

Ashramas



Hindu philosophy has traditionally observed four stages of life. These stages are known as *ashramas*. The idea is to provide structure and guidance for daily life, though most Hindus today only follow the first three stages.

The four stages:

Student life or *Brahmacharya*. The goal of this stage is learning and preparing for success in the next stages. Individuals should also gain religious training in order to lay the foundation for spiritual practice. In the modern era, it's the period that defines when males and females are in school.



Married life or *Grishastya*. Though some people choose to skip this stage, most Hindus choose to practice their spirituality while raising families. Marriage is given a high priority in Hindu culture, and there is much in the Hindu scriptures detailing how to make marriage as successful as possible. The goal of this stage is to develop spiritual practice in the midst of the material world. Individuals are encouraged to produce and distribute wealth (fulfilling the goal of *artha*) and experience pleasure (*kama*), while always acting ethically (*dharma*). In essence, each individual in this stage hopes to be a supportive family member and productive citizen.

Spiritual practice or *Vanaprashtha*. This stage begins after individuals fulfill their obligations to family. In ancient times, once reaching this stage, people would start detaching themselves from family life and the pursuit of material ends by moving to the forest to devote more of their time to spiritual practice. The idea is to live among other seekers of solace, knowledge, peace, and freedom. The key to this detachment is through service to others (i.e. needy people, animals, and nature). Most people have stopped retiring to the forest, instead choosing to spend more time giving back to their respective communities as they develop their spiritual practice. Hindus may do this by volunteering, attending lectures, reading scriptures, going on pilgrimages, and even spending time in ashrams. The goal is to devote oneself to their spiritual practice with a commitment to *moksha* and *seva* (service).



Letting go - This stage is known as *Sannyasa*, or renunciation. A few Hindus who want to pursue exclusively the goal of *moksha* enter this fourth stage in which they live a monastic lifestyle under the guidance of a *guru* (teacher). Having fulfilled all obligations to family and community, they are free to devote themselves to spiritual growth. A *sannyasin* (females are called *sannyasini*) lives a very simple lifestyle, subsisting on a minimum and devoting themselves to non-violence. The goal is to attain liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.



Key Takeaways

- There are four stages of life with different goals.
- The structure of the stages is meant to help each person balance enjoyment of the material world with ethics and progress towards *moksha*, or liberation.
- Each individual's progression through the stages is different, as some may skip one stage or the other, and others may plateau at other stages.
- The four stages offer a general guide for the attainment of a full life consisting of virtue, wealth, pleasure and spiritual liberation.