

# DANAM CONFERENCE 2005

## SESSION 1

*Theme: Contemporary Asceticism in Dharma Traditions*

*Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Presiding*

## ABSTRACTS

**Karma Lekshe Tsomo**, Theology & Religious Studies, University of San Diego

*Renunciation in Contemporary Buddhist Monasticism*

Celibate monastic practice has been a mainstay of Buddhist societies from the time of the Buddha until the present day. Whether and to what extent renunciation is present in contemporary Buddhist monastic practice is an open question, however, and responses will depend on how “renunciation” is defined. Generally, renunciants are thought to live in solitude, apart from society. But it is well known that, except for relatively rare individuals and periods of intensive retreat, few Buddhist renunciants dwell permanently in seclusion. Instead, they typically live in monastic communities and are in frequent contact with the lay community upon whom they depend for food and other necessities. This paper is an exploration of the renunciant ideal, the extent to which it characterizes the lifestyle of Buddhist monastics, and the challenges Buddhist monastics face in the modern day, with a focus on sex, food, and money.

**Jeffery D. Long**, Elizabethtown College

*Radical Renunciation: The Aim and Practice of Jain Asceticism*

Among the dharma traditions of India, none is as well known for the rigor of its ascetic practices as the Jain tradition. This paper shall briefly outline some of the practices that are specific to Jainism and for which its sadhus and sadhvis have earned the reputation of being among the most rigorous ascetics in India, such as the wearing of the muhpatti, or mouth-shield, designed to prevent the inadvertent swallowing of insects and microscopic life forms, and sallekhana, the voluntary fast unto death. Frequently asked questions will be addressed, such as whether it really is possible to lead a life of complete ahimsa—and whether this really is the point of Jain asceticism—as well as the question of intentionality in the karmic nature of an act. Ultimately, it shall be argued that Jain asceticism should be seen as cultivating a profound mindfulness of one's place within the larger web of life, an ecological vision, but one finally in the service of spiritual liberation.

**Pravrajika Vrajaprana**, Vedanta Society of Southern California

*Looking In and Letting Go: Vairagya in the Vedanta Tradition*

In this paper I will discuss the qualities of *viveka* and *vairagya* and their significance in the Vedanta tradition. By *viveka* I mean discriminating between what is transitory and ultimately unsatisfying, and that which is eternal, conducive to happiness and satisfying in the ultimate sense. By “looking in,” that is, by practicing *viveka*, we deeply consider our human situation and discover what is good for us and what is not. The next step logical step is *vairagya*, renunciation—“letting go”—which is when we let go of what is not good for us. Only then do we find abiding peace and joy. In this paper I will confine my comments to the Vedanta tradition as taught by Sankara, with particular emphasis on the Dasanâmî sannyasins, the ten Orders founded by him. This topic is of particular importance to me as I am a nun of the Ramakrishna Order who has taken *sannyâsa* vows. Through those vows and the *guru parampara* intrinsic to them, I am a

Dasanâmî sannyâsini. My guru's guru—that is, my paramaguru—was a disciple of Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna's *sannyâsa* guru was Tota Puri, a Nâgâ sannyâsin of the Puri Order of the Dasanâmîs that is traditionally identified with the Sringeri Math. Thus if we were to get technical, my full *sannyâsa* appellation is Pravrajika Vrajaprana Puri.

**Veena Howard Rani**, University of Oregon, Lane Community College  
*Asceticism in the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*

Mahatma Gandhi's life and philosophy is a complex combination of asceticism and activism. His ideology of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha* (soul-force) is directly connected to his ascetic practices such as non-attachment, *brahmacharya*, and vegetarianism. I ask: what role does Gandhi's life of fervent ascetic discipline play in his activism? How does Gandhi reconcile two apparently very different ideologies: politics and renunciation? I argue that it is impossible to understand Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance without conveying the underlying ascetic and ethical practices which are the foundation of Gandhi's life and activism. Gandhi consciously chose an ascetic path, rather than passively inheriting it, suggesting that these traditional practices were an *instrument* (and not just an accidental accompaniment) of Gandhi's overall method. It is open to question whether it is possible to effectively reconstruct Gandhi's political philosophy of non-violent activism divorced from his spiritual methods.