

# Brahmacarya

Subjects: **Ethics**

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Brahmacharya (/ˌbrɑːməˈtʃɑːrjə/; Devanagari: ब्रह्मचर्य, Bengali: ব্রহ্মচর্য odia:ବ୍ରହ୍ମଚର୍ଯ୍ୟ lit."pure conduct") is a concept within Indian religions that literally means to stay in conduct within one's own Self. In Yoga, Hinduism and Jainism it generally refers to a lifestyle characterized by sexual continence or complete abstinence. Brahmacharya is somewhat different from the English term "celibacy," which merely means non-indulgence in sexual activity. Brahmacharya is when a person completely controls his body and mind (citta) through ascetic means. In the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist monastic traditions, brahmacharya implies, among other things, the mandatory renunciation of sex and marriage. It is considered necessary for a monk's spiritual practice. Western notions of the religious life as practiced in monastic settings mirror these characteristics.

celibacy

religious life

ব্রহ্মচর্য

## 1. Etymology

The word *brahmacharya* stems from two Sanskrit roots:

1. *Brahma* (devanagari: ब्रह्म) meaning ones own Self, ultimate unchanging reality, absolute consciousness, much discussed in the Upanishads.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> Brahma is also the Vedic God of creation, no different from the Self or Atman. (*Ayam Ātmā Brahma (अयम् आत्मा ब्रह्म) The Self of mine is that Brahma*)
2. *charya* (चर्य), which means "occupation with, engaging, proceeding, behaviour, conduct, to follow, moving in, going after".<sup>[4]</sup> This is often translated as activity, conduct, or mode of behaviour.

Hence, *brahmacharya* roughly means "to stay true to one's Self or ones own Atma" or "on the path of Brahma".<sup>[5]</sup>

In ancient and medieval era Indian texts, the term *brahmacharya* is a concept with a more complex meaning indicating an overall lifestyle conducive to the pursuit of sacred knowledge and spiritual liberation.<sup>[6]</sup> *Brahmacarya* is a means, not an end. It usually includes cleanliness, ahimsa, simple living, studies, meditation, and voluntary restraints on certain foods (eating only Sattvic food), on intoxicants, and on sexual behavior (both sex and masturbation, in some schools of thought).<sup>[6][7]</sup>

## 2. As a Virtue

*Brahmacarya* is traditionally regarded as one of the five yamas in Yoga, as declared in verse 2.30 of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.<sup>[8]</sup> It is a form of self-restraint regarded as a virtue, and an observance recommended depending on an individual's context. For a married practitioner it means marital fidelity (not cheating on one's spouse); for a

single person it means celibacy.<sup>[9][10]</sup> Shandilya Upanishad includes *brahmacarya* as one of ten yamas in Chapter 1, defining it as "refraining from sexual intercourse in all places and in all states in mind, speech or body".<sup>[11]</sup>

Patanjali in verse 2.38<sup>[12]</sup> states that the virtue of brahmacarya leads to the profit of *virya* (वीर्य).<sup>[13]</sup> This Sanskrit word, *virya*, has been variously translated as virility and, by Vyasa, as strength and capacity. Vyasa explains that this virtue promotes other good qualities.<sup>[13]</sup> Other ancient and medieval era texts of Hinduism describe the fruits of this virtue differently. For example, Pada Chandrika, Raja Marttanda, Sutartha Bodhini, Mani Prabha and Yoga Sudhakara each state that *brahmacarya* must be understood as the voluntary restraint of power.<sup>[13]</sup> Chandogya Upanishad in verses of chapter 8.5 extols *brahmacarya* as a sacrament and sacrifice which, once perfected, leads to realization of the Self (Atman), and thereafter becomes the habit of experiencing the Self in others and everything.<sup>[13][14]</sup> Tattva Vaisharadi and Yoga Sarasangraha assert that *brahmacarya* leads to an increase in *jñāna-shakti* (power of knowledge) and *kriya-shakti* (power of action).<sup>[13]</sup>

The great epic Mahabharata describes the objective of brahmacarya as knowledge of Brahman (Book Five, Udyoga Parva, the Book of Effort).<sup>[15]</sup> Brahmacarya leads one to union with the Supreme Self (Chapter 43). By subduing desire, the practice of self-restraint enables the student to learn, pay attention in thought, word and deed to the *guru* (teacher), and discover the truth embodied in the Vedas and Upanishads. According to the epic, the practice of studying and learning requires the "aid of time," as well as personal effort, ability, discussion, and practice, all of which are helped by the virtue of brahmacharya.<sup>[15]</sup> A brahmacārī should do useful work, and the earnings he obtains should be given away as *dakshina* ("fee," "gift of thanks") to the guru. The epic declares that brahmacarya is one of twelve virtues, an essential part of *angas* in yoga and the path of perfecting perseverance and the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>[15]</sup>

### 3. In Jainism



Green colour in the Jain flag stands for *brahmacarya* <sup>[16]</sup>. <https://handwiki.org/wiki/index.php?curid=1508335>

*Brahmacarya* is one of the five major vows prescribed for the *śrāvakā* (layman) and ascetics in Jainism. For those Jains who adopt the path of monks, celibacy in action, words and thoughts is expected. For lay Jains who are married, the virtue of *brahmacarya* requires remaining sexually faithful to one's chosen partner.<sup>[17]</sup> For lay Jains who are unmarried, chaste living requires Jains to avoid sex before marriage.<sup>[18]</sup> *Uttam Brahmacarya* (Supreme Celibacy) is one of the ten excellencies of a *Jain monk*.<sup>[19]</sup> *Brahmacarya* is mentioned as one of the *das dharma* (ten virtues) in ancient Jain texts like *Tattvartha Sutra*, *Sarvārthasiddhi* and *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya*.<sup>[20]</sup>

## 4. Among Sramanic Traditions

Among the sramanic traditions (Buddhism, Jainism, Ājīvika and Carvaka schools ), *brahmacarya* is the term used for a self-imposed practice of celibacy generally considered a prerequisite for spiritual practice. The fourth of the five great vows of Jain monks, for example, is the vow of celibacy, which in this case means a total abstinence from the sensual pleasure of all five senses, including the avoidance of sexual thoughts and desires.<sup>[17][21]</sup> The yogin who is firmly grounded in the virtue of *brahmacarya* is said to gain great vitality.<sup>[22]</sup>

## 5. As Asrama Stage of Life

Brahmacharya in Hinduism literally means "conduct consistent with Brahman" or "on the path of Brahman".<sup>[5]</sup> Historically *brahmacarya* referred to a stage of life (*asrama*) within the Vedic ashram system. Ancient Hindu culture divided the human lifespan into four stages: *Brahmacarya*, *Grihastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sannyasa*. *Brahmacarya*

*asrama* occupied the first 20–25 years of life roughly corresponding to adolescence.<sup>[23][24]</sup> Upon the child's *Upanayanam*,<sup>[25]</sup> the young person would begin a life of study in the Gurukula (the household of the Guru) dedicated to learning all aspects of *dharma* that is the "principles of righteous living". *Dharma* comprised personal responsibilities towards himself, family, society, humanity and God which included the environment, earth and nature. This educational period started when the child was five to eight years old and lasted until the age of 14 to 20 years.<sup>[26]</sup> During this stage of life, the traditional vedic sciences and various sastras<sup>[27]</sup> were studied along with the religious texts contained within the Vedas and Upanishads.<sup>[28][29]</sup> This stage of life was characterized by the practice of celibacy.

In one context, *brahmacharya* is the first of four *ashrama* (age-based stages) of a human life, with *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest dweller), and *sannyasa* (renunciation) being the other three *asramas*. The *brahmacharya* (bachelor student) stage of life – from childhood up to twenty-five years of age – was focused on education and included the practice of celibacy.<sup>[30]</sup> In this context, it connotes chastity during the student stage of life for the purposes of learning from a *guru* (teacher), and during later stages of life for the purposes of attaining spiritual liberation (Sanskrit: *moksha*).<sup>[31][32]</sup>

Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad suggests that the Brahmacarya (student) stage of life should extend from the age a child is ready to receive teachings from a *guru*, and continue for a period of twelve years.<sup>[33]</sup>

Graduation from the Brahmacarya stage of life was marked by the Samavartanam ceremony.<sup>[34]</sup> The graduate was then ready to either start Grihastha (householder) stage of life, or wait, or pursue a life of Sannyasa and solitude like Rishis in forest.<sup>[30]</sup> Vyasa in Chapter 234 of Shanti Parva in the Mahabharata praises *Brahmacarya* as an important stage of life necessary for learning, then adds *Grihastha* stage as the root of society and important to an individual's success.<sup>[35]</sup>

**Brahmacarya for girls**The Vedas and Upanishads do not restrict the student stage of life to males.<sup>[36]</sup> Atharva Veda, for example, states<sup>[36][37]</sup>

ब्रह्मचर्येण कन्या युवानं विन्दते पतिम् ।

A youthful *Kanya* (कन्या, girl) who graduates from Brahmacarya, obtains a suitable husband.

—Atharva Veda, 11.5.18<sup>[37]</sup>

**No age restrictions**Gonda<sup>[38]</sup> states that there were no age restrictions for the start of Brahmacarya in ancient India. Not only young men, but older people resorted to student stage of life, and sought teachers who were authoritative in certain subjects.<sup>[38]</sup> The Chandogya Upanishad, in Section 5.11, describes "wealthy and learned householders" becoming brahmachārīs (students) with Rishi Kaikeya, to gain knowledge about Atman (inner Self) and Brahman (Ultimate Reality).<sup>[39][40]</sup>

## 6. Historical References to Brahmacharya

The Vedas discuss Brahmacharya, both in the context of lifestyle and stage of one's life. Rig Veda, for example, in Book 10 Chapter 136, mentions knowledge seekers as those with *Kesin* (long haired) and soil-colored clothes (yellow, orange, saffron) engaged in the affairs of *Mananat* (mind, meditation).<sup>[41]</sup> Rigveda, however, refers to these people as *Muni* and *Vati*. The Atharva Veda, completed by about 1000 BC, has more explicit discussion of *Brahmacharya*, in Book XI Chapter 5.<sup>[42]</sup> This Chapter of Atharva Veda describes Brahmacharya as that which leads to one's second birth (mind, Self-awareness), with Hymn 11.5.3 painting a symbolic picture that when a teacher accepts a brahmachārī, the student becomes his embryo.<sup>[42]</sup>

The concept and practice of *Brahmacharya* is extensively found among the older strata of the Mukhya Upanishads in Hinduism. The 8th-century BC text Chandogya Upanishad describes in Book 8, activities and lifestyle that is Brahmacharya:<sup>[43]</sup>

Now what people call *yajña* (sacrifice) is really *Brahmacharya*, for only by means of Brahmacharya does the knower attain that world (of Brahman). And what people call *Ishta* (worship) is really Brahmacharya, for only worshipping by means of Brahmacharya does one attain the Atman (the liberated Self). Now, what people call the *Sattrayana* (sacrificial session) is really Brahmacharya, for only by means of Brahmacharya does one obtain one's salvation from *Sat* (Being). And what people call the *Mauna* (vow of silence) is really Brahmacharya for only through Brahmacharya does one understand the Atman and then meditate. Now, what people call a *Anasakayana* (vow of fasting) is really Brahmacharya, for this Atman never perishes which one attains by means of Brahmacharya. And what people call the *Aranyayana* (life of a hermit) is really Brahmacharya, for the world of Brahman belongs to those who by means of Brahmacharya attain the seas *Ara* and *Nya* in the world of Brahman. For them there is freedom in all the worlds.

—Chandogya Upanishad, VIII.5.1 – VIII.5.4<sup>[43][44]</sup>

A hymn in another early Upanishad, the Mundaka Upanishad in Book 3, Chapter 1 similarly states,

सत्येन लभ्यस्तपसा ह्येष आत्मा सम्यग्ज्ञानेन ब्रह्मचर्येण नित्यम् ।

Through continuous pursuit of *Satya* (truthfulness), *Tapas* (perseverance, austerity), *Samyajñāna* (correct knowledge), and *Brahmacharya*, one attains Atman (the Self).

—Mundaka Upanishad, III.1.5<sup>[45]</sup>

The Vedas and early Upanishadic texts of Hinduism in their discussion of *Brahmacharya*, make no mention of the age of the student at the start of Brahmacharya,<sup>[46]</sup> nor any restraint on sexual activity. However, there is a clear general consensus in both specific and various Upanishads (such as the Shandilya Upanishad) as well as Hindu smritis (such as the Manusmriti) that the male "student", referred to as the "Brahmachari[n]" should abstain from the "release of semen." This rule may or may not apply to the guru. The verses 11.5.4.16 and 11.5.4.17 of the

Satpatha Brahmana present two different viewpoints on sexual activity, of the guru during the Brahmacharya ashrama, i.e., the teacher of the "student Brahmachari[n]", one against and one as a choice.<sup>[47]</sup> Similarly, in verse 11.5.4.18, the Satapatha Brahmana presents contrasting viewpoints on an eating restraint (regarding honey) for the brahmacārī student.<sup>[47]</sup>

## 7. Among Religious Movements

In Indian traditions, a *brahmacārī* is a male and *brahmacārinī* a female.<sup>[48][49]</sup>

### 7.1. Ashrams and Mathas

Various *Ashrams* (आश्रम, hermitage) and *Matha* (मठ, college of ascetics) of various schools of Hinduism call their male and female initiates as brahmacārī and brahmacārinī.<sup>[50]</sup>

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43. Translation: S Swahananda (2010), Chandogya Upanishad, Vedanta Press, ISBN:978-8171203307, Book VIII, Chapter 5, verse 1–4 Original: अथ यद्यज्ञ इत्याचक्षते ब्रह्मचर्यमेव तद्व्रह्मचर्येण । ह्येव यो ज्ञाता तं विन्दतेऽथ यदिष्टमित्याचक्षते । ब्रह्मचर्यमेव तद्व्रह्मचर्येण ह्येवेष्ट्वात्मानमनुविन्दते ॥ १ ॥ अथ यत्सत्त्रायणमित्याचक्षते ब्रह्मचर्यमेव तद्व्रह्मचर्येण । ह्येव सत आत्मनस्त्राणं विन्दतेऽथ यन्मौनमित्याचक्षते । ब्रह्मचर्यमेव तद्व्रह्मचर्येण ह्येवात्मानमनुविद्य मनुते ' ॥ २ ॥ अथ यदनाशकायनमित्याचक्षते ब्रह्मचर्यमेव तदेष । ह्यात्मा न नश्यति यं ब्रह्मचर्येणानुविन्दतेऽथ । यदरण्यायनमित्याचक्षते ब्रह्मचर्यमेव तदरश्च ह वै । प्यश्चार्यवौ ब्रह्मलोके तृतीयस्यामितो दिवि तदैरं । मदीयं सरस्तदश्वत्थः सोमसवनस्तदपराजिता । पूर्ब्रह्मणः प्रभुविमितं हिरण्यमम् ॥ ३ ॥ तद्य एवैतवरं च प्यं चार्यवौ ब्रह्मलोके । ब्रह्मचर्येणानुविन्दन्ति तेषामेवैष ब्रह्मलोकस्तेषाँ । सर्वेषु लोकेषु कामचारो भवति ॥ ४ ॥
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45. MP Pandit (1969), Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.5, Gleanings from the Upanishads, OCLC 81579, University of Virginia Archives, pages 11–12 <https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/81579>
46. Some recent Upanishads do, see for example Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad mentioned below
47. Julius Eggeling, Satapatha Brahmana Madhyandina School version, Clarendon Press, Oxford, page 90 <https://archive.org/stream/satapathabrhmman01eggegoog#page/n143/mode/2up>

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