

What About Illicit Sex?

We take a vow to not engage in illicit sex. What does that mean? The GBC has quoted Prabhupāda as saying no illicit sex specifically means sex only for procreation, done once per month after chanting 50 rounds and done at a time likely for the woman to become pregnant. But what if after taking the vow you realize it's more difficult to follow than you imagined? Is there a lesser standard that also isn't illicit?

Many *grhasthas* who want to follow no illicit sex strictly unfortunately cannot always do it. So how do we, individually, and as an institution, deal with this reality and yet move steadily forward in our Kṛṣṇa consciousness?

Some gurus will say no illicit sex clearly means sex only for procreation and any other sex, even within marriage, is illicit. Others will say that sex within marriage not for procreation is not ideal but it is not strictly speaking illicit because Prabhupāda sometimes said that no illicit sex means "sex within marriage."

But what is said publicly and what is said behind closed doors is not always the same. If a disciple is struggling to perfectly follow, will a guru chastise and shame them telling them they will suffer for this? A few might, but the rest wouldn't. They would say the goal is to abide by Prabhupāda's definition, but if you can't always do that then regulate sex. Did Prabhupāda ever explicitly say anything like this? No. Did he know his disciples were challenged with this principle? Yes. What he repeatedly told us was that we must be pure and self-controlled to become Kṛṣṇa conscious.

Sex only for procreation is ideal. Therefore this is our goal. But understandably, celibacy outside of procreation is not always easy or possible for everyone to perfectly follow, especially at a young age. Nonetheless, one should never use this as an excuse to give up trying. Along with chanting 16 rounds, we must strictly follow all the regulative principles if we are to make it back to Godhead in this life. Śrīla Prabhupāda asked us to not make him come back to save us and practically pleaded with us again and again to finish our business in this life. Over and over, he told us, "If you chant 16 rounds and strictly follow the four regulative principles, I will take you back to Godhead." Personally, I never felt it worth relinquishing my ticket to Vaikuṅṭha just for some momentary sexual pleasure.

But still, sometimes this is easier said than done.

Struggling with the 4th Principle

It is definitely not my intention in writing this to make anyone feel guilty for being human. Prabhupāda knew we would struggle to control our senses. After all, even great sages have struggled to control sex desire. Prabhupāda didn't hate, condemn, or reject us when we fell short. At the same time, he gave us instructions that could make us "super human," so to speak. He had confidence that the more we sincerely and seriously apply Kṛṣṇa consciousness, the more easily we could follow the principles. It is a fact that even sincere devotees sometimes struggle with sexual control. Yet because they are sincere, someday they win the battle: "One who does good is never overcome by evil."

So if you struggle with what I like to call "The 4th Principle," you are not alone. The good news is that generally couples who struggle to follow The 4th Principle when they were young, gradually and naturally find themselves becoming more sexually pure later in life. We can deal with sexual desire intelligently and in a way that gradually makes it less important for us.

Regulation is the key to self-control. Obviously using contraception or having sex at a time unlikely for pregnancy would have to happen if you don't want children, and this compromise is not ideal. But in the long run, it is often a better option in helping you eventually become more sexually controlled than artificial repression and its possible ugly consequences.

Sex desire is the center of material enjoyment and we are trying to do everything for Kṛṣṇa's enjoyment. So the more we control ourselves, the more we advance in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The more strict we are with our spiritual practices, meaning the better we chant, the more we read, the better *saṅga* we get, and the more we engage in service, the more our sexual inclinations subside. At the same time, we need to be realistic about where we are at so that we don't attempt artificial renunciation.

How I Dealt with the 4th Principle

Personally, I embraced the no illicit sex principle because I never wanted to see my wife as an object of my gratification, but as *bhoga* for Kṛṣṇa's pleasure. I also didn't want to imitate Kṛṣṇa. His *līlās* with the *gopīs* are telling us that He is the one who can really enjoy sex in the highest and most spiritual sense. I want to understand the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and it's clear I can't understand it deeply while I am still imitating it. Sexual control is a big price, but the reward is certainly worth it.

I did have experience with sex before joining ISKCON and burned out that desire quite a bit. It allowed me to see that sex was not all that it was built up to be. Still, I was first married at the age of 22, and controlling the desire then was not always easy. But I embraced the principle of sexual control because it helped me become less selfish and gave me spiritual strength and enthusiasm. Like other young *grhasthas*, I wish I could have followed more perfectly at that time. Still I kept trying and avoided beating myself up for being a normal young man. I valued the principle of sexual control, and I believe this is why Kṛṣṇa helped me in my efforts to become sexually controlled.

Also, I remember that as a *brahmacārī*, life was so ecstatic and engaging that sex wasn't an issue. (Mind you, this was before mobile phones! Moreover, we were chanting 7 to 10 hours daily). The symptom of advancement is that we lose our taste for material pleasures. Mr. Lust, as Prabhupāda called him will hardly bother those who are ecstatic in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

So are you a failure if you regulate sex in marriage beyond once per month for procreation? Well, the way *Kali-yuga* is going today, this would put you in the top percentile of controlled people. So that is quite some accomplishment, especially for young people with hormones firing and upbringings filled with sexual *saṁskāras*. I wouldn't use this as an excuse for not following, but just an encouragement that if you can regulate sex in marriage that is also quite an accomplishment in *Kali-yuga*. Also, remember that struggling with sense control is pretty normal, but Kṛṣṇa consciousness can make you supranormal!

What Prabhupāda Said About Illicit

When Śrīla Prabhupāda was personally questioned about sex in marriage, he was on one level uncompromising but on another level he was understanding. Once in Māyāpur, Bhavānanda went to Prabhupāda with a complaint, "Śrīla Prabhupāda, the *grhasthas* are having sex more than once a

month." Prabhupāda ignored him. Minutes went by, again Bhavānanda spoke, but this time Prabhupāda cut him off with his sharp reply, "Why do you think I told them to get married?"

In a lecture on the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (1.5.9-11), given on June 6, 1969 in New Vṛndāvana, Śrīla Prabhupāda explains the gradual process through restrictions:

"When Vyāsadeva recommends that you must have sex life by marriage, that means restriction. That means restriction. You cannot have sex life here and there unrestrictedly. You have got one wife or one husband, and that is also restricted: only for begetting child you can have sex life. So many things. The whole idea is restriction. Not that 'Because I have got a wife it is a machine for sex life.' No, no. Marriage does not mean like that. It is restriction. The whole Vedic civilization is to bring men to the transcendental platform by restricting all his nonsense habits to nil. But not all of a sudden. Gradually, according to the quality."

In this connection, Uttamaśloka dāsa recalls some incidents with Śrīla Prabhupāda:

At one time there was a devotee who came to Māyāpur and while in Māyāpur that devotee went to some local society girl over there, and the news spread among the devotee community and then they told Prabhupāda.

Prabhupāda called the devotee and asked him, "Why did you do that?" He said, "I couldn't control myself. I was too much tormented by lust." And Prabhupāda said, "But you are married! Why did you have to go to a prostitute!?" He said, "No Prabhupāda, my wife wanted to follow the principle of no illicit sex so she refused and I didn't want to force her." So Prabhupāda said that actually the violation within marriage is extremely minor as compared to what is outside of marriage. So Śrīla Prabhupāda was actually very clear about this.

Another devotee was told by his godsister that she had left her husband and when Prabhupāda asked her why, she explained that it was because he was in *māyā* and always wanted to have sex. Śrīla Prabhupāda asked, "And you cannot satisfy?"

Again in Māyāpur, on the roof. One devotee was asking Prabhupāda about the difficulty he was facing in following this strict principle about sex life. Śrīla Prabhupāda responded, "Sex between husband and wife is never sinful, but it will not help their spiritual life".

In a letter to Madhusudana dated 10 March 1969, Hawaii, Śrīla Prabhupāda elaborates:

"But you should always remember that wife is not a machine for sense gratification. Wife is your half body for nourishing your Kṛṣṇa conscious status. So you are getting a wife who is already trained up in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and if you live carefully and faithfully there will be no difficulty. That is the verdict of all *ācāryas*. I think this will simplify your agitated mind."

Obviously, there is a fine line between giving shelter to each other's senses and not using each other as a machine for sense gratification. As we mentioned earlier, it is a matter of sincerity – trying our best to minimize sex while repenting sincerely when we slip.

In Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta, Volume One, Chapter 21, (New York City, 1965-66) Satsvarūpa Dāsa Goswami shares the following episode:

To speak ill of sexual pleasure was certainly not a strategic move for one who wanted to create followers among the Lower East Side hippies. But Prabhupāda never considered changing his message. In fact, when Umāpati had mentioned that Americans didn't like to hear that sex was only for conceiving children, Prabhupāda had replied, "I cannot change the philosophy to please the Americans."

"What about sex?" asked the ISKCON attorney, Steve Goldsmith, one evening, speaking out from the rear of the crowded temple.

"Sex should only be with one's wife," Prabhupāda said, "and that is also restricted. Sex is for the propagation of Kṛṣṇa conscious children. My spiritual master used to say that to beget Kṛṣṇa conscious children he was prepared to have sex a hundred times. Of course, that is most difficult in this age. Therefore, he remained a *brahmacārī*."

"But sex is a very strong force," Mr. Goldsmith challenged. "What a man feels for a woman is undeniable."

"Therefore in every culture there is the institution of marriage," Prabhupāda replied. "You can get yourself married and live peacefully with one woman, but the wife should not be used as a machine for sense gratification. Sex should be restricted to once a month and only for the propagation of children."

Hayagrīva, who was seated just to Swamiji's left, beside the large, dangling cymbal, spoke out suddenly. "Only once a month?" And with a touch of facetious humor he added loudly, "Better to forget the whole thing!"

"Yes! That's it! Very good boy." Swamiji laughed, and others joined him. "It is best not to think of it. Best just to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa." And he held up his hands as if he were chanting on a strand of beads. "That way we will be saved from so much botheration. Sex is like the itching sensation, that's all. And as when we scratch, it gets worse, so we should tolerate the itching and ask Kṛṣṇa to help us. It is not easy. Sex is the highest pleasure in the material world, and it is also the greatest bondage."

In the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (4.27.6), Śrīla Prabhupāda explains in the purport:

"Checking population by contraceptive method is another sinful activity, but in this age of Kali people have become so sinful that they do not care for the resultant reactions of their sinful lives."

Having sex in a committed unmarried relationship does not fall exactly fall under the concept of "no illicit sex."

What Does Illicit Sex Mean for Homosexual Devotees?

Illicit sex is sinful whether one is heterosexual or homosexual but for homosexuals, all sex is illicit because they can't have sex for having kids.

Whatever one's gender preference, all the same rules and practices apply, the only difference being that homosexual couples cannot have sex for procreation. Any sex not for procreation is termed illicit sex by Śrīla Prabhupāda.

But do we need to say this?

Regarding gender fluid, Prabhupāda told one man who sometimes dressed as a woman, better to decide which one you prefer and stay with that rather than changing back and forth.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for homosexuals is dealing with devotees who may be hurtful towards homosexuals, or communities that believe homosexuality is demoniac. In those cases, homosexuals who have partners may choose to keep their homosexual identities unknown to the public, although that may not always be possible.

It is easiest in ISKCON if a homosexual remains single. It doesn't have to be a problem for their spiritual lives if they live together, as long as they follow the principles, but as I said, it may be a problem in that some communities may not accept them if they live together, or make their lives difficult in one way or another if they live together. So they may wish to live in communities or countries where they will be free to do devotional service in an environment in which they are not judged or condemned. In other words, there is not one way that all ISKCON devotees or communities will relate to homosexual couples. Most likely the greatest acceptance will be from younger devotees in Western countries.

Prabhupāda's concern was that we become Kṛṣṇa conscious. To this end he allowed disciples to marry. In one case, one of his servants had fallen in love with a boy and he couldn't break away from that relationship, and eventually Prabhupāda said he could live with him.