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## **The Meaning of *Brahmacharya*\***

“...It doesn’t have to mean literally *no sex whatsoever*...”

“...It’s simply not appropriate for this culture ...”

“Besides, most of those so-called ‘renunciates’ are just horny old men ...”

“...Yeah, social losers ...”

Brahmacharya - translated as "celibacy" by authoritative Sanskrit dictionaries - is a difficult topic to discuss in the Western yoga community. Sensory stimulation, consumption, and gratification are too central to contemporary Western culture generally to leave any of us untouched, and Freudian psychology tells us we are sexually abnormal if we are. In the yoga community, this presents a further dilemma: Almost all of the ancient Vedantic and Yogic texts recommend brahmacharya for the serious yoga practitioner. But Indian gurus often conclude, upon their first arrival in this culture, that this recommendation is almost impossible for their Westernized disciples to follow. Many of those who do experience it as a form of unjustified deprivation that proves ultimately to be unpalatable. And most of those Indian gurus themselves,

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after extended immersion in Western culture, become vulnerable to its enticements and values to the extent of violating or renouncing this prescription in their own behavior.

This situation engenders a pervasive sense of internal conflict when the question of brahmacharya is raised. Pressured by ancient scriptures to practice it and by contemporary Western culture to reject it, yoga practitioners get to feel either guilty within the yoga community for violating the injunctions of the *Yoga Sutras*, or socially punished outside it for violating a Westernized standard of psychological normalcy. Conversations about sadhana inevitably turn to the value of brahmacharya, and usually the judgment is negative, if not downright disparaging. Those who identify themselves as brahmacharins often receive alternating blasts of respect, pity, and animosity within the yoga community; and, outside of it, of incomprehension, hostility, or the insinuation that one must have a social disease.

I have practiced hatha, raja, jnana, and karma yoga since 1965; and brahmacharya since 1985. So I speak from experience of these conflicting hostile reactions. I remember how exhilarated I felt when I first discovered what it meant concretely to practice brahmacharya as a serious spiritual discipline. Indulging as usual my impulse to proselytize about my latest enthusiasm, I attempted to share this discovery with longstanding friends. Most of my male friends stampeded to the exits, while so many of my women friends engaged me in heated arguments - shouting matches, actually - that calling a truce of silence on this topic became the only way to preserve civilized discourse on any other. Within the yoga community, with few exceptions, communications tended to shut down more quickly, before the stampede or shouting stage had been

reached. After these experiences I became more cautious, and revealed my commitment only when I sensed sympathy and interest, similar values and aspirations, or an incipient amorous advance.

The circumstances that engendered this essay - and my decision to publish it - were the quintessential last straw. I was in a reading group on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, among kind, thoughtful, intelligent people whom I had just met. It was my second visit to the group, and I had taken to it, and them, right away. The topic was the ethical practices - called the *yamas* and the *niyamas* - required of a serious student of yoga. *Brahmacharya* is one of those requirements, and the usual barrage of disparaging comments began. My stomach began to sink, and I recognized a dilemma familiar from very a different situation, in which I am in all-white company and mistaken for white; and others, not realizing I am African-American, proceed to make disparaging remarks about African-Americans in my presence.

The difference was that in those situations, disparaging remarks about African-Americans mark my companions as unattractive company with whom I instantly lose any further desire to socialize. So I lose nothing by revealing my identity and thereby alienating them. In this situation, by contrast, disparaging remarks about *brahmacharya* marked my companions merely as in need of more information about it. So I stood to lose a great deal, whether I remained silent and so deceived them; or revealed myself and so alienated them. In the end it felt more important to establish relationships of integrity and trust with them than to avoid their ire or its possible consequences. So after overcoming several failures of nerve, I took the risk and "came out" as a *brahmacharin*. Their friendly and respectful responses were not at all what I had expected from past

experience. They gave me the resolve to raise the general level of discussion of this issue so I that I would never find myself in such a predicament again.

My yoga practice itself, and particularly my meditation practice, has helped me to do this. In yogic meditation (*samyama*), one aim is to be able to regard the attributes and experiences of the individual ego-self from the perspective of a transpersonal witness-consciousness (or *atman* in Vedanta, the philosophical view that, together with yogic practice, are first described in the *Upanishads*). This perspective has many benefits - among them a sense of detached amusement and compassion about one's own flaws and failures, and a keener and more pervasive sense of the tragicomic aspects of the human condition. It is also extremely useful in approaching and utilizing for expressive or didactic purposes certain subject-matter that others might regard as overly personal or private - specifically that which concerns race or gender identity. One result of my meditation practice is that those attributes do not seem all that personal or private to me. To me they are relatively superficial and generalized aspects of my external self-presentation that do not define at a deep level the person I am. Since I do not, for the most part, feel deeply attached to or invested in those particulars of my own condition, I do not feel I reveal anything particularly novel or illuminating by interrogating them as objects of public scrutiny (novelty and illumination both being, of course, relative to one's preconceptions. In fact, in order to forestall a particularly likely subset of them, let me state up front that the policy governing self-stimulation for brahmacharins is: Hands Above the Sheets!).

The head-on conflict of cultural values - between the East and the West, the yoga community and the Westernized secular community, brahmacharins

and non-brahmacharins - creates fertile breeding ground for rationalization among those of us who, as deeply indoctrinated products of Western values, nevertheless respect Eastern values, and so try sincerely in our own lives to reconcile the conflict between them. The form these rationalizations usually take is to question what the term *brahmacharya* really means: To be sure, its authoritative Sanskrit translation as "celibacy" is generally acknowledged. But sometimes the terms "celibacy" and "continence" are used interchangeably. Since "continence" can also mean "strength," or "self-control," can't *brahmacharya* also mean merely "sexual self-control"? If it can, then can't one practice *brahmacharya* while being sexually active, as long as one is not *too* active, or uncontrollably active? This reasoning leads many to conclude that what *brahmacharya* really means is sex with only one person, i.e. monogamy; or sex only for purposes of procreation; or sex only at certain times of the month; or sex without orgasm; or "personal energy management" more generally, including but not limited to sexual energy; or abstention from sex for a limited period of time in order to enhance sex over the long term. Through such reasoning the original and clear meaning of the term *brahmacharya* is obscured and transformed into its exact opposite.

Another variation on this reasoning focusses on the literal meaning of the term, which is "walking with God." What does walking with God have to do with celibacy? Can't one walk with God by strictly observing all the *other* yamas and niyamas Patanjali enumerates? So that *brahmacharya* ends up having nothing to do with celibacy at all, but rather with attaining a state of godliness through the practice of restraints and observances less inimical to Western values?

The answer to all of these wistful questions is no. *Brahmacharya* means what the dictionaries say it means, and not something easier or more appealing for us to read. It means something that is difficult for us to read because it describes a practice that is directly antithetical to some of our most deeply held Western values and beliefs - about health, happiness, normalcy, the good life. This is why Westernized culture relegates brahmacharya to the monastic context. There it is acceptable because it is seen as creating an alternative and marginalized lifestyle that neither competes with - nor, therefore, threatens - the Westernized secular one.

But neither the ancient Vedantic and Yogic scriptures nor twentieth-century Indian gurus prescribe, explicitly recommend, or often even mention monasticism as a necessary condition for the practice of brahmacharya. Rather, they treat brahmacharya as one discipline among others that also include such practices as truth-telling, nonviolence, and absence of envy and greed - all of which the yogic aspirant is enjoined to make part of her character. So the injunction to practice brahmacharya requires us to make a choice: either to affirm certain of our deeply instilled Western values and simply reject this one yogic prescription as incompatible with the lives we want for ourselves; or else to re-examine and revise those values in order to make room for it. Either alternative is honorable; to avoid the choice through rationalization is to remain deliberately in a state of *avidya* (ignorance).

The second alternative is harder. Ancient texts as well as modern writers who mean to defend the traditional practice of brahmacharya usually cite its objective benefits: health, vigor, youthfulness, the eradication of zits; the transmutation of sexual energy into spiritual energy; an acceleration of the

process by which kundalini energy is drawn up the chakras to the sahasrara chakra and samadhi thereby achieved. All of these benefits are real. But to the interested bystander they are very abstract, and external to the day-to-day, subjective experience of practicing brahmacharya. Nor do they explain what celibacy has to do with "walking with God." In fact the association between them alludes to the deep reasons for practicing yoga in the first place.

The year brahmacharya chose me, I was having a very bad time with the men in my life. My father had died, my marriage was collapsing, and I had just been fired after years of harrassment by my male colleagues. These may seem to be extremely unpromising circumstances for making a commitment to brahmacharya: How can one be sure that such a commitment is not merely sour grapes, misanthropy, or a reaction-formation to rejection? Such concerns often go along with a belief that a commitment to brahmacharya must be an act of will, undertaken in a cool, reflective and emotionally tranquil moment, as the result of extended mental deliberation - that is, that such a commitment is valid only if it is the outcome of an *intellectual* process. But consider the voice of the

*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:*

When a man has realized the Self, the pure, the immortal, the blissful,  
what craving can be left in him that he should take to himself another  
body, full of suffering, to satisfy it?

Or Patanjali's remarks regarding the effects on brahmacharya (one of the yamas) of steadfastly practicing purity (one of the niyamas):

Through purity, one gains detachment from the body and aversion to  
physical intercourse. (*Yoga Sutra* II.40)

Both writers are describing, not an act of intellectual deliberation or assertion of will, but rather an attitude that develops naturally, as the result of prior spiritual practice and development.

One implication is that a commitment to brahmacharya can be the result of spiritual growth rather than a precondition for it. Previous spiritual practices may dispose one to regard brahmacharya as a gift and a blessing rather than a rigor or a duty that one must undertake for the sake of further spiritual development. A further implication is that brahmacharya can involve an attitudinal transformation rather than a conscious decision or vow. Someone who is ready to practice brahmacharya may not need to exercise an act of will or deliberation. Instead he may simply follow the lead of his inclinations, and do what feels most natural and comfortable, given his attitudes at that time. The first writer describes this attitudinal transformation as the result of achieving samadhi; the second, as the result of successfully practicing the niyamas.

But is a successful spiritual practice all that is necessary? -- Not according to the *Bhagavad Gita*:

When one dwells on the pleasures of sense, attraction for them arises in one. From attraction arises desire, the lust of possession, and this leads to passion, to anger. (II.62)

From passion comes mental confusion, absent-mindedness, the forgetting of duty. From this loss comes the ruin of reason, and the ruin of reason leads one to destruction. (II.63)

But the soul that moves in the world of the senses and yet keeps the senses in harmony, free from attraction and aversion, finds rest in quietness. (II.64)

The writer of these verses describes causal connections among empirical events: obsession with sensory pleasure causes attraction to it, which in turn causes lust and the desire to possess, which in turn causes passion, and so on. This is not the voice of armchair a priori reasoning, or even sudden revelation, but rather of experience. It presupposes worldly knowledge, expresses personal familiarity with the vicissitudes of life in the world of the senses; and counsels us on its pitfalls. This is the kind of insight into experience, born of experience, that we recognize as wisdom rather than mere cleverness or intelligence.

But we don't have to - indeed, we should not - take this writer's word for it. We can try it ourselves, and gain knowledge of the workings of the world first hand. *We need that worldly knowledge in order fully to appreciate the wisdom the ancient texts offer us.* Without it, these texts are just words - inspiring ones, to be sure; but without the depth and complexity of meaning that only experience and reflection on experience can give. With it, however, these words acquire multiple meaning and application to many different areas of our lives: our attitudes toward money, work, and consumption; to food, fitness and self-image; to sex, romance, and relationships - to name just a few. These verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* offer us the opportunity to take a different perspective on our worldly disappointments - our recent bankruptcy or thwarted career ambitions; our weight "problems" or addiction to alcohol, tobacco, or M&Ms; our recent divorce, string of failed relationships, or "intimacy problems" - again, to name just a few. These verses offer the possibility of thinking of these disappointments as revelatory of certain internal causal mechanics of the world of sensory gratification.

However, our attachment to this world, and to the Western standards of power, achievement, acquisition, health, beauty, or personal charisma that govern and reinforce it, usually leads us to the opposite conclusion: Such disappointments are viewed as revelatory, not of the workings of the world, but rather of our personal failure to live up to its requirements. We may conclude that we have an addiction to shopping, or lack self-control over food, or are too deficient in social skills to maintain a satisfying sexual relationship. We then - if we have a healthy sense of self-esteem - find the relevant repair shop, pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and resume the pursuit of sensory gratification with renewed optimism that next time we will get it (whatever "it" is) right.

By contrast, the ethics of the Vedic *Brahmanas* regards this pursuit differently. It stipulates four different ends or ideals of life (*purusharthas*). Each of these is appropriate to a different period in a person's life, and its pursuit guides the lifestyle and practices appropriate to that period. Wealth (*artha*) is the goal of the first twenty-five years of one's life, *brahmacharya ashrama*. This period is devoted to learning and training, in order to make one's way in the world and to achieve economic wellbeing. During this period celibacy is a means to maintaining one's focus on study. Desire-satisfaction (*kama*) is the goal of the second twenty-five years of one's life, *grihastha ashrama*. During this period, one seeks and finds a mate, begets a family, and becomes a householder, utilizing one's economic wealth for the wellbeing of oneself and one's relations. Around the age of fifty, in the period of *vanaprastha ashrama*, one begins to question one's lifestyle and achievements and to search for deeper meaning in one's life. Ethical values, character, and guidance (*dharma*) become more important than worldly success or desire-satisfaction, and one develops an interest in meditation and

study of the scriptures. One begins to retire from the world of profit and gratification, and gradually to shed its trappings. Around the age of seventy-five, the *sanyasa ashrama* stage, one has fully experienced worldly success and the vicissitudes of the world of sensory gratification, and has reflected on and revised one's order of priorities toward the ethical and spiritual. One is then ready to devote the remainder of one's life to the search for union with ultimate reality (*moksha*), by renouncing the world of sensory gratification altogether.

Certainly these four stages of life will be less clear-cut, structured, and ritualized in the less structured and ritualized society of the West. The time periods may not divide one's life so evenly into four equal segments, so that one may spend less time, or more, in study or professional training; or less time, or more, as a grihastha or vanaprastha; or be called to the pursuit of moksha - and possibly a monastic life - at an earlier age. If one is pursuing an alternative lifestyle, or living in a vowed or intentional community, or is gay or lesbian, the formation of a household and of familial relationships may not follow the traditional Vedic model. Nor may the segmented model of education followed by worldly work conform closely to one's professional arrangements.

The importance of the concept of the four purusharthas is that it makes a valued place for the world of the senses, for the pursuit of power, success, and gratification. It acknowledges and legitimizes the natural human urges we all have to engage with this world, to seek our paths in it, and to cull from it the experience, worldly knowledge, and finally the wisdom it has to offer. It acknowledges the importance and value of full engagement with the world, *and* it adds that to get stuck at this particular stage of human growth is a case of arrested development. It tells us that at a certain point, we are *supposed* to give

up our ascetic devotion to our studies and plunge into the world of desire and ambition; that at a later point, we are *supposed* to become disenchanted with that world and seek beyond it for something more meaningful; and that we are then *supposed* to find and embrace what we are ultimately looking for with such love and fervour that there is then nothing to do but get rid of all the impediments to devoting oneself wholeheartedly to the journey that leads beyond death.

This alternative ethical tradition creates potent possibilities for revising one's judgments about circumstances and relationships that would count as failed or abnormal according to Western standards. Take, for example, a long-standing intimate relationship in which sex no longer occurs; or no longer satisfies; or a series of relationships seemingly thwarted by sexual needs; or the desire for a relationship in which the expectation of sex appears to be an insurmountable barrier; or the longing for a genuine meeting of minds beyond the complications of sexual involvement; or for solitude. Maybe these interpersonal conditions have nothing to do with anyone's failings or inadequacies or pathologies. Maybe they are signals that it is time to explore other options within oneself or the relationship. That is, maybe these interpersonal conditions are opportunities to be investigated, rather than catastrophes to be ameliorated as quickly as possible.

Indeed, this Vedic ethical tradition offers the possibility of turning our entire system of relationship priorities inside out. Maybe the real point of a relationship between two people is spiritual rather than sexual union. Maybe we should seek spiritual rather than sexual compatibility in a partner, and regard sex as an afterthought, on a par with hobbies such as stamp-collecting. Maybe sexual attraction is merely a decoy, a distraction that depends on rather than

transcends boundaries between individuals. Maybe sexual passion is a transient phase - we might call it the Rabbit Phase - that two people really must just endure and suffer through. Maybe the right response to sexual attraction is to just grit one's teeth and ride it out (so to speak), so that one can then move beyond it to the really important part of the relationship: the union of mind and spirit that no physical or temporal boundaries can contain. To move through and beyond the world of the senses is to put that world to the use for which it is meant: to deepen our insight into the nature of ultimate reality, and prepare ourselves for final union with it. This is part of the insight which the preceding verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* attempt to communicate to us. The only question is whether we are at the stage of being able fully to receive it.

When I first read the above verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* in the mid-1960s, I was not ready to receive their insights - at least not consciously. I was too young and frisky. I felt a strong need to go mix it up in the world of maya, and so that is what I did for a couple of decades. It was a good party. During my Bad Year With Men I did not draw any of the inferences described earlier, and I did not feel ready at all to move on to another stage. Instead I took my newfound circumstances as a jobless and fatherless divorcee as a comment on my flawed personal and professional skills, rather than on the course of the world; and was desperate to get it right the next time. My relationship antennae were up and circling in all directions, searching far and wide for a new partner to give me the love, support and protection I felt I needed.

Oddly enough, every time a likely suitor appeared on the horizon, I skittered away. After this had happened a number of times (I am a very slow learner in these matters), it finally dawned on me that my actions and bodily

reactions were trying to tell me something that I needed to heed: to back off for awhile, and relax. So I did that. I withdrew my antennae, indeed withdrew from my sexuality altogether, and watched, and wrote, and read, and analyzed, and processed all that I had been through. I became invisible to the opposite sex, and watched the sexualized messages, fashions, advertising, entertainment, peer pressure, habits, relationships, and interactions all around me, filtering everything through the lens of my experiences, my reading, and my daily journal writing.

During this time I had been functionally celibate for three years - the first time since the age of eleven that I had been without a male partner in my life for more than a few months. My sadhana, practiced daily on my own since 1972, had deepened. It consisted of a homegrown, hour-long vinyasa coordinated by Ujjayi and Kapalabhati, followed by about an hour of advanced pranayama and an hour of meditation. I have also been a vegetarian since 1967, nicotine-free since 1968, caffeine-free since 1974, and alcohol- and weed-free since 1988. Since 1968 I have tried to conduct a 24-hour water fast one day a week, although I don't always succeed. I confess to mild addictions to *People* magazine and *Star Trek*. I mention all of these habits because I believe they have some bearing on what occurred one day during meditation, within a week of embarking on a *conscious* tentative commitment to brahmacharya.

What occurred was a very gentle and gradual opening and deepening. My sensory experience became sharper, more vivid, intricate, and singular; my peripheral vision broader and more encompassing. My visual field and everything in it grew vast, timeless, and very, very clear. Everything and everyone had a familiarity and intimacy, and at the same time great mystery,

dignity, and breathtaking majesty. The world radiated a magisterial stillness behind the noise and sounds of daily urban life. Those sounds themselves had a sweetness and magic beneath their mundane meanings. All of it filled my mind and my senses so completely that I as an experiencing subject disappeared from the picture. My bodily habits regarding nourishment, sleep, etc. receded into the background, until they became needs that sharply signalled their presence and demanded attention. Satisfying them had the same texture as the rest of this experience, only not as interesting.

At the same time that my cognition and perception of my surroundings was expanding, my inner space - my mental interior, which I experience as the area approximately from the inside of the head to the throat to the abdomen - opened onto the boundless universe of deep space. Kinaesthetically, there was no "place" where "I" was "sitting" "upright," because all those spatial indices of location and orientation ceased to exist. My movement through my environment was nevertheless light, effortless, and sure. What did exist was the vast expanse of the universe, and its ancient echo-hum - too deep and low and penetrating to be a sound (although it can be replicated it at the level of sound by chanting OM), too pervasive to divide objects and things from one another, but pervasive enough to imbue all of my perceptions - of my visual field, the objects and people in it, my body and its environment - with its vibration. The clarity, intricacy and vibrational depth of each person and thing made each an object of fascination, astonishment, and unique and inestimable value. Everything revealed its timeless and limitless splendor simultaneously. As a whole, the experience was comparable to psychedelically induced ones I'd had in the

'sixties; less profoundly transformative, but also gentler and less invasive. It lasted for about a week, until I shut myself down.

I shut myself down because local circumstances and a generally inhospitable lifestyle demanded more armor and less vulnerability than this experience induced in me. In my ordinary life I have to be a warrior on many fronts: racial, social, gender, academic (I was the only tenured black woman in philosophy - a field that numbers about 15,000 - until 1994), artistic (I make difficult, confrontational art about racism that gets me into trouble with most people). Because yogic scriptures tend to come from the Brahminic caste, the prescriptions and recommendations ordinarily found in texts on karma yoga tend to presuppose a basically benevolent environment, in which the main issue is how one can maintain serenity in the face of adversity and virtue in the face of temptation. Often they counsel the cultivation of detachment, love and compassion - for oneself as well as others. I call it the Sweetness-And-Light approach. These presuppositions and recommendations are largely compatible with those of the white, upper-middle-class audience yoga tends to find in the West. They tend not to address squarely the problem of evil, i.e. how one should respond to acts of malice, cruelty, sadism, brutality, or annihilation directed against oneself by individuals for whom one's very existence is an insult to be eradicated as quickly and effectively as possible.

I have found the traditional counsel useful only to a certain extent. More useful, in my experience, are particular yamas and niyamas to which I find I am particularly attracted, in my artistic and philosophical work as well as in my life. My commitment to jnana yoga makes *satya* - translated as truth and more generally as the avoidance of falsehood - very personally important to me; as it

does *svadhyaya* (self-study). *Satya* means seeking and speaking the truth, and also refusing to collude in falsehood. It means refusing to support both one's own self-deceptions - here it becomes *svadhyaya* - and the self-deceptions and social delusions of others, even when they are deeply instilled by cultural and environmental forces. I regard *satya* as a freely available weapon for fighting ignorance, dishonesty, and disingenuity - and the dangerous actions guided by them - by speaking or otherwise expressing the truth, even though this may be troubling or painful to the speaker as well as to the listener. (Thus *satya*, in my opinion, overrides *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in some circumstances.) The only way I have ever found to survive lethal assaults on my person or spirit is to make use of this weapon to the best of my ability; to get my dukes up, protect my back, and come out swinging. That is what I did.

Since then I have kept up the personal practices I described earlier. My asana practice has been influenced by my re-entry, in 1992, to the world of hatha yoga classes - which had undergone a profound transformation during the twenty years I was away from them. Because my original meditation experience was so opening and enveloping, so inspiring of awe and reverence, bhakti yogic practices - kirtan, japam, ishta-deva pranam - have assumed a larger role in my sadhana. These, in turn, have deepened my meditation practice even more, and increased my access to that experience. The easier it gets to blast off, the more I have restricted for now my pranayama practice, in anticipation of the time when I will be free to blast off as far and fast as I like.

Some things have remained the same. If I duplicate all of the yogic practices I was doing then, I can replicate the experience I had then. I have done that several times, and more recently by simply calling it forth, without

duplicating the practices. Once it occurred while I was chanting the Bija Mantra at a yoga retreat. I am constantly reminded of the nearness of that world by the sharpness and vividness of detail I still perceive in inanimate objects, and the singular and unique personalities I still find in all sentient things (yes, I talk to plants. I even talk to cockroaches before I, um, liberate them). I live with the awareness that the world received in that way is there, very close at hand, waiting for me, whenever I am ready. I am in the process of getting ready, and am very protective of my access to it. I remember what it was like to have effectively forgotten what reality is really like, to have lost the immanent presence of that world in a fog of personal and social preoccupations, desires, and ambitions; to have operated on the practical assumption that those mundane and worldly concerns were all there were, and to have effectively lost all clue what lay beyond the surface appearances of things. I remember what it was like to give lip service to the existence and importance of that deeper reality without concretely experiencing it. I don't want to get lost in the world of maya ever again.

As the result of my meditation experience, my perceptual appreciation of physical beauty, fineness of sensibility and depth of spirit in others has been greatly enhanced; and the search for kindred spirits, who know what I know and have been where I have been, has become much more urgent. I have also gained tremendous respect for the power of sexuality as a natural biological force that can create or annihilate anything - conventions, restraints, inhibitions, individuals, relationships, families, reputations, livelihoods, lives - that stands in its way. I feel nothing but gratitude and relief that it seems to have gotten out of mine. I do not believe in free will more generally, and I have never thought that

individuals have *very* much control over the effect of biological forces on their sexual behavior. When I look back on my own it seems to me a miracle that I am still alive to allude to it.

Moreover, the hatha sadhana I now practice - an Ashtanga-style vinyasa grounded in the formal techniques and structural approach of Iyengar yoga - presents a particular challenge to my commitment to brahmacharya. Ashtanga Yoga is an intensely, unapologetically spiritual practice. From the first moments in a led class, the beginner is confronted by having to stand with her hands in prayer position, and chant OM and a lengthy Sanskrit invocation. Thereafter the coordination of asana, Ujjayi breathing, control of internal muscles (the *bandhas*) and meditative focus of the gaze (the *drishtis*) is emphasized. This practice calls on all aspects of awareness simultaneously, and arouses an intensely meditative and devotional state. Unlike Iyengar, Bikram, or Power Yoga (to name just a few alternative styles), it is not possible to practice this type of hatha yoga without coming into immediate contact with its sacred dimension.

On the other hand, Ashtanga has another dimension that can easily become profane under certain circumstances. Because Ashtanga yoga coordinates the simultaneous development of strength and flexibility, there comes a point in the development of strength when developing further flexibility requires the teacher to give the student assists that are not only hands-on, but in many cases body-on. In *baddha konasana*, for example, the teacher might kneel behind the student, his knees on her upper thighs and hands on her knees, and gradually lower the full weight of his torso and chest onto the entire length of her back, simultaneously opening her groin and lengthening her back as she bends forward while lifting her heart. The physical intimacy of these assists can

express a chaste, caring, and respectful relationship between student and teacher. It can also be a Really Fast Way to Get Babes (female or male). It is not always a simple matter - either for teacher or for student - to distinguish between these two attitudes. A commitment to brahmacharya may arouse conflicts between them - i.e. conflicts between the sacred and the profane - that are not easy either for teacher or for student to resolve. Simply announcing this commitment does not necessarily resolve the conflict, and may even exasperate it.

So I would never rule out the possibility that I might, despite what I have found, revert to Rabbit Phase nevertheless. But since then I have been seriously tempted only once. The situation was prohibitive enough, and the potential costs high enough, to be adequately discouraging; he then cooperated by behaving badly (although not badly enough to make it easy). Moreover, the quality of the friendships I have formed, selectively, with the opposite sex would be very hard to relinquish. For it turns out that those of my former male friends who beat a hasty retreat when I revealed my commitment to brahmacharya were the ones who needed to think of me as sexually available to them, even if only in theory, as a condition of interacting with me at all (the majority, to be sure). But others (a very small minority, to be sure) who were secure enough in their gender identities to explore more advanced dimensions of relationship with women reacted by relaxing their defenses, knowing that I would not make sexual demands on them. Their acceptance of me despite my commitment enabled me to relax mine, secure in the knowledge that they would make none on me. With lowered defenses on both sides has come increased vulnerability, increased trust, increased intimacy, increased freedom of self-expression. The result has been that my friendships with men, though *many* fewer in number, tend to be deeper

and more respectful than before. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these improvements depend on observing the constraints brahmacharya demands.

An increasingly popular, Westernized version of Hinduism's Tantric tradition claims one can have it both ways: both sex and samadhi together, as it were. I am not convinced. Tantra developed around 500 CE out of the ancient polytheistic culture of the Indian subcontinent. This culture pre-dates the Aryan settlement of the Indus Valley around 3000 BCE. The Aryan-composed *Vedas*, the most ancient religious and philosophical scriptures in the world, include the *Upanishads*, cornerstone of Advaita Vedanta - an orthodox, nondualistic philosophy contingently associated with the Brahmin priests of Hinduism. What has been humorously referred to as "California Tantra" is fundamentally in conflict with Advaita Vedanta.

Tantra developed in many directions. Some emphasize worship of the divine mother, or complex meditational visualization, rather than sexual rites or practices. Tantra is also often described as the "left-handed path" contingently associated with the lower castes, women, and outcasts. In some Tantric cults, the habits and actions conceived by the priests as obstacles to liberation - carnivorousism, sex, intoxication, blood sacrifice, transgression of established social norms and rituals - are utilized instead as means to it. The basic idea is that liberation from the constraints of the individual ego-self can be achieved by imitating the amorality of the gods and performing certain rites and rituals that identify one with them. The practice that has engendered most interest in the West emphasizes the achievement of ecstatic self-transcendence through sexual acts and rites in which the participants imitate and identify with, for example,

Shiva and Shakti, the god and goddess of destruction and creative power respectively.

In Advaita Vedanta, Shiva, Shakti and other traditional Hindu deities are assimilated and reconceived as divine personifications of a non-dual, unified first cause known as *Brahman* that precedes and generates the world of multiplicity and natural forces. This first cause is an all pervasive *state* of conscious intelligence, rather than a discriminable entity. In traditional Tantra, by contrast, Shiva and Shakti are two of many such deities, each of which has its role, function, and personality in social and religious life, and each of which demands its own form of supplication. And in Kashmir Shaivism, the most sophisticated expression of Hindu Tantra, even that first cause itself, the god Shiva with whom we are to identify, is particularized as a deity - and therefore as a discriminable *entity* - by the attributes of will, freedom, intention, omnipotence - much as in Judeo-Christian monotheism.

My biggest (but not my only) complaint about California Tantra is the inadequacy of its conception of self-transcendence, which decouples the experience of liberation from the experience of illumination. Illumination is a *cognitive* experience of insight into the ultimate nature of reality that finds no place in California Tantra. To see this, compare California Tantra, Western philosophy, and Advaita Vedanta. One of the most interesting differences between Western philosophy and science on the one hand and Advaita Vedanta on the other is in their respective epistemologies. Western philosophy and science conceive our access to ultimate reality as propositional, i.e. as encoded in universal, explanatory first principles that denote a level of reality that is experientially inaccessible to us. So when and if we succeed in formulating such

principles correctly, we will have only an intellectual understanding of that reality. We arrive at the formulation of these final principles through techniques of empirical observation and experimentation, inductive and deductive reasoning, and theory-construction.

In Advaita Vedanta, by contrast, epistemic access to ultimate reality is through direct experience, unmediated by extrinsic processes, techniques, or conceptualization. Instead this direct access is achieved with the aid of the mental and physical disciplines of yoga, which modify and strengthen the mind, body, and central nervous system so as to comprehend and process this experience safely. Thus insight is the fruit of revelation rather than of reasoning. Because it involves an unmediated relationship between the knowing subject and the object known, the subjective distinction between them is effectively erased. So the experience of direct access to ultimate reality is an experience of union with it; and transcending the constraints of the individual ego-self and fully grasping the universal first principles that govern ultimate reality are one and the same. Because Advaita Vedantic epistemology requires the full involvement of the person as a necessary condition of obtaining ultimate knowledge (or, more properly speaking, wisdom), it is much more demanding of all of one's capacities than Western epistemology, which exercises only the intellect. On the Advaita Vedantic view, self-transcendence - liberation - consists in a certain kind of insight; namely, in an unmediated experience of and union with ultimate reality.

California Tantra, on the other hand, promises self-transcendence through - well, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. And hamburgers, and also Coke. And maybe M&Ms. It delivers on this promise in so far as certain sexual practices, intoxicants, and rituals of rhythmic dance and movement facilitate the

experience of temporarily freeing oneself from one's limiting attitudes, inhibitions, and customary behavior. This degree and quality of liberation is real, and nothing to sneeze at. What it does not do, even under the most serious and well-intentioned of circumstances, even when all ritual prescriptions are carefully observed, is lead one beyond *identification with* the god or goddess of one's choice to a deeper *cognitive* experience of *insight into* the first principles that structure the universe in which that god or goddess has a place. Because California Tantra derives its motivation and cosmology from a basically polytheistic worldview, its conception of self-transcendence stops short of finally transcending the world of multiplicity in an act of cognitive union. Advaita Vedanta can be understood as the median between the extremes of Western epistemology, which engages only the intellect, and California Tantra, which engages the mind and senses but has no proper epistemology at all. Compared to the experience of direct and unmediated union with ultimate reality on which Advaita Vedanta is premised, the California Tantric experience of mere sexual union between cosmic divinities does not convince me that one can have both sex and samadhi together.

Central to my meditation experience was the way my bodily needs and desires receded proportionally into the background and then disappeared, as I let the world as it really is into my self more and more completely. It felt natural and easy then, and it does now, too. Very often so-called "ascetic" practices are conceived in the spirit of renunciation and self-deprivation - of food, sex, alcohol, drugs, tobacco, partying, M&Ms; as though the point of the practice is self-flagellation or the assertion of will; and as though by breaking our attachment to these things we end up with less rather than more. I think this is a mistake; and

that if one feels deprived by their lack one should have as much food, sex, M&Ms, etc. as one needs in order to feel deprived instead by their surfeit. Variants on a general rule of thumb might be: Party until you've gotten your yayas out; or until you've had enough partying for three lifetimes; or until you've learned the lessons from it you need to learn.

The point of "ascetic" practices is not what one gives up but rather what one gets. Giving up M&Ms etc. is a negligible price to pay. The point is to *get one's self, one's needs, one's desires, and one's preoccupations out of the way*, so that the universe can drop more deeply into one's consciousness for a visit: so that other people - *all* other people, not just the current object of one's affection - can be seen and sensed and received more clearly, and their singular mystery and depth comprehended and felt and valued more directly; so that objects and environments and events can make their unique and imperturbable presences felt more intensely, all along one's surfaces and beyond them; so that all of it can inhabit one vividly, simultaneously and timelessly.

Recently I was trying to make this point to a Tantric Buddhist friend of mine. Itching for a fight, he commented, "So, basically, Adrian, what you're saying is that you give up the good life so you can get fucked by the universe?"

Ahem. Well, not quite. One does not give up the good life, but rather maximizes its goodness. As to one's relationship with the universe, to design one's life and one's sadhana so as to make it easy for the universe not only to drop in for a visit, but to take up permanent residence in one's body and mind is what it means to "walk with God."