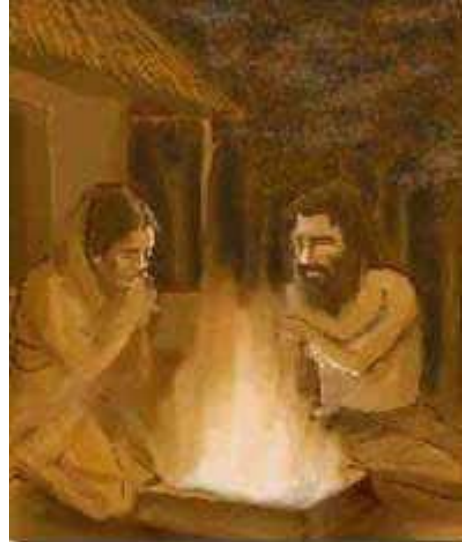


Vanaprastha - Retirement

During this stage a Hindu will begin to withdraw from business and household responsibilities to spend more time in meditation and prayer.

Time to withdraw from desires

The word *vanaprastha* derives from two Sanskrit words *vanam* meaning 'forest' and *prastha* implying 'going to'. Hence, the third *ashrama*, the *vanaprastha ashrama*, is the 'forest-dweller' stage of life. This expression may sound obscure but means a life of retirement. The *ashrama* system was fully in operation thousands of years ago, where many men and women, after fulfilling their duties in the *grihastha ashrama* retired to live in forests, away from worldly attachments. This third stage of life is therefore set aside for detachment from secular living and for making spiritual progress. This age of retirement was around fifty, or according to some scriptures, "when the skin becomes wrinkled". The individual adopts an advisory role within the family and allows the next generation to take over the burden of running the household. The 'forest-dweller' must spend time in meditation, contemplation and pilgrimage.



Relevance today

The aim of this stage of life is detachment or withdrawal from worldly pursuits and more importantly, the withdrawal of the mind from all worldly *desires*. Most people these days "die in the saddle", without making any effort to progress spiritually. The teachings of *vanaprastha* are an important reminder to re-examine our priorities.

The process

This stage occurs when the children are grown up and able to run their own lives and when a grandson is born to ensure that the family will continue. The head of the household is then able to hand over responsibilities to his elder son. Vanaprastha refers to the retirement from daily work, which in ancient times was signified by becoming a forest dweller (this is what vanaprastha really means). The duties of this stage are to become detached from worldly goods and material concerns and devote time to quietness, solitude and the study of the scriptures and meditation. Those in this stage are seen as wise elders in the family and are called upon for advice and help in educating the children. Not all Hindus take on the particular duties of this stage but those who do are highly respected.