A Variety of Ascetic Practices:
The Extremes to Which Some People Will Go in Pursuit of God

It is the privilege of the gods to want nothing, and of godlike men to want little.
(Diogenes of Sinope)

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The essence of civilization consists not in the multiplication of wants but in their deliberate and voluntary renunciation.
(Gandhi)

...。

...
Asceticism
(Encyclopedia Britannica)

The English term asceticism derives from the Greek askesis, originally meaning "to train" or "to exercise," specifically in the sense of the training and self-denial that an athlete undergoes to attain physical skill and mastery over the body.

The Stoics adapted the word to refer to the moral discipline of the sage who learns, through self-mastery, how to act freely—how to choose or refuse a desired object or an act of physical pleasure at will and how to control the emotions with reason.

Plato and the neo-Platonic philosophers also used the term in the sense of the denial of "lower" sensual desires in order to cultivate "higher" spiritual traits. The word was then passed on from the Greeks to early Christians in this sense of self-control over physical and psychological desires in favor of spiritual ideals or goals.

Asceticism has come to function cross-culturally to refer to a whole host of activities in the religions of the world. Most religions have at least some practices that can be deemed ascetic: fasting, celibacy, seclusion, voluntary infliction of pain, bodily mutilation, temperance or complete abstinence from intoxicants, renunciation of worldly goods and possessions, and, in some cases, religious suicide.
Asceticism can also include the cultivation of moral qualities requiring self-restraint and discipline, such as patience and forbearance. One sometimes reads of an “inner asceticism,” which involves various practices where one learns to be “in the world, but not of it.”

Ascetic practices are engaged in for a variety of ends. Many traditions encourage or demand asceticism at periodic or designated times of the religious calendar, usually for purification or preparation for a significant ritual event. Fasting and celibacy are particularly common practices used to this end.

Most rites of passage or life-cycle rites also require some form of self-denial and self-discipline on the part of the person undergoing the ritual. Ascetic practices as forms of penance are also very frequently prescribed for expiation of sin or impurity.

In some cases, ascetic practices are employed as a sort of sacrifice to the deity or powers one is trying to influence to obtain fulfillment of a request, while in other instances asceticism is seen as meritorious in general, leading to or ensuring a good result in this world or the next.

Bajrang Das, a standing baba, who never sits down, day and night. He sleeps standing too, hanging over this swing. A metal chastity belt covers his genitals.

A ‘standing’ Baba, who is called khareshwari, has taken the vow not to sit or lie down for twelve years. He may rest one leg by hanging it in the sling under his swing.

It is a painful austerity: the swollen legs and feet tend to develop persistent ulcers.
Many religions have within them an elite group of specialists, renouncers or monastics, who maintain an ascetic lifestyle more or less continuously. These "permanent" ascetics may be marked by their special appearance (distinctive clothes or robes, or no clothes at all; long, uncut hair or heads completely shorn of hair; the possession of certain characteristic implements or items, such as a begging bowl or staff; or in some extreme cases, signs in the form of physical mutilation, such as castration). They may be associated with particular locales (monasteries or other isolated and secluded areas, such as forests, deserts, jungles, or caves; or a mandate to wander homeless) to further indicate that they have separated themselves from ordinary society.

Ascetic techniques in many traditions are said to bring magical or supernatural powers.

Asceticism is a feature of virtually every religion.
In the middle centuries of the first millennium B.C.E., many individuals and groups known collectively as "wanderers" (shramanas) arose in India to oppose certain features of the older Vedic religion and to advocate new ideas, methods, and goals.

Most wanderer groups—especially those responsible for the formation of the new religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—shared the belief that this world has suffering and potentially endless rebirth. This negative evaluation of the world came to be called *samsara*.

All three religions also posited the new religious goal of an escape or release from this cycle, variously called *moksha* ("liberation"), *nirvana* ("extinguishing" of suffering and rebirth), or *kevala* ("isolation" or "perfection").

*Samsara* is believed to be perpetuated by desire, *karma*, and worldly life in general. The quest for liberation from *samsara* thus entailed asceticism and renunciation, and such practices became central to all three of these Indian religions.

Meditation techniques, yoga, austerities of various sorts all were developed to further the end of disengaging from the world of sensual desires, and this in turn led to the final goal of release. ([http://science.jrank.org/pages/7504/Asceticism-Hindu-Buddhist-Asceticism.html](http://science.jrank.org/pages/7504/Asceticism-Hindu-Buddhist-Asceticism.html))

Pain-producing asceticism has appeared in many forms. A popular custom was to undergo certain physically exhausting or painful exercises. The phenomena of cold and heat provided opportunities for such experiences. The Hindu fakirs (ascetics) of India provide most remarkable examples of those seeking painful forms of asceticism.

![Vaishnavite sadhu performs tapasya (ascetic practice) in thorns](https://example.com/image.png)
In the earliest examples of such radical forms of self-mortification that appeared in India, the ascetic stared at the sun until he went blind...

This ascetic has gone blind from staring at the sun.
or held up his arms above the head until they withered.

A photo, c.1880's, of an ascetic who constantly keeps his arms extended upward.
Syrian Christian monasticism was also inventive in regard to forms of self-torture. A highly regarded custom involved the use of iron devices, such as girdles or chains, placed around the loins, neck, hands, and feet and often hidden under garments.  

A late 1800’s ascetic with a metal grid welded around his neck so that he can never lie down.
Pain-producing forms of asceticism include self-laceration, particularly castration, and flagellation (whipping), which emerged as a mass movement in Italy and Germany during the Middle Ages and is still practiced in parts of Mexico and the southwestern United States.

Asceticism in Hinduism

Asceticism in the form of yoga and meditation possibly goes back to the earliest period of Indian history. Seals depicting a figure sitting in what looks like a yogic pose have been found at sites of the Indus Valley Civilization dating to the second millennium B.C.E. In the texts of the early Vedas (c. 1500–c. 1000 B.C.E.), ascetic practices appear in a variety of contexts. References are made to long-haired silent sages (muniś), clad in soiled yellow garments or naked, who are depicted as having supernatural powers, acquired perhaps as a result of their ascetic practices. The early texts also tell of the shadowy wandering ascetics (vratyas), who seem to have also practiced physical austerities.

The Vedas in some places say that the deities gained their status, or even created the entire universe, through the power of their inner, ascetic heat (tapas), acquired through the rigorous practice of physical and spiritual self-discipline and mortification of the body.

The term tapas derives from a Sanskrit root meaning to heat up or burn, and refers to any one of a variety of ascetic methods for achieving religious power. In the Rig Veda, Indra is said to have achieved his divine place through the practice of asceticism and the generation of this powerful “heat,” while elsewhere in that ancient work are encountered cosmogonic hymns that attribute the origins of the universe to the Primal One who creates by “heating up ascetic heat.” The metaphysical qualities of both truth and order are said to have derived from ascetic heat, and the ancient Indian seers (rishiś) also were supposed to have achieved their powers through ascetic heat.
This notion of ascetic heat as a creative, or even coercive, religious force was to persist in Indian religious thinking through subsequent centuries to the present. One may gain ascetic heat through a variety of ascetic techniques, including fasting, chastity, and various yogic techniques such as breath control (pranayama), and through it the adept can procure tremendous supernatural powers and even the status of a god. In the Upanishads, epics, and other Sanskrit texts one often learns of various ascetics who force their way into heaven and become gods through the power of their ascetic heat. Deities such as Shiva were especially associated with this power of ascetic heat, derived from proficiency in yoga, meditation, and extreme austerities.

Various classes of ascetics (tapasvins, "specialists in the practice of tapas ") eventually arose in Hindu India and are sometimes enumerated. They are mainly differentiated by the form of austerities they engage in.

Some ascetics, for example, stay totally stationary for years at a time or remain standing or in water for weeks on end.

A photo of an ascetic with a harness that enables him to remain standing all the time.
Some ascetics subsist solely on fruits, wild plants, and roots, or they live only on grain left in the fields.

Narayana Das is a renowned milk-drinker. For over forty years, his only food has consisted of two glasses of milk per day.

Indian Fakir sleeping on a bed of thorns as he shuns pain
Among the most famous are ascetics who practice the "five fires" ritual - building four fires around themselves, with the sun as the fifth…

Austerities with the traditional "five fires" - four of cow-dung and one the sun - , c.1890's
and "spike-lying" ascetics who sleep on beds of nails.

The proverbial bed of nails, a photo c.1900
A second strand of asceticism within the Hindu tradition might better be termed "renunciation." Such renunciation can be either *tyaga* (relinquishing a desire for actions to produce effects) or *samnyasa* (abandoning family, social, economic life, and the ritual activity associated with the householder's way of life), in order to pursue single-mindedly the ultimate goals of religion. World renouncers seem to have been a feature of Indian religious life since very early times.

Already mentioned above are the silent sages and wandering ascetics discussed in the Vedas. Later texts depict a wide variety of renouncers, hermits, and ascetic "orders" living in the jungles and forests.

Among such ascetics were those who, with or without their wives, live on wild fruits and plants and maintain a ritual sacrificial fire; those who are "god-possessed" but perform the Vedic rituals; those with matted hair who wear bark clothing; those who sleep on the ground, eat only what drops from trees and plants, and regulate their meals according to the waxing and waning of the moon; those who wander from one monastery to another, eating only eight mouthfuls of food per day; those who remain naked, live under trees or in graveyards, and remain indifferent to what they eat or receive from others; renouncers who wear red and beg only at the homes of high-caste Brahmins; and radical ascetics who do not remain more than a day in any one place and live on cow urine and feces.
According to Buddhist texts, Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–c. 483 B.C.E.), the founder of Buddhism, was born into a royal family and raised in the lap of luxury. Upon learning of the true nature of the world outside his insulated life—a world full of suffering, sickness, old age, and death—Gautama immediately renounced his privileged life, left his family, and joined a group of ascetics in the jungle.

The time of the Buddha seems to have been one in which many different renunciatory groups in the uninhabited regions of north India experimented with various techniques—ascetic, yogic, philosophical, and meditational—to attain release from suffering and rebirth. Early Buddhist texts are replete with references to ascetics of various types.

One such text depicts the typical ascetic (tapasvin) of the time as one who goes naked, is of certain loose habits, licks his hands, respects no approach nor stop; accepts nothing expressly brought, nor expressly prepared, nor any invitations. He takes food once a day, or once every two days, or once every seven days. He feeds on herbs, or on the powder of rice husks, on rice-scum, on flour of oil seeds, on grasses, on cow dung, or on fruits and roots from the woods. He wears coarse hempen cloths, discarded corpse cloths, discarded rags, or antelope hide, or bark garments.

According to hagiographies of the life of the Buddha, Gautama hooked up with such a group and practiced and mastered the radical ascetic regimen they advocated, to such an extent that he ate virtually nothing and shriveled to nothing more than skin and bones.

Finding that he had not achieved his goal through such austerities, Gautama rejected the ascetic path and pursued what he called the “middle way” between the poles of sensuality and asceticism: “There are two extremes, O monks, which he who has given up the world ought to avoid. What are these two extremes? A life given to pleasure, devoted to pleasures and lust; this is degrading, sensual, vulgar, ignoble and profitless. And a life given to mortifications; this is painful, ignoble and profitless”

Buddhism in its origins is thus somewhat ambivalent about the usefulness of asceticism. On the one hand, it rejects the extreme forms of physical abnegation and self-torture that appear in the other Indian religions it grew up with. Buddhism denies that such physical asceticism alone can procure for the practitioner the highest spiritual goals. On the other hand, however, there can be no question that Buddhism requires its more serious practitioners not only to renounce worldly life but also to train diligently in self-discipline and self-control through the “eightfold path” (right views, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration).
Attaining the permanent peace and happiness known as nirvana also requires the elimination of desire and aversion through ascetic self-discipline and abnegation. If one can eliminate desire, selfishness, and egotism by more moderate means, the more radical physical austerities are unnecessary:

"All mortification is vain so long as selfishness leads to lust after pleasures in this world or in another world. But he in whom egotism has become extinct is free from lust: he will desire neither worldly nor heavenly pleasures, and the satisfaction of his natural wants will not defile him. He may eat and drink to satisfy the needs of life"

(Mahavagga, quoted in Bhagat, p. 162)

While the Buddha rejected the extreme forms of physical asceticism recommended by others, he did allow for a number of ascetic practices called the dhutangas. These practices are said not to be the path itself but only preparatory for the path; they help the seeker eliminate all forms of attachment.

The dhutanga s include wearing only monastic robes made from discarded fabric, living only on alms begged for indiscriminately, eating only once a day, living in the forest or at the foot of a tree or in a cemetery, and sleeping only while sitting upright (and never while lying down).

The main form that asceticism took in Buddhism was monastic renunciation of the world. In stark contrast to the Hindu system of the four stages of life, in which renunciation was relegated to the end of life after the householder stage, Buddhists insisted that as soon as one recognized that this world is like a "house on fire," one should give up the worldly life and join the monastery. There, in the company of other monks or nuns, one could pursue a regulated life of study, meditation, and self-discipline similar to the monastic lifestyle pursued in other religious traditions.
The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei

The Kaihōgyō is a set of the ascetic spiritual trainings for which the Buddhist Marathon Monks of Mt. Hiei are known. These monks are from the Tendai school of Buddhism, a denomination brought to Japan by the monk Saicho in 806 from China.

The Marathon Monks’ quest is to serve Buddha through many duties but they are best known for their great spiritual effort and perseverance in ascetic practices. In particular a form of asceticism whereby the monks meditate on Fudo Myoo, chant his mantra and circumambulate a sacred mountain for many days in a row.

Part of Tendai Buddhism's teaching is that enlightenment can be attained in the current life. It is through the process of selfless service and devotion that this can be achieved, and the kaihōgyō is seen as the ultimate expression of this desire. By the end of the practice the monks have achieved a form of identification with the emanation of Buddha known as Fudo Myoo.

There are many serving priests at the temple on Mt. Hiei, but very few of them have completed the 1,000-day kaihōgyō. Abbots of Mt. Hiei temple must complete 100-days of kaihōgyō. 1,000 day practice is an uncommon and specialized area of both ascetic and esoteric disciplines.

The selection process for the kaihōgyō is after the first 100 days of practice, the monk will petition the senior monks to complete the remaining 900 days. In the first 100 days, withdrawal from the challenge is possible, but from day 101 onwards the monk is no longer allowed to withdraw; historically he must either complete the course or take his own life.

Altogether there have been forty-six 1,000 day marathons since 1885. Two monks completed two full terms, one died (on purpose) on the 2,500th day of practice, and one, Okuno Genjun, did three full terms but without actually running each day during the third term.

The majority of the marathon monks were in their vigorous thirties, while the oldest, Sakai, completed day 2,000 when he was sixty-one years old. The number of monks who died or committed suicide on route is not known, but the path is lined with unmarked graves of gyoja who have been killed in action. No one has expired in recent memory during the 1,000 day marathon, but at least three monks perished in the nineteenth century.

The secret of the marathon monks’ success lies in their spiritual rather than their physical strength. This spiritual strength – derived from the desire to realize Buddhahood, for the sake of oneself and the sake of others, in this very mind and body – is the key to the question “What makes the marathon monks run?”

There are many aspects to the kaihōgyō, but the main portion of walking meditation can be broken down into the following sections:
The Runs
The ultimate achievement is the completion of the 1,000-day challenge, which would rank among the most demanding physical and mental challenges in the world. Only 46 men have completed the 1,000-day challenge since 1885. Of these, three people have completed the circuit twice, most recently Yūsai Sakai, (1926–2013)), who first went from 1973 to 1980 and then, after a half year pause, went again, finishing his second round in 1987 at age 61.

The kaihōgyō takes seven years to complete, as the monks must undergo other Buddhist training in meditation and calligraphy, and perform general duties within the temple.

They are required to spend 12 years total on Mt. Hiei and includes vows of lifelong celibacy and sobriety in the spirit of renunciation.

The runs are divided into 100-day sections as follows:
1\textsuperscript{st} year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs, beginning at 1:30 a.m. each day after an hour of prayer.
2\textsuperscript{nd} year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs.
3\textsuperscript{rd} year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs.
4\textsuperscript{th} year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs – performed twice for a total of 200 days.
5\textsuperscript{th} year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs – performed twice for a total of 200 days.
6\textsuperscript{th} year: 100 consecutive days of 37.5 mile runs
7\textsuperscript{th} year: 100 consecutive days of 52 mile runs and 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs.

The basic rules are as follows:
During the walk the robe and hat may not be removed.
No deviation from the appointed course.
No stopping for rest or refreshment.
All required services, prayers, and chants must be correctly performed.
No smoking or drinking.

The attire of the monk is very simple. The monks wear white cloth pants and robe, a straw hat, and straw sandals. Along with the book and the clothes, the monk carries a knife and rope which is to be used for disembowelment if the course cannot be completed.

By demanding the ultimate consequence if the sadhana is not completed, each run becomes a confrontation with death. There is no sleeping in or missing a day, because to do so means death.

John Stevens, in *The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei*, writes, “Around the waist goes the ‘cord of death’, with a sheathed knife tucked inside; these two accessories remind the gyoja of his duty to take his life – by either hanging or self-disembowelment – if he fails to complete any part of the practice. This is the reason the gyoja is dressed in white – the color of death – rather than basic Buddhist black. A small bag to hold the handbook, a sutra book, two candles, and matches is hung over the right shoulder. The gyoja carries his rosary in his left hand.”
The monks wake every day at 12:00 A.M., and after an hour of prayer, they begin their daily pilgrimage at 1:30 a.m.

Throughout the night they run and pray, stopping at different stations along the way to recite prayers and perform ritual chants. Upon completion of each day’s marathon, the monks perform chores such as cleaning the temple and they continue to pray throughout the day, until retiring at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. The ritual begins again a few hours later. If at any time the monk finds himself physically or mentally unable to complete the 100-day ritual, he is duty-bound to commit suicide by hanging himself with the belt from his robe or through ritual disembowelment.

Stevens reports: Marathon monks must get by on a minimum of sleep; consequently, they become expert cat-nappers, catching a few winks while waiting for traffic lights to change or at other lulls in their daily schedules. The monks learn to sleep sitting or even standing up, and most in fact prefer not to lie down to nap because that confuses their sense of time. Unsure of the correct hour, monks sometimes leap up from a mid-day nap, jump into their outfits, and race out of the temple. While on the road, they develop the faculty to rest different sections of the body as they move along – “Now I am resting my shoulders, now I am resting my hips, now I am resting my knees,” and so on.

Other essential factors are proper rhythm, breath control, and intense concentration. The monks harmonize their pace with the “beat” of the Fudo Myoo mantra, which they chant continually, and cover meters and meters on each deep abdominal breath. An experienced marathon monk flows along naturally, maintaining the same speed for climbing up or coming down. The monks cannot allow themselves to be distracted by any obstacle, whether external or internal…”

Stevens reported that daily caloric intake for the monks is approximately 1,000-1,200 calories, which is based on a vegetarian fare of rice, miso soup, and green tea. The amount of calories seems very low, but nonetheless the monks seem to be the picture of health.

After the 700th day of running, the Gyoja faces the ultimate test, the greatest trial of all: doiri, nine days without food, water, sleep, or rest.

The doiri – the actual period without food, water, rest, or sleep is seven and a half days (182 hours) – designed to bring the gyoja face-to-face with death. Hiei legend has it that the original period of doiri was ten days; when almost all of the monks died it was shortened just a bit.

All the gyoja agree that the greatest ordeal of doiri is not starvation or thirst but keeping the head erect and not being able to rest…Maintaining the correct posture at all times is the ultimate challenge. Two monks stay with the gyoja during the doiri to insure correct posture and wakefulness.

The monks undergoing doiri spend their days reciting chants that they repeat 100,000 times.
The seventh and final year again has two 100 day runs. The first – perhaps the supreme athletic challenge of all times – consists of a daily 52.5 mile run through the environs of Kyoto. This is the equivalent of two Olympic marathons, and is performed 100 days in a row.

During the aptly named Great Marathon, the monk sets out from Hiei at 12:30 A.M., covers the 52 miles over the next sixteen to eighteen hours, and then arrives, sometimes between four and six in the afternoon, at a temple in the center of Kyoto to rest for a few hours.

The following day, beginning at 1:00 A.M., the monk reverses the course. He completes this routine for one hundred consecutive days.

The final 100 day term is the same distance and course as the first 100 day term completed long ago. This reunion with the mountain and the forest is easily completed. During this final term, Stevens describes the gyoja as having a special connection with all that inhabit the Mountain.

Yusai Sakai, the greatest marathon monk, completes his second 1,000-day ascetic alpine rounds in 1988.
Asceticism in Jainism


The founder of the religion of Jainism was, like the Buddha, a world renouncer. Unlike the Buddha, however, Mahavira (599–527 B.C.E.) embraced a program of extreme austerities to reach his religious goal. Having left the social world, Mahavira adopted the life of a naked wandering mendicant and for twelve years practiced the most severe of physical austerities until he reached perfection.

The life of Mahavira set the tone for the development of the Jain tradition. Jainism is perhaps the most ascetically oriented of all the world's religions. Most Jains are and have always been householders, but even householders are urged to live lives of self-restraint and especially nonviolence.

Jain monks pursue lives of even greater austerities, following the five "great vows" (no killing living beings, truthfulness, no stealing, chastity, and renunciation of possessions) and, in some sects, not wearing any clothing. Jains seek ascetic heat in both its "external" and "internal" forms—the former entailing fasting, begging, and mortification of the body; the latter requiring penance, modesty, service to others, study, meditation, and nonattachment to the body. The epitome of asceticism is found in the Jain tradition of religious suicide by starvation.

Blessings of a Jain monk
Conclusion:

While renunciation of the world and asceticism have had a huge influence on Indian religions, it must be remembered that the more extreme practices have always been limited to the very few, the religious virtuosi. Also, these world-denying and self-abnegating practices have always coexisted with equally or more powerful strains in these traditions valorizing a worldly life and, to some extent, material goals. The ascetic quality of Indian religions has often been exaggerated, even caricatured, at the expense of a more realistic portrait—one that admits the impact of asceticism on these traditions while contextualizing such practices and values within what have always been complex and varied religious traditions.

(http://science.jrank.org/pages/8384/Asceticism-Hindu-Buddhist-Asceticism-Conclusion.html)

Parikrama means circumambulating, clockwise around a sacred object or space, for instance a deity in a temple, a temple or a mountain.

The pilgrim (or baba) stretches out on the ground, places a stone (or something) in front of him, stands up, makes a few paces to the stone, stretches out again, etc. This would be the ‘fast’ method, and as such is also performed by lay pilgrims.

But sadhus, as Rama Kishan Das portrayed here, usually stand up and stretch out on one spot 108 times, simultaneously reciting mantras. And then he will move one body-length. At the end of the day, when he has progressed some twenty body-lengths, the baba will mark the spot and continue the next day. This way it will take him two years to go around the holy mountain.

Kailas Das has worn this steel chastity-belt for fifty years. He is also known as Mauni Baba, for he did not speak for twelve years.
Sadhu

In Hinduism, sādhu (“good; good man, holy man”) denotes an ascetic, wandering monk. Although the vast majority of sādhus are yogīs, not all yogīs are sādhus. The sādhu is solely dedicated to achieving mokṣa (liberation), the fourth and final aśrama (stage of life), through meditation and contemplation of brahman. Sādhus often wear ochre-colored clothing, symbolizing their sanyāsa (renunciation).

This way of life is open to women; the female form of the word is sādhvī.
Sadhus are sanyasi, or renunciates, who have left behind all material attachments and live in caves, forests and temples all over India and Nepal.

A Sadhu is usually referred to as *Baba* by common people. The word *baba* also means father, grandfather, or uncle in many Indian languages. Sometimes the respectful suffix - *ji* may also be added after *baba*, to give greater respect to the renunciate. It is also a term of endearment for small boys.

There are 4–5 million sadhus in India today and they are widely respected for their holiness, and sometimes feared for their curses. It is also thought that the austere practices of the sadhus help to burn off their karma and that of the community at large. Thus seen as benefiting society, sadhus are supported by donations from many people. However, reverence of sadhus is by no means universal in India. Historically and contemporarily, sadhus have often been viewed with a certain degree of suspicion, particularly amongst the urban populations of India. Today, especially in popular pilgrimage cities, posing as a *sadhu* can be a means of acquiring income for non-devout beggars.

There are naked Naga (Digambara, or “sky-clad”) Sadhus which are non-shaven and wear their hair in thick dreadlocks, and Jata, who carry swords. Aghora sadhus may claim to keep company with ghosts, or live in cemeteries as part of their holy path. Indian culture tends to emphasize an infinite number of paths to God, such that sadhus, and the varieties that sadhus come in have their place.
Asceticism in Christianity

Christian authors of late antiquity such as Origen, Jerome, St. Ignatius, John Chrysostom, and Augustine interpreted meanings of Biblical texts within a highly asceticized religious environment.

Scriptural examples of asceticism could be found in the lives of John the Baptist, Jesus, the twelve apostles and the Apostle Paul. The Dead Sea Scrolls revealed ascetic practices of the ancient Jewish sect of Essenes who took vows of abstinence to prepare for a holy war.

An emphasis on an ascetic religious life was evident in both early Christian writings (Philokalia) and practices (hesychasm). Other Christian practitioners of asceticism include individuals such as Simeon Stylites, Saint David of Wales and Francis of Assisi.

The deserts of the middle-east were at one time inhabited by thousands of hermits including St. Anthony of Egypt, St. Mary of Egypt, and St. Simeon Stylites.

The Extraordinary Life of St. Anthony of the Desert

Asceticism as a response to the problem of living
Published on April 21, 2012 by Neel Burton, M.D. in Hide and Seek

A beacon of the ascetic life is St Anthony of the Desert (251-356), the ‘Father of All Monks.’

According to the Life of Anthony by the 4th century and near contemporary bishop St. Athanasius of Alexandria, Anthony, having lost both his parents, renounced his inherited wealth and devoted himself entirely to religious exercises, heeding the supererogatory counsel of Jesus, who, according to Matthew 19:21, said to the rich man, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’

After some years on the ascetic path, Anthony took up residence in a tomb near his native village. There he resisted the temptations and torments of the devil, an episode that has often been depicted in art, including by modernists such as Cézanne and Dalí. Demons in the forms of wild beasts attacked him in the tomb, occasionally leaving him bruised and unconscious and in need of care.

Having spent 15 years in the tomb, Anthony retreated further and into complete solitude, secluding himself in an abandoned fort in the desert of Egypt and subsisting on nothing more than the food that pilgrims catapulted over the walls. After some 20 more years, his devotees persuaded him to leave the fort to instruct and organize them, whence his epithet ‘Father of All Monks’. He emerged from the fort not emaciated as people had been expecting but healthy and radiant.
He passed five or six years with his devotees and then once again withdrew into the Egyptian desert, to a mountain whereupon can still be found the monastery that bears his name, Der Mar Antonios. This time, however, he did consent to receiving visitors and even undertook some travels. In particular, he twice visited Alexandria, once in 311 to support the Christian martyrs in the persecution, and a second time near the close of his life in around 350 to preach against the Arians.

One must believe that austerity makes for longevity: Anthony died at the grand old age of 105, which for the 4th century might be considered not far short of a miracle.


St. Anthony is believed to have lived as a hermit and died in a rock cave above the site of the present-day monastery. More than a thousand stairs lead to the cave of St Anthony.

A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this, the old man said to him, "If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that." The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Abba Anthony said, "Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for themselves are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them."
Asceticism
William James
(From: The Varieties of Religious Experience)

When the craving for moral consistency and purity is highly developed, the subject may well find the outer world too full of shocks to dwell in, and can unify his life and keep his soul unspotted only by withdrawing from it.

That law which impels the artist to achieve harmony in his composition by simply dropping out whatever jars, or suggests a discord, rules also in the spiritual life. To omit, says Stevenson, is the one art in literature: "If I knew how to omit, I should ask no other knowledge."

And life, when full of disorder and slackness and vague superfluity, can no more have what we call character than literature can have it under similar conditions.

So monasteries and communities of sympathetic devotees open their doors, and in their changeless order, characterized by omissions quite as much as constituted of actions, the holy-minded person finds that inner smoothness and cleanness which it is torture to him to feel violated at every turn by the discordancy and brutality of secular existence.

That the scrupulosity of purity may be carried to a fantastic extreme must be admitted. In this it resembles asceticism, to which further symptom of saintliness we had better turn next. The adjective 'ascetic' is applied to conduct originating on diverse psychological levels, which I might as well begin by distinguishing from one another.

1. Asceticism may be a mere expression of organic hardihood, disgusted with too much ease.

2. Temperance in meat and drink, simplicity of apparel, chastity, and non-pampering of the body generally, may be fruits of the love of purity, shocked by whatever savors of the sensual.

3. They may also be fruits of love, that is, they may appeal to the subject in the light of sacrifices which he is happy in making to the Deity whom he acknowledges.

4. Again, ascetic mortifications and torments may be due to pessimistic feelings about the self, combined with theological beliefs concerning expiation. The devotee may feel that he is buying himself free, or escaping worse sufferings hereafter, by doing penance now.

5. In psychopathic persons, mortifications may be entered on irrationally, by a sort of obsession or fixed idea which comes as a challenge and must be worked off, because only thus does the subject get his interior consciousness feeling right again.

6. Finally, ascetic exercises may in rarer instances be prompted by genuine perversions of the bodily sensibility, in consequence of which normally pain-giving stimuli are actually felt as pleasures.
I will try to give an instance under each of these heads in turn; but it is not easy to get them pure, for in cases pronounced enough to be immediately classed as ascetic, several of the assigned motives usually work together.

“Often at night in my warm bed I would feel ashamed to depend so on the warmth, and whenever the thought would come over me I would have to get up, no matter what time of night it was, and stand for a minute in the cold, just so as to prove my manhood.”

Such cases as these belong simply to our level 1.

In the next case we probably have a mixture of levels 2 and 3—the asceticism becomes far more systematic and pronounced. The writer is a Protestant, whose sense of moral energy could doubtless be gratified on no lower terms, and I take his case from Starbuck’s manuscript collection.

“I practiced fasting and mortification of the flesh. I secretly made burlap shirts, and put the burrs next the skin, and wore pebbles in my shoes. I would spend nights flat on my back on the floor without any covering.”

The Roman Church has organized and codified all this sort of thing, and given it a market-value in the shape of ‘merit.’ But we see the cultivation of hardship cropping out under every sky and in every faith, as a spontaneous need of character. Thus we read of Channing, when first settled as a Unitarian minister, that—

“He was now more simple than ever, and seemed to have become incapable of any form of self-indulgence. He took the smallest room in the house for his study, though he might easily have commanded one more light, airy, and in every way more suitable; and chose for his sleeping chamber an attic which he shared with a younger brother. The furniture of the latter might have answered for the cell of an anchorite, and consisted of a hard mattress on a cot-bedstead, plain wooden chairs and table, with matting on the floor.

It was without fire, and to cold he was throughout life extremely sensitive; but he never complained or appeared in any way to be conscious of inconvenience. ‘I recollect,’ says his brother, ‘after one most severe night, that in the morning he sportively thus alluded to his suffering: “If my bed were my country, I should be somewhat like Bonaparte: I have no control except over the part which I occupy; the instant I move, frost takes possession.”’

In sickness only would he change for the time his apartment and accept a few comforts. The dress too that he habitually adopted was of most inferior quality; and garments were constantly worn which the world would call mean, though an almost feminine neatness preserved him from the least appearance of neglect.”
In the next case we have a strongly pessimistic element, so that it belongs under level 4. John Cennick was Methodism's first lay preacher. In 1735 he was convicted of sin, while walking in Cheapside,—

"And at once left off song-singing, card-playing, and attending theatres. Sometimes he wished to go to a popish monastery, to spend his life in devout retirement. At other times he longed to live in a cave, sleeping on fallen leaves, and feeding on forest fruits.

He fasted long and often, and prayed nine times a day. ... Fancying dry bread too great an indulgence for so great a sinner as himself, he began to feed on potatoes, acorns, crabs, and grass; and often wished that he could live on roots and herbs.

At length, in 1737, he found peace with God, and went on his way rejoicing."

In this poor man we have morbid melancholy and fear, and the sacrifices made are to purge out sin, and to buy safety. The hopelessness of Christian theology in respect of the flesh and the natural man generally has, in systematizing fear, made of it one tremendous incentive to self-mortification.

On the other hand, in the form of loving sacrifice, of spending all we have to show our devotion, ascetic discipline of the severest sort may be the fruit of highly optimistic religious feeling.

M. Vianney, the curé of Ars, was a French country priest, whose holiness was exemplary. We read in his life the following account of his inner need of sacrifice:—

'On this path,' M. Vianney said, 'it is only the first step that costs. There is in mortification a balm and a savor without which one cannot live when once one has made their acquaintance. There is but one way in which to give one's self to God,—that is, to give one's self entirely, and to keep nothing for one's self. The little that one keeps is only good to trouble one and make one suffer.'

Accordingly he imposed it on himself that he should never smell a flower, never drink when parched with thirst, never drive away a fly, never show disgust before a repugnant object, never complain of anything that had to do with his personal comfort, never sit down, never lean upon his elbows when he was kneeling.

The Curé of Ars was very sensitive to cold, but he would never take means to protect himself against it. During a very severe winter, one of his missionaries contrived a false floor to his confessional and placed a metal case of hot water beneath. The trick succeeded, and the Saint was deceived: 'God is very good,' he said with emotion. 'This year, through all the cold, my feet have always been warm.'

In this case the spontaneous impulse to make sacrifices for the pure love of God was probably the uppermost conscious motive. We may class it, then, under our level 3.

Father Vianney's asceticism taken in its totality was simply the result of a permanent flood of high spiritual enthusiasm, longing to make proof of itself.
The Blessed Henry Suso

Henry Suso, was a German Dominican friar, who was a noted spiritual writer and mystic. He died on 25 January 1366. He was beatified by the Catholic Church in 1831.

Suso often subjected himself to extreme forms of mortifications, which he prudently moderated in maturer years, and bore with rare patience corporal afflictions, bitter persecutions, and grievous calumnies.

Suso devised for himself several painful devices. Some of these were an undergarment studded with a hundred and fifty brass nails, sharpened and so fixed as to pierce his skin, gloves with sharp tacks in order to discourage him from disturbing the noxious insects with which his body teemed; a very uncomfortable door to sleep on and a cross with thirty protruding needles and nails just under his body. In addition, in winters he slept on the bare floor of his cell and froze, his body covered with scars and his throat parched with thirst.

Over a period of twenty-five years he never took a bath.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Suso)

William James on Suso

And now, as a more concrete example of levels 4 and 5, in fact of all our levels together, and of the irrational extreme to which a psychopathic individual may go in the line of bodily austerity, I will quote the sincere Suso’s account of his own self-tortures. Suso, you will remember, was one of the fourteenth century German mystics; his autobiography, written in the third person, is a classic religious document.

“He was in his youth of a temperament full of fire and life; and when this began to make itself felt, it was very grievous to him; and he sought by many devices how he might bring his body into subjection.

He wore for a long time a hair shirt and an iron chain, until the blood ran from him, so that he was obliged to leave them off. He secretly caused an undergarment to be made for him; and in the undergarment he had strips of leather fixed, into which a hundred and fifty brass nails, pointed and filed sharp, were driven, and the points of the nails were always turned towards the flesh. He had this garment made very tight, and so arranged as to go round him and fasten in front, in order that it might fit the closer to his body, and the pointed nails might be driven into his flesh; and it was high enough to reach upwards to his navel. In this he used to sleep at night.

Now in summer, when it was hot, and he was very tired and ill from his journeyings, or when he held the office of lecturer, he would sometimes, as he lay thus in bonds, and oppressed with toil, and tormented also by noxious insects, cry aloud and give way to fretfulness, and twist round and round in agony, as a worm does when run through with a pointed needle. It often seemed to him as if he were lying upon an ant-hill, from the torture caused by the insects (lice); for if he wished to sleep, or when he had fallen asleep, they vied with one another.
Sometimes he cried to Almighty God in the fullness of his heart: Alas! Gentle God, what a dying is this! When a man is killed by murderers or strong beasts of prey it is soon over; but I lie dying here under the cruel insects, and yet cannot die. The nights in winter were never so long, nor was the summer so hot, as to make him leave off this exercise.

On the contrary, he devised something farther—two leathern loops into which he put his hands, and fastened one on each side his throat, and made the fastenings so secure that even if his cell had been on fire about him, he could not have helped himself.

This he continued until his hands and arms had become almost tremulous with the strain, and then he devised something else: two leather gloves; and he caused a brazier to fit them all over with sharp-pointed brass tacks, and he used to put them on at night, in order that if he should try while asleep to throw off the hair undergarment, or relieve himself from the gnawings of the vile insects, the tacks might then stick into his body.

And so it came to pass. If ever he sought to help himself with his hands in his sleep, he drove the sharp tacks into his breast, and tore himself, so that his flesh festered. When after many weeks the wounds had healed, he tore himself again and made fresh wounds.

He continued this tormenting exercise for about sixteen years. At the end of this time, when his blood was now chilled, and the fire of his temperament destroyed, there appeared to him in a vision on Whitsunday, a messenger from heaven, who told him that God required this of him no longer. Whereupon he discontinued it, and threw all these things away into a running stream.”

Suso then tells how, to emulate the sorrows of his crucified Lord, he made himself a cross with thirty protruding iron needles and nails. This he bore on his bare back between his shoulders day and night.

“The first time that he stretched out this cross upon his back his tender frame was struck with terror at it, and blunted the sharp nails slightly against a stone. But soon, repenting of this womanly cowardice, he pointed them all again with a file, and placed once more the cross upon him. It made his back, where the bones are, bloody and seared. Whenever he sat down or stood up, it was as if a hedgehog-skin were on him. If any one touched him unawares, or pushed against his clothes, it tore him.”

Suso next tells of his penitences by means of striking this cross and forcing the nails deeper into the flesh, and likewise of his self-scourgings,—a dreadful story,—and then goes on as follows:

“At this same period the Servitor procured an old castaway door, and he used to lie upon it at night without any bedclothes to make him comfortable, except that he took off his shoes and wrapped a thick cloak round him. He thus secured for himself a most miserable bed; for hard pea-stalks lay in humps under his head, the cross with the sharp nails stuck into his back, his arms were locked fast in bonds, the horsehair undergarment was round his loins, and the cloak too was heavy and the door hard. Thus he lay in wretchedness, afraid to stir, just like a log, and he would send up many a sigh to God.
"In winter he suffered very much from the frost. If he stretched out his feet they lay bare on the floor and froze, if he gathered them up the blood became all on fire in his legs, and this was great pain. His feet were full of sores, his legs swollen, his knees bloody and seared, his loins covered with scars from the horsehair, his body wasted, his mouth parched with intense thirst, and his hands tremulous from weakness. Amid these torments he spent his nights and days; and he endured them all out of the greatness of the love which he bore in his heart to the Divine and Eternal Wisdom, our Lord Jesus Christ, whose agonizing sufferings he sought to imitate.

After a time he gave up this penitential exercise of the door, and instead of it he took up his abode in a very small cell, and used the bench, which was so narrow and short that he could not stretch himself upon it, as his bed. In this hole, or upon the door, he lay at night in his usual bonds, for about eight years.

It was also his custom, during the space of twenty-five years, provided he was staying in the convent, never to go after compline in winter into any warm room, or to the convent stove to warm himself, no matter how cold it might be, unless he was obliged to do so for other reasons. Throughout all these years he never took a bath, either a water or a sweating bath; and this he did in order to mortify his comfort-seeking body. He practiced during a long time such rigid poverty that he would neither receive nor touch a penny, either with leave or without it. For a considerable time he strove to attain such a high degree of purity that he would neither scratch nor touch any part of his body, save only his hands and feet."

I spare you the recital of poor Suso's self-inflicted tortures from thirst. It is pleasant to know that after his fortieth year, God showed him by a series of visions that he had sufficiently broken down the natural man, and that he might leave these exercises off.

His case is distinctly pathological, but he does not seem to have had the alleviation, which some ascetics have enjoyed, of an alteration of sensibility capable of actually turning torment into a perverse kind of pleasure.

Saint Catherine of Genoa

“In the first four years after she received the sweet wound from her Lord,” says the Life of St. Catherine of Genoa, she “made great penances so that all her senses were mortified. And first, so soon as she perceived that her nature desired anything at once she deprived it thereof, and did so that it should receive all those things that it abhorred. She wore harsh hair, ate no meat nor any other thing that she liked; ate no fruit, neither fresh nor dried . . . and she lived greatly submitted to all persons, and always sought to do all those things which were contrary to her own will; in such a way that she was always inclined to do more promptly the will of others than her own.” . . . “And while she worked such and so many mortifications of all her senses it was several times asked of her ‘Why do you do this?’ And she answered ‘I do not know, but I feel myself drawn inwardly to do this . . . and I think it is God’s will.’”

Saint Peter of Alcantara

Saint Peter of Alcantara, 1499 – 1562, was a Spanish Franciscan friar canonized in 1699.

Saint Peter, Saint Teresa of Avila tells us in her autobiography, "had passed forty years without ever sleeping more than an hour and a half a day. Of all his mortifications, this was the one that had cost him the most. To compass it, he kept always on his knees or on his feet. The little sleep he allowed nature to take was snatched in a sitting posture, his head leaning against a piece of wood fixed in the wall. Even had he wished to lie down, it would have been impossible, because his cell was only four feet and a half long.

In the course of all these years he never raised his hood, no matter what the ardor of the sun or the rain's strength. He never put on a shoe. He wore a garment of coarse sack-cloth, with nothing else upon his skin. This garment was as scant as possible, and over it a little cloak of the same stuff. When the cold was great he took off the cloak and opened for a while the door and little window of his cell. Then he closed them and resumed the mantle,—his way, as he told us, of warming himself, and making his body feel a better temperature.

It was a frequent thing with him to eat once only in three days; and when I expressed my surprise, he said that it was very easy if one once had acquired the habit. One of his companions has assured me that he has gone sometimes eight days without food.

His poverty was extreme; and his mortification, even in his youth, was such that he told me he had passed three years in a house of his order without knowing any of the monks otherwise than by the sound of their voice, for he never raised his eyes, and only found his way about by following the others. He showed this same modesty on public highways.

He spent many years without ever laying eyes upon a woman; but he confessed to me that at the age he had reached it was indifferent to him whether he laid eyes on them or not.

He was very old when I first came to know him, and his body so attenuated that it seemed formed of nothing so much as of so many roots of trees.

With all this sanctity he was very affable. He never spoke unless he was questioned, but his intellectual right-mindedness and grace gave to all his words an irresistible charm.”

Madame Guyon

Madame Guyon, a delicate girl of the leisured class, accustomed to the ordinary comforts of her station, characteristically chose the most crude and immoderate forms of mortification in her efforts towards the acquirement of “indifference.” But the peculiar psychic constitution which afterwards showed itself in the forms of automatism and clairvoyance, seems to have produced a partial anesthesia. “Although I had a very delicate body, the instruments of penitence tore my flesh without, as it seemed to me, causing pain. I wore girdles of hair and of sharp iron. I often held wormwood (creating a bitter taste) in my mouth.” “If I walked, I put stones in my shoes. These things, my God, Thou diest first inspire me to do, in order that I might be deprived even of the most innocent satisfactions.”
Of Madeleine Sophie Barat, the founder of the Sacred Heart order, for example, we read that:

"Her love of pain and suffering was insatiable. ... She said that she could cheerfully live till the day of judgment, provided she might always have matter for suffering for God; but that to live a single day without suffering would be intolerable. She said again that she was devoured with two unassuageable fevers, one for the holy communion, the other for suffering, humiliation, and annihilation. 'Nothing but pain,' she continually said in her letters, 'makes my life supportable.'"

So much for the phenomena to which the ascetic impulse will in certain persons give rise. In the ecclesiastically consecrated character three minor branches of self-mortification have been recognized as indispensable pathways to perfection. I refer to the chastity, obedience, and poverty which the monk vows to observe.

(http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Varieties_of_Religious_Experience/Lectures_XI,_XII,_and_XIII)

This kind of renunciation, in fact, has often been the strength, born of necessity, of the world's disinherited, of those who do not fit in with their surroundings or with their own body or with their own race or tradition and who hope, by means of renunciation, to assure for themselves a future world where, to use a Nietzschean expression, the inversion of all values will occur.

(Julius Evola)
Saint Simeon Stylites or Symeon the Stylite
(c. 388 – 459)

Saint Simeon Stylites was a Christian ascetic saint who achieved fame for living 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo in Syria. Several other stylites later followed his model (the Greek word style means pillar).

He is known formally as Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder to distinguish him from Simeon Stylites the Younger and Simeon Stylites III.

Simeon was the son of a shepherd. He was born at Sis, now the Turkish town of Kozan in Adana Province. Sis was in the Roman province of Cilicia, and after the separation of the Roman Empire in 395 it became part of the Eastern Roman Empire and Christianity grew quickly there.

According to Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus, Simeon developed a zeal for Christianity at the age of 13, following a reading of the Beatitudes. He subjected himself to ever-increasing bodily austerities from an early age, especially fasting, and entered a monastery before the age of 16.

On one occasion, moving nearby, he commenced a severe regimen of fasting for Lent and was visited by the head of the monastery, who left him some water and loaves. A number of days later, Simeon was discovered unconscious, with the water and loaves untouched. When he was brought back to the monastery, it was discovered that he had bound his waist with a girdle made of palm fronds so tightly that days of soaking were required to remove the fibers from the wound formed. At this, Simeon was requested to leave the monastery.
He then shut himself up for one and a half years in a hut, where he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. When he emerged from the hut, his achievement was hailed as a miracle.

He later took to standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him.

After one and a half years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence on the slopes of what is now the Sheik Barakat Mountain and compelled himself to remain a prisoner within a narrow space, less than sixty-five feet in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the area to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions. This at last led him to adopt a new way of life.

In order to get away from the ever increasing number of people who frequently came to him for prayers and advice, leaving him little if any time for his private austerities, Simeon discovered a pillar which had survived amongst ruins, formed a small platform at the top, and upon this determined to live out his life. It has been stated that, as he seemed to be unable to avoid escaping the world horizontally, he may have thought it an attempt to try to escape it vertically. For sustenance small boys from the village would climb up the pillar and pass him small parcels of flat bread and goats’ milk.

When the monastic Elders living in the desert heard about Simeon, who had chosen a new and strange form of asceticism, they wanted to test him to determine whether his extreme feats were founded in humility or pride. They decided to tell Simeon under obedience to come down from the pillar. They decided that if he disobeyed they would forcibly drag him to the ground, but if he was willing to submit, they were to leave him on his pillar. St Simeon displayed complete obedience and humility, and the monks told him to stay where he was.

This first pillar was little more than thirteen feet high, but his well-wishers subsequently replaced it with others, the last in the series being apparently over fifty feet from the ground. At the top of the pillar was a platform, with a baluster, which is believed to have been about three square feet.

According to his hagiography, Simeon would not allow any woman to come near his pillar, not even his own mother, reportedly telling her, “If we are worthy, we shall see one another in the life to come.” Martha submitted to this. Remaining in the area, she also embraced the monastic life of silence and prayer. When she died, Simeon asked that her remains be brought to him. He reverently bade farewell to his dead mother, and, according to the account, a smile appeared on her face.

Edward Gibbon in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* describes Simeon’s existence as follows:

“In this last and lofty station, the Syrian Anachoret resisted the heat of thirty summers, and the cold of as many winters. Habit and exercise instructed him to maintain his dangerous situation without fear or giddiness, and successively to assume the different postures of devotion.
He sometimes prayed in an erect attitude, with his outstretched arms in the figure of a cross, but his most familiar practice was that of bending his meager skeleton from the forehead to the feet; and a curious spectator, after numbering twelve hundred and forty-four repetitions, at length desisted from the endless account.

The progress of an ulcer in his thigh might shorten, but it could not disturb, this *celestial* life; and the patient Hermit expired, without descending from his column.”

Even on the highest of his columns, Simeon was not withdrawn from the world. If anything, the new pillar drew even more people, not only the pilgrims who had come earlier but now sightseers as well.

Simeon made himself available to these visitors every afternoon. By means of a ladder, visitors were able to ascend, and it is known that he wrote letters, the text of some of which have survived to this day, that he instructed disciples, and that he also delivered addresses to those assembled beneath, preaching especially against profanity and usury.

In contrast to the extreme austerity that he demanded of himself, his preaching conveyed temperance and compassion, and was marked with common sense and freedom from fanaticism.

Simeon's fame spread throughout the Eastern Roman Empire. The Emperor Theodosius II and his wife Aelia Eudocia greatly respected the saint and listened to his counsels, while the Emperor Leo I paid respectful attention to a letter he sent in favor of the Council of Chalcedon. Simeon is also said to have corresponded with St Genevieve of Paris.

Simeon became so influential that a church delegation was sent to him to demand that he descend from his pillar as a sign of submission. When, however, he showed himself willing to comply, the request was withdrawn.

Once when he was ill, Theodosius sent three bishops to beg him to come down and allow himself to be attended by physicians, but Simeon preferred to leave his cure in the hands of God, and before long he recovered.

After spending 37 years on his pillar, Simeon died on 2 September 459. He inspired many imitators, and, for the next century, ascetics living on pillars, *stylites*, were a common sight throughout the Christian Levant.

The ruins of the vast edifice erected in his honor can still be seen. They consist of four basilicas built out from an octagonal court towards the four points of the compass to form a large cross. In the center of the court stands the base of the *style* or column on which St. Simeon stood.

In the *Guinness World Book Of Records 2010* he holds record for the longest pole sit, it is also the longest-held record of any kind by anybody (1551 years as of 2010).
In the center of the court stands the base of St. Simeon's column.

Saint Daniel the Stylite (c. 409 – 493) is a saint of the Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic and Eastern Catholic Churches. During a voyage he made with his abbot to Antioch, he passed by Tellnesin and received the benediction and encouragement of St. Simeon Stylites. Then he visited the holy places, stayed in various convents, and retired in 451 into the ruins of a pagan temple. Daniel lived on the pillar for 33 years. By continually standing, his feet were covered with sores and ulcers: the winds of Thrace sometimes stripped him of his scanty clothing.

Saint Alypius the Stylite (c. 522-640) was a seventh-century ascetic saint. Alypius built a church in honor of the Great Martyr Saint Euphemia the All-Praised on the site of a dilapidated pagan temple. He erected a pillar beside the church and lived atop it for the majority of his adult life. St Alypius stood upright for 53 years before his feet could no longer support him, after which, still atop his column, he lay on his side for the remaining 14 years of his life. He died in 640, at the age of 118. He is recognized as one of the three great stylite ascetics along with Simeon Stylites the Elder and Daniel the Stylite.
Maxime Qavtaradze is literally close to the heavens. The 59-year-old monk lives atop a stone pillar in Georgia, scaling a 131-foot ladder in order to leave and enter his lofty home.

The Katskhi Pillar has long been venerated by locals in the area, though it has been uninhabited since around the 1400s. When climbers ascended for the first time in centuries in 1944, they found the ruins of a church and the 600-year-old bones of the last stylite who lived there.

The stylite tradition is believed to have begun in 423 when St. Simeon the Elder climbed a pillar in Syria in order to avoid worldly temptations, but the practice has since fallen out of favor. However, Qavtaradze is a modern devotee.

Though isolated, he is not a total hermit, coming down once or twice a week to counsel the troubled young men who come to the monastery at the bottom for his help. After all, he was once one of them. Though he now lives at the top of the world, Qavtaradze found his vocation when he was the lowest he's ever been, doing prison time after he "drank, sold drugs, everything" as a young man.

He took monastic vows in 1993, and has been working to rebuild the monastery complex, chapel, and hermitage for the last fifteen years.
Hairshirt
(Catholic Encyclopedia)

A hairshirt is a garment of rough cloth made from goats' hair and worn in the form of a shirt or as a girdle around the loins, by way of mortification and penance. The Latin name is said to be derived from Cilicia, where this cloth was made, but the thing itself was probably known and used long before this name was given to it. The sackcloth, for instance, so often mentioned in Holy Scripture as a symbol of mourning and penance, was probably the same thing; and the garment of camels' hair worn by St. John the Baptist was no doubt somewhat similar..

During the early ages of Christianity the use of hair-cloth, as a means of bodily mortification and as an aid to the wearer in resisting temptations of the flesh, became very common, not only amongst the ascetics and those who aspired to the life of perfection, but even amongst ordinary lay people in the world, who made it serve as an unostentatious antidote for the outward luxury and comfort of their lives.

St. Jerome, for instance, mentions the hairshirt as being frequently worn under the rich and splendid robes of men in high worldly positions. St. Athanasius, St. John Damascene, Theodoret, and many others also bear testimony to its use in their times.

Cassian, however, disapproved of it being used by monks, as if worn outside it was too conspicuous and savored of vanity and if underneath it hindered the freedom of the body in performing manual labor. St. Benedict does not mention it specifically in his rule, but van Haeften maintains that it was worn by many of the early Benedictines, though not prescribed universally throughout the order.
Later on, it was adopted by most of the religious orders of the Middle Ages, in imitation of the early ascetics, and in order to increase the discomfort caused by its use it was sometimes even made of fine wire.

It was not confined to the monks, but continued to be fairly common amongst lay people also. Charlemagne, for instance, was buried in the hairshirt he had worn during life. The same is recorded of St. Thomas of Canterbury.

In modern times the use of the hairshirt has been generally confined to the members of certain religious orders. At the present day only the Carthusians and Carmelites wear it by rule; with others it is merely a matter of custom or voluntary mortification.

(http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07113b.htm)
Typical week-day schedule for a monk at a Carthusian monastery – a Catholic cloistered monastery in Vermont

11:30 pm = rise from bed
11:45 pm = in cell prayer
12:15 am = church service (prayers, hymns, chants, Biblical readings)
2:15 am to 3:15 am = return to cell, prayer to Blessed Virgin; to bed
6:30 am = rise
6:45 am = in cell prayer or spiritual reading from scripture
7:45 am = church service – conventional mass
8:45 am = return to cell for spiritual reading and study
10:00 am = in cell reading of the psalms
10:45 am = study or manual work
11:45 am = in cell recitation of set prayers and psalms
12 noon = meal & recreation (reading, gardening, walk outside)
2:00 pm = in cell recitation of set prayers and psalms
3:15 pm = manual work
4:00 pm = in cell prayer service to the Virgin Mary
4:45 pm = free time
5:00 pm = church service
6:00 pm = light evening meal; free time
7:00 pm = in cell last service of the day
8:00 pm = bedtime

The Life of a Carthusian Cloister Monk

Stay in the Cell

Our principal endeavor and goal is to devote ourselves to the silence and solitude of cell. Therefore the dweller in cell should be diligently and carefully on his guard against contriving or accepting occasions for going out, other than those normally prescribed. Each monk, therefore, is given all the tools that he needs to avoid his having to leave cell, since this is in no way permitted, except when the community is meeting in church or cloister, or on occasions laid down by rule.

Maintain Silence

Our rule is not to speak to one another without the President’s permission. Love for our brothers should show itself firstly in respect for their solitude. Should we have permission to speak about some matter, let us do so as briefly as possible. If, however, it does happen that a group of the fathers are deputed to work together, they can speak among themselves of matters useful for the work, but they may not speak to passers-by.
Remain Sheltered from the World

We should not allow our minds to wander through the world in search of news and gossip; on the contrary, our part is to remain hidden in the shelter of the Lord’s presence.

We should therefore avoid all secular books or periodicals that could disturb our interior silence. To introduce newspapers treating of politics into the cloister in any way would be particularly contrary to the spirit of our Order. If, by chance, we come to know something of events in the world, we must be careful not to pass it on to others.

Visitors

Since it is written, "Honor your father and your mother," we relax a little the rigor of our enclosure in order to receive the visit of our parents and other relations each year for two days. But apart from this, we avoid visits from friends and conversations with seculars. No visitors (other than those mentioned above) are allowed in a Carthusian monastery.

Women are Prohibited

Women can not be admitted within the cloister (other than those mentioned above).

Diet

The fathers keep abstinence once a week, normally on Friday. On that day they content themselves with bread and water. We exclude all eating and taking of meat from our way of life. On certain days and at certain times of the year, we observe the fast of the Order, and take only one meal a day.

No Internet

We do not use the Internet.
Philippine Easter Rituals of Crucifixion

Each Easter in the Philippines, Christians make a grueling march on Good Friday to atone for their sins through self-flagellation and crucifixion.

In the Philippines at the Easter season, Roman Catholics practice the extreme ascetic rituals of flagellation, cutting, wearing crowns of thorns, bearing crosses, and crucifixion, emulating the passion of Christ. These Christian Filipinos are Roman Catholic, although the Church does not officially approve of these observances.

Purpose Behind the Ascetic Rituals:

The purpose of performing these rituals is to ask forgiveness for the sins committed over the year for oneself and one’s family - a type of penitence. In following the last painful events in the life of Christ, these people feel a closer connection with their religion and their God, and a feeling of ease or forgiveness for their sins.

Some Christian ascetics believe that the apostle Paul taught asceticism in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:13 "If you live after the flesh, you shall die, but if through the spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live." The Catholics believe that this means that mortification or self-inflicted acts of pain will end the disease of the soul.

While Christ’s atonement was to pay for all men’s sins, the Catholic belief is that men should also do something in the expiations of their own sins, which sacrificing acts are pleasing to God. Protestants do not practice such extreme asceticism, but do practice fasting for somewhat similar reasons.
Easter Rituals in the Philippines:

Each year in the Philippines men and women take part in the passion plays of torture and crucifixion as symbolic of the suffering of Jesus Christ. The painful rituals take place at the end of the march on Good Friday, with self-flagellation, whipping and cutting of the flesh by officials, and carrying heavy crosses.

Each year, over a dozen people are actually hung on crosses. Crucifixion is an extremely painful form of torture and death.

The Filipino crucifixion followers are either tied to the crosses or actually nailed there.

They are not left on the crosses to die, as was the practice during ancient times by the Romans and other civilizations worldwide generally from the 6th century B.C.E. to the 4th century C.E.. In actual crucifixions, people usually died from asphyxiation or heart failure.

Most Filipinos attest to the feeling of worship, forgiveness and cleanliness that occurs through the process of their painful Easter rituals. They generally practice self-flagellation and crucifixion to atone for their sins.

Others Who Self-Flagellate:

The Filipinos are not the only modern group to practice self-flagellate in the name of religion. It is also seen by the Shi’ite Muslims as they commemorate the passion of Imam Husayn and other martyrs at the Battle of Karbala in the 7th century C.E.

Catholic monks and nuns practiced self-flagellation since medieval times as a reminder of the suffering of Christ. In modern days Los Hermanos Penitente of Colorado and New Mexico practice self-flagellation, the bearing of crosses, and actual crucifixion like the Filipinos.

It was reported by a nun who looked after Pope John Paul II, that he practiced self-flagellation, and the sounds of the whip on his flesh could often be heard from his living quarters. (http://suite101.com/a/philippine-easter-rituals-of-crucifixion-a209064) New World Encyclopedia. “Crucifixion,” available at newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Crucifixion. Accessed 3 Mar 2010

Read from a distant star, the majuscule script of our earthly existence would perhaps lead to the conclusion that the earth was the distinctively ascetic planet, a nook of disgruntled, arrogant creatures filled with a profound disgust with themselves, at the earth, at all life, who inflict as much pain on themselves as they possibly can out of pleasure in inflicting pain which is probably their only pleasure.

(Friedrich Nietzsche)
The Sant Mat Tradition

Sant Mat Gurus insist on sexual restraint, yet they reject the traditional Hindu forms of professional asceticism and even the traditional opposition between home and forest: on the spiritual plane, nothing more can be achieved in the forest than in the home; all that pertains to salvation is achieved within the heart of man himself.

The first Guru (Guru Nanak) insisted upon the way of the householder as the ideal and all-sufficient pattern of life for the seeker of salvation, rejecting in clear and unmistakable terms the ascetic alternative. His successors upheld the same ideal, expressing it in their own lives as well as in their teachings. (The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India, 39, 232)

Sant Kirpal Singh

With all our gratifications at the sensual level, we get nowhere. "Desire is the root cause of all misery," exclaimed Buddha. It is the intense craving for the enjoyment of the senses which leads to untold misery and agony. It is a perverted viewpoint that we try to satisfy our thirst for enjoyment by our indulgence.

Even in the field of spiritual discipline, many souls continue looking for the Lord outside in the scriptures, places of pilgrimage, ascetic living, or in other good acts, all of which mean searching the self outside, ignoring the fact that the fountain of bliss and immortality known as Amritsar (the Pool of Nectar) is within, and can be properly tapped with the grace of a Master-saint.

The bliss-giving Holy Naam, or the Word, is within the body; and we waste our precious time and energy in Its pursuit in the wrong direction. The divine source of immortality is within us all, and those who introvert and recede within do sip the Elixir of Life; and by drinking that, all their cravings come to an end.

The holy initiation into this mystic science by the living Master gives a foretaste of the wine from the divine cup-bearer, who doles out and administers it under the divine commandment. No worldly enjoyments can equal the ineffable grandeur which lies far beyond the ken of human comprehension and apprehension. (http://www.ruhanisatsangusa.org/dsos.htm)

His would be a life of detachment or of nishkama. But detachment would not be for him a life of indifference or of ascetic renunciation.

To know all life is to discover a new bond between oneself and the rest of creation. He who knows this cannot be merely "indifferent." He must perforce be filled to overflowing with sympathy for all that he confronts, and sympathy toward the whole must imply a certain holy indifference to the part.
He will no longer be tied to his own narrow individual interests, but will share his love and resources with all. He will develop, slowly but surely, something of the compassion of the Buddha and the love of Christ.

Nor will he feel himself called upon to leave the world for the solitude of the forest, the mountain or the desert cave. The detachment must be an inner one, and one who cannot achieve it at home will not achieve it in the forest.

He will recognize the great use of occasional retreats from worldly affairs and cares to the silence of solitary meditation and concentration, but he will not seek to escape from life and its responsibilities. He will be a loving husband and a good father, but while being these he will never forget the ultimate purpose of life, always knowing how to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and preserving for God that which is God's.

The way for transcending desire, he will know, is not through repressing it but meeting it squarely and overcoming it. To him, sanyasa is not a matter of outer evasion or escapism but of inner freedom…(http://www.ruhanisatsangusa.org/col/col-5a.htm)

Those who are initiated are given some capital to start with. By regular practice, self introspection and self restraint, they have to develop it more and more, from day to day. You will get more bliss while still remaining in the world, but you will not be attached.

So we should see where we stand, and where we stood before, two years ago, a year ago. Generally, we see that we were better off before than now. Why? We should progress. So one must be true to one's own self. God is within you. The Guru or the Master Power is within you. He is waiting for you, but you are attached outside.

It does not mean that you should leave the world and go to the Himalayas. We have to learn swimming in water, not on dry land, and not only through intellectual wrestling. It is a training in which you are given something to start on within you.

It is like the needle of a compass, which always points to the North. It is to be done while you are doing your work in the world.

A true Master does not advise you to leave the world, but remain in it and yet be not of it. A boat remains in the water and you may be rowing in the boat, but be careful that the water does not enter the boat, otherwise you will be drowned.

If the outward impressions are overflowing within you, you will be drowned in the water of the world and will have to come back again and again. (ruhanisatsangusa.org/mt/righteousness.htm)
The Mother on Asceticism

The practice of extreme self-mortification was very much in vogue in ancient India and continues to this day even in other religions. These are the Mother Mirra’s observations on the subject.

These practices, which consist of ill-treating the body in order, so they say, to liberate the spirit from it, are in fact a sensuous distortion of spiritual discipline; it is a kind of perverse need for suffering which drives the ascetic to self-mortification.

The sadhu’s recourse to the bed of nails or the Christian anchorite’s resort to the whip and the hair-shirt are the result of a more or less veiled sadistic tendency, unavowed and unavowable; it is an unhealthy seeking or a subconscious need for violent sensations.

In reality, these things are very far removed from all spiritual life, for they are ugly and base, dark and diseased; whereas spiritual life, on the contrary, is a life of light and balance, beauty and joy.

They are invented and extolled by a sort of mental and vital cruelty towards the body. But cruelty, even with regard to one’s own body, is nonetheless cruelty, and all cruelty is a sign of great unconsciousness. Unconscious natures need very strong sensations, for without them they can feel nothing; and cruelty, which is one form of sadism, brings very strong sensations.

The avowed purpose of such practices is to abolish all sensation so that the body may no longer stand in the way of one’s flight towards the spirit; but the effectiveness of this method is open to doubt. It is a recognized fact that in order to progress rapidly, one must not be afraid of difficulties; on the contrary, by choosing to do the difficult thing at every opportunity, one increases the will-power and strengthens the nerves.

Now, it is much more difficult to lead a life of moderation and balance, in equanimity and serenity, than to try to contend with over-indulgence in pleasure and the obscuration it entails, by over-indulgence in asceticism and the disintegration it causes.

It is much more difficult to achieve the harmonious and progressive development of one’s physical being in calm and simplicity than to ill-treat it to the point of annihilation. It is much more difficult to live soberly and without desire than to deprive the body of its indispensable nourishment and cleanliness and boast proudly of one’s abstinence.

It is much more difficult to avoid or to surmount and conquer illness by an inner and outer harmony, purity and balance, than to disregard and ignore it and leave it free to do its work of destruction. (http://auromere.wordpress.com/2010/07/02/on-some-customs-and-traditions-of-hinduism/)
Mortification
Aldous Huxley - The Perennial Philosophy

‘Our kingdom go’ is the necessary and unavoidable corollary of 'Thy kingdom come.' For the more there is of self, the less there is of God. The divine eternal fullness of life can be gained only by those who have deliberately lost the partial, separative life of craving and self-interest, of ego-centric thinking, feeling, wishing and acting.

Mortification or deliberate dying to self is inculcated with an uncompromising firmness in the canonical writings of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and most of the other major and minor religions of the world, and by every theocentric saint and spiritual reformer who has ever lived out and expounded the principles of the Perennial Philosophy.

But this 'self-naughting' is never (at least by anyone who knows what he is talking about) regarded as an end in itself. It possesses merely an instrumental value, as the indispensable means to something else. In the words of one whom we have often had occasion to cite in earlier sections, it is necessary for all of us to 'learn the true nature and worth of all self-denials and mortifications.'

That the mortified are, in some respects, often much worse than the unmortified is a commonplace of history, fiction and descriptive psychology. Thus, the Puritan may practice all the cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance and chastity and yet remain a thoroughly bad man; for, in all too many cases, these virtues of his are accompanied by, and indeed causally connected with, the sins of pride, envy, chronic anger and an uncharitableness pushed sometimes to the level of active cruelty.

Mistaking the means for the end, the Puritan has fancied himself holy because he is stoically austere. But stoical austerity is merely the exaltation of the more creditable side of the ego at the expense of the less creditable.

Holiness, on the contrary, is the total denial of the separative self, in its creditable no less than its discreditable aspects, and the abandonment of the will to God. To the extent that there is attachment to 'I,' 'me,' 'mine' - there is no attachment to, and therefore no unitive knowledge of, the divine Ground.

Mortification has to be carried to the pitch of non-attachment or (in the phrase of St. Francis de Sales) 'holy indifference'; otherwise it merely transfers self-will from one channel to another, not merely without decrease in the total volume of that self-will, but sometimes with an actual increase.

As usual, the corruption of the best is the worst. The difference between the mortified but still proud and self-centered stoic and the unmortified hedonist consists in this : the latter, being flabby, shiftless and at heart rather ashamed of himself, lacks the energy and the motive to do much harm except to his own body, mind and spirit; the former, because he has all the secondary virtues and looks down on those who are not like himself, is morally equipped to wish and to be able to do harm on the very largest scale and with a perfectly untroubled conscience.
These are obvious facts; and yet, in the current religious jargon of our day the word ‘immoral’ is reserved almost exclusively for the carnally self-indulgent. The covetous and the ambitious, the respectabe toughs and those who cloak their lust for power and place under the right sort of idealistic cant, are not merely unblamed, they are even held up as models of virtue and godliness.

The representatives of the organized churches begin by putting haloes on the heads of the people who do most to make wars and revolutions, then go on, rather plaintively, to wonder why the world should be in such a mess.

Mortification is not, as many people seem to imagine, a matter, primarily, of severe physical austerities. It is possible that, for certain persons in certain circumstances, the practice of severe physical austerities may prove helpful in advance towards man’s final end.

In most cases, however, it would seem that what is gained by such austerities is not liberation, but something quite different - the achievement of ‘psychic’ powers. The ability to get petitionary prayer answered, the power to heal and work other miracles, the knack of looking into the future or into other people’s minds these, it would seem, are often related in some kind of causal connection with fasting, watching and the self-infliction of pain.

Most of the great theocentric saints and spiritual teachers have admitted the existence of supernormal powers, only, however, to deplore them. To think that such Siddhis, as the Indians call them, have anything to do with liberation is, they say, a dangerous illusion.

These things are either irrelevant to the main issue of life, or, if too much prized and attended to, an obstacle in the way of spiritual advance. Nor are these the only objections to physical austerities. Carried to extremes, they may be dangerous to health and without health the steady persistence of effort required by the spiritual life is very difficult of achievement.

And being difficult, painful and generally conspicuous, physical austerities are a standing temptation to vanity and the competitive spirit of record breaking. ‘When thou didst give thyself up to physical mortification, thou wast great, thou wast admired.’ So writes Suso of his own experiences which led him, just as Gautama Buddha had been led many centuries before, to give up his course of bodily penance.

And St. Teresa remarks how much easier it is to impose great penances upon oneself than to suffer in patience, charity and humbleness the ordinary everyday crosses of family life (which did not prevent her, incidentally, from practicing, to the very day of her death, the most excruciating forms of self-torture. Whether these austerities really helped her to come to the unitive knowledge of God, or whether they were prized and persisted in because of the psychic powers they helped to develop, there is no means of determining.)

Anybody who wishes to do so can get all, and indeed more than all, the mortification he wants out of the incidents of ordinary, day-to-day living, without ever resorting to harsh bodily penance.
Here are the rules laid down by the author of Holy Wisdom for Dame Gertrude More:

First, that she should do all in her power to abide by any law, human or Divine.

Secondly, that she was to refrain from doing those things that were forbidden her by human or Divine Law, or by Divine inspiration.

Thirdly, that she should bear with as much patience or resignation as possible all crosses and contradictions to her natural will, which were inflicted by the hand of God. Such, for instance, were aridities, temptations, afflictions or bodily pain, sickness and infirmity; or again, the loss of friends or want of necessaries and comforts. All this was to be endured patiently, whether the crosses came direct from God or by means of His creatures.

These indeed were mortifications enough for Dame Gertrude, or for any other soul, and there was no need for anyone to advise or impose others.

To sum up, that mortification is the best which results in the elimination of self-will, self-interest, self-centered thinking, wishing and imagining.

Extreme physical austerities are not likely to achieve this kind of mortification. But the acceptance of what happens to us (apart, of course, from our own sins) in the course of daily living is likely to produce this result.

If specific exercises in self-denial are undertaken, they should be inconspicuous, non-competitive and uninjurious to health. Thus, in the matter of diet, most people will find it sufficiently mortifying to refrain from eating all the things which the experts in nutrition condemn as unwholesome.

And where social relations are concerned, self-denial should take the form, not of showy acts of would-be humility, but of control of the tongue and the moods in refraining from saying anything uncharitable or merely frivolous (which means, in practice, refraining from about fifty per cent, of ordinary conversation), and in behaving calmly and with quiet cheerfulness when external circumstances or the state of our bodies predisposes us to anxiety, gloom or an excessive elation.

God, if I worship Thee in fear of hell, burn me in hell. And if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty.

(Rabia)

Rabia, the Sufi woman-saint, speaks, thinks and feels in terms of devotional theism; the Buddhist theologian, in terms of impersonal moral Law; the Chinese philosopher, with characteristic humor, in terms of politics; but all three insist on the need for non-attachment to self-interest – insist on it as strongly as does Christ when he reproaches the Pharisees for their ego-centric piety, as does the Krishna of the Bhagavad-Gita when he tells Arjuna to do his divinely ordained duty without personal craving for, or fear of, the fruits of his actions.
St. Ignatius Loyola was once asked what his feelings would be if the Pope were to suppress the Company of Jesus. ‘A quarter of an hour of prayer’ he answered, ‘and I should think no more about it.’

This is, perhaps, the most difficult of all mortifications to achieve a ‘holy indifference’ to the temporal success or failure of the cause to which one has devoted one’s best energies. If it triumphs, well and good; and if it meets defeat, that also is well and good, if only in ways that, to a limited and time-bound mind, are here and now entirely incomprehensible.

*By a man without passions I mean one who does not permit good or evil to disturb his inward economy, but rather falls in with what happens and does not add to the sum of his mortality.*

*(Chuang Tzu)*

Sufficient not only unto the day, but also unto the place, is the evil thereof. Agitation over happenings which we are powerless to modify, either because they have not yet occurred, or else are occurring at an inaccessible distance from us, achieves nothing beyond the inoculation of here and now with the remote or anticipated evil that is the object of our distress.

Listening four or five times a day to newscasters and commentators, reading the morning papers and all the weeklies and monthlies nowadays, this is described as ‘taking an intelligent interest in politics.’ St. John of the Cross would have called it indulgence in idle curiosity and the cultivation of disquietude for disquietude’s sake.

In the practice of mortification as in most other fields, advance is along a knife-edge. On one side lurks the Scylla of ego-centric austerity, on the other the Charybdis of an uncaring quietism.

The holy indifference inculcated by the exponents of the Perennial Philosophy is neither stoicism nor mere passivity. It is rather an active resignation. Self-will is renounced, not that there may be a total holiday from willing, but that the divine will may use the mortified mind and body as its instrument for good.

Or we may say, with Kabir, that ‘the devout seeker is he who mingleth in his heart the double currents of love and detachment, like the mingling of the streams of Ganges and Jumna.’

Until we put an end to particular attachments, there can be no love of God with the whole heart, mind and strength and no universal charity towards all creatures for God’s sake.

Hence the hard sayings in the Gospels about the need to renounce exclusive family ties. And if the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, if the Tathagata and the Bodhisattvas ‘have their thoughts awakened to the nature of Reality without abiding in anything whatever,’ this is because a truly Godlike love which, like the sun, shines equally upon the just and the unjust, is impossible to a mind imprisoned in private preferences and aversions.
It is by losing the egocentric life that we save the hitherto latent and undiscovered life which, in the spiritual part of our being, we share with the divine Ground. This new-found life is 'more abundant' than the other, and of a different and higher kind.

Its possession is liberation into the eternal, and liberation is beatitude. Necessarily so; for the Brahman, who is one with the Atman, is not only Being and Knowledge, but also Bliss, and, after Love and Peace, the final fruit of the Spirit is Joy.

...$\ldots$...

If there is no element of asceticism in our lives, if we give free rein to the desires of the flesh (taking care of course to keep within the limits of what seems permissible to the world), we shall find it hard to train for the service of Christ. When the flesh is satisfied it is hard to pray with cheerfulness or to devote oneself to a life of service which calls for much self-renunciation.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer - *The Cost of Discipleship*)

A wealthy merchant addressed a visiting Guru,

“Maharaja, you are a great renunciate. How did you free yourself from the bondage of worldly attachments?”

The Guru replied,

“It is not I that am a great renunciate but you! For I have merely given up this perishable world in exchange for the imperishable God, while you, my friend, have given up God for the world.”

...$\ldots$...
An intending disciple said to Dhu-L-Nun, the Egyptian mystic:  
“Above everything in this world I wish to enroll in the Path of Truth.”

Dhu-L-Nun told him: “You can accompany our caravan only if you first accept two things. One is that you will have to do things which you do not want to do. The other is that you will not be permitted to do things which you desire to do. It is ‘wanting’ which stands between man and the Path of Truth.”

Those who seek the easy way do not seek the True Way.  
(Dogen)

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