

Response Article 3: The Perspective of a Hindu Swami**Celibacy: A Hindu Perspective**

By Swami Tyagananda

Hindu monks take the vow of poverty and celibacy. The Sanskrit word for celibacy is *brahmacharya*, “dwelling in Brahman.” What do I mean by Brahman? What does “dwelling in” mean and how is it to be practiced? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the Hindu worldview.

In Hinduism, the ultimate reality is called *Brahman*. Brahman is neither the name of a person, nor a state to be attained, nor a place to be reached. Literally the word simply means “that which is vast.” It is used to denote pure consciousness. Why “pure” consciousness? By that is meant not the consciousness “of” something but “consciousness-itself.” Understood thus, Brahman—or “consciousness-itself”—is undivided, all pervading, birthless, and deathless.

The characteristics of Brahman are best described by the phrase “Being, Consciousness, Bliss Absolute” (*sat-cit-ananda*, in Sanskrit). Brahman is not merely consciousness-itself but also existence-itself and bliss-itself. To be “dwelling in Brahman” is the same as being one with existence, consciousness, and bliss. Oneness with existence removes the threat of being reduced to nonbeing or “nothingness” (which is what death looks like), oneness with consciousness removes the threat of being reduced to dust (the eventual fate of the body), and oneness with bliss removes the threat of sorrow and suffering in this life and the afterlife. Being-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute is not just the “ultimate” reality; it is also the “present” reality of you and me.

Our current experience is, of course, vastly different. We see ourselves as just ordinary human beings—weak, imperfect, and vulnerable to forces outside of ourselves. According to Hindu teachers, this happens because something is obstructing us from getting in touch with our true reality. My true reality is my real Self, it is the “real me,” which is different from the ego. Hindus see the ego as a function of the mind. According to them, the mind is still outside—or is a kind of covering over—the “real me,” which is sometimes called the true Self (to distinguish it from the ego) or the divine Self (to distinguish it from our frail human identity)—usually the “S” is capitalized in writing.

The Self—with a capital S—is the only spiritual part of the human personality. By spiritual I mean non-material. Both the body and the mind are the material parts. That the body is made up of material particles is perhaps easy to understand, but it may sound strange that even the mind is material. Hindus say that the mind is not visible the way the body is because it is made of subtle matter. Our sense organs have limitations and so we cannot see the mind the way we can see the body.

The mind is similar to the body in many ways: both undergo changes for better or worse, both are subject to illness and both have doctors, both get tired and need rest, and both can produce joy and sorrow. The only obvious difference

between the two is that one can be seen while the other can only be felt. Hindu thinkers attribute this not to a difference in kind but in degree: they say that both the body and the mind are material, one made of gross matter and the other of subtle matter. Both the body and mind cover—or, at least, seem to cover—the spiritual Self, which is why our true identity remains hidden from us.

The goal of life—or the supreme consummation of life—is reached when we have a direct experience of our true nature as divine beings, and when we dwell continually in that blessed experience. Those who attain this state are called enlightened: these are the people who are truly in the state of *brahmacharya*, because they are truly dwelling in Brahman.

The body and the mind limit the full manifestation of our divine nature. It is a big climb-down really: imagine being reduced to a miserable, bound, imperfect and mortal human being from our original status as the blissful, free, perfect and immortal divine being. For Hindus, spiritual life is a conscious and voluntary effort to go back to our original state of joy and freedom, pristine purity and perfection. For this spiritual journey to be successful, every hurdle on the way needs to be overcome and transcended.

Of hurdles and obstacles there will be plenty (as every spiritual seeker can testify), but the root problem is the chronic forgetfulness of our joyful spiritual identity and the amazing attachment to our frail, sorrow-ridden human identity. What makes us human are, of course, the human body and the human mind (which includes the intellect and the ego). My human identity is inseparably connected with perceiving my body and mind as “me.” Every demand of the body and mind is considered “my” demand—and in the process, the spiritual Self within is forgotten; my body/mind complex becomes my de facto “self.”

The practice of *brahmacharya*, “dwelling in Brahman,” involves moving away from the body/mind complex, which is the false self, and affirming the true Self, the “real me.” What makes the “moving away” process difficult is the strong claim that the body and the mind exert over me, the constant demands that they make of me. Hunger and thirst, rest and work, joy and sorrow, ambition and frustration, likes and dislikes—who has been free from the demands and pressures of these? The body and mind make their presence felt through all of these and more. But the intensity of sexual desire is often more powerful and more persistent than that of our other needs, so the meaning of *brahmacharya* often gets narrowed down to sexual abstinence.

Sexuality plays an important part in human life and it often absorbs much of our thinking, feeling and willing. In Hinduism it is customary to view most things at three levels: physical, mental, and verbal. *Brahmacharya*, or celibacy, includes sexual abstinence at all these levels. Celibacy thus is not limited to merely physical abstinence from sexual activity but also includes non-indulgence in sexual fantasy and sexual talk. Body, mind and speech are interconnected and they tend to influence one another. When these three become compartmentalized and disconnected, the result is disharmony, which often leads to mental stress and anxiety, physical illness, and unhealthy interpersonal relations.

The Hindu tradition believes that the ideal of *brahmacharya* is relevant to all, but its “application” to monastic life is different from its application to married life. Marriage is not a license to do away with all restraints. Chastity and

fidelity are the foundation on which a strong and happy marital relationship can be built. In a world full of temptations, if a married person can fulfill these duties, he or she can get the same benefits that a monastic does through a sincere practice of celibacy.

Since *brahmacharya* is about self-restraint, it doesn't really matter to whom one feels sexually attracted or with whom one has a committed long-term relationship. Sex is sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual. For spiritual seekers of every persuasion, the ideal is still *brahmacharya*. This ideal is not about sex per se. It means "dwelling in Brahman," or dwelling in the experience of our identity as Being, Consciousness, Bliss Absolute.

The troubled times in which we live today may lead us to imagine that the *brahmacharya* ideal is unattainable. But there are, in every generation, people who have lived up to this ideal, and that gives hope to the rest of us. Furthermore, the ideal of *brahmacharya*, although relevant for all, is not mandatory for all. Not everyone feels the call to practice *brahmacharya*, and those who do, have options and a graded system of employing it in their own lives. For those who choose monastic life, the rules are most stringent and uncompromising, given the difference in the vocation of those called to monasticism. In marriage, the emphasis is on fidelity—remaining faithful to one's spouse. Indeed, the glory of chastity in married life and the spiritual power it can generate have been described in great detail in Hindu history as well as in mythology.

The benefits of celibacy are many. It cultivates spiritual intuition, a strong memory and a remarkable capacity to grasp the subtle realities of life. The faithful attest that the lack of it results in loss of mental vigor and moral strength. Furthermore, for a sustained practice of contemplation our brain needs to be strong and calm—and this becomes possible through *brahmacharya* because it provides nourishment and vigor to the brain. The validity of these claims is borne out by the actual experience of people who have practiced *brahmacharya*.

It is needless to say that the ideal of celibacy, like any other ideal, has its own challenges and pitfalls. These challenges have to be faced head-on and the pitfalls have to be avoided. This has to be done by both individuals as well as institutions. Among the things important to foster if one intends to keep the ideal of celibacy are strong motivation, spiritual longing, the practice of detachment and self-restraint, and the direction of one's energies in higher creative pursuits. Celibacy is a lofty ideal, and it is a rewarding experience to know how this ideal is defined and practiced in faith traditions other than one's own. Why? We have much to learn from one another. The more we do that, the better our understanding will be of the ideals that we hold dear in our own lives.