

Five Stanzas on the Ascetic's Loincloth (Kaupîna-Pancaka)

Attributed to Shankarâcârya

Translated by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Shankara, the famous teacher of nondualism (Advaita Vedânta) who might have lived as early as the seventh century A.D., composed numerous popular hymns. Among these is said to be the *Kaupîna-Pancaka* ("Five [Stanzas] on the Loincloth"), a short Sanskrit hymn in praise of the loincloth of the ascetic who, having renounced all worldly pleasures and desiring liberation alone, wanders about freely, dressed only in a loincloth. The *kaupîna*-wearing renouncer is a master of voluntary simplicity. His quest is for the treasure of immortality, and his lonely path is filled with privation.

Far from being unhappy about his self-chosen situation, he lives continually in the bliss of *Brahman*, feeling at peace with himself and the world. His enviable state of mind is the result of his perfect control of the senses that, in the ordinary person, constantly hook attention to the multiple objects of the outer world and thereby cause emotional entanglement in them, notably greed (*lobha*). So long as we are preoccupied with the material world, we are unlikely to make great discoveries in the nonmaterial (spiritual) realm. Even when we wear the skimpiest covering, as on a sunny beach, we still have our attention very much in the physical domain, and the great yogic ideal of renunciation is far removed from our mind.

The radical renunciation of the traditional Indian ascetic, some of whom even let go of the loincloth and walk about nude, is shocking to our Western sensibilities. We who measure almost everything against the yardstick of material prosperity readily dismiss the ascetic's abandonment of conventional life as being misguided and a failure. Yet asceticism remains a grand symbol that reminds us of the finitude of our existence, and that when we die, we cannot take anything with us.

Ever delighting in the sayings of Vedânta and always content with begged food, wandering about and free from concerns, surely the wearer of the loincloth is happy!

Leaning in solitude against the roots of a tree, silently eating with his hands, avoiding wealth like a stitched together garment, surely the wearer of the loincloth is happy!

Content with the condition of his own felicity, pacifying all movements of the senses and remaining day and night in *brahman*'s delight, surely the wearer of the loincloth is happy!

Observing the behavior of body and mind,*1 glimpsing the Self within himself and oblivious of inside, outside, and in-between, surely the wearer of the loincloth is happy!

Uttering the purifying word *brahman* and contemplating "I am *brahman*" while wandering everywhere and consuming alms, surely the wearer of the loincloth is happy!

Note

1. The Sanskrit text reads *deha-âdi-bhâvam*, meaning literally “the condition/behavior of the body, etc.” The “etc.” (*âdi*) stands for the mind here.

I first translated this poem into German at the age of twenty-one, and it was published in the April 1969 issue of the long-defunct magazine *Yoga: Der Pfad zur Vollendung*.

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