The Sanskrit term *samnyāsa* commonly means "renunciation of the world." It refers both to the initiatory rite at which a renouncer (*samnyāsin*) formally breaks all his ties with society and to the way of life into which he is so initiated. The term is absent from the Vedic texts and from the Buddhist and Jain literature. It is used exclusively in the Brahmanic tradition and the Hindu sectarian traditions deriving from the medieval period; it refers to renunciation as practiced only within these traditions. The word entered the Brahmanic vocabulary probably around the second century BCE.

**Renunciation and Brahmanism.** There is no consensus among scholars regarding the origin of world renunciation in India. Given the fragmentary nature of the evidence, this is an issue that is likely to remain unresolved. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the claim once made that the renunciatory ideal originated exclusively among the non-Brahmanic or even the non-Aryan population is unfounded. The earliest available evidence shows that by the sixth century BCE the institution of world renunciation formed an important part of the entire spectrum of religious traditions and sects of North India, including Brahmanism.

Renunciation, nevertheless, questioned the value of major Brahmanic institutions such as marriage, sacrificial rites, and the social hierarchy of castes. Because it proclaimed the path of renunciation, divorced from ritual and society, as the acme of religious life, the way of renunciation posed a special challenge to the society-centered Vedic religion, which recognized only one socio-religious role for adult men, that of the married householder with his social, procreative, and ritual obligations. The Brahmanic tradition, however, has always demonstrated the ability to absorb the new without discarding the old. Attempts were made to find theoretical legitimations for the lifestyles of both the renouncer and the householder, the most significant of which was the system of the four *āstamas* (orders of life). Renunciation was sometimes redefined to accommodate life in society. The devotional traditions (*bhakti*), for example, considered true renunciation to be the inner quality of detachment from the world and from the results of one's actions rather than the physical separation from society. Some of these traditions defined renunciation as surrender to God. Despite such efforts at synthesis, a tension between these two ideals has continued to exist within Brahmanism. [See also *Bhakti*.]

**Lifestyle and Goal.** The main features of the renunciatory life are substantially the same in all sects. Renouncers are homeless. Except for the four months of the rainy season (June through September), they are required to wander constantly. Their ideal residence is the foot of a tree. Renouncers shave their heads and either go naked or wear an ocher robe. They practice celibacy and poverty, obtaining their food and the other few necessities of life by begging. Several terms for a renouncer, such as *parivṛttaka* ("wanderer") and *bhikṣu* ("mendicant"), reflect these aspects of his life. All these features, moreover, need to be understood not merely as ascetic practices but as symbolic rejections of social customs and institutions.

A significant feature of the renouncers' style of life is the abandonment of fire. It symbolizes their separation from Vedic society and religion, and in a special way their rejection of the Vedic sacrifice. Though it is present in all renouncer traditions, the abandonment of fire occupies a central position in Brahmanic renunciation, which is often defined as the abandonment of all ritual actions. The absence of fire gave rise to two other customs. Unable to cook for themselves, renouncers beg cooked food daily. After death they are not cremated like other people but are buried either on land or in water; for cremation is performed with the sacred fires of the deceased and constitutes his last sacrifice (*āntyēṣṭi*).

The greatest transformation of renunciation occurred in early Buddhism with the establishment of permanent monastic communities and the consequent abandonment of the itinerant lifestyle. [See *Monasticism*, *article on* Buddhist Monasticism.] Monastic orders were not organized within Brahmanism until a much later period. The best known among them is the Order of Ten Names (Daśa-nāmīs), reputedly founded by the Advaita philosopher Śaṅkara (788–820 CE). In spite of the drift toward settled monastic living, however, it was never accepted either as law or as ideal. The rule of homeless
wandering was maintained at least theoretically both within and outside Brahmanism.

Although lower goals, such as attaining a heavenly world, are often mentioned, liberation (mokṣa) from the constant cycle of births and deaths (saṃsāra) is considered the goal of renunciation. Many sects regard it as a precondition for liberation. Saṃnyāsa, therefore, is often referred to as mokṣāśrama or simply as mokṣa.

Brahmanism establishes a hierarchy among renouncers based on the degree of their removal from the world and from social norms. The lowest is called a kṣatriya. He lives a life of retirement in a hut and receives his food from his children. The next is a bhikṣu, who begs his food and adopts a wandering life. A hṛṣi carries a single staff. He is thus distinguished from the first two, who carry three staffs tied together. The fourth and highest type of renouncer is a paramahānyā. He breaks all social ties, discarding the sacrificial thread and the tuft of hair on the crown, the two basic symbols of his former ritual and social status.

Initiation. All renouncer sects devised some form of initiation, and Brahmanism was no exception. In fact, one of the earliest usages of the term saṃnyāsa was with reference to the Brahmanic rite of renunciation. No uniform rite, however, evolved within Brahmanism, and even the medieval handbooks give different versions. On the major features, nevertheless, there is agreement.

The rite takes two days, although most of the major ceremonies are performed on the second. On the first day the candidate performs nine oblations for the dead (śrāddha), the last of which he offers for himself. The following day he performs his last sacrifice and gives away all his worldly goods. He then symbolically deposits his sacred fires within himself by inhaling their smoke, burns his sacrificial utensils, and extinguishes his sacred fires. The abandonment of fire and ritual is interpreted as an internalization; a renouncer carries the fires within himself in the form of his breaths (prāna) and offers an internal sacrifice these fires every time he eats. He then utters three times the Praṣa, or renunciatory formula: “I have renounced” (“Saṃnyāsalya”), and gives the “gift of safety” (abhoyadāna) to all creatures with the promise never to injure any living being. He is now a renouncer. He ceremonially takes the requisites of a renouncer, such as staff and begging bowl, the emblems of his new state (yatiliṅga).

Qualification. The rite of renunciation results in the ritual abandonment of all rites. Paradoxical as this seems, it enabled the socioritual norms of Brahmanism to control the entry into the very state that aims at transcending them. The question of qualification preceeds any discussion of a ritual action, including the rite of renunciation. Only the three twice-born classes (varṇas) are qualified to perform rites, and, therefore, to renounce. Opinion, however, is sharply divided as to whether only brahmas or all three upper classes are so qualified.

A person, moreover, has to pass through the āśramas of student, householder, and forest hermit before renouncing, although with the obsolescence of the hermit’s state this rule was interpreted to mean that a person should be free from the three debts incurred at birth, namely Vedic study, sacrifice, and procreation, which are paid by fulfilling the obligations of the first two āśramas. One view, however, holds that these provisions apply only to ordinary people; one who is totally detached from the world may renounce immediately.

The position of women is also ambiguous. Orders of nuns exist in Buddhism, in Jainism, and in some medieval Hindu sects. Female renouncers are referred to frequently in Sanskrit literature, and their position is recognized in Hindu law. Brahmanic authorities generally deny the legitimacy of female renunciation, although occasionally dissenting voices are heard in this regard.

Ritual and Legal Effects. The renunciatory rite is regarded as the ritual death of the renouncer. Although dead, he is nevertheless visibly present among the living and occupies an ambivalent position within Brahmanism. He is excluded from all ritual acts. His status as far as ritual purity is concerned is unclear. Although theologically he is often considered the acme of purity, within ritual contexts his presence is feared as a cause of impurity.

In Hindu law, the renouncer’s ritual death constitutes also his civil death. The renunciation of the father, like his physical death, is the occasion for the succession of his heirs. It also dissolves his marriage, and some authorities, such as the Nārasaṃs (12.97), would permit his wife to remarry. Renouncers, moreover, cannot take part in legal transactions and are released from previous contractual obligations and debts. They are not even permitted to appear as witnesses in a court of law.

Renunciation is considered an irreversible state, both ritually and socially. A renouncer who reverts to lay life (āraṇḍhapātita) becomes an outcaste (cāṇḍāla) and is excluded from all ritual and social contact.

Conclusion. Renunciation was one of the most significant developments in the history of Indian religions. It influenced the post-Vedic worldview based on the central concepts of saṃsāra and mokṣa. The founders of almost all major Indian religions and sects were renouncers. The mentality of the renouncer influenced even the religious life and the value system of people within society. The society-centered and the world-renouncing
SAMOYED RELIGION. The Samoyeds are peoples of northern Eurasia who speak a systematically related set of languages. Most of them live in western Siberia, in the region extending from the Yamal and Taimyr peninsulas in the north to the Sayan Mountains in the south; a few live in northeasternmost Europe, on the Kola Peninsula and near the Pechora River. As a linguistic group, Samoyed is related to Finno-Ugric; together they form the Uralic language family.

Currently numbering about 35,000, the Samoyed peoples are broadly divided into the northern Samoyeds and the southern Samoyeds. Northern Samoyed groups include the Nentsy (also called the Yurak Samoyeds or the Yuraks), who, with approximately 30,000 members, are by far the largest Samoyed group; the Nganasani (or Tavgi), with about 900 members; and the Enets (or Yenisei Samoyeds), with about 450 members. Of the southern Samoyeds, only one group survives, the Selkup (formerly called the Ostyak Samoyeds), with some 3,500 members. Some extinct southern Samoyed groups (e.g., the Kamassiaans, the Koibal, the Motor, and the Taigi) are known from records. Before the formation of the present Samoyed languages and groups, a proto-Samoyed group presumably existed some 3,500 years ago, when it secluded from the larger proto-Uralic parent group.

The neighbors of the Samoyed are, or have been in the course of history, the Khanty and the Komi (Finno-Ugric peoples), various Sierian Turkic peoples, the Evenki (a Tunguz people), the Ket (sometimes classified as a Paleosiberian group), and, most recently, the Russians. Samoyed traditional culture is based primarily on hunting for fur-bearing animals, gathering, fishing, and reindeer breeding; collectivization was introduced into the Samoyed economy by the Soviet government in the 1920s.

The Spirit World. The principal deity of the Nentsy is Num, the creator of the world, of men, and of things. His role is ambiguous: in general he distances himself from human beings and abstains from interference in their affairs, except when explicitly implored for help in the struggle against Nga, the god of evil, death, and hell. In Nenets religion, Nga is Num's son, but this father-son duality is not found among other Samoyed groups, where the high benevolent gods and their antipodes are considered independent of one another. Sacrifices are made to Num twice a year, at the beginning of winter and again in the spring. They are either bloody, involving the killing of dogs or reindeer, or bloodless, involving the offering of money, clothing, and food. [See Num.]

Another inhabitant of the spirit world is Ilibemberti; in Nenets religion he is reported variously as a spirit

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