



flights of pleasure

does spiritual development require celibacy?

Eileen Delehanty Pearkes looks at the nuances of *brahmacarya* in the 5th of a 10-part series exploring the *yamas* & *niyamas*.

illustrations by Cristina Sitja Rubio

A few merlin hawks live in a small stretch of mature woodland not far from my house. I hear them taking control of the skies each year as the mating season begins. They fill the air with a high-pitched avian laughter somewhere between a hoot and a cackle. They swoop and slice the dome overhead with their sharp wings. Sometimes, they construct their roost in a tall fir tree that stands like a sentinel just down the hill. I like to look up from my tasks in the garden to watch them go about their celestial lives.

When I was walking in the woodland one day, I heard a merlin's intense chuckle directly overhead. I looked up and, following the noise to the tip of a fir tree, found two merlins, not one. They were locked in a midair mating dance, wings fluttering around them in a feathered tangle. I was spellbound by their balance and poise. Even from my own perch on the ground, I could feel the incredible concentration of energy as they joined with one another without any support of their weight.

The yoga sutras of Patanjali, which outline the various practices that lead to spiritual freedom in a series of aphorisms, discuss a yogi's use of sexual energy. Patanjali mentions the five *yamas*, or basic principles of behaviour guiding how an individual should relate to others in the world. The *yamas*

are followed by the *niyamas*, or principles that guide one's relationship to oneself. *Brahmacarya* is the fourth *yama*, explained in sutra II.38. This word translates variously as "continence," "chastity" and "celibacy" or more generally as "highest modification of the senses" and "respect for the Divine." A common interpretation of the original Sanskrit is that with containment of sexual energy comes greater vitality, potency and vigour. This in turn focuses essential energy on spiritual worship and respect.

The freedom of the birds was not lost on me that day, nor was the sense I had of their airy pragmatism, their singular focus on the task at hand, their unfettered, instinctual approach. I couldn't help but contrast their experience to mine. Mating to perpetuate the species may have been the purpose of sex back in the mists of time, but for thousands of years, human physical intimacy has also been imbued with many other complex cultural experiences: love, pleasure, possession, power and control, to name just a few. In fact, the biological purpose behind sex – the meeting of two sets of cells to form a new life – is an outcome specifically avoided or guarded against by many in the West. The emotionally charged or physically pleasurable aspects of mating often dominate instead.

As raptors, merlins are birds of prey that use their strength and speed to seize and plunder. They are direct and keenly aware. They are more likely to capture and consume small songbirds than nibble politely at seed-heads of grass. Like eagles, falcons and other hawks, they know what they want and they go after it. Their focused stance includes the work of procreation.

For creatures other than humans, annual mating appears to be motivated by a deep-seated instinct to perpetuate the species. It does not get much more complicated than that, whether the creature is a bear, deer, sea otter or hummingbird. In the natural world, the act of copulation is precisely contained by its own purpose. Emotional entanglements, complicated power struggles, hurt feelings and the giving over of precious energy to another do not appear to enter into the process.

And then there is the quasi-natural world of human beings. I seem to be on a different flight pattern altogether from the birds and other wild creatures around me. I often find that I need spiritual guidance for my relationships with others to function at their best, even when it comes to matters of the flesh. How can I allow myself to be influenced by *brahmacarya*, to learn to love in a constructive way that supports my spiritual development?



Does spiritual development necessarily require celibacy?

As B.K.S. Iyengar points out in *Light on the Yoga Sutra*, *brahmacharya* is often misunderstood in the West as total abstinence. The sutra's language is in fact quite vague on the "dos and don'ts" of relating to others in this way. Another yoga teacher and translator of the sutras, Mukunda Stiles, interprets this *yama* not as celibacy or containment at all but as "abiding in behaviour that respects the Divine as omnipresent." Nothing there about never having sex. In fact, the great master Vasista had 100 children, and some of yoga's twentieth-century masters – Iyengar himself, Sri K. Pattabi Jois and T.K.V. Desikachar, to name a few – are married with children.

Iyengar writes and thinks in a measured tone as he presents the

many nuances of the meaning behind *brahmacharya*. He teaches that continence or control of sexual energy does not translate as complete denial of it, and in no way contradicts the measured enjoyment of pleasure. In his view, *brahmacharya* encompasses but does not limit itself to the concept of physical celibacy. Developing a cultured body in the yoga tradition is not so much a moral issue as a choice: to use sexual energy wisely and well.

I have had the experience of doing neither, with the result being a fair share of mixed feelings, inner turmoil and even some good old-fashioned drama in my life. My track record of "abiding behaviour" has fallen short of the mark. My own foibles explicate quite clearly how romantic entanglements could effectively divert a spiritual seeker. Much of my life's turmoil

and drama can be traced back to the misuse of, or a lack of awareness of, the potency of sexual energy and the best use of its gifts.

As I have reflected on *brahmacharya*, I have had moments of wondering whether it is possible to have sex and continue to develop spiritually and physically in a yoga practice. I have also wondered the opposite with some clawing resentment: Why might I need to give up such a pleasurable, deeply human experience in order to evolve and seek greater meaning in this world?

Abstinence is counseled by many spiritual teachers in many traditions during the process of an individual seeker's evolution toward the highest forms of human consciousness. On the path to spiritual liberation, all attachments, egoism and clinging to life



must be relinquished. The process of enlightenment can be impeded by the leaking of energy to procreation and pleasure, rather than containing it to do the work of higher consciousness: prayer, meditation and selfless service to the Divine.

And yet I am not a *sanyasin*, the Sanskrit word that describes a seeker on the path who gives up everything in service to the Divine. Many yoga traditions in India would instead call me a “householder yogi,” one who seeks to integrate the wisdom and elegance of yoga within the framework of day-to-day life, as I peel carrots, vacuum, nurture a marriage and family and meet deadlines.

The word *brahmacarya* also describes a specific stage of life when young Hindu students undertake study of the sacred texts. It calls cultural atten-

tion to the full and appropriate use of the abundant energy carried by each of us through our lives, in whatever stage we find ourselves. We are all, in effect, lifelong students of the complex interplay between self and other. We are all lifelong seekers of greater meaning in the world.

Being guided by *brahmacarya* asks me to take full responsibility for the remarkable potential of the creative life force, one that manifests in many forms, at many levels. Connecting intimately with another human being is only one of the possibilities, though it is an enticing one. It can be dangerous, exciting, risky and, in its own way, liberating. It can call up powerful and mysterious experiences. It can bring about wonderful flights of pleasure.

Although the focused awareness and perception of the midair merlins

inspires me, my practice of yoga tethers me, always, to the Earth. When I stand in the Mountain pose at the beginning and end of the primary series of Ashtanga Yoga, I feel the Earth’s stability and reality beneath my feet. I love the practice for its refinement of my body’s physical experience in the world. I appreciate the ideal of *brahmacarya*, one that promises not to exclude the fullness of human experience, but to give it greater meaning. ॐ

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previous parts in this series for ascent: *Asteya*: non-stealing (issue 29); *Samtosa*: accepting what happens (issue 32); *Aparigraha*: taking only what is necessary (issue 33); *Sauca*: inner and outer cleanliness (issue 34)