

Brhat-Vrata

The great Vow - Celibacy in Krishna Consciousness

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Study Aim: Understanding, Preaching Application (to Devotees)

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Brhat-Vrata

The great Vow - Celibacy in Krishna Consciousness

Introduction - Is Celibacy Unnatural?!

„I have been sent by divine intervention to teach you how to open your heart! Give up your ridged practice of following rules and regulations! Stop suppressing your feelings and needs! You are a human being, you have to accept your desires. I can perceive your longing for union, your desire for intimacy and love! The love between Man and Woman is sacred and God, Sri Krishna, has sent me to teach this loving exchange to you!“

These are the words of a woman who recently approached me. She was convinced that we are meant for each other by divine destiny. In fact, she was claiming that we already have established a relationship with each other on a subtle energy level. I was shocked. I hardly ever talked to her and did not give any indication from my side that I would be interested.

I am a brahmacari for almost twenty years now. To live alone, to refrain from having a relationship or any sex life has become something quite natural for me. Ok, I might not be completely free from sex desire. But who is? Everyone in this world, from Brahma down to an insignificant ant is controlled by the desire to enjoy sex life. But still, over the years I learned how to control myself, how to find pleasure in other sources of happiness and how to engage myself on the spiritual platform. That's brahmacarya; acting (acarya) on the spiritual (brahman) platform, being satisfied within the realm of spiritual practice and aiming for the ultimate goal in life.

But for this lady, and many people in general, celibacy seems to be something unnatural, something artificial. „Something that actually no one is able to do. Maybe some really very advanced spiritualists, but they are anyway very, very rare. In general, everyone needs a relationship and needs some form of sex life...!“

„Well,“ I would argue: „sex life is not natural. It might be for the human being, but not for the soul! The soul does not require sex. The soul has nothing to do with this body and bodily needs. The more we understand our true nature, different from the body, the more we actually live and act from a spiritual platform, the less we are bound by the demands and urges of the senses!“

With this blog, I would like to show, based on sections from Canto Five, why celibacy is important, how, in what kind of mindset, is it practiced, and what forms of brahmacaris are existing.

Part One - Why brahmacarya?

Rare Human for of Life!

In his instruction to his one hundred sons Lord Rsabhadeva explains the importance of the human form of life and how one should not waste it with simply hard work and a little sense gratification:

ṛṣabha uvāca
nāyaṁ deho deha-bhājāṁ ṅṛloke
kaṣṭhān kāmān arhate viḍ-bhujāṁ ye
tapo divyaṁ putrakā yena sattvaṁ
śuddhyed yasmād brahma-saukhyaṁ tv anantam

„Lord Rṣabhadeva told His sons: My dear boys, of all the living entities who have accepted material bodies in this world, one who has been awarded this human form should not work hard day and night simply for sense gratification, which is available even for dogs and hogs that eat stool. One should engage in penance and austerity to attain the divine position of devotional service. By such activity, one's heart is purified, and when one attains this position, he attains eternal, blissful life, which is transcendental to material happiness and which continues forever.“ (1)

In other words gratification of the senses is possible in any species of life but as a human being we have the ability to attain divine blissful life. How to achieve this? By the purification of ones heart. For that tapo divyam, divine austerities and penances are required.

Srila Prabhupada writes in his purport to this important verse:

„...human beings should voluntarily accept suffering in the form of austerities and penances in order to attain the divine life. After attaining the divine life, one can enjoy happiness eternally. After all, every living entity is trying to enjoy happiness, but as long as one is engaged in the material body he has to suffer different kinds of misery.“

This is the principle of tapasya, to voluntarily undergo some difficulties for a higher cause. In general, people strive for preyas, goals they can be achieved very quickly without much endeavor. But the sastras recommend us to strive for sreays, for the ultimate goal, which is not immediately and easily achieved. In some way, we all perform some tapasya. Everyone that goes to work accepts some trouble in order to get his payment at the end of the month. Students may work throughout the night to prepare for an important exam in order to attain their diploma. But the human form of life is especially meant to achieve the highest goal, pure love of God. In order to achieve that Krishna Prema, tapo divyam, divine austerity is required.

I remember how my Gurumaharaja, H.H. Bhakti Svarupa Damodara Swami used to say: „ We have to develop a taste for tapasya, we have to become enthusiastic to preform tapasya!“ What dose this mean? That we have to perform very severe austerities? Do we have to submerge ourselves in ice-cold water during the winter and surround ourselves by fire in the summer? No! Srila Prabhupada gave us a perfect process. If we just chant sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna Mahamantra, follow the four regulated

principles and perform sadana bhakti that will be enough tapo divyam for us. The meaning, as I understand it, that we should be very much convinced that there is no real pleasure in this world. We have to understand this deeply. The nature of sense gratification is such, that we never can really become satisfied with it. The opposite is the case, it entangles us more and more in a network of sinful karma. Lord Rishabadeva confirms this in the same teachings to his sons:

nūnaṁ pramattaḥ kurute vikarma
yad indriya-prītaya āprṇoti
na sādhu manye yata ātmano 'yam
asann api kleśada āsa dehaḥ

„When a person considers sense gratification the aim of life, he certainly becomes mad after materialistic living and engages in all kinds of sinful activity. He does not know that due to his past misdeeds he has already received a body which, although temporary, is the cause of his misery. Actually the living entity should not have taken on a material body, but he has been awarded the material body for sense gratification. Therefore I think it not befitting an intelligent man to involve himself again in the activities of sense gratification by which he perpetually gets material bodies one after another.“ (2)

This verse emphasizes the same principle: as a human being, we should not just become a slave of our senses and run for sense gratification. That does not make any sense. Because of the desire to enjoy we got a material body in the first place. If we now just again run for temporary pleasures in this life we only create our next body and with that the continuation of samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

Sex Attraction - The Basic Principle of Material Life

Especially the attraction between man and woman is the cause for further bondage in this world:

puṁsaḥ striyā mithunī-bhāvam etaṁ
taylor mitho hṛdaya-granthim āhuḥ
ato gṛha-kṣetra-sutāpta-vittair
janasya moho 'yam ahaṁ mameti

„The attraction between male and female is the basic principle of material existence. On the basis of this misconception, which ties together the hearts of the male and female, one becomes attracted to his body, home, property, children, relatives and wealth. In this way one increases life's illusions and thinks in terms of "I and mine.“ (3)

The basic principle of material existence - these are very strong words! From this, we can understand that in this world everything is centered around sex. Lust cannot be satisfied by any amount of sense enjoyment, just as fire is never extinguished by a constant supply of fuel. The desire for sex is also called maithunya-āgāra, which means that sex life is just like shackles that bind us to this material world. While in an ordinary prison the criminals are kept within bars or tied up in some ways, the conditioned soul is also bound up in this world, which can be compared to prison for those who have disobeyed the laws of God, but with shackles of sex life. That means because we so much desire to enjoy sex, we will have to come again and again into this world. And as described in the above-quoted verse, by the union of man and woman a hṛdaya-granthim, a knot in the heart is being tied up very strongly and as a consequence one

starts to identify oneself more and more with the body and everything that is related to it. What a perfect prison house?! No one ever was able to escape it and most of the inhabitants do not even know that they are prisoners, and therefore desire to stay there permanently.

Some may argue, that sex is a very natural need for every human being, why then sex is so much condemned in Vedic literature? Sex in itself is not bad. Krishna even proclaimed that He himself is sex! But what kind of sex? Sex according to religious principles. That means sex for the procreation of children. That kind of sex is not condemned. Even Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur said, that one can produce hundreds of children if they become all Krishna Consciousness. So yes, sex is natural. But as natural as sex is, so are also the consequences of sex - children. To take responsibility to raise children is the price one has to pay for sexual pleasure! Just enjoying sex without that responsibility is condemned. Therefore regulation is required.

Sense gratification is natural, and who ever has accepted a material body needs some satisfaction for the senses. But not to much and also not to little. Srila Prabhupada explains in this very beautifully as follows: *„Sense gratification is just like salt. One cannot take too much or too little, but one must take some salt in order to make one's foodstuff palatable. Those conditioned souls who have come to this material world should utilize their senses according to the direction of the Vedic literature, otherwise they will be put into a more miserable condition of life.“* (4)

The brahmacharya ashrama, the time as a student is especially meant to study sastra and to learn how to control ones senses. This will be later on helpful so that one is able to use the `right amount of salt` when it comes to sense gratification, especially in the grihastha ashrama.

It is also significant that out of four ashramas, three are living a complete celibate lifestyle:

„Out of the four social divisions, the brahmachārī, vānaprastha and the sannyāsī—three orders—are strictly prohibited from the association of women; only the grhasthas, or householders, are given license to have an intimate relationship with a woman, and that relationship is also restricted for begetting nice children. If, however, one wants to stick to continued existence in the material world, he may indulge in female association unrestrictedly.“ (5)

In summary, we can say: sex is a powerful energy that is meant for procreation. If one misuses sex life just for enjoyment one will become bound up more and more into conditioned life. By sex indulgence, one identifies more with the body and develops attachments to this world. A spiritualist needs to learn how to balance his needs for sense gratification. For that, some sense control and some volunteer renunciation are required. By such divine austerity ones, heart becomes purified and higher spiritual pleasures can be experienced. Therefore it is so important to understand, that one cannot be a yogi and at the same time enjoy sex life unrestrictedly. One can not lit a fire and at the same time pour water on it. Thus we have explained the need for brahmacharya, celibate lifestyle. But how to do it? What mindset should a brahmachari have to successfully practice celibacy?

Part Two - How to practice brahmacarya ?

The Path of `Via Negative`

Since the illusory energy is very strong, one who wants to practice brahmacarya needs to be very determined, very much fixed in the understanding of the absolute truth.

One way to strengthen one's determination is the path called `via negative`. That means that one reflects about the temporary and miserably nature of reality. In Europe, during the middle ages, many great writers and poets use to keep a skull on their desks, just to be reminded of the temporary nature of this world. I have heard of Buddhist monasteries that keep a skeleton in a display case that has a picture of a young beautiful woman next to it. She had owned this skeleton, now where has her beauty gone? This is the mood of via negative, the mood of seeing things in a very pessimistic way. We find this also in the Vedic culture, as given in the Bhagavatam and in Srila Prabhupada's writings:

„The real beauty of a young woman is her breasts. When Kardama Muni saw the breasts of his wife so nicely decorated, increasing her beauty many times, he was attracted, even though he was a great sage. Śrīpāda Śaṅkarācārya has therefore warned the transcendentalists that one who is after transcendental realization should not be attracted by the raised breasts of a woman because they are nothing but an interaction of fat and blood within the body.“ (6)

That which in general is most attractive, the raised breasts of a young woman, is turned into a most disgusting thing, fat and blood! That's the mentality behind `Via Negative`. Trying to change the perspective in order to become free from the attraction.

Srila Prabhupada often used to tell the story of liquid beauty: A man was very much attracted to a beautiful woman. That woman was not only handsome but also spiritually mature and therefore wanted to teach the lusty man a lesson. The woman made a date to see him, and before seeing him she took a purgative, and that whole day and night she simply passed stool, and she preserved that stool in a pot. When the man the next day came to see the woman he could not even recognize her. Then she explained to him that she was separated from the ingredients of her beauty. What happens then Srila Prabhupada describes as follows:

„When the man asked how she could be so separated, the woman said, "Come on, and I will show you." She then showed him the pot filled with liquid stool and vomit. Thus the man became aware that a beautiful woman is simply a lump of matter composed of blood, stool, urine and similar other disgusting ingredients. This is the actual fact, but in a state of illusion, man becomes attracted by illusory beauty and becomes a victim of māyā.“ (7)

The `Via negative` - perspective wants to wake us up from the slumber of illusion and show as the `naked` reality as it is - not as attractive as we thought!

In the fifth canto, we find a whole chapter in this mood of `via negative`. The chapter is called `The Forest of material enjoyment` An allegorical story told by Jada Bharat to King Rahuganatha that describes material family life.

Here some excerpt from Srila Prabhupadas purport:

„One Hindi poet has sung: din kī dakinī rāt kī bāghinī pālak pālak lahu cuse. During the daytime, the wife is compared to a witch, and at night she is compared to a tigress. Her only business is sucking the blood of her husband both day and night. During the day there are household expenditures, and the money earned by the husband at the cost of his blood is taken away. At night, due to sex pleasure, the husband discharges blood in the form of semen. In this way he is bled by his wife both day and night, yet he is so crazy that he very carefully maintains her.“ (8)

Who would wants to enter family life after hearing this description? Srila Prabhupada even says that this is the reason why in general everyone is encouraged to remain a brahmarcari:

„The so-called comfortable family position is compared to a dark well in a field. If one falls in a dark well covered by grass, his life is lost, despite his cry for rescue. Highly advanced spiritualists therefore recommend that one should not enter the grhastha-āśrama. It is better to prepare oneself in the brahmacarya-āśrama for austerities and remain a pure brahmacārī throughout one's life so that one will not feel the piercing thorns of material life in the grhastha-āśrama.“ (9)

People enter family life with a lot of expectations to have a happy life, but in reality no one ever has really become happy in this way: *„The happiness of family life is compared to a drop of water in the desert. No one can be happy in family life.“ (10)*

The idea is that by hearing this kind of Brahmacary Katha one becomes fixed his vows and gives up his lusty desires. And there is certainly importance to this, otherwise, the Bhagavatam would not be filled with such descriptions in many different places.

But there is also a danger to this. Unfortunately, immature people have always misinterpreted such sastric statements and have developed hatred towards woman after hearing statements like we find it in this section of the Bhagavatam. In the early days of ISKCON, especially after Srila Prabhupadas departure, woman where treated very badly by many so called strict brahmacaris.

A mature brahmacari understands, it is not the woman in itself that is maya, it is the attraction towards a woman thats the problem. Its the lusty desire to enjoy the beauty of a woman that is the problem. Instead of condemning the woman, I should condemn my own lusty desires! Instead of seeing a woman as a mayadevi personified, a proper brahmacari respects every woman as a mother and in this way naturally feels respect for them that does not allow lust to arise.

The path of via negative alone will not hep us. It can be useful in times of difficulties. Just like first aid box. In an emergency you may pull out some medicine to avoid greater problems. But on a long term something else is required. And what is that? It is pure loving devotion to Krishna, and nothing else that we need to become a true brahmacari!

The Positive Path - Devotion for Krishna!

*kasayan na ca bhojanadi-niyaman no va vane vasato
vyakhyanad athava muni-vrata-bharac cittodbhavah ksiyate
kintu sphita-kalinda-saila-tanaya-tiresu vikridato
govindasya padaravinda-bhajanarambhasya lesad api*

„Not by wearing saffron cloth, not by restricting food and other sense-activities, not by living in the forest, not by discussing philosophy, and not by observing a vow of silence, but only by even the slightest beginning of devotional service to the lotus feet of Lord Govinda, who enjoys pastimes on the Yamuna’s wide banks, is Kamadev, lust, stopped.“ (11)

At the end of the day, the only thing that will help us is to develop our loving relationship to Krishna. Krishna is not very much impressed by tapasya, by scholarship or any other mundane quality, The only thing that Krishna attracts is love, devotion. In order to make that happen we really need to become very sincere in our practice and absorb ourselves deeply in the process. Especially chanting the holy name is the foremost way how to connect with the Lord. Srila Prabhupada confirms this by giving the following warning:

„If we stick to the principle of chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra offenselessly, then, by the grace of Śrīla Haridāsa Ṭhākura, we may be saved from the allurements of women. However, if we are not very strict in chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra, we may at any time fall victim to women.“ (12)

Once we experience a higher taste in Krishna Consciousness, very naturally we will give up the lower taste:

„When one is attracted by the transcendental beauty of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, he is no longer attracted by material feminine beauty. That is the special significance of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa worship.(..) When we are attracted by Madana-mohana and the beauty of Kṛṣṇa and His consorts, then the shackles of conditioned life, namely the beauty of a material woman, cannot attract us.“ (13)

A brahmacari can maintain his spiritual life and tapasya because he is satisfied within himself and in his relationship with Krishna. True satisfaction, true joy is always found within our own heart. Unfortunately people in general are not able to access that inner peace and therefore try to compensate their lack with external pleasure. Because a brahmacari has realized this deeply, he is peacefully situated in his relationship with Krishna and therefore acts on the spiritual platform - brahma acarya.

But what about those who are not able to remain a brahmacari for their whole life?
How long should one practice brahmacharya?

Part Three - What kind of brahmacarya?

According to sastra, there are the following divisions of brahmacarya life:

- (1) **Sāvitra**, a brahmacārī who, after initiation and the sacred thread ceremony, must observe at least **three days** of celibacy.
- (2) **prājāpatya**, a brahmacārī who strictly observes celibacy for at least **one year** after initiation.
- (3) **brāhma-brahmacārī**, a brahmacārī who observes celibacy from the time of initiation up to the time of the **completion of his study** of the Vedic literature
- (4) **naiṣṭhika**, a brahmacārī who is celibate throughout his **whole life**. (14)

In our Hare Krishna Movement we also have different kind of brahmacaris. Some join a Guru kula in a very young age and actually get a traditional brahmacari training for many years. But most of our members the maybe, if at all, spend a couple of years at the temple and then move into the Grihasta Ashrama. But even then one can remain a brahmacari:

*„One who is leading **complete celibacy**, complete free from sex life, he is called brahmacārī. Another brahmacārī is **gr̥hastha-brahmacārī**. He has got his wife (..) One who has his relationship with wife under rules and regulation and does not know any other woman, he is also brahmacārī. That is also called brahmacārī-vrata.“ (15)*

This is very important to understand. Celibacy is not restricted to a particular ashrama, it is a lifestyle favorable for spiritual life in all the different Varnas and Ashramas.

While in the past brahmacaris who got married had been seen as someone that has fallen from his position, we hopefully have adopted the understanding that to become a grihasta is a step upwards. To be a Grihasta actually requires more maturity and experience than to be a brahmacari. That's way the word Adhikari is after the name. It means someone who has qualified himself to be a householder, a father or a mother.

That even one who had been very renounced might enter gr̥hastha Ashrama for a higher purpose and how one can be practicing Krishna Consciousness successfully in family life can be understood from the example of Priyavrata. Lord Brahma ordered Priyavrata to give up his renunciation and accept the responsibility to rule the world. Priyavrata was hesitating to do so, since he thought this would disturb his bhajan, his spiritual practice. Lord Brahma understanding Priyavratas doubts instructed him saying that it is not a matter of which ashrama one is situated but whether one is able to control his senses or not. If one controls his senses by engaging them in the Lords service, any circumstances might be accepted. In his Purport Srila Prabhupada quotes Śrīla Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī Ṭhākura who said durdāntendriya-kāla-sarpa-ṭaḷāḷi protkhāta-damṣṭrāyate:

„The sense organs are certainly our greatest enemies, and they are therefore compared to venomous serpents. However, if a venomous serpent is bereft of its poison fangs, it is no longer fearful. Similarly, if the senses are engaged in the service of the Lord, there is no

need to fear their activities. The devotees in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement move within this material world, but because their senses are fully engaged in the service of the Lord, they are always aloof from the material world. They are always living in a transcendental position.” (16)

In Conclusion - Mercy of a Great Devotee is Required

What ever ashram we may choose to practise our spiritual life, Brahmacharya is an important element. It helps us to purify our existence and to experience higher spiritual happiness.

At the end of the day however we always require the blessings of advanced devotees, only by their mercy will we be able to develop love for Krishna, which is the ultimate remedy to become free from sex desire!

rahūgaṇaitat tapasā na yāti
na cejyayā nirvapaṇād grhād vā
na cchandasā naiva jalāgni-sūryair
vinā mahat-pāda-rajo-,bhiṣekam

*„My dear King Rahūgaṇa, unless one has the opportunity to smear his entire body with the dust of the lotus feet of great devotees, one cannot realize the Absolute Truth. **One cannot realize the Absolute Truth simply by observing celibacy [brahmacharya], strictly following the rules and regulations of householder life, leaving home as a vānaprastha, accepting sannyāsa, or undergoing severe penances in winter by keeping oneself submerged in water or surrounding oneself in summer by fire and the scorching heat of the sun. There are many other processes to understand the Absolute Truth, but the Absolute Truth is only revealed to one who has attained the mercy of a great devotee.**“ (17)*

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- 1 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.5.1
 - 2 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.5.4
 - 3 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.5.8
 - 4 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.15.8
 - 5 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.31.39
 - 6 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.23.37
 - 7 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.26.23
 - 8 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.14.3
 - 9 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.14.4
 - 10 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.14.18
 - 11 - Quoted in Srila Rupa Goswami's Padyavali, Text 11. Author unknown.
 - 12 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.6.3
 - 13 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.31.38
 - 14 - Krishna Book, Chapter 87
 - 15 - Srila Prabhupada, Lecture in New York, September 7, 1966
 - 16 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.1.17
 - 17 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.12.12

