

CHAPTER 13

PRACTICE OF BRAHMACARYA OR CONTINENCE

(Specific instructions for the celibate)

Necessity of Brahmacharya

Swami Vivekananda laid great emphasis on continence. He used to tell his disciples. '*Brahmacharya* should be like a fire tingling in your veins'. In his '*Rāja-yoga*' he says that through continence sex energy is converted into a higher form of psychic energy called *ojas*.

The *yogīs* say that that part of the human energy which is expressed as sex energy, in sexual thought, when checked and controlled, easily becomes changed into *ojas*, and as the *mūlādhāra* guides these, the *yogī* pays particular attention to that centre. He tries to take up all his sexual energy and convert it into *ojas*. It is only the chaste man or woman who can make the *ojas* rise and store it in the brain, that is why chastity has always been considered the highest virtue. A man feels that if he is unchaste, spirituality goes away, he loses mental vigour and moral stamina. That is why in all the religious orders in the world which have produced spiritual giants you will always find absolute chastity insisted upon. That is why the monks came into existence, giving up marriage. There must be perfect chastity in thought, word and deed, without it the practice of *Rāja-yoga* is dangerous, and may lead to insanity. If people practise *Rāja-yoga* and at the same time lead an impure life, how can they expect to become *yogīs*?¹

In the spiritual teachings of Swami Brahmananda we read:

To secure the full development and vitality of the body, brain and mind, *brahmacharya* is essential. Those who observe strict *brahmacharya* develop a strong memory and a remarkable capacity for understanding. By means of *brahmacharya* a special nerve is developed which brings about these wonderful powers. Do you know

¹ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972) Vol. I
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why our great teachers have laid so much emphasis on *brahmācārya*? It is because they knew if a man fails in this respect everything is lost. The strict *brahmācārīn* does not lose his vitality. He may not look like a *pahlavān* (a great athlete) but the development of his brain is so fine that his capacity for grasping super-sensuous things is remarkable.²

Once Swami Brahmananda told me, 'My boy, give your body and mind to worldly enjoyments, and the world will destroy them both. Devote them to God and His service, and you will enjoy bodily health, peace of mind and spiritual joy.'³

Give all that you have—your health, wealth, youth, talents, everything to the Divine. If you give it to the world, the world will spoil it and leave you empty in the end. The forces of *avidyā* and destruction are everywhere. Forgetting this if we rush thoughtlessly into worldly life, we will have to suffer the consequences.

One of the difficulties about the observance of continence is that we see people getting along and thriving without that. This may be true in worldly life. *Brahmacārya* may not make you an intellectual prodigy or a wrestler, though it definitely improves the mind and the body. But the main purpose of *brahmācārya* is the development of the spiritual faculty—the spiritual 'nerve' called *medhā nādi*—referred to by Swami Brahmananda. When a man practises *brahmācārya* for ten or twelve years he feels the awakening of this 'nerve' or faculty in him. It is the power of intuition latent in all men. Sri Ramakrishna⁴ and Swami Vivekananda have spoken about this. It is not a mere theory.

Moreover, *brahmācārya* is essential for the nourishment and vigour of the brain. People who do not observe *brahmācārya* find their brain getting heated up quickly when they try to meditate. Sustained contemplation is impossible unless the brain is strong and cool. Without continence the brain will not be able to withstand the tremendous strain of long hours of meditation.

Really speaking, *brahmācārya* is absolutely necessary in higher spiritual life, although people are not told about this very plainly to avoid discouraging them at the very beginning of their spiritual life. The real truth is that there can never be any real meditation, any higher realization, without unbroken *brahmācārya* in thought, word and deed. Without perfect continence and purity, higher spiritual life does not

² Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion*, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1978) p. 238.

³ *ibid.*, 1971 edn., p. 84.

⁴ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 362-63.

become natural. But we usually talk about it in a milder and less direct way so as not to upset people.

The first task in spiritual life is to open the higher centres of consciousness. Meditation has to be practised in one of the higher centres, and for this it has to be opened first. How can this be done if the lower centres are intensely active? The sum total of psychic energy left free for higher activity is not much. If all this is diverted to lower centres, the higher centres will not develop.

If the working of the lower centres is not stopped, the spiritual aspirant will never be able to keep himself on a higher plane, whatever people may say or think. Really speaking, there can be no spiritual life if these lower centres are allowed to function. Stop their work. Unless you do this, the higher centres can never work properly. When the water-taps in the ground floor of a building are all open, you find little or no water available on the upper floors.

Some people may have got some glimpses of mystic vision even without observing the strictest *brahmacarya*, but they can never succeed in remaining on the higher plane and no higher form of realization can ever be attained by them. *Brahmacarya* is to be observed under all circumstances if the aspirant wants to attain to any higher life and to any higher form of realization. There is no other way out. This is the plain truth about spiritual life.

Wrong notions about continence in the West

The trouble in the West is that there the spiritual ideal has been lowered very much and dragged down to the plane of mere morals. Nobody bothers about direct superconscious realization. People are so beggarly that they are satisfied with very little. Just a little good mood is enough for them. And then they go and make much of it. Moral life is not spiritual life, although a really spiritual person will always act morally as it has become habitual and natural to him. Conventional morality alone is not enough for higher spiritual experience. A thorough overhauling of personality is needed. This is the gist of Christ's 'Sermon on the Mount'. 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'⁵ The religion that Christ taught was essentially a religion for the monk. Something of the self-denial and discipline of the monastic way of life is essential for every spiritual aspirant, even if he is a householder, if he wants to gain some genuine spiritual experience. Protestantism, by discarding celibacy and monasticism, has done a great harm to the spiritual tradition in the West.

Modern psychologists have done a great service to humanity by their researches into the nature of the unconscious, dreams, motivation,

⁵ Bible, St. Matthew, 5:48

complexes, repression, etc. But very many of them have in effect done an equal amount of harm by propagating the theory of free expression. Though many eminent psychoanalysts have protested against this abuse of a noble science, the idea that suppression of sex is harmful has rapidly gained popularity in the West. The Yoga psychology, on the contrary, believes that conscious suppression of sex with a spiritual aim is not only not harmful but also absolutely essential. Repression may be dangerous, but not Yogic suppression followed by sublimation of the sex instinct through love of God and meditation. At first this may lead to tensions and conflicts. But then, is there any higher venture which does not cause some tension or struggle? The true and earnest spiritual aspirant soon overcomes all internal troubles, and through divine Grace reaches a higher plane where he is free from the conflicts of the lower planes.

Nowadays there is an attempt in the West to popularize Vedānta without stressing purity of mind. Many people in the West feel drawn to Advaita because of its loftiness and logical beauty. But intellectual appreciation alone is not enough. Many people think that Advaita does not need the practice of *brahmacharya* and other virtues. This is not true. On the contrary, it demands the strictest control of mind and senses. A *jīvanmukta* or a liberated man may not pay much attention to social conventions but never does he—nor can he—violate the fundamental virtues like chastity. These have become his second nature. In the *Vedāntasāra* we find a passage that says, 'If a man who has known the truth of Oneness acts according to his whims, then where is the difference between a knower of Truth and a dog as regards eating impure stuff?'⁶

Testimony of great saints

In the higher forms of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, great stress has been laid on the observance of perfect *brahmacharya* in thought, word and deed. You find it in the 'Sermon on the Mount', in the *Vinaya Pitaka* of Buddhism, in the Upanisads, in the *Gītā* and in the *Bhāgavatam*. A socially accepted form of moral life alone is not enough for a spiritual aspirant. He must attain perfection in moral virtues, especially chastity. He must totally control his sex instinct.

The great mystics of the world always gave the highest importance to chastity. The words of Brother Giles, who was originally an illiterate peasant but who later on became one of the foremost disciples of St Francis of Assisi, are to be remembered by every sincere spiritual aspirant.

⁶ Sadānanda Yogīndra's *Vedāntasāra*, trans. Swami Nikhīlananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974) p. 121. Quoted from Suresvara's *Naishkarmya Siddhi*, 4.62.

Amongst all other virtues I would set the virtue of chastity first, because sweet chastity contains all perfection in itself, but there is no other virtue which can ever be perfect without chastity

Chastity is, in strict truth, the careful and continual custody of our corporeal and spiritual senses, in order to preserve them pure and immaculate for God alone

Every vice troubles and obscures the fair glory of holy chastity, for it is like a bright mirror which is clouded and darkened, not only by contact with impure and defiling things, but by the mere breath of man. It is impossible for man to attain to any spiritual grace, so long as he is inclined to carnal concupiscence and therefore, whithersoever thou turn thyself, thou shalt never be able to attain to spiritual grace until thou canst master all the vices of the flesh. Therefore, fight valiantly against thy frail and sensual flesh, thine own worst enemy which wages war against thee day and night. And know that he who shall overcome this mortal enemy of ours has most certainly defeated and discomfited all his other enemies, and shall attain to spiritual grace, and every degree of virtue and perfection.⁷

Brahmacarya is, undoubtedly, the first thing required in spiritual life. And people who are not prepared to observe perfect continence in thought, word and deed will never be able to remain on the higher plane, even if they obtain some glimpses of higher truths. They will fall down again and again, and the highest realization and the higher forms of spiritual life can never be attained by them.

Practice of Brahmacarya — physical aids

Now the question is, how to practise strict continence. What are the rules to be observed? First of all, make it a point never to give the enemy a frontal attack. There is an art of fighting the senses which must be learnt. Never be too violent. Sometimes without first creating the right mood, we want to overcome the senses by extreme violence. That is very dangerous and should never be attempted. Sometimes, remaining in a lower mood, we try to control ourselves in a most violent manner without rising to a higher plane. Then, naturally, there come the most violent reactions, physical as well as mental, and our whole progress is retarded or even stopped altogether. So, with an effort of the will we should first raise the mind and create the higher mood, and then with a little force everything is accomplished. We should never court the danger of violent reactions. Regarding this point Brother Giles gives a fine advice

⁷ *Teachings of Brother Giles* (London: Burns, Oats, Washerbourn & Co. 1935)

He who wishes to move a large stone or any other great weight and carry it to any other place must try to move it rather by ingenuity than by force. And so if we desire to overcome the vice of 'impurity and to acquire the virtue of chastity, we must set to work rather by way of humility and by a good discrete method of spiritual discipline, than by a rash and presumptuous use of penitential austerities.

What a wonderful advice! Just think of the lever action, the action of a crowbar, for instance. The simple device enables you to raise heavy weights which you can never move with your bare hands. The fun is, with reference to the things of the world we are so wise and careful, so ingenious and practical, but with reference to spiritual life and practice we are so foolish and careless. But in the case of the great mystics the opposite is true; they were intensely practical on the spiritual side. They were indifferent to worldly prosperity but extremely alert and methodical regarding spiritual matters.

People try to employ various physical means to overcome the sex drive. Some of these have a limited effect but one should not depend on them too much. Swami Brahmananda says:

There are certain rules which a *brahmacārin* must observe. He must avoid exciting food, oversleeping, over-exercise, laziness, bad company and evil conversations.⁸

Some people try violent physical exercise. Though this takes off the surplus energy, it is never the right method. Those who want to practise *brahmacharya* should see that they don't accumulate more energy in their body than they can handle. If they find more vital energy rising in them, they should reduce their food for a few days.

There is a basic creative urge in all of us. If this is not sublimated and directed to higher channels, it tries to find expression in lower centres. Those beginners who find it impossible to think of God always, who cannot transmute all their energy into meditation, prayer and worship of the Lord, should employ themselves in some creative work. Along with this, studies and deep thinking are also helpful. Always keep the higher centres active.

Regulated breathing is a great help in keeping the mind calm. When the mind is restless all sorts of emotions and impulses crop up. Practise rhythmic breathing always. This will give you a sense of control over your entire body and will make your mind alert. But this does not mean *prāṇāyāma* which is dangerous for the majority of aspirants to practise. Instead of that, just practise rhythmic breathing.

One of the most important habits to be cultivated by all is cleanliness.

⁸ *The Eternal Companion*, op. cit., 1978 edn, p. 238.

of body. Keep your body and clothes clean and pure. Bathing and washing should not be taken only as a ritual as is often done in India. Physical cleanliness must be associated with mental cleanliness. The most important point is to attain purity of mind. Patañjali says:

By the practice of purity there arises aversion to one's own body, and disgust for contact with other bodies.⁹

However this should not degenerate into what psychologists call 'washing mania' which is a kind of mental disease. Commenting on the above *sūtra* of Patañjali, Swami Vivekananda says:

When there is real purification of the body, external and internal, there arises neglect of the body, and the idea of keeping it nice vanishes. A face which others call most beautiful will appear to the *yogī* as merely animal, if there is not intelligence behind it. What the world calls a very common face he regards as heavenly if the spirit shines behind it. This thirst after body is the great bane of human life. So the first sign of the establishment of purity is that you do not care to think you are a body. It is only when purity comes that we get rid of body idea.¹⁰

Holy company is a great help in the observance of chastity. Contact with pure-hearted people who themselves have observed strict continence has a profound influence on struggling aspirants. But in order to profit by this contact, the aspirant should avoid the company of immoral people. Nothing is perhaps more harmful for the maintenance of *brahmacarya* than the company of bad elements.

Sex control at the mental level

However, through physical means alone one can never control sex which has its roots deep within the personality structure. The most important point is to tackle the problem at the mental level. We find that imagination plays a dominant role in our life. Apart from sex fantasies, subtle shades of sex get mingled with our ordinary thinking. Though Freud undoubtedly exaggerated the role of sex in a normal man's life, there really exists some connection between sex and the imaginative faculty in man. This connection often gets stronger through wrong associations, and as a result many people find themselves imagining the wrong sort of things. There is nothing to get upset about all this, provided one keeps oneself physically aloof from all objects of temptation. Still, wrong imaginations and guilt feelings are a great source of torture to so

⁹ श्रीयोगसूत्रे ४। सुशुद्ध्या परिरक्तमर्थः ।

Patañjali: *Yoga-sūtra* 2.49

¹⁰ The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, op. cit. Vol. I, p. 25.

many aspirants. But brooding only makes the problem worse. The problem of imagination has to be tackled in a systematic way.

The main point to note is that the mind should never be allowed to form wrong pictures and brood over them. This is possible only by the practice of producing counter-thoughts. This is what Patañjali advises us to do in his *Yoga-Sūtra*. 'To obstruct thoughts which are inimical to Yoga, contrary thoughts should be brought.'¹¹ This is an important technique of great help to spiritual aspirants. By constantly thinking good thoughts the whole old bad thought structure can be changed. We may be near a bad or impure thing physically, but at the same time can be very far from it mentally and psychically. In order to remain unaffected, we should raise a strong mental barrier to insulate ourselves on the thought plane. But this is not enough. It is a negative process. We should bring in a positive factor also, i.e. we should think of the Divine or of some Holy Personality most intensely, filling our whole mind with that thought. Draw yourself away physically and mentally, and then give your whole mind and attention to the Divine alone, and do not allow it to stray away towards the object of temptation. Do not allow yourself to go near it either physically or mentally. Then, in a very easy and natural way, we learn to draw ourselves away from the things and persons that tempt us, to raise a strong barrier between them and us, and to remain unaffected.

Physical nearness is not the only danger. The person who tempts us may be far away physically, but we feel a tremendous attraction for him or her on the thought plane. So even when the person who attracts us or the object that tempts us is only on the thought plane and not physically near, we should do exactly and scrupulously what we are told to do on the physical plane, i.e. we should in no way communicate with that person, but should dissociate ourselves mentally from him or her, draw our mind away from all thoughts connected with the object of temptation, and raise a strong barrier or even a feeling of loathing or disgust for that person. And, after having done that, we should see that we give all our thoughts and feelings to the Divine alone. Creating a strong dislike or disgust for the object of temptation is not the ultimate solution, but in many cases it proves to be very helpful as a stepping-stone to the sublimation of feelings and desires, and so it should be made use of.

It is a very vital point to do this consciously, deliberately, in a systematic way. At the same time, one may do more of *japa*, practise more meditation and prayer, repeat some elevating passages even if the mind is divided or is in a state of unrest, even if there is a terrible tug-of-war

¹¹ चित्तवृत्त्याधने प्रतिपक्षभावनम् ।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.33

going on in the mind. Somehow or other, in the case of all aspirants, a strong counter-current of spiritual thought is to be raised.

Practically speaking, all our troubles are more mental than physical, and unless there be mental troubles there can never be any physical ones. Unless something in us responds to the outer stimulus, whatever it may be, there can be no object of temptation. So the defect lies in us more than in others.

If we are not able to create the higher mood as soon as the trouble arises, we should first draw ourselves away from the person or object of temptation and then try to create that mood. There should be a conscious, deliberate cutting off in all such cases. Those who are always in a higher mood will experience less temptations. It is only when a man forgets God or his higher Self and dwells on the worldly plane, that temptations come upon him frequently. Always keep a good stock of holy imaginations and ideas, so that you can use them as weapons the moment any undesirable thought or feeling arises and tries to find some expression on the mental or physical plane. Suppose a person attracts you. Raise at once a very intense counter-picture. Imagine that the person is dragging you down and think at the same time strongly of your *Istam* or Chosen Ideal, setting the picture of your *Istam* against that of the other person. Thus it becomes easier to evade the subtle charm of the object of temptation and to change the thought and feeling regarding it. But one should love one's Chosen Ideal intensely. Those who love God intensely are not easily affected by the charms of physical beauty and sex.

Another effective way is to merge all forms that rise in you into the light of your Self which is always shining in you and which forms your real nature. Temptations can take place only in the dark regions of the unconscious mind. Direct the searchlight of the *Ātman* into all these shadowy areas. All the hideous images that lie crouching there will vanish in the brilliance of the Self. Bring all submerged forms into the focus of higher consciousness, and you will see that they vanish at once. Consciousness has such a tremendous power. But few people care to do this.

You see, the whole trouble is this. Our images have acquired reality. We forget that images are only images. Each image becomes, as it were, a real person and haunts us. We should learn to deflate these images and deprive them of life. In the beginning this may be difficult. Then we have to bring in another good image in order to counteract the bad ones. But the technique of deflating the images must be learned by all one day or other. When you feel drawn towards a person, if you can regard him or her as a mere shadow, as something unsubstantial, then the charm and influence he or she has on you will disappear and the fight would become a very easy one. But generally the attraction is such, and our consciousness so confused and full of wrong notions, that we do not even want to do this in most cases.

More practical suggestions for sex control

Be conscious of your higher centres. Hold on to your higher centre of consciousness (in the heart or head). Then you will find that you are on a higher plane than the person or object that tempts you. You are caught only when you come down. You must always remain on a higher plane. Any kind of strong temptation is preceded by a fall in consciousness. First you fall down from a higher level yourself before you fall into the hands of others. So hold on to the higher centre always.

When you feel your mind going down, say to it 'Come up, why stay in the lower centres?' Try to cajole it. 'My mind, what a fool you are to run after enjoyments and sex! Aren't you ashamed to do it? You should really know better.' Treat your mind as a friend. Never create an enemy within. You must make your mind your companion and collaborator in spiritual life.

Sometimes, especially in the case of persons who cannot do higher forms of visualization, it is better to do some imagination of human anatomy. Haven't you seen the human skeleton in a museum or a laboratory? Instead of the beautiful form that draws you, you should see the skeleton, the bony structure with its stupid grin. If you wish, you may add blood, entrails, nerves and other disagreeable things to this skeleton. This is not a false imagination after all. It is the truth about the human body. Only we have forgotten this truth. We have got accustomed to seeing only the skin. Even doctors who know everything about anatomy forget this truth.

The most effective means of overcoming the attacks and attractions of sex is to look upon oneself as the Ātman, the Self. We should change our attitude towards ourselves and towards others. We should try to look upon ourselves in a different and truer way. Say to yourself again and again 'I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not the body. I am the Self. I am Infinite Consciousness and Bliss, not limited by any attributes. I am not this physical form with which I happen to be associated for some time. I am sexless', etc. If we are able to bring about this change in our outlook and really come to feel it, then our position becomes secure. Drive this idea into the depths of your mind at the time of your meditation, early in the morning and also before going to bed. At first these appear to be mere suggestions. But repeated practice will make this idea a part of your outlook and influence your thinking and actions.

By constant thinking in a certain way a habit is created, and once this is done, everything else becomes easy. And this thinking can be done very effectively and without any great strain if one tries to rise to a higher plane of consciousness. Just take the example of the baby kangaroo. Whenever there is any danger, it just jumps into its mother's pouch. Your centre of consciousness should be for you even as the mother's

pouch is for the baby kangaroo. Try to be with your *Istam* at the light-centre the very moment any trouble arises, and then you are safe. Do not court any unnecessary reaction by acting in too violent a way. The moment you let go the hold on your *Istam*, you allow your mind to come down and feel the worldly attraction, and then you are lost.

Learn to connect all your thoughts to your *Istadevatā*. Those who love their *Istadevatā* intensely will not be troubled by lust. The inability to love the Ideal, which seems so abstract, is one of the main causes of difficulty for people in the observance of strict *brahmacarya*.

When we are struggling with our senses and some outward attraction or mental picture, we should have several weapons at hand for use. Never rely on one weapon alone. *Japa*, repeating some holy passage or prayer or intense and one-pointed visualization of a Holy Personality, rhythmic breathing, company of holy people, production of counter-thoughts—any one of these could be utilized as the occasion demanded.

Change of consciousness—the ultimate solution

What we have discussed above about continence is meant for the beginner in spiritual life. These preliminary practices are necessary until the aspirant is able to go deeper into the problem. The ultimate solution, however, lies in the transformation of consciousness. Sex consciousness is only a part of body consciousness, and unless this body consciousness is overcome, perfect continence in thought and deed is difficult. Unless the aspirant experiences spiritual awakening and his physical consciousness is changed into supersensuous awareness, the sex idea will persist in some form or other.

The *anāhata cakra* or the heart centre must be awakened. One should experience the bliss of supersensuous Light. The craving for pleasure which is at the root of the problem of sex vanishes when this bliss of spiritual experience is enjoyed by the aspirant. In the case of the *brahmacārin* or celibate, all other desires get some kind of satisfaction. But the craving for sex is not satisfied. This problem can be solved only when he experiences the bliss of the heart lotus. When the heart centre awakens, one sees the light of the Self. In the glory and splendour of this light, the beauty of physical body and sense cravings disappear. This is the only way to overcome the fascination for women that many men feel.

When the aspirant comes down from that higher experience, the memory of that exalted state will linger in his mind and will protect him from earthly temptations which then appear trivial and paltry. He then craves only for spiritual bliss instead of sense pleasures.

So, the problem of continence is directly connected to the larger problem of spiritual experience. The main concern of the aspirant must be, how to get spiritual experience, how to transform his physical consciousness, how to open the higher centres, how to keep his mind

on a higher plane, etc. When this supremely important quest occupies all his mind and grips his imagination, the problem of sex will dwindle and fade away.