. It made me ponder the paradox of India’s thought: the world is fundamentally unreal, truth is at the back of things. But it is one thing to be an arm-chair philosopher and quite another to experience these truths for yourself. Now that I have some time at my disposal, I’m going on a quest for that experience.

2.2 AT THE OFFICES OF THE NEWSPAPER "THE DECCAN HERALD"

Narrator: For 35 years, E.R. Seturam has worked as a journalist and newspaper editor in Bangalore, south India. He’s recently retired, but he often returns to the Deccan Herald as a consultant and to visit old friends.

Seturam: All my life, I suppose, I’ve been a seeker for some kind of objective truth. But if there’s one thing that I’ve learned from 35 years of journalism, it’s that no two men will report a single event in the same way. All truth of this world is only relatively real. But now, at 64, I feel the need to seek for a different kind of truth, which is more abiding, more real.

Narrator: For Seturam, the problem of retirement isn’t keeping busy. It’s a time for the most difficult decision of his life.

Seturam: What is old age really for? I mean, is a time just to ruminate on the past? Or can it be something more challenging? The start of something. Perhaps you in the West look at it differently. You view old age as an ending. But traditionally in India, the last stage of life is seen as a new beginning - a time to renounce the world you have known with all of its attachments and seek for something different.

2.3 THE GOAL OF BECOMING A SANNYASIN [ASCETIC]

Narrator: Indian society traditionally recognizes four stages of life. An orthodox Hindu man passes through the stages of youth, householder and then a time of seclusion in preparation for the fourth stage, becoming a sannyasin. Sannyasa means "to abandon". The sannyasin leaves behind all wealth, personal comforts, and above all his family. His only possessions are his robe, staff, water pot and begging bowl.

The purpose of begging is to humble one’s pride. The logic is that if you’re nobody, you’re closer to God. People humble themselves before a sannyasin because they feel that it brings them closer to God themselves.

In the past, it was common practice for a man to take sannyasa. Today, only a minority even consider taking it. The aim of sannyasa is to free the individual from duties so that he can devote all his time to preparation for mystical experience.

Seturam: I don’t know whether I’ll eventually have the conviction to become a sannyasin. It seems very remote. But I feel that I must discover more about it. To see whether it’s right for me. But, of course, there is a conflict between my own spiritual needs and the needs of my family.

It probably seems to you that the whole idea is very selfish and irresponsible, to abandon one’s family. We have always been very close to each other.

Now that I’m about to set off it’s not surprising that they’re very anxious and very hostile.
2.4 SETURAM DISCUSSES THE DECISION WITH HIS FAMILY DURING DINNER

Seturam: I’ve decided it’s time to tell you what was on my mind.

Sahana [Seturam’s Daughter]: You’re really thinking of taking sannyasa now?

Seturam: Not right away; but I want to find out if it’s the right thing to do.

Many of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers have taken sannyasa.

Isn’t the last stage of life the most important?

When you think about self-realization and proximity to god?

Well, anyway, this is what has been on my mind.

Seturam’s Wife: I understand, but how long have you been thinking this?

Who put the idea into your head? What about my fate, your children’s fate?

It’s not for a man like you, it’s for others.

How can you think of this after marrying? What about looking after your family?

Seturam: It’s not a question of taking sannyasa right away; I want to explore the idea. If I did decide to do it, I would make sure you were provided for.

Seturam’s Wife: If this is how you think, you should have never married.

Older Daughter: No, you should have never married.

Sahana [Younger Daughter]: It sounds very ridiculous. I don’t know why you want to take sannyasa now.

Seturam: I’m not running away from things. In fact, I am getting involved.

Sahana [Younger Daughter]: It is high-sounding nonsense.

Seturam: I’m not jumping into the Ganges at once. This thought is in our tradition.

Wife: Give up these thoughts filling your head.

If you ask anyone, no one will approve of what you’re saying.

Sahana [Younger Daughter]: You can talk well, convince anybody.

Seturam: If I find out that it’s not all right. I’ll accept it. No votes here, I know.

Older Daughter: We’re all against your idea.

2.5 ATTORNEY S.L. SIMHA INTERVIEWED AT THE BANGALORE CLUB

Seturam: [Voice Over] I knew that even discussing the idea of sannyasa would lead to many emotional problems. Apart from that, there are legal implications too. Legally, what would happen to my family and all my possessions?

My relative, S.L. Simha, is an eminent lawyer. I have arranged to meet him at the Bangalore Club, one of the most powerful reminders of the British Raj.

Simha: Recently, a retired deputy secretary, after having taking sannyasa, he tried to lay a claim to his property. There was a dispute. And the High Court of Andhra Pradesh, finding that all of the necessary ceremonies had been performed, held that he was a sannyasa. He had lost all of his rights and that the property had descended upon his sons and that his sons were allowed to take the property.
Seturam: It can't be revoked?
Simha: It's an irreversible process. The consequences of death all ensue. Property passes on to your heirs and you lose all right to inherit from your former family. Any property that you might acquire subsequent to taking sannyasa passes on to your heirs in the form of a family, but to your brother sannyasa, if there are any. Otherwise, it goes to the State via S.G. So, it's a virtual cutting away from your former family and starting a new life. It's as if you are re-born.

2.6 JOURNEY TO SRINGERI

Seturam: I said good-bye to my family. Not such a traumatic parting because we knew that we could see each other again. Even if I did decide to take sannyasa, I would have to return home to make arrangements for them. Nothing would be done in a hurry.

 Narrator: Seturam was born into an orthodox brahmin family. [Please note that we are using the spelling "brahmin" to indicate to priestly caste and the spelling "Brahman" for Ultimate Reality.] Sanskrit learning and Hindu rituals shaped him as a child. But later as he went through college, Western ideas became increasingly influential. For a time he was a Marxist and then a freedom fighter in the struggle against the British. This is a journey back into his own traditions, to re-assess them and to see if they can provide the meaning he is now looking for in this, the last part of his life.

The first stage of the journey takes him to Sringeri, one of the major monasteries believed to have been established by the 8th century philosopher and saint, Shankara. Seturam's family has had a long relationship with this monastery and his grandfather was a sannyasin here. The 8th century philosopher, Shankara, was the major force behind one of the most important Hindu philosophical traditions, called Advaita which means unity. It's said that Shankara established the monastery on this spot because he saw here an auspicious sight -- a frog resting in the shade of a hooded cobra, its natural enemy.

In the Indian tradition, the crossing of a river has always been a powerful symbol of crossing from this world to the next.

The role of the Shankaracharya or pontiff is handed down from generation to generation. The present Shankaracharya was initiated as a young boy and already his successor has been chosen. His disciples fall at his feet out of respect for his proximity to God.

2.7 SWAMI SARVANUBHAVA INTERVIEW

Narrator [Over Sarvanubhava walking]: This sannyasin, now staying at Sringeri, was formerly an engineer. He took sannyasa after his wife died. He has spent the past two years walking the 2000 miles from the Himalayas.

[Seturam and Sarvanubhava walking in garden.]

Sarvanubhava: At first, it was difficult to attain concentration. But I am gradually attaining this state of mind. In time I think that it is possible to attain even greater peace of mind.

Seturam: What about someone just beginning? Is it a very difficult process?

[End, walk in Garden]

Sarvanubhava: I am tremendously at peace now, and my heart is free from sorrow. There is nothing that I want or desire. I live very well.

It was in my heart to do God's work, to be at peace with myself.
And so I took this path. No ties with anyone.
Now I can meditate as long as I wish.
For two hours, if I want, I can sit in deep meditation.
I would like to try to sit in meditation for a whole month or two.
Learn? It’s difficult to spell out what I have learned.
You can only know this feeling by experiencing it.
Sugar, for example. It is difficult to explain sugar by saying it’s sweet.
You can only know by tasting it.
Only through meditation can you know its advantages, what peace it brings.
It’s hard to put into words.

[End, Sarvanubhaya Interview]

2.8 VEDIC RECITATION
Narrator: (Over Vedic Recitation):
Sringeri is not just a place for sannyasins, it is also a center where the laity come to be taught. These children are memorizing Vedic scriptures. A Hindu child is brought up to a lifetime of detailed ritual, governing everything from how you worship to how you wash yourself. Most people who become sannyasins do so in later life, but you can prepare for it in your youth. You can’t just enroll as a sannyasin; you have to prove to your teacher that you’re ready.

2.9 SENIOR SHANKARACHARYA INTERVIEW AND ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY
Seturam: When we come into the presence of a great teacher, like the Shankaracharya, the custom is to prostrate. You know, it’s not kind of idol worship, we don’t think that he’s God or anything like that. It’s a form of respect towards someone you feel is charged with spiritual power.

His Holiness Abhinavavidyatirtha [the Senior Shankaracharya]:
You have a feeling that you want to renounce everything.
True. But this has not arrived through wisdom.
It has arisen because of a few personal difficulties.
Once these difficulties go, so will the feelings.

Narrator: (Over sand carriers): Hinduism believes that while man’s body is perishable, his inner spirit is immortal and is reborn again and again. It is as if man is condemned to a never ending succession of labors to perform. The ultimate goal is moksha or liberation from this endless cycle. The Advaita tradition holds that this is achieved by man taking it upon himself to understand the true nature of reality. Man must actively pursue this knowledge. He must understand, not just believe or guess.

Understanding is gained through meditation. The sannyasin develops an attitude toward physical sensations, viewing them as passing experiences, nothing more, nothing less. He then slows down the fluctuations of the mind by concentrating on an image or concept. The goal is to experience the permanent awareness behind the waking and dreaming states, called Atman or Pure Consciousness.
Once we see our true nature as spirit rather than just as body, we discover that the basic stuff of the world is spirit, not matter. We also realize that the true identity of ourselves and the world is one.

On becoming a sannyasin, a man gives up his caste and lives outside the mainstream of Hindu society. Some of the laity see sannyasins as parasites; a sannyasin has to learn how to pocket insults quietly.

Off Camera Voice To Sannyasin (Subtitled): There’s no food here. Go away!

Back to Abhinavavidyatirtha Interview: (Over movement of people in street.)

The individual is identical with Brahman -- pure being... and has no existence other than Brahman.

Just as the existence of the jar is nothing other than clay...

...and in the end the jar will become clay again.

It is the same with the individual.

Someday the individual will become one with the pure existence of the world.

(Interview continued with Abhinavavidyatirtha in view:)

I have seen many people living in darkness.

Even after the sun rises, they still don’t see anything.

Isn’t that amazing?

After the sun’s pure light illumines everything, you should see yourself.

Yet people still aren’t compelled to see their own inner selves.

[End Interview with Senior Samkaracarya]

2.10 NAVARATRI CEREMONIES IN THE VIDYASHANKARA TEMPLE

Narrator: Sannyasins try to be in the world but not of it. But the Sringeri Pontiffs can’t just cut themselves off. As representatives of a thousand-year-old tradition, they fill a ceremonial role for the Hindu laity. For the majority, the experience of their religion is not one of ascetic practice but often of rich ceremonies. Seturam’s stay at Sringeri coincides with the year’s most important festival, Navaratri.

Presiding over the ceremonies is the Shankaracharya’s chosen successor. He follows the ceremonial image of the deity which is carried around the temple. They walk backwards so as not to show disrespect to the deity. The younger Samkaracarya leads a re-enactment of an imperial court, giving prizes for Vedic recitation and music. This symbolizes the time when the 14th century Samkaracarya was offered but declined temporal power.

The morning after the ceremony Seturam goes to the younger Shankaracharya to ask for further advice.

2.11 THE "JUNIOR" SHANKARACHARYA TESTS SETURAM’S FITNESS TO TAKE SANNYASA

His Holiness Bharatitirtha, [the "Junior" Shankaracharya]: Have you got the desire to earn money, or not?

Seturam: All that to a large extent has vanished.
Bharatitirtha: To an extent, or completely?
Seturam: It has been overcome completely.
Bharatitirtha: Really? Have you still some desire to accomplish things in this world?
Seturam: I believe that the desire is gone; so I think of taking sannyasa.
Bharatitirtha: Have you, or haven’t you, attachment to your wife and children?
Seturam: Sannyasa means giving up these attachments.
Bharatitirtha: True, but my question is whether you still have these attachments.
Seturam: I think not.
Bharatitirtha: If you are certain you have no attachments...
...if you feel that you have nothing else to accomplish in this world...
...that you have arrived at a stage where you can live peacefully alone...
...then you are fit to take sannyasa.
But you must decide whether your mind has reached that stage of maturity.
Seturam: I feel I ought go to Banaras to find out more about sannyasa.
Do you think it would help me to go?
Bharatitirtha: Banaras is a holy city on the banks of the sacred Ganges...
...sanctified by the goddess Annapurna.
It may help you to go to such a holy place.
Seturam: (to camera): The whole place is full of peace and tranquility. I get some peace of mind, true. But there is a little doubt persisting. After all, the ego cannot be erased by just feeling peace temporarily. The ultimate is jnana, wisdom, whether we could erase the ego and get eternal peace in sannyasa. Anyway, the doubt has arisen in my mind. I will do as the Shankaracharya says, go to the holy city and seek some more clarification.

2.12 TRAVEL TO VARANASI

Transition Scene (Train, old family photographs):
Seturam: (Voice Over): I didn’t want to travel from place to place, endlessly in pursuit of an elusive truth. There are many parables which tell of the man who so relentlessly travels that he fails to see that the object of his search was to be found in the very place he started.

Narrator: But there’s an important reason for going to Banaras. Banaras represents the world’s oldest continuous culture. It has always been a major religious center. Banaras is the most sacred place for Hindus. It is built on the holy river, the Ganges. The popular belief is that whoever dies there attains instant moksha — liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth.

Seturam: (Voice Over): Spiritual seekers have always felt drawn to Banaras. The atmosphere is extraordinarily vivid and colorful — a great melting pot of questing humanity. If you want to know what Canterbury must have been like in Chaucer’s time, you should see the medieval fair which is Banaras. It’s strange to think that such a noisy bustling place is a spot which people chose for tranquility and enlightenment.
Narrator: (Over Seturam walking in courtyard): The place where Seturam stays is called Mumukshubhavan, which means literally "the residence for those who desire liberation."

One of the sannyasins living here is known as "Judge Swami" because he was a high court judge in Delhi before leaving his family to take sannyasa.

Seturam: (Voice Over): But you see, my family, and a few friends of mine, tell me that this is a very selfish purpose...I am thinking of these things...

2.13 "JUDGE SWAMI" [VIPIN CHANDRANANDA SARASVATI] INTERVIEW

Vipin Chandrananda Sarasvati ["Judge Swami"]: If you are contemplating the uplift of your soul, it cannot be called selfish. That is the broadest view of life. You are rising so high that nobody can call it selfish. Selfishness consists of a small ego, a finite ego, and attaching yourself to worldly things. If you are renouncing things, it cannot be called selfish. If you uplift your soul, thereby you raise the whole world by some few points.

Now family says so, but the family cannot prevent your death. When God’s hand comes, you part company. And if you part company, then that is dismissal from service. It is compulsion, nobody can help you. Compulsion. Now, some time the family may not like you to be there. That I’ll call removal from service. The wife wants to divorce you, the children want that you get away now, give us charge of the whole family. That is removal. So why go in for that? Why not voluntarily resign with good grace? Bid them good-bye in good humor; make all provisions for them. You say that I am leaving all the property to you.

Seturam: How did you feel, Swamiji, when you renounced the ordinary life?

Vipin Chandrananda Sarasvati ["Judge Swami"]: I felt that I have completed all of my obligations to the world, now I can fly Godwards completely.

Seturam: A glorious feeling came to you...

Vipin Chandrananda Sarasvati ["Judge Swami"]: Oh yes. A glorious feeling.

Narrator: (Over bodies carried on stretchers): From hundreds of miles around the dead are brought to be burned in Banaras because of its holy powers. In Banaras, death is looked straight in the eye.

Vipin Chandrananda Sarasvati ["Judge Swami"]: It is not fashionable for the householder to talk about death and religion or God, ordinarily. But when you have become a sannyasi then it is the subject to talk about. The feeling of death is that I am going to my maker, I am going back to my maker where I come from. We talk of religion - the boat that will take me there.

According to Hindu philosophy, it is just a changing of the clothes. It is the transmigration of the soul, changing of the clothes, from one suit of clothes you change to another. Otherwise, for the spirit, there is no death, absolutely. Spirit is everlasting, it never dies. The major goal of taking sannyasa is to remove fear of death.

Narrator: Bodies are burnt by the families on the river's bank.

Seturam: (Voice Over while looking from boat): Banaras is a place where death is very much on your mind. Warnings of the impermanence of worldly things echo throughout Banaras. The ancient riverfront is built on the ruins of still older, even greater temples. I think that the fear of death is the starting point of all religious instincts.
Seturam: (Voice Over while walking through street): As I jostled my way through the alleys and gullies of Banaras, sometimes I felt as though I was going round and round in circles. But what kept me going was the feeling that if I could turn the next corner, there I would find what I was looking for.

2.14 SWAMI GANGANANDA INTERVIEW

[Subtitled conversation while walking in the street:]

Seturam: Did you leave wife and children when you took sannyasa? Are they living?
Swami Gangananda: They are still alive; they are living in Delhi now.
Seturam: Do you miss them in any way?
Swami Gangananda: I never went there, and they never came to me.
Swami Gangananda (seated next to temple): A man who has left his wife has left the whole world. Who has left the world, who has renounced the whole world, he is quite happy. He is fortunate.
Seturam: Has this been your experience?
Swami Gangananda: Quite true. There is no doubt.
Seturam: When you renounced ordinarily life and became a sannyasin, what about the difficulty of controlling sexual and bodily desires?
Swami Gangananda: It is a new life. Sannyasa is a new life. And family, domestic life, is another life.
Seturam: But control?
Swami Gangananda: The world is like an illusion, a dream or shade. The influence of the domestic life was removed from my heart at once, like a shade, when I put on these geharu vastra [ochre robes]. At once, quite clear, wiped out. No difficulty, I have never dreamt of them.
Swami Gangananda [Subtitled over English]: God is the great operator of the world, the cinema of the world.
And it begins from the sunrise, and it sets at sunset.
Swami Gangananda [Unsubtitled]: And there is nothing afterwards at 12 o’clock, nothing remains. Hence it is just like a cinema. It is an illusion.

Narrator (over Seturam on boat): In Advaita philosophy, the world is an illusion in the sense that it is not ultimately real. Behind the physical backdrop of the world you travel past lies a deeper, spiritual reality. Mystics have described the experience of that reality as Pure Consciousness. A state where there is no distinction between the inner Self and Pure Being. In moments of calm, you may have a glimpse of that experience, an intuition which may be enough to carry you on.

(Over distribution of food): But not all sannyasins rigorously pursue this spiritual knowledge, and not all the rules are obeyed to the letter. In practice, nowadays, only a minority go out begging for their food. The majority are fed in their communities.

Seturam: I suppose, like many Westerners, I have been somewhat naive about the holy men of India. Of course, I knew that not every chap with a long white beard sitting by the Ganges was an enlightened soul. But I had been inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt. After this journey, I think that I am more skeptical.
Clearly, there is the danger that the more you go into the self that, instead of transcending the self, you can end up with a king-sized ego.

About one thing I was totally clear: I would not become a sannyasin merely out of duty as a brahmin. If I were to do it, it would have to be for the right reasons.

2.15 INITIATION OF A SANNYASIN

Narrator: A man becomes a sannyasin by an initiation which includes the ritual performance of his own death ceremony. The initiate first symbolically burns himself on his funeral pyre using an effigy made of wheat, while the priest recites the ritual prayers.

Then he performs the death rites. According to Hindu tradition, the transmigrating spirit travels to sixteen different worlds and is provided with food for its various stops. The proper ceremonies are performed for guiding the spirit through the realm of ghosts to the heaven of the ancestors.

The initiate performs an atonement for all his previous misdeeds and for those of his ancestors.

Seturam: (looking from rooftop): As I watched this death ceremony and imagined what it would be like if I myself was taking part, it hit home exactly how serious and final it would be. Could I really see myself in the place of that man? Would I have the conviction to go through with it?

Narrator: The sannyasin is shaved, ritually bathed, and given orange robes. He will be regarded as svarupa Narayana -- the living presence of god.

At the end of the ceremony, the guru whispers to him a mantra, secret words to meditate upon. Now he is a sannyasin, the man he was several hours before no longer exists.

Seturam: (Voice Over, walking in a courtyard): It was becoming clear to me that the missing link was the right guru. I had yet to find someone who could make the implausible seem possible. But how can you tell the difference between a real and a false guru?

2.16 MAHESHANANDA INTERVIEW

Swami Maheshananda Giri: The first important thing is that we have to depend not upon any individual but on our own intellectual certitude. There is a Upanisadic passage which says to the disciple: "tvam tathos guruh guro yogyata vijnata" -- "because you have to find out who is your guru, therefore you who determine the guruness of the guru is really the guru of the guru."

Narrator: Swami Maheshananda is head of the Dakshinamurti monastery. He studied philosophy and science in the United States. He became a sannyasin at the age of thirty-three.

Swami Maheshananda Giri: You must not pay too much attention to the personality of the guru, but the message that he is giving. If you are convinced of that message he his giving, then it is no more his message, but it is your own message. So after you have become doubtless, moving to different gurus, having not faith in their personality but in their message, then you dive deep into this meditation. And as you go deeper and deeper, your knowledge becomes more and more unified, and there is an integrity between what you know, what you feel, and how you act. Once that has been obtained then you will be absolutely harmonious within yourself.
And as Gaudapada says, "samaprantam na calayati" -- once you have attained to that state of absolute harmony within yourself, you need not worry, nothing will be able to move you from that position. Now, that is what Acarya Shankara says that unless the disciple can roar like a lion against what the guru is saying, his experience is not complete. So I think that your journey will not end by going to a particular individual, but just as a honeybee collects honey from many sources but makes it into its own, similarly the knowledge will be your own.

It is never wrong to be late, but it is always wrong to be early in taking sannyasa."

2.17 SETURAM'S SUMMATION OF THE JOURNEY

Seturam: (Voice Over while leaving monastery): "Better to be late than too early." I know that it is too early for me. To say good-bye to the world, renouncing everything, means a demand, a great leap from the known into the unknown. If you leap before you are prepared, you will certainly fall into a chasm. I know that I am not yet prepared.

The sannyasins I talked to made it all sound so easy. But as yet, I don't feel that I could really renounce my family. My life is so bound up with theirs. I know that to leave them would cause unhappiness for us all. So how do we weigh our own spiritual fulfillment against the happiness of the family we love? Maybe one day I will find a resolution and be ready for the leap.

[End]

3 BIOGRAPHIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

3.1 Mr. E. R. Seturam

E.R. Seturam is a retired newspaper editor from the city of Bangalore, in Karnataka State in South India. He received the education of an orthodox Hindu brahmin in his youth but later received a westernized college education, studying political science and psychology. After thirty-five years of journalism, Seturam is enjoying a busy retired life teaching journalism at a local college, presiding over several cultural associations, and writing extensively in both English and Kannada on Indian classical music.

3.2 His Holiness Abhinavavidyatirtha Swamigal, Sringeri "Senior" Shankarcharya

Mahasannidhanam His Holiness Abhinavavidyatirtha was initiated into sannyasa in 1931 at the age of fourteen by the previous pontiff, HH Candrasekhara Bharati. He ascended the pontifical seat in 1954. During his many tours throughout India he acquired the facility to speak Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi.

3.3 His Holiness Bharatirtha Swamigal, Sringeri "Junior" Shankarcharya

Sannidhanam His Holiness Bharatirtha, born in 1951 into the family of a Vedic scholar from Andhra Pradesh, was initiated by Abhinavavidyatirtha in 1974. He is an outstanding scholar of logic and philosophy. He presides over many of the religious functions and organizational chores of the Sringeri monastery.

3.4 "Judge Swami"

Vipin Chandra Ananda Saraswati, a former lawyer and High Court judge in New Delhi, studied Advaita philosophy under the Shankarcharya of Puri and took initiation from Hariharananda Saraswati "Karpatri Swami" of Varanasi. He resides in Mumukshubhavan when in Varanasi and also travels between Puri and Rishikesh.
3.5 Swami Gangananda Tirtha
Swami Gangananda Tirtha was born in California, USA where his father was a building contractor in the 1920s. He returned to India at age four, was employed in the Indian Administrative Service, and met his guru in Varanasi while on an official trip in 1944. Within a year he provided for his family, retired from service, and took san\-nyasa. He’s lived in the same room at Mumukshubhavan in Varanasi for the past 40 years. He also hadn’t spoken English for 40 years, a carry-over from the Mumukshubhavan policy during the independence movement. Swami Gangananda has a reputation for being a "real san-
nyasin", one who strictly follows the arduous rules and spirit of the institution.

3.6 Swami Maheshananda Giri
Swami Maheshananda Giri is a student of the late Shankaracharya of Puri Samkaracarya. Swami Maheshananda Giri took sannyasa at age 32, and is one of three mandaleshvara’s [district teacher of sannyasins and one who can give initiation] in Varanasi. A manda-
leshvara in Varanasi may have as many as twenty small monasteries, each having 5-25 san-
nyasins, under his jurisdiction. As head of the Dakshinamurti monastery, with branches in Varanasi and Delhi, Maheshananda Giri takes a keen interest in the education of sannyasins by presiding over the publication of a fine series of Sanskrit texts on Advaita philosophy.

4 MAP OF INDIA DETAILING LOCATIONS OF THE FILM
Our film begins in Bangalore [1], population of over a million. We then travel to the mon-
astery at Sringeri [2], population of about 5,000. Both cities are located in Karnataka State. Seturam goes to Varanasi (Banaras) [3] in Uttar Pradesh State and finally to India’s capital in New Delhi [4] where he met with Swami Maheshananda Giri.

5 CULTURAL PRESUPPOSITIONS BEHIND THE FILM
What are the assumptions within the film’s cultural context that are not readily apparent to viewers outside the Indian tradition?

5.1 RENUNCIATION: The "Highest Ideal" in Hindu Society
A society is best revealed through the ideals which it holds to be the highest for humans to achieve. The ideals of the individual often become the ideals of the society at large - these ideals can become society’s better nature when they are elevated to national or cul-
tural symbols. In America, the image of the rugged individualist has repercussions throughout America’s history, from the manifest destiny doctrine that led to the territorial expansion to the Pacific Ocean to attitudes on wealth, social mobility, and religi-
gious freedom. In India, the individual aspires to “do his dharma [correct social duty]”-- obey scriptural injunctions to pass through the four life stages of student, householder, and a period of secluded preparation for the fourth stage, life as a wandering ascetic. It is from this respected position that one is beyond all social laws, the living presence of god, and a symbol who advises and inspires the laity. The ideal of completing all four stages of life according to the Hindu tradition has shaped Indian society in a variety of ways, from family structure to justification for political power.
The image of the spiritually enlightened individual who gives direction to society is one of the most potent symbols in Indian culture. The logic behind this phenomenon is that once an individual has understood the nature of the universe, that person is then vested with the authority and the duty to guide society in accordance with this realization. Variations of this theme are found in the tradition of the Buddha, Krishna in the Bhagavadgita, Rama in the Ramayana, Mahatma Gandhi, and politically active self-proclaimed "God-men".

5.2 MOKSHA: LIBERATION, THE GOAL
There are four goals recognized for the development of the complete individual: artha (material well being), kama (sexual desire and understanding), dharma (social duty) and moksha (individual liberation from the cycle of rebirth). The highest goal, the one which results in the greatest amount of good for both the individual and society, is moksha.

The explanation of moksha will lead to the discussion of the following topics, among others:


6 ANSWERS TO VIEWER QUESTIONS

6.1 Why make a film about religious renunciation? If so few people do it, why is it important?

The notion of sannyasa -- living the life of a renunciate -- is predicated upon the belief that in doing so one will attain moksha, liberation, from the endless cycle of rebirth. Moksha, like the notion of Heaven in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, is the highest goal in the Hindu-Buddhist-Jaina tradition. The state of sannyasa, the fourth stage of life according to orthodox Hinduism, is therefore the social position of one who is seeking the highest ideal in Hinduism. By focusing on the highest ideal in Hindu society, we put into perspective a goal that has shaped and inspired a large segment of India over the past 3000 years. Without an understanding that moksha is a real and felt imperative for those answering the "religious call," it is relegated to the realm of a mere concept. Although several films have been made about what ascetics "do" in India; there were none examining why anyone would think of becoming such an individual.

6.2 What was the impetus for making the film about the process of renunciation?

The film's approach was determined by two factors, a chance dialogue with a prospective sannyasin and the filmmaker's background in Varanasi.
On a train ride from Bombay to Madras, Paul Kuepferle met a forty year old architect who was wrestling with the idea of whether or not to take sannyasa. The decision making process was agonizing for this man, as if the entire weight and responsibility of Indian culture were put upon his shoulders. Was it possible to become a "realized soul," or was this just some sort of mythical and unachievable cultural ideal? Was there anyone who could show him the way? Did he believe in these ideals enough to sacrifice and renounce what he had already achieved? The dialogue also drove home the fact that in order to become a renunciate one had to have something to renounce. This man actually had something to renounce -- career, family, wealth -- whereas most sannyasins leave little behind when they join the order. Nobody in his family could understand what was bothering him. When he met somebody versed in the Advaitist tradition, he couldn't stop talking. Here was a deeply emotional longing that no textbook theory of philosophy could ever convey. The possibility of moksha and the implied necessity of taking sannyasa to achieve it were not archaic oddities of Indian culture but were the most important decision in a man's life.

The second factor in this dialogue was Paul Kuepferle's close acquaintance with the Advaita Vedanta tradition. His Ph.D. specialization was in Advaita Vedanta philosophy, and he had lived near a group of Dasnami sannyasins in Banaras for eight years. Kuepferle had provided this group with funds to repair their decaying three-room building, an electrical power line, and medical help. In return, he got a unique glimpse of their lifestyle. Over eight years, Kuepferle saw the deaths of all eleven original members and a radical transformation of the group's attitudes. The original group was led by three well-educated, earnest, and spiritually inclined individuals who attempted to impart these ideals to their brother ascetics. As the group dynamics changed, the "new old men" were less educated, less curious, and more self-righteous, more reactionary, and worried more about food than spiritual pursuits. For example, during the first three years Kuepferle and the three bright sannyasins would discuss philosophy late into the night. During the last few years Kuepferle would be awakened at night to assist a sannyasin who couldn't understand why he had stomach pain after eating sixteen green bananas. Given this experience, Kuepferle was aware that finding a teacher would not be easy for an earnest, spiritually inclined, and worldly-wise individual.

Given the train ride dialogue and the filmmaker's background, it became clear that the film must be about the decision making process, the accumulation of data to make a responsible decision.

We could not make the film about the man on the train because it took six years before the funding for the film became available. The search for someone in a similar state of life as well as a similar state of mind took more than one additional year.

6.3 How was it possible for the film crew to locate someone like Seturam who was on the brink of deciding whether or not to take sannyasa? How was he selected?

Paul Kuepferle went to monasteries and centers of traditional learning throughout India and interviewed numerous people who were thinking of taking sannyasa. About a year of fruitless searching went by. While many people volunteered to be the "hero" of the film, it became obvious that someone who had already made the decision was not suitable. Those who already had made the decision to become sannyasins and who had yet to be initiated were like the novices of any religious tradition, alternatively adamant about the correctness of their decision and insecure over the possibility of saying something wrong to the camera. People in this stage of life could not reveal the scope and weight of the institution of sannyasa, nor could they carry a 40 minute film. We needed someone who was in the middle of the decision-making process.
In general, younger people were more amenable to becoming the subjects of a film and openly discussed what they were thinking. They felt the spiritual crisis more than the older men who often were just going through the motions. Even though the younger men were willing to talk, they were also so "gung Ho" that they were unwilling to think. Their intellectual immaturity would have been boring. If younger men were forthcoming, older men were equally guarded. Almost invariably their public statement was: "We're too modest and spiritually inclined to be the subject of a film." Privately we came to learn that most were afraid of showing their ignorance of Advaita philosophic doctrine or wary of expressing doubts about the fourth stage of life that other sannyasins might later use against them. However, their professed modesty didn't interfere with their desire for money. Only three of more than thirty older men did not ask for substantial monetary recompense; whereas only one of about ten younger men brought up the subject. The first six months of the search were disheartening.

It became obvious that the subject of the film must be sought on the basis of a framework provided by the initial conversation on the train. That is, the architect placed circumstance, and the weight of circumstance, first. The search had to focus on a person who was the right age, intellect, social strata, family history, etc. If these circumstances or conditions were not fulfilled, there would be few pressures on the decision-maker.

Finally, a devotee of the Senior Shankaracharya, a former District Magistrate and writer, S.Y. Kirshnaswamy, put us in contact with Seturam and his family. Seturam was not unequivocally defending the institution of sannyasa. He was close enough to the tradition to see it -- warts and all -- yet still respect it. And he was of the right circumstance to be able to feel the weight of the decision. Seturam was a Brahmin. He was retired. He was versed in the tradition. As a matter of fact, the land for his house was given to him by the Sringeri Shankaracharya for services his family had rendered for generations. His grandfather had been a sannyasin. In another time and place there might have been family pressure on him to take sannyasa to perpetuate the family tradition. He was simply the right person to examine the dynamics of a thought process that had been central to Hinduism for millennia.

6.4 How difficult was it for the film crew to get Seturam to agree to be filmed? How about the other members of his family, his lawyer friend, etc?

Yes, it was difficult. Friends eventually persuaded him. Once Seturam agreed, his friends were very accommodating.

6.5 Did the presence of the film crew affect Seturam's eventual decision not to become a sannyasin?

No. The crew didn't affect his decision. But, a film crew looking over your shoulder changes your behavior. When the camera is rolling, people's personalities change. On the negative side, the presence of the crew made Seturam's comments more guarded. On the positive side, he knew little about the philosophic presuppositions of the tradition and learned a lot by association with people known to the crew members. We became his guides and mentors in Varanasi. His decision was based upon what he learned during the journey, not the opinion of the crew. His interest in the tradition was one of genuine respect, while his decision making process and life training made him cautious, probing, and eventually reinforced his initial motive: "It would have to be for the right reasons, not just out of duty as a Brahmin".
6.6 How did the presence of the film crew affect Seturam and his family?

In the many meetings with Seturam and his family prior to filming, the relations were very cordial and loving. In the "kitchen scene," when the cameras were rolling, they took on a different persona. Things below the surface of relationships manifested themselves and fueled the confrontation. The film's producers merely asked the family to discuss the notion of sannyasa as they would any other issue that might affect the whole family.

This might be a good place to remind viewers about the limitations and the advantages of documentary films. Consider this remark as an addendum to both Mass Communications 101 and Epistemology 101. Film cannot give you Truth. There is a rather naive, if not anti-intellectual, belief that film's value lies in its ability to reveal events "as they truly are". This view assumes that one could capture the essence of an event if one just kept the cameras rolling. Some of those who accept this view even believe that the editing process is a subjective constraint on the event. In response we say that even a simple act like throwing a stick in a ritual can be fraught with problems. Are the people throwing the stick doing it right? What does throwing the stick mean? Does it mean what the stick-throwers say it does? Without informed commentary, viewers might erroneously interpret the throwing of the stick as an act of hostility. Film can't give the unadulterated truth, but it can give you a feel, an entree into a culture that is baffling, contradictory, and imposing. This film can and should let you know that the question of whether or not to "take sannyasa" and enter the classical fourth stage of life is not just a postulate in a book about India. Seturam's struggle to reach a decision is important because it takes place within the context of Indian society at a time when the country is looking back at the great institutions that once shaped Indian society.

6.7 Was Seturam paid anything for agreeing to be the subject of the film?

He was not paid anything for being the subject of the film but he was hired to make transcripts of the dialogue in southern Indian languages. He was paid the same rate as other transcribers. We felt it unfair not to pay him because after he retired and began receiving his pension, he continued to work as a free-lance journalist to supplement his retirement income.

6.8 Has Seturam seen the film? Did he have anything to say about the final editing or narrative of the film? Did he ask to have any final say over how the film treated his decision making?

He has seen and enjoyed the film. He did not have a final say over any editorial decision. The thread of, and structure of, the film was Seturam's voice-over commentary, his state of mind at various stages during the trip. And the film was shaped as his travel quest. We filmmakers were faced with the challenge of balancing information and story-line. We had to give the audience enough information to "bring them up to speed" with what many Indians, including Seturam, know about sannyasa just by living in India. At the same time we did not want to overpower the narrative of Seturam's quest with so much information that the narrative got lost.

6.9 In the Hindu scheme of things, the First, Second, and Fourth Stages are all pretty clear. But the Third Stage is a bit vague. Can you describe the Third Stage. Did Seturam symbolically or otherwise pass through the Third Stage before he began to debate entering the Fourth Stage? Why? Or Why Not?

The the four ashramas [life-stages] mentioned in the film are student [brahmacarya], householder [grihastha], recluse - literally "forest dweller" [vanaprastha] and initiate [san-
nyasins]. The third and fourth stages are often blurred. But there is a very important distinction between the two. Those persons who become sannyasins out of duty as a "good" Hindu often ignore this contemplative intermediate third stage. They are often theists, devotees looking for a personal god to help them through divine grace, rather than contemplatives looking inward as the meditative life. The third stage [Vanaprastha Ashrama] was a period for one to make up for lost time, to consider those spiritual matters that one ignored while being caught up in the daily demands of raising a family. It should be noted that one can observe the practices of this third ashrama while still part of a joint family household, giving the daily reins to the eldest son and withdrawing into the background of family matters in order to spend more time in meditation.

6.10 How old is the institution of sannyasa?

The oldest written evidence for the type of sannyasa presented in the film comes from the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad [II, iv, I and III, v, I] compiled circa 1000 BCE [Before the Common Era]. The passages describe Yajnavalkya’s declaration to his wife that he wants to become a parivrajaka [wandering ascetic] and distribute his wealth to his family. It is further stated that the purpose of becoming such a parivrajaka is to realize Brahman [Ultimate Reality]. Since the Upanishads were oral traditions of ascetics put to writing at a later date, the supposition that this practice dated to at least 1500 BCE is not unreasonable. One of the earliest references to the institution is by the grammarian Panini [500 BCE], who mentions in Ashtadhyayi IV, iii, 110-111, that there are codified aphorisms, called Bikshusuras, compiled by the authors Parasharya and Karmananda. The major Dharma Shastra’s or rules for householders compiled 600 BCE-200 BCE [Kane] recognize sannyasa as an established institution and outline eligibility, rituals, and practices. It should be noted that the term sannyasa refers to the institution of asceticism while the terms sannyasi or sannyasin refer to the individual male ascetic.

The Mahabharata [XII, 147.89] recognizes four types of sannyasins: kuticaka [lit. "Those who dwell in a hut" and do not wander], bahudaka [wandering ascetics who "drink water in many places"], hamsa ["swan" - one who swims on the divine lake of the mind], and paramahamsa [those who no longer need to worship religious images]. This classification is applicable today in only very general ways because the various sects have adopted their own rules and procedures.

For example, the same terms as those that appear in the Mahabharata have different meanings in the Advaitist interpretation. There are usually four designations given in both Vidyaranya’s Jivanmuktiveka [circa 1350 CE] and the Yatidharma samuccaya. Vidyaranya describes them as: kuticaka [one who stays in a hut because he is too weak to travel], bahudaka [one who has strong feelings of detachment], hamsa [one wishing to attain Brahmaloka] and paramahamsa [one wishing to attain moksha in this lifetime].

There are different sets of rules for each type of ascetic in accordance with the hierarchy of spiritual attainment.

Professor Louis Dumont, in a famous article, "World Renunciation in Indian Religions" [Contributions to Indian Sociology, IV p.33-62, 1960], contends that the basic premise of renunciation originated as a rejection of brahminism because renunciation is antithetical to brahminical concepts of duty of an individual. However, it is much more likely that the formal institution of renunciation was a vigorous counterpart to Vedic practices during a period prior to the rigid codification of duty and social behavior that came to be regarded
as brahminism. Certainly the Upanishadic tradition predates Buddhism and Jainism and is of an orthodox persuasion. That is, it advocates a permanent entity, Brahman, behind the phenomenal reality. Heterodox traditions like Jainism and Buddhism reject this fundamental premise.

Later information about the institution of sannyasa can be found in the major Dharma Shastras. See Gautamadharmsastra section III 1-36, and Baudhyanadharmasutra section II, vi, 11,9-34 both translated by George Buhler, Sacred Books of the East, 1879. Later composite texts like the Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, and Manusmriti have sections on the stage of life that is entered through renunciation. There is also a collection of later Upanishads, called the Sannyasopanisads [Adyar Library, Madras], that are collections of old passages, new ideas and a popular eulogy of the institution. Kane’s History of Dharmastras I p.989-1158 lists many works on renunciation.

6.11 What does Seturam mean when he says "... the world is fundamentally unreal; truth is at the back of things?"

This requires a brief introduction to the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. According to the Advaita Vedanta interpretation of the Upanishad, the Ultimate Reality is Brahman. According to this interpretation, an ascetic practices a meditative discipline that enables him to have a moment of direct cognition of this Ultimate Reality. On the basis of this unique intuitive flash of mystical experience, the person says that everything else is less real, or pales into insignificance, when compared to the cognition of Brahman. After one has achieved this mystical experience, the world does not vanish in a puff of smoke, rather, one’s experience is so self-certifying, so real, that one laughs at one’s ordinary orientation to worldly values. When this Advaita Vedanta value system is put into categories that describe levels of enduring experience, the levels are classified as: paramarthika [ultimately reality = Brahman], vyavaharika [practical reality of everyday experience, the phenomenal world]; pratibhasika [illusion, where the reality of the object, such as the snake’s reality when a rope is mistaken to be a snake, is real only as long as the illusion persists]. Given this analysis of levels of reality, the Advaitists philosophers were labelled as the "mayavadi" school - those who contend that the phenomenal world is not ultimately real.

6.12 Must one become a sannyasin to achieve the realization of Brahman?

This controversy raged within Advaitist circles for several centuries. Householder-scholars said that it was not necessary; while ascetics said that it was necessary. According to Advaitist doctrine, the illuminating knowledge of Brahman that produces moksha is not a "prapti" [or attainment of knowledge] but a recognition of our own real nature. If this is the case, then the knowledge is not a karma [the result of any action] and the rites and rituals of sannyasa cannot be a necessary prerequisite for that knowledge. Hence, taking sannyasa is not necessary for the realization of Brahman. Those sannyasins who hold that it is necessary to become a sannyasin in order to achieve the realization of Brahman argue that one must be free from the social duties of a householder and the hundreds of obligatory rites of Hindu society if one is to achieve that illuminating knowledge. Both arguments have their merits. Other religio-philosophic traditions besides Advaita Vedanta had views on this subject. Vallabhadri [1473?81?-1533CE], the founder of the Suddhadvaita school, wrote the Sannyasanirupana that rejects the institution of sannyasa. Teachers and swamis in this school wear ochre robes and yet can be married!
6.13 Are there any eligibility requirements for becoming a sannyasin?

There’s a difference between theory and practice. Theoretically there are several requirements for becoming a sannyasin. One should have either completed the householder stage or never have entered it (i.e., should still be a student-stage bramacari). One should be born into one of the three highest ranks of Hindus: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or Vaishyas. That is, you can’t be a Shudra. [However, it is interesting to note that during Moghul persecutions of ascetics in the 1500s, Shudra military men were allowed into the Dasnami sannyasin order]. And finally, one should have spiritual aptitude. This spiritual aptitude was described by Shankaracharya in his Brahmasutrabhasya as nitya-anitya-vastuviveka "the capacity to discriminate between things eternal and non-eternal." One should be convinced that there is a spiritual reality more enduring and significant than worldly values and attainments. Candidates who met the first two requirements but not the third were denied initiation. As a matter of fact, the uninitiated were often not allowed even to hear Advaitist teachings.

6.14 Can you say something about the Deccan Herald? Who started it? What happened to it when the British left? How many subscribers does it have today? In what language is it published?

The Deccan Herald is one of South India’s oldest and most respected newspapers. It is published in both English and Kannada. Once private, it was recently purchased by a syndicate.

6.15 In the Deccan Herald office, why does Seturam’s friend ask him if he is going to Sringeri? What’s so important about Sringeri?

This portion of the film is rather stilted because we asked the participants to repeat portions of a conversation they had while we were setting up our equipment to film at the Deccan Herald. Sringeri is a symbol of the Advaitist tradition and a metaphor for spiritual contemplation. It’s a place off the beaten track designed specifically for ascetics. It’s not primarily a pilgrimage site. It’s a place to go to think.

6.16 In one scene, why is the woman touching the feet of the sannyasin?

Touching the feet is a sign of respect. While most laypersons don’t mind this ritual demonstration of respect, many sannyasins don’t like to be touched out of concern that they will lose some of their spiritual power. The ancient assumption behind touching the feet of respected people is that saintly people can transmit the good merits of their ascetic penances through their feet. The many nerve endings and pressure points outlined by traditional Hindu medicine also assume that this transference through the feet is possible. The ritual of touching the feet perhaps came from behavior towards ascetics and later became formalized behavior for all people worthy of respect.

6.17 Can you identify the women in Seturam’s family who are sharing the meal with him while they scold him for considering becoming a sannyasin?

They are his two daughters, granddaughter and wife.

6.18 What is the language in which Seturam addresses his family members?

Kannada, the language of most of Karnataka State.
6.19 Can you say anything further about the Bangalore Club that apparently was founded in 1863. Were Indians free to join the club from the beginning, or was it exclusively for the British? What happens in the club today?

During the days of the British, the club was exclusively British, as were all clubs in India. British rule in India ended in 1947. Today the club is a meeting point for the city’s elite and a place for them to play tennis. The Bangalore Golf Club, founded in 1876, carries on the British tradition of a Madras vs Bangalore golf match that formerly required the transport of players in bullock cart caravans under military escort.

6.20 When Seturam arrives at the Sringeri Monastery, why does he wear only a white draped cloth?

Among various groups in India, unstitched clothes are felt to be a sign of humility. People don such clothes to reflect their spiritual intent during their stay in Sringeri.

6.21 Who was Shankaracharya?

Much of the historical information about Shankara is obscured by mythology. He was a Nambudiri brahmin from Kerala, became a sannyasin as an adolescent, wrote the Brahmastutrabhasya, commentaries on the Upanisads and Bhagavadgita, and toured India to debate publicly his Advaita [non-dualist] interpretation of the classic Vedanta texts. He lived some time between 650 CE and 850 CE, although his traditional dates are put at 788-820 CE. He had four main disciples who commented upon his works. He may have died at an early age, most hagiographers say 32. There are about thirty works that profess to be chronicles of his triumphant tour [agriyajay] around India, but most of these works rehash the same basic information and add a few facts that are clearly motivated by inter-monastery rivalries. The tradition holds that he was the one who established the Dasnami monastic centers in Sringeri [Karnataka State], Dvaraka [Gujarat], Puri [Orissa], Bandrinath [Uttar Pradesh], and Kanchi [Tamil Nadu]. While none of the monasteries date to that period, it is plausible that there was a loose infrastructure at each of the sites that became better established as the sect grew in importance. In time, Shankara’s philosophy became the dominant pan-India interpretation of the Vedanta.

6.22 How many Shankaracharyas are there today? How does this relate to the monasteries around India?

Each of the five main monasteries has a Shankaracharya or pontiff. The original Shankaracharya is sometimes referred to as the Adi [=first in a continuous series] Shankaracharya.

6.23 Is Sringeri a town exclusively devoted to the tradition of these pontiffs?

No. According to local legends, this area used to have many Buddhists and Jains. In fact, there is an inscription in the local Jain temple dated 1161 CE which pre-dates the monastery’s main Vidyashankara temple dated 1336 CE. The population of Sringeri appears to have increased in a spurt of activity during the building of the Vidyashankara temple [1336 CE] and during the pontificate of Bharatitirtha [1350 CE] when many scholars moved to the area to assist Sayana in the composition of the Veda Bhashya. Three primary families and one hundred twenty assisting families of scholars received land grants. There is also a mosque established by Tippu Sultan. Today the Sringeri monastery provides funds for the maintenance of both the Jain temple and the Muslim mosque.

6.24 Can you provide a map of India showing where the major monasteries are located?
6.25 Why is the Sringeri Shankaracharya dressed entirely in orange, with an orange cloth wrapped around his head and with beads and sandals?

His ochre robes are the traditional garb of an ascetic. The beads are called rudraksha, often worn by devotees of the god Shiva, and believed to benefit the cardiac system. His sandals are wooden, rather than leather, because nothing that results from death of an animal should be worn by an ascetic.

6.26 What language are Seturam and Sarvanubhava speaking. Answer: Tamil. How did Seturam learn Tamil well enough to converse so fluently?

Seturam, like many South Indians, can speak a smattering of all South Indian languages. This talent was refined during his years as a reporter. In this film Seturam shifts from English to Kannada, Tamil and Telugu with no apparent difficulty.

6.27 Who are the boys studying Vedic scriptures?

Most of the students in Sringeri are from Brahmin families and come from the surrounding villages; only a handful come from cities. Their number fluctuates from twenty to sixty, making the organization of the school increasingly difficult.

6.28 What is the significance of the white horizontal lines of the boys’ and sannyasin’s foreheads?

White horizontal lines reflect affiliation with Shaiva [Shiva] or Smarta worship while Vaishnava [Vishnu] worshipers have vertical markings.

6.29 What language is the Shankaracharya speaking? Why does he chose to speak to Seturam in Hindi? Couldn’t it have been one of the Dravidian languages?

The Shankaracharya is speaking Hindi at the request of the filmmakers. We wanted to make this pivotal philosophic discourse and assessment of spiritual fitness accessible to the largest number of people. Further, we wanted to show that the Shankaracharyas look at themselves as pan-India personalities and therefore speak each regional language. The mother-tongue of the Sringeri Acharyas is Kannada, as is Seturam’s.

6.30 In a close-up of the hand of a meditator, we see the meditator’s left hand, with the thumb touching the forefinger. Is there any significance to that particular hand position?

The hand position is known as a mudra [hand symbol]. Traditionally, there are twenty-four major mystical mudras. But in practice, there are many more mudras employed by various denominations of meditators, temple priests and even dancers. Explanations of the meaning of individual mudras are relative to individual disciplines, religious affiliations and the whim of the practitioners. The use of mudras seems to have evolved out of the practice of yogis following a conceptual scheme of psychical-material “evolutes” explained in the Samkhya philosophy and Ayurvedic medical school of Charaka. In general, closed fingers indicate a connecting and conservation of energies, while open fingers indicate a discharge of such energy. In Buddhist iconography the closed hand positions indicate Buddha in a pre-enlightenment pose while open hand positions indicate a post-enlightenment pose. Perhaps this is why some orthodox ascetics view open hand mudras of other schools as a sign of unmerited spiritual hubris.
6.31 During the Navaratri festival, the younger Shankaracharya is wearing a very elaborate costume. What is the meaning of such an elaborate costume?

The history of the Sringeri monastery and its rituals is intertwined with the Vijayanagar Empire. The Navaratri festival contains ceremonies where the Shankaracharya dresses in a very fine "worldly" costume of an emperor. The ritual symbolizes an event when the Sringeri pontiff was offered, but then declined, temporal power offered to him by Vijayanagara Kings Harihara I and Bukka I. They "placed the royal insignia at the feet of the pontiff". The precise relationship between Sringeri and the Vijayanagara Kings is in question. For a good overview, see Professor Kulke's article listed in the Bibliography.

6.32 What is the image being carried around during the Navaratri festival?

The presiding deity and major figure of Sringeri monastery is the goddess Sharada. Her utsava murti [processional/festival statue] is carried during the festival. Sharada is the name used in southern India for the goddesses in northern India known as Sarasvati and Durga. Not surprisingly, the Durgasaptasati is chanted here as it is in northern India. According to the Sringeri explanation, Sharda represents an integration of the Trimurti Shaktis [female counterparts to the three gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva] and is hence transcendent to them. That is, she represents the Paramatman or Brahman of the Advaita Vedanta tradition.

6.33 What is the theistic affiliation of the Advaita tradition?

The message of the Advaita tradition is that all theistic images are ultimately unreal. Ultimate Reality [Brahman or Param Atman] is nirguna [devoid of form]. Yet, for the purposes of religious ritual and private worship, devotees may worship a form of god of their own choice, technically called saguna upasana [worship of a form]. What form does one worship? The theoretical answer is "any form one choses as long as the devotee realizes that it is not ultimately real". In practice, the Advaita tradition in Sringeri and in southern India follows a path known as "Shanmatha" [the six traditions].

Most readers will be familiar with the Trimurti [triune deity] concept of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesha [Shiva]. The shanmatha tradition is an attribution of various new deities on the older trimurti concept. Shamkara is traditionally held to be the founder of this eclectic shanmatha school that worships Shiva, Shakti [Durga], Vishnu, Kumara [Subrahmamnya], Surya [the sun], and Ganapati [Ganesha]. One of the earliest examples of this form of worship can be found in the lower set of cave temples in Tiruchirapalli.

6.34 What language does the younger Shankaracharya use?

Answer: Telugu. Why? Telugu is his native language -- he was born in Andhra Pradesh. Seturam's ancestors are also from Telugu speaking areas.

6.35 Who is the goddess Annapurna? What is her significance in Banaras?

Annapurna is Shiva's female counterpart in Varanasi. As Annapurna, she is the goddess of material prosperity, specifically food and wealth.

6.36 "Banaras represents the world's oldest continuous culture." Is that true? What about Jerusalem? Some of the Chinese cities?

This phrase has been used by many residents of Banaras and, although mildly self-serving, it is justified. The key word is continuous. There have been major upheavals,
both cultural change and physical re-location, in cities like Peking and Jerusalem.
Banaras has a claim based on continuity of tradition, of a world view and social structure
that has persisted, unlike other great cities around the world and other cities in India.

6.37 Who would build a place like Mumukshu Bhavan?
This facility for ascetics was built during the 1920s-1930s by a philanthropist who was a
disciple of the founding swami. A trust was set up to perpetuate the institution. However,
as a sign of the times, Mumukshu Bhavan is no longer admitting new sannyasins even
though it could accommodate three times the number of ascetics that are in residence at
present. Since the administrators of the trust have begun building modern apartments
for themselves and relatives, the sannyasins feel that the administrators are just waiting
for the old ascetics to die so that the administrators could take over the substantial prop-
erty for themselves. For most ascetics at the bhavan, this is the stuff of juicy gossip. For a
few dedicated sannyasins, they could care less.

6.38 Why are the funeral pyres burning with nobody standing nearby? Don’t friends and
relatives wait by the funeral pyre until it burns down?
After the ritual breaking of a jar in the ceremony, the immediate family members circum-
ambulate the pyre, and depart from the cremation grounds to bathe and fulfill additional
ritual responsibilities. It looks as if there are just a few people attending the funeral pyres.
Actually most of them remain in covered areas higher up along the ghats. Friends and
relatives do remain to retrieve the ashes, but this is often done many hours later when the
fire has totally burnt out and cooled. So, the footage in the film is not visually representa-
tive of the many people who frequently do stand near the funeral pyres. This question
does touch on a recent and very significant religio-social-political issue in Banaras. There
are a growing number of people who come to die in Varanasi and for whom there are no
relatives to oversee the cremation. In response to this problem, where 10%-20% of all cre-
mations have to be underwritten by the city corporation [Nagar Mahapalika], an electric
crematorium was established in 1987-88.

6.39 Why are the bodies brought to the river’s edge?
The bathing of the corpse is the first step in the funeral rites. Although some rites should
have been performed in villages before a body is brought to the cremation ground, the
rites are usually repeated to ensure that all rites are actually fulfilled. The first step is wash-
ing the body, putting on a forehead mark, wrapping the body in cloth, applying a paste
called jatamansi and finally a garland of flowers around the body’s neck. The body is
then brought to the north and placed on the pyre so that the head faces south. Earliest
and most authoritative descriptions of antyeshti funeral rites occurs in the Rigveda
X,14-18, Shatapatha Brahmana [900 BCE] and the Ashvalayanagrhyasutra.

6.40 Why do only men attend the funerals?
The usual absence of women at cremations stems from the fact that those who attend a
cremation must remain sequestered from the rest of the family for between three and ten
days. Some women do attend funerals. In fact the widow sometimes plays an important
part in the cremation rites. However, many orthodox women do not attend funerals to
avoid being sequestered from the family since there would be no one left at home to cook
food and run the household. The attendance of women appears at cremations seems to
depend upon caste and degree of orthodoxy practiced in the household.
6.41 Why is the group founded by Shankara given such prominence?
The organization of Shankarite ascetics, the Dasnamis, is the largest and oldest organized
group of brahminical or Hindu ascetics in India. While there is no proof that Shankara
founded this group, traditional lore contends that Shankara founded this order after he
made a "victory tour" [digvijaya] of India wherein he reestablished the "true" Hindu faith.
Further, popular brahminical lore holds that Shankara drove out or defeated the Bud-
dhists and re-established "sanatan [eternal and true] dharma". While India had witnessed
the conversions of kings who in turn persecuted rival faiths, it is doubtful that Shankara
had such an impact. The history of this ascetic group is a neglected but fascinating area of
study. The order, like the Advaita philosophy, indeed assimilates much from the Bud-
dhists. But the Buddhists had previously borrowed much from the Upanishads. The rich
history and philosophy of this group makes it a worthy subject of study.

6.42 What is the meaning of the ashen marks on the foreheads of these ascetics?
Forehead marks have long been used to indicate sectarian affiliation. They perhaps had a
practical or medicinal use to cool photosensitive areas of the forehead, such as the area
between the eyes, that were irritated as a result of meditative concentration. While ashes
and cooling substances ceased to be used for their therapeutic value, they took on orna-
mental use, as in the woman's "bindu", and the sectarian marks of laypersons and ascet-
ics. There are two main division of these markings: tripundarika [horizontal] Shaivite
and ardhvapundarika [vertical line or lines] Vaishnavite. The tilaka [forehead mark] is
usually made out of sandalwood paste and is applied after bathing. Both Shaivites and
Vaishnavas mark other parts of the body [chest, throat, etc.]. For example, some Vaishna-
vas mark twelve parts of the body, each designated for a name of Vishnu. The textual ref-
terence to such practices is quite late, beginning with the Puranas, and no two authors
seem to agree on how many marks should be made or what they mean. But the
Vaishnave and Shaivite distinctions are consistent.

6.43 What is the significance of the orange staffs the sannyasins carry?
The danda [staff] has sociological and religious significance. Sannyasins from the school
of Shankaracharya carry a staff made up of a single stick and are known as dandi or eka-
dandi swamis. The staff itself is a composite of weapon and object of worship. It can be
used practically as an instrument to find one's way at night. Religiously, it symbolizes the
world - the top must never touch the ground because it is worshipped as a sacred spot in
the universe. The carrying of staffs is an old institution. The number of individual sticks
that comprise one whole staff and that serve as a group identification symbol has prob-
ably undergone many changes. However, we do know that the distinction between those
who carry one stick to comprise a staff and those who use more sticks to comprise one
staff is quite old. The famous Naiyayika philosopher, Udayana [984 CE], mentions eka-
dandins [one staff sannyasin] and equates them with Advaitists while tridandins [three
staff ascetics] represent the Bhedabheda school of Bhaskara.

As a social symbol in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, the staff indicates to other sannyasins
and prospective food donors that the holder of the staff was a member of the brahmin
caste. Caste within the community of ascetics is a thorny issue. The initiation ceremony is
a legal and social rite where the initiate as a member of the brahmin caste dies. That man
is no longer a brahmin. Subsequently, thinking of oneself as a brahmin is natural but
technically incorrect both socially and religiously. From the perspective of spiritual pro-
gress or awareness, the Advaita tradition says that one must abandon the sense of caste-
ness if one is to achieve moksha. However, the sense of caste within the sannyasin ranks
has grown over the past few decades. Within the dasami [ten named] or Advaita ascetic
tradition a paramhamsa ascetic is one who does not carry a staff. This occurs because he is either a non-brahmin, one who is not allowed to carry a staff due to caste restriction, or a brahmin who is spiritually secure enough to renounce this mark of caste. Shankaracharya is always designated as paramhamsa [highest level and staff-less] and parivrajaka [wandering]. In the 1930s and 1940s the majority of brahmin sannyasins gave up their staffs. Today it is an exception for the brahmin to do so.

6.44 What are the possessions of a sannyasin?

The most generally agreed upon possessions are the danda [staff], kamandalu [water pot with handle and spout], kashaya [colored, unstitched garments], an undergarment, and footwear.

6.45 During the funeral ceremony for the newly initiated sannyasin who is the priest performing the ceremony? He is not the initiate’s guru, because we later see the guru whispering a mantra into the initiates ear.

The ritual is conducted by a priest whose profession it is to conduct such ceremonies. Remember, the man sitting at the beginning of the ceremony is still a householder; he’s not yet in the world of ascetics. Technically, ascetics don’t have authority to do Vedic rituals, although many do so by default because nobody else is competent to perform the rite. There’s still another distinction to be made. The only type of ascetic who has authority to initiate a person into sannyasa is a mandalesvara, head of a group of ascetics. In Varanasi, there are four or five mandalesvaras. So it is possible that one can be initiated into sannyasa by a mandaleshvara who is not one’s immediate teacher of things spiritual. In this case, the person whispering the mantra is indeed a mandaleshvara.

6.46 How is the self effigy made for the funeral ceremony [i.e. does the initiate make his own effigy? Does the priest? Does one buy such effigies in a store? Are there special ceremonies associated with the making of such effigies?]?

The effigy is made out of wheat paste by the priest many hours before the ceremony begins. The setting up of the ceremony took about twelve hours and cost several thousand rupees for the materials and payment to the priest.

6.47 We saw only glimpses of the initiation ceremony. Please explain what was actually done and how it compares to the process outlined in literature.

The preparations were lengthy but the ceremony took only about three hours. The initiate had his head shaved, performed the death or shradhha ceremony described as pindadana [offering of rice balls] for his ancestors then for himself [he is responsible for eight previous generations of ancestors]; viraja homa [the lengthy purification ceremony where he throws clarified butter into the fire and chants along with the priest]; the initiation or diksha where his remaining topknot lock of hair is cut; followed by receiving the mahavakhya or “great saying” such as “tat tvam asi” [“you are that” = “your inner essence and the inner essence of the universe are identical”]. The new ascetic now has a ritual response, saying “I must go to the Himalayas for tapasa [religious austerities]”. He then is called back by teacher and brother sannyasins for “loka kalyana” [to bring happiness to the world].
In theory, the ritual is a bit more melodramatic and evocative. The are twenty steps outlined in the Yatidharmasamuccaya [see Oliville p.38-39 and Kane, Vol. II, Part II p.953-62]. The initiate Performs penance; Performs nine shraddhas or death ceremonies for himself and the ancestors for whom he is ritually responsible; Procures various articles used by sannyasins, traditionally there are twenty-one articles allowed, of which five are obligatory: staff, loop, water strainer, water pot and begging bowl; Proclaims his intention to become a sannyasin; Shaves his head except for his top-knot, cleans his nails and bathes; Makes a sacred fire; Performs a ceremony entitled "entry into savitri": savitri is a mantra from the Rigveda III,62.10 that is chanted in the ritual of every major rite of passage from one ashrama to the next; Performs the brahmavadana ceremony and proclaims his intent to fast; Performs the evening fire sacrifice; Remains awake the entire night before taking sannyasa; Bathes in the morning, does the sandhya ritual and does the fire sacrifice; Performs the Prajapati sacrifice, the last Vedic sacrifice he will ever perform; Gives away all his possessions to the priest who performs the ritual; Symbolically places all ritual fires within himself and discards all sacrificial instruments for use with external sacrifice; performs the caru oblation to the Purusha; Optionally, performs the viraja oblation; Pronounces the praisha formula by: saying good-bye to his relatives, leaving his home and going to a body of water, declaring his intention to renounce, making a water offering, discarding his sacrificial thread, plucking his top-knot, reciting the praisha ["I have renounced"] and giving the gift of safety to all creatures [See how "Judge Swami" raised his hand in the film]; Commits suicide or; Acknowledges the receipt of articles used by a sannyasin; Becomes a disciple of a guru.

6.48 If these men don’t have any ritual duties of a householder, what do they do all day long?

Although they don’t have layperson duties, they do have sannyasin rituals. It’s a paradox that they’ve left the many rules of Hindu society only to find more rules and regulations. In the morning a sannyasin rises at dawn, voids excrement, performs purifications, cleans his teeth, bathes in a river, performs sandhya worship, studies Vedantic texts, performs the tarpana [water offering to dead], and returns to the monastery for worship. Around noon he should take another bath and perform the sandhya ritual. In the afternoon he should look for food. This begging should be done in a random manner called madhukara - "like a bee" so as not to put strain on the same family. The food collected should be mixed together, the sweet with the sour, in an attempt to renounce pleasures of the senses. The food is usually eaten cold because he is not allowed to touch fire and therefore cannot re-heat the food. He then retires for study, performs the evening sandhya worship, and continues to study until he falls asleep. [See also Oliville p.45-6 for textual references.]

Just as the wandering ascetic should not form permanent attachments or relationships with a select few who give him food, so too should he not take root in any one city or village. An ascetic is theoretically required to move to a new locale every three days except during the rainy season. This season is called caturmasa ["Four Months", from mid-June onwards until the end of the rainy season].

6.49 Do these sannyasins have any real value for society?

Sannyasins often settle disputes and are regarded as impartial bystanders in a world of communal self-interest. As urban centers get more crowded and the standard of living goes down, people are less inclined to be charitable and less willing to get associated with an outsider. Seeing the function of a sannyasin at the village level makes one’s judgment of the institution less harsh.
Villagers are by nature suspicious of outsiders and even more wary of ascetics. There's a popular saying that it is inauspicious to wake up and have either a sannyasin or an astrologer as your first sight of the day! To make matters worse, prior to reform movements of the 1850s, sannyasins and their Muslim counterparts, the fakirs, used to rove and rob the north Indian countryside. Heavily armed bands of ascetics terrorized village India in the early 1800s. British law controlled the robbery, while the Independence movement and other reforms changed the old image of ascetics. Despite the suspicions ascetics may initially raise, ascetics who reveal themselves to be genuine are warmly received in villages. The sannyasin uplifts the community by giving the householder an opportunity to exchange spiritual thoughts, receive advice, and have disputes settled. A householder might perceive how well-educated the sannyasin is and think that perhaps the sannyasin was a wealthy individual who gave up everything. The householder gets the womenfolk to bring food for the ascetic. Word spreads to the next few houses. Pretty soon the mood of an entire village street changes when just one householder responds favorably. The sannyasin brings people together who might not have been on speaking terms with one another.

6.50 What happens when ascetics die? Are they treated like other Hindus?

Most sannyasins are buried in the middle of the river, often in a seated position in a weighted chair. When an old or famous sannyasin dies, there is usually great fanfare and rejoicing by his layperson disciples as he is brought to the river. The idea behind this is that a sannyasin has already been "burnt by the fires of penance" and does not require cremation. According to the written tradition, burial depends upon the various attainments of the ascetics. The Yatidharmsamgraha says that the kuticaka is cremated, the bahudaka should be buried on either land or water, the hamsa can be buried in water, while the paramhamsa can be buried on land or in water or even cut into pieces and scattered.

6.51 What is the "dharma" [correct duty] that these men feel compelled to do?

Dharma is defined by the Mimansa sutras of Jaimini [I,1,2] as "codanalaksanortho dharmah" "a desirable result [that will follow if you act in accordance with the commands] prescribed by [Vedic] injunctions". One of the earliest confirmations of a formal "stages of life" system comes from the Chandogya Upanishad [1500-1000 BCE] II,23: "there are three stages of dharma [= ashramas/stages of life]". The stages were brahmachari, grhasta and sannyasin.

The best explanation of dharma is given by P.V. Kane, the greatest dharmaashastra scholar of this century, in his History of Dharma Sastra, Volume, I p.3: "the word dharma passed through several transitions of meaning and ultimately its most prominent significance came to be 'the privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the castes, as a person in a particular stage of life'."

Many English speakers misinterpret this term because it has become part of American slang. You'll notice that dharma does not involve an individual's "free thinking". In American post-hippie post-Star Wars slang, dharma is used to indicate an individual's innermost conscience or an appeal to "follow the force". Dharma is actually just the opposite; it is behavior imposed from outside the individual and assumes that the individual should not make such decisions by himself. The notion of dharma has a subtle subtext when it comes to personal behavior: "Don't think, just do as you're told by the lawbooks." The are many people who take comfort in knowing that they don't have the burden of thinking for themselves and don't have to be responsible for making a wrong decision. In
terms of social behavior, dharma is a political and religious term. In dharmashastra texts it is clear that there is no inkling of a separation of church and state or that such a separation is even possible. From a political perspective, the more people who respond to the orders of what their dharma should be, the easier it is to control society from the top down.

A close reading of dharmashastra texts will reveal that the perpetuation of dharma is the perpetuation of the status quo; adharma ["the opposite of dharma" is a religious, social, and political "sin"] is any challenge to the status quo and those who attempt to maintain it. The Indian Constitution was written by Indian lawyers many of whom had worked in courtrooms filled with cases involving "Hindu law" and the presuppositions of dharma and adharma. The most stinging and articulate rejection of dharma is found in Parts III and IV of the Indian Constitution. This puts the secular Indian state at loggerheads with those who have a vested interest in controlling the hearts and minds of ordinary people who want to be "good Hindus". For those who resist change, the most notable rallying cry has been the appeal to maintain sanatandharma [the eternal, unchangeable dharma or status quo and power structure]. Their message is "don’t change anything". Things were perfect until the Muslims, the British, and secular Indians messed up everything. The rallying cry to bring back sanatandharma was championed by Karpatri Swami [see the film Four Holy Men] and is heard in the large-scale Hindu fundamentalist uprisings in Ayodhya and throughout India in the late 1980s.

Many Hindu fundamentalists demonstrate an embarrassing ignorance of their own tradition when they defend sanatandharma. They assume the status quo of their childhood was also that of ancient India, they see the loss of caste privileges and increasing secular changes over their lifetime as a transformation of the society in the wrong direction, and they want to go back to the idealized world of their childhood. They fail to see that Hindu society has been undergoing transformations for centuries.

6.52 If entering into the fourth stage of life is recognized as a duty or obligation of an orthodox Hindu, how is this duty outlined in scripture?

The Manusmriti [VI,38-97] has an entire chapter devoted to the fourth stage of life and begins with the command "a brahmana should abandon his home and become a wandering ascetic". All of the major Dharma Shastras [Gautama, Apastambha, Baudayana and Vaikhansal] sanction and outline rules for sannyasa.

6.53 Is sannyasa only for the brahmin caste or can other castes join? What about women?

While the Manusmriti [VI,97] says that the four stages of life are applicable only to the brahmin caste, many allow all castes to become ascetics while a few other authorities [Mitaksara on Yajnavalkya III,58; from Kane II,II p.945] also allow for women to become ascetics. The Dasnami tradition of ascetics does not admit women. The most common popular Hindu belief is that a woman should be reborn as a man before she can attain moksha. The Digambara sect of Jains also hold that a woman cannot attain liberation because she cannot become a totally naked ascetic. By way of contrast, the Svetambara sect of Jains admits that a woman can achieve moksha. Not surprisingly, the number of Jain nuns is more than double the amount of male ascetics.

6.54 Who is Narayana, whose svarupa the initiate becomes? What is a svarupa?

The term Narayana is used to indicate a transcendent presence of god. Narayana is a flexible term. Narayana is the son of the first man, according to the Manusmriti. Elsewhere it is used as a synonym for god, while later it came to be more commonly used as a
Vaishnava term to indicate either Vishnu or Krishna. The Advaitist ascetics greet each other with the phrase: "namo narayana" - which is intended to mean "I salute the presence of god in you." The term svarupa means essential or inherent nature.

6.55 During the funeral ceremony, what is the guru's relationship to the initiate? How did they select each other? What kind of personal relationship develops between a guru and his disciple? Does that relationship continue after the funeral ceremony?

There is a difference between the initiating guru and the teaching guru. This distinction is centuries old. The initial passage of many Advaitist philosophic works begins with paying respects to one's vidyaguru [teacher who imparts scholarly knowledge] and one's dikshaguru [teacher who initiates one]. Those who teach usually get top billing. The relationship may or may not continue. The relationship will continue, depending upon the competency of the initiator and the aptitude of the initiate.

6.56 Why is Maheshananda sitting in a red chair? Nobody else seems to use chairs?

Swami Maheshananda ordinarily sits in a small wooden chair. The red chair was the biggest and softest chair that could be found. Swami Maheshananda had received a broken leg and puncture wounds in the back a few days before the interview as the result of a car accident. He was a real trooper to meet with us.

6.57 Where is the Dakshinamurti Monastery located?

The location of the main Dakshinamurti Monastery is in Varanasi where Maheshananda is a mandaleshvara. The second location is in Delhi. The Dakshinamurti Monastery is a branch of the Puri Monastery, one of five main Advaitist Pithas or pontifical "seats".

6.58 Who is Gaudapada? Why is his writing quoted in a reference by Swami Maheshananda?

Gaudapada is traditionally regarded as the grandguru of Shankaracharya. As is the case with so many traditions, this legend has internal inconsistencies. The major work of Gaudapada, the Mandukhyakarika, was probably a Buddhist text that had Advaitist elements grafted into it at a later date.

6.59 Which of the film sequences were "staged" and which were "natural"?

This is an important question, dealing with both ethics and the degree of reality presented in a documentary film. People often change their behavior when they know that they're in front of a camera. Some are inhibited, others become "hams", and still others skillfully manipulate reality -- they're called actors. There are no actors in this film, nor are there any segments that distort reality. There are several moments in the film where we asked the participants to repeat things they said or done when the camera wasn't running. Sometimes this results in people looking like bad actors. For example, Seturam is asked in the Deccan Herald office: "Are you going to Sringeri?" This sounds artificial or "unnatural", but is definitely authentic because it was asked seconds earlier. The astute viewer who has grown up watching television must "unlearn" some of his visual judgment process. Documentary films can present the viewer accustomed to dramas with a paradox. In a drama, a viewer equates bad acting with generating an artificial feel to the reality the actor intends to create. However, that "reality" of good acting may be "unreal" to the extent that it misrepresents reality. A careful viewer of documentary films must ask the question whether the film is "true" [accurately represent the events] or "distorted and therefore false" [alters the cultural context to fit filmmaker's point of view or style of the
film]. Hence, something can be repeated or "staged" while still being "authentic" and "true". The "kitchen scene" was "staged" to the extent that we asked the family to sit in the location where they would normally discuss such issues. They got carried away with the presence of the camera and probably said things in a way that they wouldn't have said without the presence of the film crew. The funeral ceremony was a duplicate of a ceremony that had taken place three days earlier - the same Vedic priest, sannyasins, etc. We gave the sannyasins fruit and five rupees - the same amount that they received at the first ceremony. It should be remembered that within the initiation ceremony, the funeral ceremony is a symbolic drama. It is understood as a reenactment, a philosophically profound dramatic performance. As for the authenticity of the rites, they were more "ritually accurate" for the camera than they were for the first ceremony because the officiating priest wanted to demonstrate that he knew how to do the rites "by the book".

6.60 What approach to filmmaking did the producer take?

I'd like to call the style "giving the culture its best shot". Given the paucity of knowledge about India in the West and the frequent misinterpretation of those facts, it seemed that my job was to explain the ideal of renunciation in its proper cultural context. In exploring the ideal to which people have aspired for generations, I wanted to let the culture put its best foot forward. Renunciation is a noble ideal even though some people fall short, just as democracy is a noble ideal even if people don't vote and don't pay attention to the issues at stake. I also wanted people to know that the ideals and concepts they read about in textbooks have more than just a theoretical impact. Structurally, I wanted the film to have a compelling narrative thread -- a story that mattered and held one's attention. I wanted to portray the culture from inside out, rather than from the outsider in.

It might be difficult to comprehend why this approach was taken or why it is different from any other filmmaker's perspective. Perhaps if this is seen in the light of other approaches (and even bad filmmaking) one can understand why the material was handled as it was. The world has become so small that a documentary film can no longer be made by someone who happens to possess a movie camera while visiting a distant place. Further, many documentary films made that way encourage the very stereotypes that we wish to dispel. Outlined below are approaches to documentary filmmaking that you'll recognize.

6.60.1 Assumed Cultural Superiority of Western Observer/Filmmaker:

In this type of filmmaking the final message takes the form: "We're better than they are." Or, "Thank God I'm a Westener." The general tone is: "They may be quaint, perhaps like children; I'm glad that I'm from a sensible country where we aren't gripped by superstition and naivete."

6.60.2 The Bleeding Heart:

This is the equally pretentious corollary to the first attitude. It might be characterized by the statement: "We're so holy because we don't eat meat". Even if we happen to be vegetarians, we have no business in a documentary film telling people how to live their lives or championing issues of morality. As things happen, this style of documentary film frequently drives away more people from a cause than it converts to a cause.
6.60.3 The Hidden Political Agendas:
This type of documentary film turns into a series of political statements with illustrations. An example might be a description of the plight of brick carriers accompanied by a call to improve their working conditions. Such a film is no more academic than a political figure trying to get people angry over an issue.

6.60.4 The News Report:
This is probably the most common type of film on South Asia. This genre is best described as a "news report" wherein random but compelling images are held together by commentary because there is no strong story line or visual narrative. When a story doesn’t tell itself through the local culture, there is the danger that an outsider will create a story line reflecting the outsider’s own viewpoint. Most every documentary filmmaker has a "news report" structure as a fall-back in case his or her primary story is undermined. But, this genre is not the most desirable style of filmmaking about India.

6.60.5 The Artist’s Approach to "Truth":
The more damaging form of documentary filmmaking is a pseudo-artistic approach wherein little or no information is conveyed, and the viewer must interpret a gamut of images for herself or himself. I feel that this style is irresponsible, given the state of the general U.S. public’s awareness about India. Not only does it reinforce stereotypes, but it also contains the faults of the other approaches in that it denigrates the culture as a subservient object for the filmmaker’s "special vision". While the filmmakers take credit for their artistic view, they absolve themselves from the responsibility for understanding the material or even presenting the material so that it can be understood by others. The underlying and fallacious rationale is that the camera itself records the unadulterated "Truth." This implies that any background information or commentary would be subjective, less real than the image itself, while all viewer’s responses are equally subjective and equally valid.

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Chapter 1: "Freedom and Its Conditions" (p.1-24)
   a) Four Attitudes, especially the "final aim of man", mokṣa. b) Bondage and Karma, "the given" of the Indian world view. c) Distinction between Duty and Liberation, Krishna's Gīta discourse. d) Transmigration of the soul, the metaphysical assumption of all Indian philosophy. e) The Necessary conditions of freedom: belief that it is actually possible and attainable.

Chapter 2: "Knowing Oneself" (p.25-35)
   a) Identification of the Challenge, a felt tension. b) Verification of role, meeting the challenge.

Chapter 3: "Renunciation, The Path to Freedom" (p.36-46)
   a) Path Philosophy, paths recognized to achieve results b) Paths to Freedom, the path of activity & path of wisdom

Chapter 4: "How Speculative Philosophy Comes In" (p.47-55)
   a) Distinction between advocacy of the primacy of reason in achieving liberation and the advocacy of faith.


7.2 ARTICLES

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