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Abbot Protests Boy's Initiation As Successor

The famed holy town of Udupi in Kerala, India, is distressed again, due this time to a dispute among heads of its famous monasteries. Several weeks ago Swami Vidyabhooshana Theertha attempted to stop the initiation into sannyas, and installation as abbot-in-training, of a 16-year-old. Irked by a string of defections from the ranks of the abbots, he felt he had identified the villain: *balasannyasa*, the custom of initiating boys into monastic renunciate life. The community was shocked, as *balasannyasa* has been a part of Udupi's hallowed traditions ever since the renowned saint-philosopher, Madhvacharya, established the town's eight maths (monasteries) 800 years ago. And it is a tradition in most of Hinduism's other monastic orders as well.

It all started in the early 1970's when Swami Raghuvallabha Theertha, who was initiated into sannyas as a boy, suddenly quit his post as abbot and returned to life in the world. He is now said to be a happily married professional man in New Jersey, USA. A few years later, Swami Lakshmimanojnana Theertha, young abbot of Shirur Math and initiated at about 18, threw off his robes. He is now working for a bank in Dharwar. In 1988, it was abbot Swami Vijaya Theertha's turn. Initiated as a young man, and just returning from a tour of the USA where he had captured many hearts, he suddenly abdicated, slamming the door quite hard, and turning his back upon Udupi and his dismayed followers [HINDUISM TODAY, February 1988]. He has since not been seen or heard from.

And now, as the Kaniyoor Math was about to initiate 16-year-old Krishnaraja Raghupati and transform him into Swami Sri Vidyavallabha Theertha, Vidyabhooshana, head of the Kukke Subrahmanya Math, protested to the media. He explained to the INDIAN EXPRESS, "It is most unfortunate that someone so young should be made a sannyasi. The bad effects of imposing the rigors of sannyas on young persons is there for everyone to see. We know what it has done to us. The ideal would be to initiate persons at least 30, as they can then decide if they have the mind for it." Himself a former *balasannyasi*, he demanded the initiation be cancelled. The swami slated to initiate the boy, Vidyavarinidhi Theertha, countered that "it is only when they are young that they can be molded.

How can you expect an adult to develop a sense of renunciation?" It seemed that the now-embattled maths might take the quarrel to court. They did not, and the initiation took place anyway. But the controversy continues, as does the heartache of followers who now must also bear the spectacle of quarreling maths and monks.

HINDUISM TODAY spoke with several devotees of the Udupi Maths as well as swamis and spiritual leaders. Most feel Swami Vidyabhooshana should have kept the debate within the monastery's walls. Others said this would be useless, implying something may be amiss within some of the maths themselves: that abbots are initiating their own relatives, and that the boys are pressured by their families to take up the staff. Why? So that "the great wealth of the math may remain in the hands of the family," said one devotee. Swami Paramananda Bharati of Sringeri Math pointedly had but one suggestion to resolve the controversy: that no abbot be allowed to initiate one of his relatives as his successor. If the crux of the problem of *balasannyasa* is indeed that children are pressured, or forced into it, then all will agree as to the solution. "No one should pressure another into *sannyasa*. If you force a mango to ripen, you end up with a sour, shrivelled fruit that no one wants to touch. This is to court disaster," said Yogi Hari.

Otherwise, spiritual leaders interviewed agreed that *balasannyasa* is acceptable in cases where the child is obviously a highly evolved soul. Otherwise, Ma Yoga Shakti and Yogi Hari suggested a practical alternative: to train the young one in *brahamacharya* first, and have him take *sannyasa* later, as is already the custom in many Hindu orders.

Should the Tradition of Child Monks be Preserved, Swami?

Swami Satchidananda

There is no need to change the tradition. After making sure that his astrology and *samskaras* (personal evolution) correspond, it is best to train a *sannyasi* from childhood. He must never be forced into it. It is best to stick to one's commitment, but if once in a while a *sannyasi* leaves I see no cause for concern. This has happened since long ago. Nothing is lost. He will benefit from having had a taste of that pure life. And we go on.

Swami Paramananada Bharati Saraswathi

Balasannyasa is difficult. But in the exceptionally rare case of a boy with inborn vairagya (natural detachment), it may not be wrong. Why get upset over a dropout? The devotees in consultation with senior sannyasins of untarnished image should prevail upon the Math head to choose someone [as successor] who is not closely related to him. If he is obstinate, shastras permit the devotees to reject him, too.

Ma Yoga Shakti

It is a matter of the soul's evolution, not age. Some children have great maturity, and can decide in favor of sannyas. This is confirmed by their astrology, their aura. Balasannyasa was a good system in the old village culture. But today, it is better to initiate children into brahmacharya first, until they are well educated and traveled so that as sannyasins, they can meet the challenges from modern times and other religions and cultures.

Sant Keshavadas

I am from Udupi and the Madhva tradition. There may be one or two flaws in the present maths which simply need correcting. I pray that we will maintain this 800-year-old tradition. Check the astrology, the palm, the aura of the child. If marriage is not indicated, then it is fine. He will be guarded and protected and grow up into the greatest of all traditions. In tradition, we have power, unity. Without it, we have disability.

Yogi Hari:

Balasannyasa was a good practice 800 years ago, but today it must stand its test also. If a child shows inclinations for a spiritual life, he should be nurtured in the environment that will foster that development, and at a mature age of about 25 be

given the chance to voluntarily take the vows of sannyasa. It cannot be forced. It must happen by virtue of one's spiritual unfoldment. Let us give up blame and all look for the solutions.

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