

Dealing with Illicit Sex

Author:

Matsyavatara Prabhu

Question: In ISKCON we are taught to follow the four regulative principles, among which avoiding illicit sex is often the most crucial one. However, there are situations where one member of the couple doesn't agree on practicing sexual restraint, and this could lead to the drastic break-up of the marriage. What can be done in such cases?

Answer: This is a burning issue, which requires an honest and urgent clarification. It is not the first time I have talked about it, but so far I have done so only with very intimate students. According to my understanding of Srila Prabhupada's teachings, I distinguish between two categories of illicit sex: the first is pre-marital and outside marriage—they belong to the same category—and the second is within wedlock, between a regular couple united before God, with the authorization and blessing of the spiritual master, who sanctifies the marriage. Both categories are classified as illicit sex—to use the classic terminology—but for me there is no comparison between the consequences of extra-conjugal illicit sex and those from illicit sex within a religiously constituted couple. The term “illicit sex” is used to point out that sexual organs are not toys and, for both men and women, their proper function is procreation. Sexual organs are parts of the body with a precise function, and every other function is improper or “illicit.” Having said this, the embodied being experiences many conditionings, arriving to this body with a huge karmic load of samskaras* and vasanas**. For some people, therefore, the urges could be so strong that, despite all good intentions, there could be some lapses. But one thing is the lapse occurring within the married couple, and quite another thing is the lapse outside marriage. Outside the regular couple the failure is disastrous, both personally and socially, whereas within the regularly constituted couple the damage is contained—but I am still talking of damage, don't misunderstand. There is no comparison between the two damages. By the mercy of the divine grace, I have always strongly stressed the importance of following the regulative principles, and I am not talking like this to promote a different behavior, a different standard. I do believe that those who seek spiritual realization and aspire to develop pure love of God should strictly follow the regulative principles, and therefore should not engage in illicit sexual activities. At the same time, in my many years of experience counseling people, I have witnessed a lot of suffering caused by the uncritical, uncompromising application of the law. People live on different planes of consciousness: it is exceptional to find two people on the same level, even if they both sincerely desire to become devotees at the same time. In a couple there is often a partner who makes quick advancement, while the other might remain stationary for some time. This usually generates a gap. I have been advising couples for more than twenty years to help each other, to be patient and tolerant. If one of the two needs help, the other should offer it generously. Perhaps I have not stressed this enough. I consider that one should rigorously follow the regulative principles, but I am now talking of cases that could lead to serious turmoil in the family, cases that usually lead to betrayal. I don't want to suggest that anyone should abandon the principle of purity, but it should be understood that people can be cured through constant love and affection. If between husband and wife there is real sincerity and friendship, in some measure there will also be real love and

affection. If the willingness to overcome one's limitations is there, some careful concessions can be excused, thus avoiding big, serious, irreparable havoc. In my answer I limit myself to say that we shouldn't put extramarital illicit sex on the same level as the occasional weaknesses in married life. Considering them the same would show a lack of spiritual comprehension and maturity and a misunderstanding of the function of controlling sexual energies. To rectify a person—to rectify the character, to cure a disease—we need to follow the path of recovery. An expert doctor always knows how to administer the medicine. I am not surprised or astonished if a young couple of my students once in a while indulge in effusions that go beyond the limit. Of course, I absolutely don't encourage such things because they dissipate emotional resources and increase bodily identification, distracting the devotee from the real purpose of life: Krishna-bhakti. At the same time, I am in my late fifties and I have some knowledge and experience of psychology; I have seen people who have rigidly negated their impulses for a long time and later—even in the guise of renunciators—have abandoned their religious vows. Repression and Sublimation Whoever represses his sexual instincts without being able to sublimate them—which means increasing his sadhana and connection to guru and Krishna—won't be able to resist long enough, and will inevitably head for a fall down. These fall downs could be so serious that the individual thrown in such a state of moral and spiritual prostration might not be able to rise again, at least in that lifetime. As the Vaishnava scriptures explain, only a few people in this age are already so elevated that they can immediately and completely abstain from sexual activity. The majority of people need gradual distancing, protected by the institution of marriage and regulated by the four principles—the necessary groundwork for ethical life and the pursuit of spiritual realization. The management of emotions requires great competence and maturity, both cultural and spiritual. The guidance and direct assistance of the spiritual master is therefore essential, especially in crucial moments of life, when one is called to make fundamental choices (e.g.: choice of asrama) that, if wrongly handled, could jeopardize or stop spiritual advancement. Both repression of instincts and indiscriminate indulgence can produce neurosis and serious personality disorders. Our Vaishnava literature explains that psycho-physical energies, indispensable for the journey towards transcendence, should be neither negated or repressed, nor indiscriminately dispersed; they should be correctly used, beneficially to the development of personality. In other words, they should be sublimated by engaging in devotional service. Hari-nama japa and nama sankirtana, Deity worship and spiritual association are the best means to overcome problems of lust. Experience teaches us that through the discipline of bhakti-yoga not only is possible to sublimate impulses—by the elimination of their self-destructive unconscious charge—but also to re-integrate them on the plane of pure consciousness, as divine rasa. Otherwise, when one gives in to such impulses without discrimination, they obscure the consciousness, provoking confusion, frustration and suffering; they enslave the subject in ephemeral conceptions and bodily identities, in destructive tendencies and instincts. The science of bhakti aims at the exact opposite: making the person fully conscious of his divine nature, his own relationship with God and an instrument for everybody's well being, including his own. The second and third chapter of the Bhagavad-gita teach us that whoever represses certain impulses but keeps cultivating attachment for the sense objects in the mind—persisting in their contemplation and internally longing for them—won't succeed in the path of yoga.*** We need to learn how to dissociate from the sense objects psychologically, transcending the problem. For this there is a discipline or a route to follow, with arrangements and methods that partially differ from person to person, according to the various states of consciousness and psychological

conditioning. Such different arrangements are obviously all finalized to reach the same objective: to overcome bodily identification and selfish gratification, and to develop pure bhakti.**** Krishna says that discovering a higher taste is necessary to abandon the inferior, conditioned and conditioning taste—source of multiple sufferings—and to reorient physical and mental dynamics: "The embodied soul may be restricted from sense enjoyment, though the taste for sense objects [the desire for them] remains. By experiencing a higher taste and ceasing such engagements, he becomes fixed in [Krishna] consciousness." *****

Right and Wrong Decisions We should try to be honest and serious, first of all with ourselves. We should have a balanced vision and not allow people to take the vow of lifelong celibacy at a young age, without first having shown tangible signs of maturity and dominion over the senses. This maturity should be on different planes: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. A choice that is the best in absolute terms can produce serious damages if made at the wrong time, due to the person's lack of preparation. If not properly helped, the person who has such difficulties generally develops a sense of self-failure and a heavy sense of guilt, which eventually cause inhibition, depression, emotional blocks and the stop of spiritual progress. This sense of guilt can be defined as pathological, whereas a healthy and beneficial sense of guilt arises when the person is aware of his mistakes and deeply repents them, finding in himself, guru and Krishna, the energies to rise above them. Regarding such sensitive issues, specifically connected to life in the grihastha asrama, I have noticed over many years unhealthy symptoms and many damages produced by hasty decisions and a rigid mentality. Many marriages have failed because the person experiencing difficulty in restraining the senses—when confronted with an overly rigid partner—has looked for satisfaction outside the marriage, starting love affairs and betraying the spouse, thus producing a hellish condition for all the people involved. I recall a whole list of rigid people who first ruined their family members and then ruined themselves. Real affection means to come forward to the needs of others, and I believe that every real need in the family has to be taken into serious consideration. If a person thinks that he or she can't or shouldn't concede anything, absolutely nothing, such person should not get married. And if they do get married, throughout their whole matrimonial life they will be bitterly reminded that they should not have married. Couple means two people, two people who promise to help each other for the rest of their lives. If one is in need and the other doesn't help, I don't know how this refusal could be beneficial for his spiritual advancement, and how it could be done in the name of devotion for Krishna. Of course there can be embarrassment, little enthusiasm and whatever else, but something has to be done to help. I have seen so many cases of conflict and I have come to the deep conviction that there must be a mediation, there must be reciprocal affection, reciprocal care. When the desire for intercourse assumes a dangerous psychological proportion—producing a "fixed idea," a true neurosis—we should act as with any other disease, looking for a remedy and a cure. When I acted as a direct witness and I advised people in this way, they often solved their problem brilliantly, gradually finding balance, detachment and serenity, discovering a type of affection that was not based on sexual intercourse. Real affection, spiritual affection, has no need for sexual intercourse or physical contact. Such affection is the achievement of the target of bhakti, and is obtained after a long practice; it is not a starting point. At the beginning the couple might endeavor to overcome the problem, but to rise above it the effort must be equipped with enough capacity and experience, and above all enough cultural and spiritual maturity in Krishna consciousness. Cultural Conditioning I spoke about religious duties, but now I wish to mention the cultural environment where every one of us—consciously or unconsciously—lives. Over the last century Western culture has been

increasingly fascinated by rationalism and materialism, progressively polluting itself with a pseudo-scientific literature***** that has considerably contributed to the development of a dangerously permissive sexual behavior. Such literature has induced people to think of eroticism and sexual acts as something physiologically necessary, comparing sex desire to the need for food and air. Not only have they presented the satisfaction of such an urge as inevitable, they even declared that whoever neglects it would develop psychological disorders. It is difficult to calculate the extent of harm that such mentality has caused and is causing. It is truly a social and psychological plague, both on the collective and on the individual level. Spiritual Affection On the plane of spiritual realization, of spiritual affection and friendship, sexual intercourse becomes totally needless, extraneous and artificial. But, as we know, people acquire perfection after long efforts. According to sastras, a married couple that can transcend illicit sex is on the direct, true path towards perfection. Until there are distractions, spiritual realization is overcast and shadowed. Besides the authoritative sastric statements in this regard, the results of scientific research made by some American universities (Wisconsin, 1968) demonstrate that numerous couples can live well without sexual intercourse, provided they cultivate their interest for elevated ethical values. First of all—as I said at the beginning of my answer—people should try hard to abstain from extra-conjugal sex, because this generates hellish conditions in the society, in the family, in the couple and in the relationship between parents and children. Such illicit connections, metaphorically speaking, create hell; they create great embarrassment and pain; they condemn children to experience distress and harmful life-models, and condemn the spouse to anguish and deep suffering. Illicit sex in family life is like giving methadone to a heroin-addict. Methadone is better than heroin (extramarital conjugal sex), but better than methadone is to rise above the problem. Methadone also creates addiction, but not as strong and devastating as the addiction created by heroin. Illicit sex in family life creates dependence, addiction and identification with the body—besides being a great waste of energy—but there is no comparison with illicit sex out of wedlock. When my students intend to get married I ask them to get to know each other very well; they should thoroughly inquire about the other's choices and priorities in life. They should become deeply aware of the responsibility, the obligation, and the burden they assume in getting married. Then I become the witness, and I commit myself to help both of them to overcome all the difficulties and to face their responsibilities, which include economical, social, and emotional aspects. These are all comprised in the sphere of family responsibility and, consequently, of spiritual realization. As I told you many times, ultimately to solve this type of problems the real solution is to seriously adopt a Krishna conscious mentality. But now I believe I should stop here with the answer. Obviously, given the magnitude and complexity of the theme, this answer will not satisfactorily exhaust the various topics touched, but it will merely serve as an orientation tool for deeper study and meditation. Notes *1. Traces in the memory that determine the conformation of the deep psyche or unconscious, and which are the origin of mental tendencies and automatisms. **2. Latent tendencies that condition the individual character and behavior. ***3. "While contemplating the objects of the senses, a person develops attachment for them, and from such attachment lust develops, and from [frustrated] lust anger arises. From anger, complete delusion arises, and from delusion bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost one falls down again into the material pool." Bhagavad-gita 2.62-63. ****4. The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: "O Partha, when a man gives up all varieties of desire for sense gratification, which arise from mental concoction, and when his mind, thus purified, finds satisfaction in

the self alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness." Bhagavad-gita 2.55. *****5.
Bhagavad-gita 2.59. *****6. See the Freudian literature on the topic of libido.

From a lecture by Matsyavatara Prabhu translated from the Italian by Kaunteya Das