We were not poor. We just didn't have Any money.
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Poverty is not a thing people normally pursue. Riches are pursued; poverty is fled from, the faster, the better. Just look at how much of life today is engaged in the long flight from poverty, ending, if one is fortunate, somewhere near the middle or end of this incarnation.

But what if the escape from being poor costs too much? What if one has to purchase freedom from penury with one's peace of mind, creative freedom or simple happiness? Most people do just that. Working forty hours a week is no longer sufficient. Fifty or sixty hours a week is the common worker's lot. Two jobs, sometimes three. Struggling, sacrificing, people do whatever is necessary to keep the dogs of destitution away from the door.

In India, as in most traditional societies, there has always been another way. True, people wanted things and worked for things. Wealth, or artha, was valued as one of life's four legitimate goals - along with dharma, love and liberation. Even so, there was an ease about the pursuit of possessions. Nothing frantic. The other goals were considered more essential to a life well lived. Even today visitors in India are amazed to find villagers, who may earn a few hundred dollars in a whole year, so content, calm and hospitable. Readers have all heard pilgrims share their amazement that children in India, even amid their indigence, have a natural light in their eyes, an ingenuous happiness that children in richer nations seem to have misplaced.

In what other modern nation outside of India are mendicants - those who consciously choose a life of privation - culturally revered above bankers and lawyers? Not one. India has, for millennia, intuited something special about the

state of voluntary poverty and, more importantly, acted on its intuitions. When a person there gives away whatever little or much he owns and adopts the life of a renunciate, he is admired, even worshiped. His sacrifice elevates him, idealizes him. He may not be a perfect human being, but his faults are overlooked and his path of detachment encouraged. Elsewhere in the world such a soul would be branded a ne'er-dowell, a useless bum.

Not in India. There he is admired for his courageous abandonment of the world, for his determination to know deeper truths, for his full-time commitment to the spiritual pursuit. There are millions of such souls in India, and their strength and numbers are one of the most powerful forces in Hinduism today.

Gandhi knew the power of simplicity and renunciation, as did Buddha, Francis of Assisi, Mahavira and Diogenes. Thoreau, whose views have been the subject of a three-part series in HINDUISM TODAY concluding this month, spent a miserly $28.47 for his self-built wood cabin, and managed to live a lofty life at Walden Pond on 25[?] a week. These souls are the exception in their understanding of the difference between forced privation and willing self-denial.

Consider the bold words of Swami Vivekananda: "The greatest purifier, without which no one can enter the regions of the higher devotion, is renunciation. This frightens many; yet without it there cannot be any spiritual growth. In all the yogas renunciation is necessary. This is the steppingstone and the real center, the real heart, of all spiritual culture - renunciation. This is religion - renunciation. When the human soul draws back from the things of the world and tries to go into deeper things, when man, the Spirit, which has here somehow become concretized and materialized, understands that he is going to be destroyed and reduced almost to mere matter, and turns his face away from matter - then begins renunciation, then begins real spiritual growth."

None of this will surprise readers familiar with Hindu spiritual thought; but what I have to say next might. The kind of voluntary poverty practiced by yogis and sadhus has become, in a lesser form, the latest fad in the West. Really! Remarkably! Miraculously!

A few weeks back there arrived at our editorial offices in Hawaii a book sent by a

publisher for review. It is titled Less is More, The Art of Voluntary Poverty - An Anthology of Ancient and Modern Voices Raised in Praise of Simplicity. It is a precious little collection, containing a wealth (if you will forgive the allusion) of insights from an extraordinary variety of cultures and peoples. The editor speaks for a meager five pages in his introduction and then lets loose three hundred pages of "voices:" economists, philosophers, businessmen, saints and scripture from every part of the world.

This book does not propose that all prosperous folks in this world sell everything and embrace the renunciate's life. But it does propose, in a compelling way, that both individuals and the race as a whole would be much better off if we changed a few basic concepts about what we need, what we desire and what we can do without. In this sense, it is a potent corrective lens to the materialistic myopia that most people in most countries are growing up with these days as the cultural given. Much of its potency derives from the mix of sources, economists next to poets. Alexis de Tocqueville next to Swami Sivananda. Less is More is an important affirmation of the Hindu ideals of simplicity and frugality. In helpful categories - shelter, clothing, food, livelihood, etc. - it draws attention to the many ways we can choose to live better with less.

We offer in the box at the left a handful of quotes from this delightful anthology in hopes that a renewed appreciation for simplicity may quell the cupidity which corrodes clarity of consciousness.

Less is More, by Goldian Vandenbroeck, is published by Inner Traditions International, One Park Street, Rochester, Vermont 05767. Paperback, $10.95.

Among us English-speaking peoples especially do the praises of poverty need once more to be boldly sung. We have grown literally afraid to be poor. We despise anyone who elects to be poor in order to simplify life and save his inner life. If he does not join the general scramble and pant with the money-making street, we deem him spiritless and lacking in ambition. We have lost the power even of imagining what the ancient idealization of poverty could have meant: the liberation from material attachments, the unbridled soul, the manlier indifference, the paying our way by what we are or do and not by what we have. William James, 1842-1910

Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have even lived a more simple and meager life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindu, Persian and Greek were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich inwardly. None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call involuntary poverty. Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862

Those who have little, if they are good at managing, must be counted among the rich. Socrates, 470-399 BCE

What right have you to take the word wealth, which originally meant "wellbeing," and degrade and narrow it by confining it to certain sorts of material objects measured by money? John Ruskin, 1819-1900

The superior man understands what is right, the inferior man understands what will sell. The superior man loves his soul, the inferior man loves his property. Confucius, 551-479 BCE

Desires can't be satisfied by fulfilling. It grows more and more, and there is no end of desires. If a person becomes a king of a country, he desires other countries. But one who doesn't want to possess anything possesses everything. The desires can be given up by understanding desire. Sri Baba Hari Dass, 1973

If you must be mad, why should you be mad for the things of the world? If you must be mad, be mad for God alone. Sri Ramakrishna, 1834-1886

Small rooms or dwellings set the mind in the right path, large ones cause it to go astray. Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519

The expenses connected with daily meditation, with the building up of mental

habits, with the practice of self-control and of cheerfulness, with the enthronement of reason over the rabble of primeval instincts - these expenses are really, you know, trifling. All that is required is ingenuity in one's expenditure. And much ingenuity with a little money is vastly more profitable and amusing than much money without ingenuity. Arnold Bennett, 1867-1931

In India there is a particular type of man who delights in having as few needs as possible. He carries with him only a little flour and a pinch of salt and chilies tied in his napkin. He has a pot and a string to draw water from the well. He needs nothing else. He walks on foot ten to twelve miles a day. He makes dough on embers. It is delicious. Such a man has God as his companion and friend and feels richer than any king or emperor. Contentment is his treasure. Gandhi, 1869-1948

The knowledge which results in renunciation consists of the realization that what is renounced is of little value in comparison with what is received. Al-Ghazali, d.1111

By his own thirst for riches the foolish man destroys himself as if he were his own enemy. Dhammapada

Any discussion of world poverty that does not come round to demanding a radical change in our habits of consumption and waste, our tastes, our profligate standard of living and our values generally is a hypocrisy. Theodore Roszak, 1972.

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