

[Editorial](#)

Category : [October 1994](#)

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Editorial

Coed Ashrams

the Editor

Dear Abbotji: My unmarried daughter Mala is living in an ashram in India. We were all so happy about her serious yoga pursuits, until today. We just found out that boys and girls are staying together in the same building. I can't believe it. What can we do? Signed Marsha Delleps Sdrawkcb.

Dear Marsha: It's hard to know what to believe when even your own eyes will deceive you. Consider the pattern above. Which of the long lines are parallel? The answer is all of them! The short hash marks confuse the brain cells that gauge orientation, making us interpret the lines as diverging. To negate this effect, tilt the diagram flat, looking across it from the lower left corner.

Hindus are living under our fair share of delusions. As with the lines above, we need to get a better perspective of what we see around us. Your encounter with coed ashrams is a case in point. There is a cultural momentum these days that rationalizes departure from the old ways of keeping single men and women apart. Today many contend it's OK for unmarried seekers to reside together in spiritual brother-sisterhood. It's harmless, the theory goes. These are grown adults, aware of the temptations, spiritually competent enough to see others not as bodies to be desired but souls evolving. It may even strengthen their yogic purpose, revealing residual attachments or desires which they can then resolve in meditative detachment.

Outside India here's the justification: "We have neither the living quarters nor

the staff to manage men and women separately. Even if we could, we're in the West where it's acceptable, where people value freedom over discipline. Women here are more outgoing. We have to fit in. Besides, people in the West are more fragile, psychologically, needing family-style nurturing more than monkish rigor. Sure it creates problems, but we couldn't expand membership or run our centers if we were so strict."

Ashrams these days are a kind of non-hostile hostel, where people go for kinship not provided by their family, to get themselves straightened out, find new meaning in life. Such centers provide a very real social service and spiritual oasis. Ashram inmates, that awful Indian term, come and go and are not expected to stay beyond a year or two. In other words, these are not mathas, monasteries, where the codes of conduct are far more exacting.

I spoke with ashram leaders this month, and the above is a verbal mosaic of their views. They know it's a problem, but see no options. Some groups consider themselves "strict" if the living quarters for men are separated from women on the same property, or on another floor. Others contend even that precaution is unnecessary. In either case, men and women are thrown into an intimate proximity that even most married couples, who are apart most of the day, seldom experience. Ashramites work together, eat together, meditate together, launder their clothes together, shop, strive, suffer and celebrate together. Most of them are unmarried, trying to be celibate. No one should be surprised or disappointed when those who dedicated their lives to yoga, renunciation and selfless service fail in their vows and revert to more worldly endeavors. Or when hanky-panky happens (one swami described the situation as "bringing fire and cotton together and expecting no blaze.") There's a saying in Sri Lanka: "Don't drink milk sitting under a toddy tree." Even if it really is milk, people will doubt and criticize. Even if boys and girls aren't involved sexually, coed ashrams raise suspicions. Society is suspicious of communal groups, equating them whether we like it or not with Waco-type cults. Society always destroys that which it cannot absorb. And it has not reached the point of accepting boys and girls living together in communal situations outside of matrimony. Though a strong leader can command needed restraint while he or she lives, what happens when that control is gone? All traditions that have lasted beyond a few decades have respected the need to keep men and women segregated. Trappist monks and Carmelite nuns have survived for centuries in the West precisely because of their respect for the cloister. The Ramakrishna Mission is exemplary. The Swaminarayan Fellowship is even more strict, not allowing its male swamis to move among or speak a single word with women. That's a tough regimen to follow in these permissive days, but their chaste diligence has resulted in one of the strongest Hindu organizations in the world.

Marsha, why don't you write to the ashram leaders? Explain your concerns and suggest that: 1) All facilities for men and women be separate, including dining and working areas, and that they sit separately at satsang; 2) That boys and girls be closely supervised and counseled to show a formal friendliness towards each other as striving souls, not objects of affection. Definitely no hugging; 3) That boys and girls always travel separately and in pairs when outside the ashram. That may help Mala, and others like her. Write again. Om shanti...PS: Did you know your name is ashram spelled backwards?

To be continued: