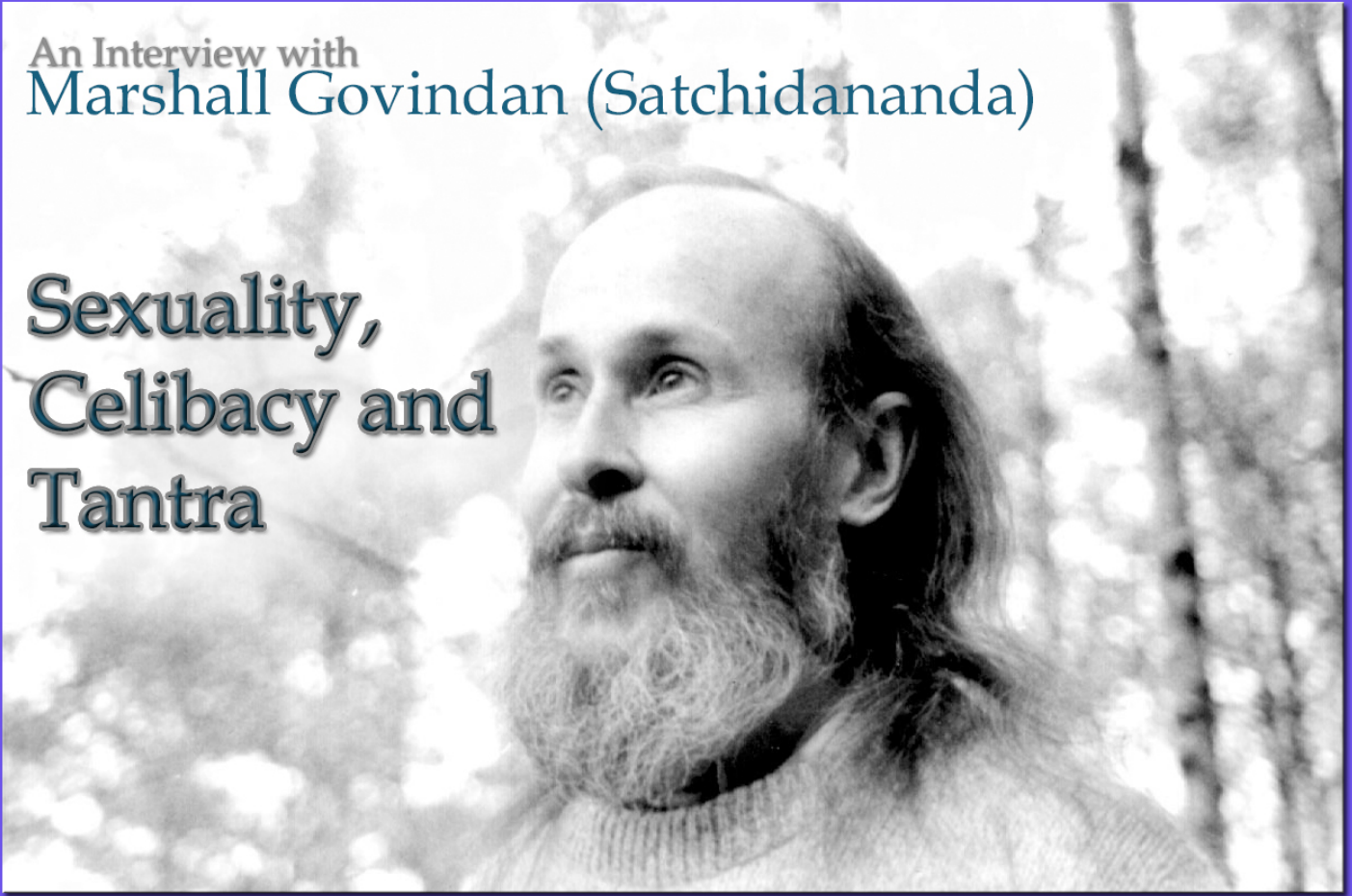


An Interview with
Marshall Govindan (Satchidananda)

Sexuality,
Celibacy and
Tantra



Marshall Govindan (also known as **Satchidananda**) is a disciple of Babaji Nagaraj, the famed Himalayan master and originator of Kriya Yoga, and of his late disciple, Yogi S.A.A. Ramaiah. He has practiced Babaji's Kriya Yoga intensively since 1969, including five years in India.

Since 1980 he has been engaged in the research and publication of the writings of the Yoga Siddhas. He is the author of the bestselling book, *Babaji and the 18 Siddha Kriya Yoga Tradition*, now published in 15 languages, the first international English translation of *Thirumandiram: a Classic of Yoga and Tantra*, *Kriya Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Siddhas*, and the *Wisdom of Jesus and the Yoga Siddhas*. Since the year 2000, he has sponsored and directed a team of seven scholars in Tamil Nadu, India in a large scale research project engaged in the preservation, transcription, translation and publication of the whole of the literature related to the Yoga of the 18 Siddhas. Six publications have been produced from this project, including a ten volume edition of the *Tirumandiram* in 2010.

Sexuality, Celibacy and Tantra

By M. Govindan Satchidananda

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Question: Why have you decided to give this interview?

I was asked by the online magazine “Nonduality magazine” to submit an article on the subject of celibacy. After considering it and jotting down a few ideas I decided to submit the article. This interview reflects that article.

With regards to the subject of “celibacy” there is a lot of misunderstanding, especially since very few persons have ever practiced it. As I adhered to a vow of celibacy for 18 years, I believe that I can help to clear up some of this misunderstanding, and share some practical means to those readers who would like to avail themselves of its benefits.

Anything, including celibacy, which touches upon human sexuality will almost always be controversial. This is because it is related to human values, and unless one is living in some remote part of the world where there is only one set of values, a mono-culture, people will look upon sexuality differently.

Even within those who should have the understanding if not the wisdom to appreciate the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, human sexuality is problematic. Therefore, whenever one considers anything related to this sexuality, one needs to view it with reference to the philosophical if not religious teachings which provide direction to whatever practices or disciplines or moral choices one adopts. If these are unclear, or undecided, it may be best to first reflect on these, come to some conclusions and make some decisions, before considering what to practice, and how to answer questions related to sexuality.

Even if one has made nondual awareness, Self-realization, God-realization, enlightenment, liberation or nirvana one’s ultimate spiritual objective, state or value, sexuality will very often cause detours, in which one forgets, even for many years, what one is seeking. I am reminded of the famous lament of St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the founders of Christianity, who lived in North Africa during the fourth century. Before he became a Christian celibate monk, he belonged to a sect known as *hedonism*, and had experienced his fill of human sexual adventure. Hedonism is a school of thought that argues that pleasure is the only intrinsic value. In very simple terms, a hedonist strives to maximize net pleasure (pleasure minus pain). As a young man he uttered his famous prayer, “Lord, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” Who was it that at the beginning of this brief prayer who asked the Lord to help him to be celibate? And who was it that by the end of the same prayer had forgotten? Now, in the 21st century, Western culture, especially in America, is a curious mixture of hedonism and religious restriction. While most religions require restrictions on sexual activity, as we shall see below in the discussion of *Tantra*, human sexuality and spirituality are not mutually exclusive. Confusion

and conflict occur however, when one's objective is not singular or firmly held, and one underestimates the power of sexuality to distract, as in the case of young St. Augustine.

Question: What is celibacy, and what is its purpose?

Marshall Govindan: *Celibacy is purposeful abstention from sexual activity which begins with a formal vow.* It is not merely living one's life without sexual relations. As such, celibacy is as different from merely not having an active sex life, as fasting is different from merely not having anything to eat!

In the West, the only persons who are generally qualified to say anything about "celibacy" are those who have taken vows, for example, current and former Catholic priests, monks and nuns. Others can only express questions, because without experiencing it, opinions can express only here say.

Taking a vow of celibacy will strike nearly every adult as strange, unnatural or foreign, particularly in the modern Western popular culture, where the average person is continuously bombarded by advertising and the media to entertain sexual fantasies, virility or association with sexual attraction. Happiness requires an active sex life according to advertisements for Viagra, and millions of men believe it.

In India, celibacy is usually referred to as "*brahmacharya*." The word "*brahmacharya*" means "knower of *Brahma*," that is, one who is able to access the nondual transcendental state of awareness. It is one of the *yamas*, or social restraints of Patanjali's "eight limbed" (ie. *astanga*) yoga, and in that context implies the broader concept of chastity, in thought, word and deed. As a "social restraint" or *yama*, it is prescribed as a means of spiritual Self-realization, to protect the seeker in social relationships, where the ego's manifestations, which include pride, greed, lust, and anger, can cause mental delusion and inter-personal conflict. The other *yamas* include not harming, not lying, not stealing and greedlessness.

Celibacy, therefore, is not merely abstaining from sexual activity. It includes avoiding lust, sexual desire and fantasy.

Celibacy's greatest purpose is to slay desire, the principle of all our superficial life, which satisfies itself with the life of the senses and in the play of the passions. When we eliminate desire, that propensity of our natural being, the passions, the emotional results, will fall into quietude. A calm equality will then be gained. As a result, the delusion that "I am the body," and "I am my feelings, emotions, wants, and thoughts," is gradually replaced by the realization that "I am," that which never changes, that Witnesses the drama of my life, as "being, consciousness, and bliss," *sat chid ananda*.

Celibacy is not an end in itself, but a means to realizing a greater spiritual or religious purpose. In Christian religious orders a vow to maintain celibacy is part of one's complete dedication to Christ and the work of His Church. Catholic nuns or sisters are taught to view themselves as the "brides of Christ." When viewed as a means to a greater purpose, it makes perfect sense. It is not unlike a marriage vow of faithfulness to one's wife or husband which helps to ensure the success of the marriage. In Hindu and Buddhist monastic traditions, in order to keep one on the path to *moksha* or spiritual liberation from the wheel of *samsara*, endless desire and reincarnation, it is part of a three-fold life time vow of celibacy, poverty, and obedience to one's spiritual preceptor or to the discipline of one's monastic order.

Question: What must one do to prepare oneself to adopt celibacy? It appears that even highly motivated spiritual seekers would consider it to be a very challenging austerity in today's material culture.

Marshall Govindan: Celibacy is a form of austerity, or *tapas*. Tapas means self-challenge, voluntarily assumed, for the purpose of effecting a positive change in one's life.

Tapas has three essential elements:

1. A vow, which expresses one's intention or *sankalpa*. To be effective it should include a clear, positive statement in the present tense, using a verb which leaves no doubt even at the subconscious level as to one's intention. For example: "In thought, word and action, I remain chaste." Or "I see in others only the embodiment of the Divine." Statements like "I hope to" or "I want to" which imply doubt are avoided. One's vow should not include reference to what one is trying to avoid, otherwise, it may contribute to psychological suppression. One therefore concentrates on what one is seeking: *Brahma*, the universal nondual state of consciousness. A vow of tapas is generally made for a predetermined period: for example, a day, or a month, a year. So it is usually temporary, but it may be for the remainder of one's life.
2. The exercise of ones willpower. When desires come, one does not dwell on them. One does not allow the mind to fantasize nor to dwell on memories of sexual experiences. Above all, one's mantra is "I shall not manifest it (this desire) with any word or action," for example through masturbation or flirtation. A little success will multiply one's willpower. Failure will weaken one's willpower by a multiple degree.
3. Persistence: sincerity is doing what you say you are going to do. So, no matter how difficult, no matter the failures, no matter the doubts of one's capacity, one continues to exercises one's discernment and one's willpower. One notices when desires begin to

enter the mind, and one exercises detachment towards them immediately. One detaches from the mind's attempts to justify the desire.

Tapas is most often applied to vows of silence, vows of fasting, dietary vows, vows of renunciation of material possessions, family, vows of obedience to a guru, vows related to social behaviour, vows to strictly follow the disciplines prescribed by a guru, and extremely ascetic practices such as sitting in meditation surrounded by small fires, for many hours over many days.

One can apply the principles of *tapas* to anything you want to change in your life. For example, eliminating a bad habit, like anger, over eating, swearing, smoking, gossiping, or to developing new positive habits, such as rising early, being kind or generous, physical exercise, regularity in meditation or other spiritual practices, self-control, developing virtues of honesty, patience, humility or frugality.

Tapas or austerities can be done for purpose of developing power, when one's intentions are moved by the force of *rajas*, expressing itself in the need to be active, to create, to exert one self. *Tapas* can done for the purpose of penance, out of guilt or atonement for past errors, or as a sacrifice with the expectation of absolution, or forgiveness. This reflects the *guna* of *tamas*, or inertia, doubt and fear. But for the authentic spiritual aspirant, only *tapas* which reflects the *sattva guna* of balance, calmness, clarity, understanding, peace, and various virtues including as patience and love are acceptable.

The decision to take a vow of celibacy must be in alignment with one's purpose. If someone decides that their life's purpose is "Self-realization" then vows of celibacy, silence and obedience, can be very helpful. The vows made to fulfil this purpose express an aspiration to be free of egoism, attachment, aversion, and to realize absolute Being, Consciousness and Bliss. When made with this purpose, such actions are not contrary to human nature, nor are they merely moral, but done in alignment with *swabhava*, the essential law of one's spiritual nature. They express the purposeful will of the Divine in us searching for and discovering not the pleasure of the lower Nature, but the Ananda, unconditional joy, of its own play and self-fulfilling. *Dharma* is usually understood as righteous action, ethical or moral conduct. But in the spiritual sense *dharma* is not morality or ethics, but action governed by *swabhava*, the law of self-becoming and divine being in the Soul. Humans are not compelled to limit their identity to the current limitations in their personal nature. The soul has no such limitation. It is moved by a law of becoming. Spiritual disciplines enable one to fulfil the law of the soul, its *swabhava*.

Austerities are relative, and depend upon the person and their experience. For example, when one decides to give up eating meat, and become a vegetarian, it feels difficult at times, it feels austere, because one misses eating meat, and one's family and friends express their

disagreement with doing so. But after being a vegetarian for a number of years, one no longer misses meat; and when one no longer misses eating meat, it ceases to be an austerity. It is simply what one does. One no longer identifies with it.

Therefore, while celibacy may feel difficult initially and for some extended period, as long as one continues to entertain lustful thoughts or sexual fantasy, once one develops the skill to “let go” of these, celibacy becomes easy. One simply is. One is no longer the person who is not getting any sex.

The great danger of this form of *tapas* is that in one’s effort to control one’s sexuality, one may only suppress it. Instead of “letting go” of sexual fantasy and desire, one may add to its *samskara* or habit by dwelling on it.

Question: What consideration should be given to one’s cultural and social environment before adopting a vow of celibacy?

Marshall Govindan: The decision to make a vow of celibacy needs to be made after considering whether one’s environment is going to be sufficiently supportive. Do you need to and if so, can you give up watching movies which involve sexuality? Are you going to school and surrounded by persons who tempt you? If you are working in a place which brings you into contact with many sources of temptation, it may be necessary for you to decide whether you can manage it, or change where you live or work. It will be easier to maintain the vow if you are living in a place which is isolated, for example a rural retreat center. Or even if you commit your free time to your practices and study rather than to socializing.

In India, in certain orthodox Hindu communities, children take a vow of *brahmacharya* at the age of puberty, so that until they are married, all of their energy can be directed towards their studies, both spiritual and temporal, and so prepare themselves for the second phase of life, the heavy responsibilities of family life. The life of the student is the first stage of four stages, or *ashramas* of life. It is followed by the life of the householder, the *grahasta*, wherein one enjoys sexuality activity, creates and maintains a family, contributes to society’s economic needs. When one’s children are grown and have become married, then the third stage of life, that of a retired person, a *vanaprasti*, when one has more time for self-study, contemplation of eternal verities, public service and spiritual seeking. Typically during this third phase, sexual activities are avoided. This third stage prepares one for the final *ashrama*, the fourth stage of life, known as *sannyas*, wherein one may choose to renounces one’s material possessions and family. This choice may be formalized with vows of renunciation, made with or without the blessings and guidance of a spiritual preceptor. Such vows will usually include vows of celibacy. In India, most sannyasins, are men, and they can be identified by their ochre colored clothes. But many women enjoy a special status when they reach the age of sixty, which allows them to be freed

of family responsibilities and to dedicate their time to activities associated with religion and spirituality. Such women choose to mark this status by wearing only white.

A social code will also be supportive. In India, men socialize only with men. Women socialize only with women. Even in social gatherings, this has been the rule, until recently, when Western social behavior, through modern media, has weakened the observance of this social code. Otherwise, dating is frowned upon. Group social activities are the norm. Such limitations serve to prevent unwanted advances and unnecessary intimate exchanges. Unfortunately it also leads to frequent psychological suppression, because people are ignorant of the need for “letting go” of sexual fantasy, and even less skilled in practicing it. Fueled by the influx of pornography and Western values, India’s spiritual and religious culture is threatened. If one decides to follow such a social code, one must also avoid mentally “pushing away” with others, as this may create psychological suppression, and worse, misogyny, or antipathy, and towards others, and alienation. One must also avoid the belief that one is superior to others. Such a belief is sometimes fostered within religious sects.

Question: I understand that you belong to a Siddha tradition, whose teachings are tantric. How do you reconcile the practice of celibacy with those of Tantra?

Marshall Govindan: While celibacy is usually associated with spiritual traditions which renounce involvement in worldly life, both in the East and West, *it plays an important role in preparing adepts in various sects of Tantra.* “Tantra” has many meanings. It means “web” and in this sense refers to the web of teachings which unite the spiritual and material worlds. Tantra also refers to “teachings” which encompass the use of energetic practices, to bring about a transformation of human nature. It is based upon the *Samkhya*, the dualistic philosophic school which posits two fundamental poles of reality, the Seer and the Seen, spirit/consciousness and nature. The writers of the *tantras*, whether they are Hindu or Buddhist, recorded the results of their experiments with the subtle anatomy, including the chakras and nadis, using pranayama, mantras, visualization, inner worship, and finally hatha yoga. Tantra includes practices which involve sublimating sexual energy, *bindu*, into spiritual energy, *ojas*, through *kundalini yoga*. Practitioners of *tantra* are known as *sadhaks*, those who follow a prescribed *sadhana*, or discipline. Adepts of *tantra* are known as *siddhas*, or perfect masters of human nature. The tantrics realized that human nature can be transformed, based upon the principle of identifying with Shiva-Shakti, Conscious-Energy. They realized that consciousness follows energy and that energy follows consciousness. Everything emanates from Supreme Consciousness, referred to as Shiva and Supreme Energy, referred to as Shakti.

Much of tantric yoga is *ultra-sadhana*, or “contrary practice.” Unlike traditions which avoid contact with worldly activities, considering them to be illusionary or distracting temptations, the tantrics embraced the world of nature and sought to transform their human nature. They

considered the Divine to be both transcendent and imminent within everything. Performing *tapas* in most cases involves doing the opposite of what human nature requires. For example, keeping silence rather than speaking, fasting instead of eating, remaining awake when the eyes are closed, and *maithuna yoga*, sublimating semen and sexual energy upwards rather than ejaculating during sexual intercourse. This leads to control and silencing of the mind, the realization of Oneness, when this energy reaches the crown of the head. Consequently, desire is removed and one may realize enlightenment and immortality. The foremost text of Tantra in the Yoga Siddha tradition of south India is the *Tirumandiram*, written by the Siddha Tirumular in the Tamil language, probably between the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. It includes an entire chapter (section 19 of *tantra* 3) on sexual yoga with a partner, *maithuna yoga* which he refers to as “*paryanga yoga*”.

Until and unless one is established in the witness consciousness, for which the discipline of *brahmacharya* or celibacy, is so valuable, one will generally not be successful in the practice of *paryanga* or *vajroli yoga* or *maithuna yoga*. Unfortunately, today in the West, so called practitioners of “neo-tantra” promote “sacred sexuality” as a means of having longer and deeper orgasms. This only serves to strengthen the delusion that “I am my body” and that one’s happiness depends upon pleasuring it, and avoiding what is uncomfortable. Authentic *tantra* teaches that unless one maintains the perspective of the Witness, the Seer, making everything else, every sensation, every thought, every emotion, the object of one’s awareness, the Seen, it is not authentic *tantra*. Therefore one must first purify the vital body of desire to a large extent before one can even attempt to practice *paryanga yoga* or *maithuna* with a partner. The application of breathing and relaxation techniques, muscular locks and visualization can then be used successfully to sublimate sexual energy during intercourse. One realizes Oneness with the Supreme Being. One becomes Shiva-Shakti in blissful union.

In the teachings of authentic *tantra* celibacy realizes its full potential as mean of purifying the vital body of desire. The Siddhas, or adepts of Tantra were not life long celibates. They performed *tapas* as celibates for extended periods to develop mastery over their human nature and to purify themselves of desire. They practiced kundalini yoga to sublimate sexual energy. They also practiced *paryanga yoga* to transform *bindu* into *ojas* and enter into Oneness. But *paryanga yoga*, like celibacy, is a means to ultimate God realization, here in the world, embracing and transforming nature. It is not a complete path, according to Tirumular, but it may be part of one.

Question: You indicated earlier that there was a great danger of suppression in attempting to control ones sexuality through a vow of celibacy.

Marshall Govindan: Celibacy requires great skill and self-awareness. Otherwise it results in psychological suppression of desire, and consequent neuroses. One slays desires not by

suppressing them, but by observing them, and “letting them go.” Not only celibacy, but any object of desire, any intention which one sets for oneself, for example, dietary restriction, or marriage fidelity, can become a source of inner conflict. That is why more than half of the adult population in the West suffer from serious neuroses. Anyone who begins to meditate, or with the help of a therapist, begins to observe their thoughts and emotions with detachment can eventually develop the skill required to “let go” of them. As most emotions entail suffering, the practice of meditation can weaken these sources of suffering, the *samskaras*, or habits of mind. But only by repeatedly returning to the nondual state of consciousness, *samadhi*, can one uproot these habits, according to Classical Yoga, as expressed in the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali. “Letting go” of desires requires that one observe them as they arise. One uses one’s intellectual faculty of discernment to recognize the desire for what it is: a disturbance of the vital body. One may label what kind of desire it is. By doing so, it ceases to be “me” or “mine,” or subjective; it becomes an object, like a cloud, or a tree. One does nothing to manifest the desire until or unless one is in a calm state, with little or no preference as to whether to indulge it or not.

It is not the object of desire which is to be avoided usually. It is not the object of desire which is usually problematic. The bar of chocolate just is. The attractive co-worker or acquaintance just is. It is the desire which is problematic. It is desire that must be slain. Desire creates suffering. This is one of fundamental tenets of all spiritual traditions around the world, and all Eastern religions. One’s spiritual progress is inversely related to the degree to which one is subject to desire. If one does not yet recognize this, then reflect deeply upon it, and examine the wisdom teachings of authentic spiritual traditions.

Convinced of its value and with the courage to apply yourself to it, consider making a vow of celibacy for some period, for example, two weeks, a month, three months, to begin with. If you are in a relationship be prepared to explain why to your partner and invite them to do so also. If you fear that you will lack the capacity to fulfill the vow, then work on the subject of fear for awhile, with meditation and self-study. You will be amazed by what you learn about yourself, and what you are not.

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