

Vaisnava Moral Theology and Homosexuality
by Hridayananda das Gosvami Acaryadeva
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I have recently recommended that ISKCON acknowledge and appreciate the sincere efforts of all devotees who

- a) sincerely strive to be Krishna conscious;
- b) cannot be celibate, and thus
- c) choose monogamy rather than promiscuity as a strategy for sense control and gradual renunciation.

Since my brief statement on this topic has alarmed some devotees, I will try here to more clearly explain my position on this matter. I will develop here the following thesis:

The role of sexuality in a spiritual society is clearly a moral issue that must be understood within the greater context of Vaishnava moral philosophy, as we find it in authoritative Vaishnava scriptures. Lord Krishna's own pastimes, and His explicit teachings, reveal that in human life, there are certain inevitable moral tensions, such as

1. the tension between justice and mercy;
2. the tension between competing moral duties;
3. the tension between the ideal and the real;
4. the tension between acts and consequences;

1. *Justice and Mercy*

As in all societies, moral conflicts occur in Vedic culture, often involving a tension between the moral principles of justice and mercy. Indeed we find instances of this in Lord Krishna's own pastimes, often resulting in an attempt to strike a balance between justice and mercy.

Asvatthama

We find a striking example of this in the first canto of the *Bhagavatam* when Arjuna arrests the murderous Asvatthama and brings him back to the Pandavas' camp. The sequence of events is as follows:

1.7.35 Lord Krishna orders Arjuna to kill the captured Asvatthama.

1.7.35-39 Krishna presents the case for killing Asvatthama, directly ordering Arjuna again [1.7.39] to kill him.

1.7.40-41 Arjuna decides not to kill Asvatthama, despite being twice ordered to do so by Krishna, and instead brings him back to the Pandavas' camp and delivers him to Draupadi.

1.7.42-48 Draupadi urges Asvatthama's release on the plea of compassion for his mother and respect for the brahmana caste.

1.7.49 Yudhisthira agrees with Draupadi.

1.7.50 Nakula, Sahadeva, Yuyudhana, Arjuna, Krishna and all the women agree with Draupadi.

1.7.51 Bhima urges the killing of Asvatthama.

1.7.53-54 Krishna tells Arjuna that Asvatthama should be killed and not killed, and orders Arjuna to please both Draupadi and Bhima.

1.7.55-56 Arjuna cuts off the prisoner's topknot and jewel and drives him, humiliated and socially dead, from the camp.

We may note the following about this story:

A. The debate over Asvatthama's fate centers around dharma, which is one of the standard words for *morality*.

B. There was tension between two moral positions, both positions held by great devotees.

C. Krishna ordered severe punishment, but then changed His position upon hearing a compassionate plea from His devotee, Draupadi.

D. Bhima urged justice, Draupadi urged mercy. Krishna finally accepted a compromise between justice and mercy.

Another *Bhagavatam* story, found in the tenth canto, chapter fifty-four, illustrates Lord Krishna's wish to strike a compromise between the moral principles of justice and mercy. Here is the sequence of this pastime.

Rukmi

10.54.31 Having kidnapped Rukmini, Lord Krishna prepares to kill the attacking Rukmi.

10.54.32-33 Alarmed, Rukmini begs Krishna not to kill her brother.

10.54.34 Rukmini arouses Krishna's compassion and He does not kill Rukmi.

10.54.35 Krishna ties up Rukmi and mocks him by cutting his hair and moustache.

10.54.36-37 Lord Balarama, being merciful, releases Rukmi and chastises Krishna, accusing Him of doing something which is "asadhu" and "terrible for us", since "disfiguring a relative is like killing him."

10.54.38-50 Balarama preaches to Krishna and Rukmini.

This story clearly parallels that of Asvatthama:

A. Krishna first prepares to deliver justice by killing Rukmi, just as Krishna first ordered Arjuna to kill Asvatthama and bring his head to Draupadi.

B. Compassionate Rukmini opposes this killing, just as Draupadi opposed the killing of Asvatthama.

C. As with Asvatthama, Krishna takes a middle course, figuratively killing by humiliation.

D. Balarama presents a fourth position, the first three being 1) Krishna's decision to kill Rukmi; 2) Rukmini's plea to spare her brother; and 3) Krishna's decision to kill Rukmi figuratively. Balarama chastises Krishna for figuratively killing a relative and then admonishes Rukmini for her excessive family sentiment.

E. As in the previous story of Asvatthama we find Krishna resolved to administer justice, then adjusting the punishment after a plea for mercy by a devotee.

In both these stories of Asvatthama and Rukmi we find justice tempered by mercy, resulting in an act of merciful justice which does not obey the strictest letter of the law.

2. Conflicting moral duties

Kunti and Pandu

We find another example of tension between competing moral duties in the *Mahabharata*, in a conversation between Pandu and his wife Kunti.

Cursed to never beget a child, and thus unable to provide an heir to the Kuru throne, Pandu begs his devoted wife Kunti to beget a child with a surrogate father, a saintly brahmana. Eventually of course, Kunti will reveal that Durvasa blessed her with the power to call demigods, and she will thus beget three sons with Dharma, Vayu and Indra. But for now, Pandu is trying to convince her to obey him and beget a son with a saintly brahmana. Among his arguments Pandu states:

“O king’s daughter, knowers of dharma know that a wife is to do as her husband says, whether he speaks according to dharma or even if he speaks what is not dharma.” [MB 1.113.27]¹

One might read this verse and conclude that a wife must always obey her husband, right or wrong, since this is what Pandu states. However in the very next chapter, after Kunti has given Pandu three sons, Pandu requests Kunti to call another god and beget another son, yet Kunti adamantly refuses her husband’s request and says:

“They do not recommend a fourth child by this means, even in times of trouble. With a fourth child, I would be a loose woman, with a fifth, I would become a harlot.” [MB 1.114.65]

Pandu clearly stated that a wife must obey her husband, whether he is right or wrong. But in fact when Kunti is right, Pandu accepts her argument and follows, abandoning a moral principle he has just declared.

Kunti then calls the twin Asvins for Madri, who thus begets Nakula and Sahadeva. But when Pandu requests yet another son for Madri, Kunti refuses and again Pandu accepts the wishes of his wife.

We find the same dialectic pattern of moral claims and duties repeated here: a strong male seeks to act in a strong way, claiming such an act to be just. A respected lady then insists on a somewhat different course, and the male adjusts his behavior.

The brahmana family of Eka-cakra

In the *Mahabharata*, *Adi Parva*, chapters 145-7, we find another striking example of moral conflict. In the city of Ekacakra, where the Pandavas live incognito in a brahmana’s house, a powerful Raksasa named Baka terrorizes the city, taking advantage of a weak, incompetent king who rules that region. In exchange for his protection, the townspeople are forced to periodically supply the demon a wagonload of food and one human, selected in turn from each of the town’s families.

Kunti hears her host brahmana family engaged in a strange, tearful argument in which the husband, wife, daughter and son all insist on sacrificing themselves to save the

¹ I have translated this and all other *Mahabharata* verses from the *Critical Edition* of the text.

family, for that family's turn has come to feed the demon. Eventually of course Bhima kills the demon, but this incident shows clearly that in Vedic culture, there were moral conflicts.

On the one hand a man must protect his family, yet if the father gave himself to the demon, society would prey on his unprotected family. The wife felt that her duty was to serve her husband by sacrificing herself to the demon, yet how could a husband sworn to protect his wife sacrifice her to a demon. Even the daughter wanted to save her parents and little brother by giving herself to the demon.

The key point here is that practical circumstances presented a seemingly insoluble moral conflict to a good, brahminical, Vedic family. The family's moral duty, was not at all clear to the them and they could not agree on what to do since any possible moral act seemed to violate another moral duty of equal importance.

3. *Ideal vs Real*

Another moral tension found in every society arises from the inevitable gap between the ideal and the real. Vedic culture teaches the highest moral and spiritual principles, but also engages practical human nature with remarkable candor and realism. The religious principles of dharma function as moral principles in Vedic culture. And when we study the application of dharma in texts such as the *Bhagavatam* and *Mahabharata*, we find that in the great majority of cases, dharma is used to regulate the two most passionate, and thus most dangerous, human activities: sex and violence.

In order to clearly understand the Vedic approach to moral issues, we must look at the way Vedic culture deals with sex and violence. As stated above, because these two activities arouse the wildest passion in human beings, it is precisely these two activities that most threaten moral and spiritual order in society, and which must therefore be regulated by dharma, morality.

To illustrate the mature complexity of the Vedic approach to moral issues, let us consider examples of the Vedic approach to violence, in the form of hunting, and sex, in the form of polygamy. We shall find in each case that Vedic culture teaches ideal moral principles, yet at the same time acknowledges real human nature and creates a cultural space for sincere people who cannot practice the ideal.

Hunting

The hunting of animals deeply violates one of the most grave Vedic moral principles: *ahimsa*, not harming the innocent. Lord Krishna mentions *ahimsa* four times in the *Bhagavad-gita* [10.5, 13.8, 16.2, 17.14].

At 13.8, Krishna declares that *ahimsa*, together with other qualities, is knowledge and that everything else is simply ignorance. Thus *himsa*, harming the innocent, is ignorance. At 18.25, Krishna states that work undertaken without considering the resultant *himsa*, or harm to the innocent, is work in the mode of darkness. Krishna also states at 18.27 that a worker in passion is *himsatmaka*, which Prabhupada translates, "always envious."

At 16.2, Lord Krishna states that *ahimsa* is one of the godly qualities to which Arjuna is born. And at 17.14, the Lord says that *ahimsa* is a necessary component of bodily austerity. The *Bhagavatam* similarly praises the moral quality of *ahimsa*:

1.18.22 declares that *ahimsa* is the very nature of a pure soul. 3.28.4 enjoins that one should practice *ahimsa*. 7.11.8 teaches that *ahimsa*, and other qualities, are *paro dharmau*, the highest religious principle.

Significantly, 11.17.21 insists that *ahimsa* is *sarva-varnika*, for *all* varnas. And at 11.19.33 Krishna Himself teaches *ahimsa*.

Similarly, the *Mahabharata*, 1.11.12, declares that *ahimsa* is the supreme dharma for all living things.

Srila Prabhupada often taught that *ahimsa* especially means that one must not kill animals. For example, in his purport to the *Bhagavad-gita* 16.2, he writes,

“*Ahimsa* means not arresting the progressive life of any living entity. One should not think that since the spirit spark is never killed even after the killing of the body there is no harm in killing animals for sense gratification. People are now addicted to eating animals, in spite of having an ample supply of grains, fruits and milk. There is no necessity for animal killing. *This injunction is for everyone*. [emphasis mine] When there is no alternative, one may kill an animal, but it should be offered in sacrifice. At any rate, when there is an ample food supply for humanity, persons who are desiring to make advancement in spiritual realization should not commit violence to animals. Real *ahimsa* means not checking anyone's progressive life. The animals are also making progress in their evolutionary life by transmigrating from one category of animal life to another. If a particular animal is killed, then his progress is checked...So their progress should not be checked simply to satisfy one's palate. This is called *ahimsa*.”

Similarly, in his purport to *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.3.24, he states,

“There is no justice when there is animal-killing. Lord Buddha wanted to stop it completely, and therefore his cult of *ahimsa* was propagated not only in India but also outside the country.”

Yet despite these numerous and heavy scriptural statements enjoining *ahimsa* and forbidding *himsa*, we find that Vedic kings often hunted. Prabhupada taught that ksatriyas, warrior kings responsible to defend the people, were allowed to hunt in order to sharpen their skill with weapons. However, as Prabhupada points out in his purport to the *Bhagavatam* 4.22.13, even such hunting was not auspicious. Indeed it was still considered a sin. Prabhupada writes:

“Kings are ... sometimes employed to kill animals in hunting because they have to practice the killing art, otherwise it is very difficult for them to fight their enemies. Such things are not auspicious. Four kinds of sinful activities—associating with woman for illicit sex, eating meat, intoxication and gambling—are allowed for the kñatriyas. For political reasons, sometimes they have to take to these sinful activities...”

Recall that the *Bhagavatam* [11.17.21] directly states that *ahimsa* is *sarva-varnika*, to be practiced by all the social orders, including ksatriyas. Indeed the *Bhagavatam* shows that even kings are not spared the sinful reactions of killing animals. Thus at 4.25.7-8, the great Narada says to King Barhisman:

“O Prajapati! O King! See the animals, living things that you cruelly killed by the thousands in sacrifice.

“These animals are waiting for you, remembering your butchery. When you have departed this world, they will slice you up with iron horns, for you have enraged them.”

Similarly, the *Bhagavatam* declares at 5.26.24 that even Ksatriyas who take pleasure in hunting go to the hell known as Pranarodha. Prabhupada comments on this verse as follows:

“Men of the higher classes (the *brāhmaëas*, *kñatriyas* and *vaiçyas*) should cultivate knowledge of Brahman, and they should also give the çüdras a chance to come to that platform. If instead they indulge in hunting, they are punished as described in this verse. Not only are they pierced with arrows by the agents of Yamarāja, but they are also put into the ocean of pus, urine and stool described in the previous verse.”

How do we understand this paradox? On the one hand, Vedic scriptures could not be more clear in their teaching of *ahimsa*, not harming the innocent, and their condemnation of *himsa*, harming the innocent. On the other hand it seems that a special concession is given to warriors to hunt. However this concession is problematic for several reasons:

1. Shastra teaches that even kings are punished for killing animals.
2. The *Bhagavatam* states that all social orders, including warriors, must practice *ahimsa*.
3. Vedic history teaches the powerful lesson that many of the greatest Vedic kings suffered tragic fates while hunting. Exalted kings such as Dasaratha, Pandu and Pariksit also encountered disaster while hunting. And the stepbrother of Dhruva, Uttama, was murdered on a hunting expedition. There can be no mistake that such historical lessons discourage hunting.

It is fair to conclude that Vedic culture strikes a balance here between the ideal and the real. The ideal is clearly *ahimsa*. The “real” however is that throughout recorded history all over the world, warriors hunt. And throughout history we find that warriors do not in fact strictly limit their hunting to the minimum necessary to hone their essential skills as protectors of humanity.

Thus we find the following moral strategy in place:

1. The ideal is enjoined.
2. That which violates the ideal is prohibited.
3. A concession is made to those who simply cannot or will not follow the ideal.
4. Those who accept these concessions are accepted within society, however...
5. The dangers and repercussions of accepting this concession are clearly indicated.

I pointed out earlier that dharma, morality, focuses especially on the two most dangers human passions: sex and violence. In his purport to the *Bhagavatam* 4.26.4, which describes how King Puranjana went out to hunt animals, Srila Prabhupada relates hunting to lust.

“One form of hunting is known as woman-hunting. A conditioned soul is never satisfied with one wife. Those whose senses are very much uncontrolled especially try to hunt for many women. King Puraijana's abandoning the company of his religiously married wife [represents] the conditioned soul's attempt to hunt for many women for sense gratification.”

There is a clear similarity between hunting and sexual promiscuity, for both are attempts to enjoy the physical body of another soul, with little or no regard for the

ultimate well-being of that other soul. Thus it is not surprising that we find a Vedic moral approach to sexual promiscuity which resembles the approach to hunting.

Let us look briefly at the Vedic practice of polygamy, which was especially practiced among warrior kings. The Sanskrit word *sapatni* means “co-wife.” Another Sanskrit word, directly derived from it, is *sapatna*, “enemy.” It is not by chance that from the Sanskrit word for “co-wife,” we get the Sanskrit word for “rival, adversary, enemy.”

Thus in the *Bhagavad-gita* 11.34, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna, “You will conquer your enemies in battle.” The word for “enemies” is *sapatna*, derived from *sapatni*, “co-wife.”

Similarly in the *Bhagavatam* we often find the word *sapatna* translated as “enemy.” A few examples are found at 1.14.9, 3.18.4, 5.1.18, 5.1.19, 5.11.15, 7.2.6, 8.17.10, 10.49.10, 11.1.2, and 11.16.6.

Similarly, at 5.1.17, Prabhupada translates the term *shat-sapatna*, “the six enemies” (the mind and senses), as “six co-wives.” At 8.10.6, Prabhupada translates the term *sapatna* as “violent enemies.”

Additionally we have historic evidence that even in the best Vedic families, polygamy could lead to serious problems. In the story of Citraketu, we find at 6.14.42 that his co-wives burned with envy of the one wife who bore him a son. Then at 6.14.43, the co-wives murder the king’s only son.

Queen Kaikeyi, fearing that her co-wife’s son would suppress her own son, caused Lord Rama to be banished to the forest, against the wishes of her own husband and indeed the entire kingdom.

Apart from this, legions of Vedic verses teach the evils of lust and extoll the virtues of sexual restraint. It was on these grounds that Prabhupada rejected polygamy in ISKCON. Prabhupada taught that polygamy redressed the imbalance between the male and female population in human society, and kings were often polygamous, yet we find that polygamy often led to trouble. Indeed from the word “co-wife,” *sapatni*, comes the word *sapatna*, which indicates bitter quarrel among enemies.

The history of the world teaches that warriors and rulers from the beginning of time have sought to enjoy many women. An absolute prohibition on hunting or multiple sexual partners among rulers would only lead to widespread hypocrisy that would seriously debilitate the force of Vedic law and scripture. To avoid this, Vedic culture teaches the ideal and, within appropriate limits, accommodate the real.

This accommodation often involves connecting an unfavorable but unavoidable activity to some social good. Hunting is bad, but it achieves a good social purpose by training kings to protect the innocent, even as they kill other innocent creatures. Sex indulgence is bad, but polygamy achieves the social good of protecting women who otherwise might not find spouses.

Polygamy and hunting are clearly different moral issues, yet in some ways they are similar: Prabhupada has pointed out the general relation between hunting and lust. And in both cases, Vedic culture simultaneously teaches the moral and spiritual advantages of restraint, but also gives some space, under certain conditions, only to then tell stories that illustrate the problems found within that conceded space. Both hunting and polygamy illustrate the method by which Vedic culture attempts to deal with the inevitable tension between the ideal and the real.

We find another example of a realistic strategy for dealing with human sex desire within ISKCON itself. In the *Bhagavad-gita* 9.27, Lord Krishna clearly teaches that we must perform all acts as an offering to Him. Krishna also states at 7.11, that He is present in sexuality which does not oppose dharma, morality. Srila Prabhupada has repeatedly explained that devotees offer their sex life to Krishna by procreating Krishna conscious children. Thus in a strict sense, all initiated devotees must vow to give up illicit sex, ie sex that is not for procreation.

That is the ideal, however it is not the real. The real situation in ISKCON is that many, many householders follow the easier, less ideal version of the rule: no sex outside of marriage. Prabhupada himself at times taught both the ideal and, for many, the “real” version of this rule, the version they can actually follow.

There can be absolutely no doubt that ultimately a Krishna conscious devotee must give up sex not meant for procreation. And there can be absolutely no doubt that very large numbers of ISKCON householders are not able to always follow this rule. Here again, we find Vedic culture, through the medium of ISKCON, teaching the ideal and accommodating the real. The assumption in all these cases is that people who somehow or other remain with the shelter of Vedic culture will eventually rise to the ideal platform. Thus Vedic culture has always sought to retain within its shelter sincere souls who are doing their best to pursue higher values, even when those souls are fallen far beneath the ideal standard.

A final dramatic example illustrates this principle.

In *Sri Caitanya Caritamṛta*, 2.24.230-258, Narada narrates the story of Mrgari the hunter, which clearly demonstrates the Vedic moral principle of choosing the lesser of moral evils. Here is a passage from that story:

Narada said: “I am asking only one thing from you in charity. I beg you that from this day on you will kill animals completely and not leave them half dead.”

The hunter replied: “My dear sir, what are you asking of me? What is wrong with the animals’ lying there half-killed? Will you please explain this to me?”

Narada replied: “If you leave the animals half-dead, you are purposefully giving them pain. Therefore you will have to suffer in retaliation. You are a hunter, you kill animals. That is a slight offense on your part. But when you consciously give them unnecessary pain by leaving them half-dead, you incur very great sins. All the animals that you have killed and given unnecessary pain will kill you one after the other in your next life and in life after life.” [CC 2.24.247-251]

Narada here undeniably introduces another Vedic moral principle: the gravity of a sin is relative, and is measured in relation to the status and consciousness of the sinner. Thus Narada explicitly says,

“You are a hunter. In killing life, your sin is small. In perversely giving pain, your sin is boundless.”²

We must note here the following:

² vyādha tumi, jéva mära—‘alpa’ aparādha tomära
kadarthanä diyä mära’—e päpa ‘apära’

1. Vedic scriptures teach that killing innocent animals is indeed a sin. But because Mrgari was a hunter, his offense was *alpa*, “small.” The sin is relative to the sinner.
2. In comparison to this “small offense”, unnecessarily and consciously giving pain is called an “unlimited evil.”
3. Narada urges upon Mrgari the lesser of evils.
4. Following the above method, Narada ultimately brings Mrgari to pure Krishna consciousness.

4. Acts and Consequences

Apart from the inevitable moral tensions between justice and mercy, and between the ideal and the real, we can further observe in Vedic scriptures two distinct moral philosophies, one primarily morality in the act itself, the other seeking morality primarily in the consequences of acts. Both views are well known to Western philosophy by the names *deontological ethics* and *consequentialism*.

The first, *deontological ethics*, roughly argues that moral behavior depends on the act itself, regardless of the consequences. The second, *consequentialism*, argues that moral behavior must produce good consequences.

We find examples of both moral philosophies in the life of the great soul Bhishma, who in his youth professed a primary concern that the act itself be moral, but who in his mature old age, clearly realized the moral importance of consequences.

Young Bhishma

In the *Mahabharata*, the death of the young and childless king, Vicitravirya, son of Satyawati and Santanu, left the Kuru dynasty without a ruler. In this precarious situation, the Kurus’ political enemies began stealing their lands.

In desperation, the Queen Mother Satyawatí urged Bhishma to marry Vicitravirya’s widows and rule the kingdom. Bhishma adamantly refused with these words:

“Without doubt, mother, you have declared the highest dharma. [But] you also know my highest vow in regard to offspring. And you are aware of what took place when your bride-price was to be paid.

“Again, Satyawati, I make the same vow to you. I can give up sovereignty over the three worlds, or yet among the gods, or whatever is greater than that, but in no way can I give up my vow.

“The earth may give up fragrance, and water its own flavor. Thus light may give up form, air may give up the quality of touch, the sun its light, and smoke-bannered fire its heat, ether may give up sound, the moon may give up the coolness of its rays, Indra, slayer of Vritra, may renounce his courage, the king of dharma may give up dharma, but I shall never resolve in any way to abandon the truth.” [MB 1.97.13-18]

This speech is admirable, but it also reveals a lack of concern with consequences. In a sense, Bhishma declares here that even if the universe should collapse, he will not give up his vow. Consequences don’t matter. All that does matter is the integrity of an act itself, in this case the act of keeping one’s vow.

Bhishma’s speech illustrates one distinct approach to morality: the act itself must be moral, regardless of the consequences. Although Bhishma will eventually suggest to

Satyavati, as Pandu suggested to Kunti, that a qualified brahmana be asked to beget sons in the widowed queens, Bhishma has already made it clear that regardless of any possible consequences, he will not break his vow. After all, if he had accepted Satyavati's proposal, married and ruled the kingdom, then he would have spoken falsely to the Satyavati's father who gave her to Bhishma's father as a bride only on the condition that Bhishma never marry.

There is, however, another approach to morality in which one's primary concern is with the consequences of an act. The most famous proponent of this pragmatic approach is of course Krishna Himself. Indeed Krishna teaches pragmatic moral philosophy to Bhishma himself at the Battle of Kurukshetra. We then find, in Bhishma's deathbed teachings, that the Kuru grandsire has learned well Lord Krishna's lesson on moral philosophy.

Bhishma at Kuruksetra

Both the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavatam* reveal that on the Battlefield of Kurukshetra, Lord Krishna gave up his vow not to fight in order to protect his devotee Arjuna.

In the *Bhagavatam* 1.9.37, the dying Bhishma recalls,

“Giving up His sacred word, He [Krishna] got down from the chariot to make my promise a greater truth.”³

In the *Mahabharata* 6.102.66, in a famous scene, Arjuna grabs the legs of Krishna, who is running to kill Bhishma, and pleads with Krishna as follows,

“Stop O mighty-armed! O Keshava, previously you said ‘I shall not fight,’ and you should not make your words untrue. O Madhava, the world will say you spoke falsely, and this whole burden will certainly be on me. I shall slay Bhishma of fixed vow.”⁴

Though Krishna relents, He was clearly prepared to break His vow to bring about necessary consequences.

Similarly, in the Drona Parva of the *Mahabharata* [7.164.68], Krishna tells Yudhisthira,

“O Pandava, casting aside dharma, do what is practical for victory so that Drona of the golden car does not kill you all in battle.”⁵

Later in this same scene, Krishna tells Yudhisthira,

“You yourself save us from Drona. Untruth [in this case] is better than truth. Lies do not pollute one who is speaking them when life is at stake.”⁶

³ *Sva-nigamam apahya mat-pratijam
Atam adhikartum avapluto ratha-sthau*

Bhagavatam 1.9.37

⁴ *Nivartasva mahä-bäho nänataä kartum arhasi
Yat tvayä kathitaä pürvaä na yotsyaméti keçava
Mithyä-vädéti lokas tväa kathayinnyati mädhava
Mamaiña bhäraü sarvo hi haniñyami yata-vratam*

Mahabharata 6.102.66

⁵ MB 7.164.68

*Ästhéyatäa jaye yogo dharmam utsäjya päëdava
Yathä vaü saäyuge sarvän na hanyäd rukma-vähanaü*

Appearance and Intention

In the Karna-parva of *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna two stories to dramatically illustrate that true piety cannot always be judged by external acts, but rather at times by the consequences of those acts. The first story describes an apparently sinful man who went to heaven, the second narrates the opposite: a “religious” sage who went to hell. In both stories, what matters most is not the act itself, but rather the consequences of the act. Here are the stories:

Krishna said: “There was a an animal hunter named Balaka who killed animals to maintain his children and wife, not for his own desire. He also maintained his blind mother and father and other dependents. Ever dedicated to his duty, he spoke the truth and did not envy.

“One day, though seeking prey with much effort, he did not find any. Then he saw a wild beast drinking water and using its nose for eyes. Though he had never seen a creature like that before, he slew it at once. Just after that a shower of flowers fell from the sky. And from heaven came an enchanting airplane resounding with the songs of Apsaras and musical instruments, and desiring to take away [to heaven] that animal hunter.

“The [slain] creature had performed austerities and obtained a boon, Arjuna, to destroy all creatures and therefore Svayambhu had blinded him. Having slain him, who was sure to destroy all creatures, Balaka then went to heaven. Thus dharma is very hard to understand.

“Now there was a brahmana named Kaushika, not very learned in scripture, who dwelled [in the forest] at the confluence of several rivers, not far from a village.

“‘I must always speak the truth!’ This became his vow. O Dhananjaya, he then grew famous as a speaker of truth. Then some people entered that forest out of fear of robbers. Indeed the cruel robbers followed, searching hard for them. Knowing Kaushika to speak the truth, the robbers approached him and said, ‘By which path, sir, did all those people go? We ask in truth. Speak out if you know where they are. Tell us!’

‘Thus questioned, Kaushika told them the truth: ‘They are hiding in that grove full of trees, creepers and bushes.’ Then the robbers found them and cruelly killed them. Thus it is heard from authorities.

“Because of that great *adharma* of injurious speech, Kaushika went to a very painful hell, for he did not grasp the subtle principles of morality. His studies were insufficient, he was foolish, and he didn’t know the divisions of dharma.” [MB 8.49.34-46, Ganguli 8.9.70]⁷

⁶ MB 7.164.99

*Sa bhavāās trātu no droëät satyāj jyāyo 'nātaà bhavet
Anātaà jévitasyārthe vadan na spāçyate 'nātaiù*

⁷ 8.49.46

*tenādharmeëa mahatā väg-duruktena kauçikaù
gataù sukañöaà narakaà sükñma-dharmeñv akovidaù
aprabhüta-çruto müðho dharmäëäm avibhägava-vit*

Krishna Himself then explains to Arjuna the purport of these two stories:

“It is difficult to grasp the highest understanding [of morality]. One ascertains it by reasoning. Now there are many people who simply claim ‘morality is scripture.’ Though I don’t oppose that view, scriptures do not give rules for every case.”⁸

This statement is most significant. Precisely because of the complexities of life --- the tensions between justice and mercy, the ideal and the real, the act and its consequence, individual needs and the needs of society --- morality, dharma, can never be reduced to a list of rules. Lord does not oppose the notion that the rules of scripture govern morality, however the rules by themselves are not sufficient. One must rationally analyze individual cases, and one must grasp the subtleties of real life. Kaushika’s moral failure, which drove him to a very painful hell, was his failure to grasp the “subtle principles of morality.” One cannot grasp the subtleties of morality, unless one understands the purpose of morality. In this same passage from *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna explains this purpose:

“Morality is taught for the progress of living beings. Morality [dharma] derives from the act of sustaining [dharana]. Thus authorities say that morality [dharma] is that which sustains living beings. The conclusion is that whatever sustains is actually dharma.” [MB 8.49.48-50]⁹

Thus although Balaka was a hunter, his intention was to maintain his family. He was not ultimately a bad person, but he found himself in an undesirable situation. Similarly, Narada told Mrgari, “Because you are a hunter, for you killing animals is a slight offense.” Balaka’s acts were abominable, but his intention was not.

In contrast, Kaushika’s act was superficially moral: he told the truth. Yet in doing so, he harmed other people. He placed a “morality” above the actual good of others, not realizing that morality is only such when it benefits others. We have already seen in the case of Mrgari and Balaka that morality is relative to a person’s situation. In the case of Kaushika, Lord Krishna establishes another mitigating principle: morality is relative to circumstances. Thus Lord Krishna states:

“Whenever people seek to unjustly rob someone, if that person can get free by not uttering a sound, then no sound should be uttered. Or, one should necessarily utter a sound if the robbers will be suspicious of silence. In that situation, it is considered better to speak a lie than to speak the truth.” [MB 8.49.51-52]¹⁰

⁸ MB 8.49.48-49
duñkaraà parama-jüanaà tarkeätra vyavasyati
çrutir dharma iti hy eke vadanti bahavo janäu
na tv etat pratisüyami na hi sarvaà vidhéyate

⁹ MB 8.49.49-50
prabhavärthäya bhütänäa dharma-pravacanaà kätam
dhäraëäd dharmam ity ähur dharmo dhärayati prajäu
yau syäd dhäraëa-saâyuktau sa dharma iti niçcayau

¹⁰ MB 8.49.52
ye ‘nyäyena jihérñanto janä icchanti karhicit
aküjanena cen mokño nätra küjet kathaàcana
avaçyaà küjitavyaà vä çaikerañ väpy aküjatau
çreyas tatränätaà vaktuà satyäd iti vicäritam

Mature Bhishma

In Bhishma's teachings spoken from a bed of arrows (*Mahabharata*, Shanti-parva), we find that Krishna's powerful moral lesson – that consequences do in fact matter, at times more than the act itself – has not been lost on Bhishma. The dying Bhishma speaks about *satyam*, truth, in a far more complex, nuanced way than he did in his youth. He is now extremely concerned with consequences, more than with the act itself. And he understands that in moral matters, appearances can be deceiving, a lesson he has gleaned from Krishna's two stories of the hunter Balaka and the brahmana Kausika. We shall even see Bhishma, at the end of his life, repeat and paraphrase Krishna's explicit language on this topic.

As Bhishma lay on the bed of arrows, Yudhisthira inquired about morality (dharma). Significantly, the truth of morality was not obvious even to the king of morality, Yudhisthira. Here is their conversation:

Yudhisthira said,

“How should a person, who wants to stand on moral principles, behave? I seek to understand this, O wise one, so kindly explain, O best of Bharatas.

“Both truth and falsity exist, covering the worlds. Of the two, O king, which should a person dedicated to morality practice? What is actually truth, what is falsity and what is really the eternal moral principle?”

Bhishma said,

“Speaking truth is righteous. Nothing is higher than truth. O Bharata, I shall speak to you that which is very hard to understand on Bhuloka. Truth is not to be spoken and falsity is to be spoken in a case where falsity becomes truth and truth becomes falsity. An immature person is bewildered in such a case where truth is not firmly established. Determining truth and falsity, one then knows morality.

“Even a non-Aryan, lacking wisdom, indeed a very violent man, can achieve very great piety as Balaka did by killing the blind beast. And what is astonishing when a fool, desiring morality but not recognizing it, achieves a very great sin, like Kausika on the Ganges?”

“Such a question as this regarding where morality is to be found, is very difficult to answer. It is difficult to calculate, so in this matter, one must resolve the issue by reasoning. Morality is that which prevents injury to living beings. That is the conclusion.

“Morality (dharma) comes from the act of sustaining (dharana). Thus authorities say that morality sustains living beings. So that which provides such sustenance is dharma. That is the conclusion.

“Certainly some people say, ‘Morality is scripture,’ while other people deny this. I do not deny it, but in fact scriptures do not give rules for every case. Whenever people seek unjustly to rob one's property, it should not be divulged to them. That is actually dharma. If a person can get free by not uttering a sound, then no sound should be uttered. Or, one should necessarily utter a sound if the robbers will be suspicious of silence. In that situation, it is considered better to speak a lie than to speak the truth. One who does so is freed from the sins of taking a false oath.”¹¹

¹¹ [MB 12.110.1-15]

1. *yudhiñöhira uväca*

Here Bhishma repeats basic points of Vedic moral philosophy taught by Krishna Himself:

1. To understand what is moral behavior, we cannot, in every case, simply cite the moral rules of scripture.
2. One must also reason about morality.
3. In so reasoning, one must keep in mind that the whole purpose of moral principles is to benefit people.
4. At times, good people, externally, perform bad deeds.
5. At times, bad people, externally, perform good deeds.
6. In such cases one must look beyond appearances to see what actually produces good consequences.

Tension between society and the individual

In calculating the good and evil consequences of an act, one must consider both the individual and society as well. There is a natural tension, and balance, in human life between individual freedom and social responsibility. Srila Prabhupada urged all of us to work cooperatively within ISKCON, and at the same time he fought against

*kathaà dharme sthätum icchan naro varteta bhärata
vidvã jijiäsamänäya prabrühi bharatarñabha
2. satyaà caivänãtaà cobhe lokän ävãtya tiñöhataù
tayou kim äcared räjan puruño dharna-niçcitaù
3. kià svit satyaà kim anãtaà kià svid dharmyaà sanãtanam
kasmin käle vadet satyaà kasmin käle 'nãtaà vadet
4. bhéñma uvãca
satyasya vacanaà sädhu na satyäd vidyate param
yad bhüloke sudurjãtaà tat te vakñyãmi bhärata
5. bhavet satyaà na vaktavyaà vaktavyam anãtaà bhavet
yatrãnãtaà bhavet satyaà satyaà väpy anãtaà bhavet
6. tädãçe muhyate bälo yatra satyam aniñöhitam
satyanãte viniçcitya tato bhavati dharmavit
7. apy anãryo 'kãtaprajãtu puruño 'pi sudãruëaù
sumahat präpnuyät puëyaà balãko 'ndhavadhäd iva
8. kim äçcaryaà ca yan müðho dharmakãmo 'py adharmavit
sumahat präpnuyät päpaà gaigäyãm iva kauçikaù
9. tädãço 'yam anupraçno yatra dharmau sudurvacaù
duñkaraù pratisaäkhyãtuà tarkeëãtra vyavasyati
10. prabhävãrthãya bhütãnãà dharmapravacanaà kãtam
yat syäd ahiäsãsaàyuktaà sa dharna iti niçcayaù
11. dhãraëäd dharna ity ähur dharmeëa vidhãtãù prajãù
yat syäd dhãraëasaàyuktaà sa dharna iti niçcayaù
12. çrutidharma iti hy eke nety ähur apare janãù
na tu tat pratyasüyãmo na hi sarvaà vidhãyate
13. ye 'nyãyena jihérñanto dhanam icchanti karhi cit
tebhya tan na tad äkhyeyaà sa dharna iti niçcayaù
14. aküjanena cen mokño nãtra küjet kathaà cana
avaçyaà küjitavyaà vä çãikeran väpy aküjanät
15. çreyas tatrãnãtaà vaktuà satyäd iti vicãritam
yaù päpaiù saha saãbandhãn mucyate çapathäd iti
[MB 12.110.1-15]*

centralization and bureaucratization precisely because they stifle individual freedom, inspiration and creativity, all of which are essential in spiritual life. Prabhupada thus writes in his purport to the *Bhagavatam* 1.6.37,

“Every living being is anxious for full freedom because that is his transcendental nature. ...A full-fledged free soul like Nārada, always engaged in chanting the Lord's glory, is free to move not only on earth but also in any part of the universe, as well as in any part of the spiritual sky. ...Similarly, ... in all spheres of devotional service, freedom is the main pivot. Without freedom there is no execution of devotional service. The freedom surrendered to the Lord does not mean that the devotee becomes dependent in every respect. To surrender unto the Lord through the transparent medium of the spiritual master is to attain complete freedom of life.”

Yet we have unavoidable duties to society, especially to the spiritual society created by Srila Prabhupada. In general, when one decides not to live alone but rather to live within society and to thus enjoy the benefits that society offers, one enters into a kind of social contract and one pays a price for social benefits one receives. To live within society, and to enjoy its opportunities and benefits, one sacrifices the unrestricted freedom of life outside society. The individual within society learns that all that is natural for an individual may not be natural for society. And what is unnatural for an individual may not be unnatural for society.

Because we must depend on society, even while we yearn for freedom, there will always be some degree of tension between individual desires and hopes and the desires and needs of the society in which the individual lives. A Krishna conscious society should seek a healthy balance between social and individual needs so that both the individual and society may achieve their goals without significantly harming the other.

At this point, let us return to our discussion of the tension between the ideal and the real, within the context of the individual and society. On the one hand, a Krishna conscious society must preserve eternal spiritual ideals: the goal of every life is to approach Krishna, the Supreme Lord. Every human body belongs to Krishna and should be used exclusively in His service, according to *sanatana dharma*, eternal spiritual principles established by the Lord Himself. A Krishna conscious society thus praises and criticizes, rewards and punishes, encourages and discourages its members' behavior to the extent that such behavior supports or violates the society's ideals.

On the other hand, every functional society must create cultural and social space for sincere members who, inevitably, struggle with the very imperfect reality of conditioned life. Society must realize that good, sincere people often fall short of society's ideals and that society ultimately exists to encourage and facilitate the soul's struggle for Krishna consciousness.

To be practical, society must further distinguish between public and private behavior, enforcing higher standards for the former, while responding to the latter as well whenever such a response is appropriate, relevant and necessary. A Krishna conscious society must also keep in mind that conditioned souls follow spiritual ideals only partially and imperfectly. Thus for those not far advanced in spiritual life, progress toward the ideal often involves calculated compromises with irrepressible urges and needs of the material body.

The individual also must not hold society to impossible, ideal standards. As much as the individual will usually fall short of society's ideals, so must the society often fall

short of the individual's expectations for it. Thus an intolerant society must ultimately itself fall a victim to its members' intolerance of that society's own inevitable flaws.

Scripture and Homosexuality

Earlier, we heard Lord Krishna's statement in the *Mahabharata* that

"It is difficult to grasp the highest understanding [of morality]. One ascertains it by reasoning. Now there are many people who simply claim 'morality is scripture.' Though I don't oppose that view, scriptures do not give rules for every case."¹²

So in trying to understand how ISKCON should deal with homosexuality, we must first ask this question:

Do Vaishnava Vedic scriptures give specific, explicit unambiguous rules for dealing with homosexuality, or if not, must we reason our way to a conclusion?

Srila Prabhupada taught that we must understand the spiritual science through *guru, sadhu, and shastra*, "one's teacher, other saintly persons, and revealed scriptures." Srila Prabhupada also taught unceasingly that his own ultimate qualification, and indeed the qualification of any bona fide guru, is to always faithfully repeat the teachings of Krishna as they are found in revealed scriptures. Thus we must search the most important Vaishnava scriptures presented by Srila Prabhupada, the *Bhagavad-gita* and the *Srimad-bhagavatam*, for specific, explicit, unambiguous scriptural statements about homosexuality.

The result? There are none. Remarkably, neither the *Gita* nor the *Bhagavatam* gives a single explicit reference to mutually consensual homosexuality. We do of course find in the *Bhagavatam*, 3.20.23-37, the well known story wherein Brahma creates male demons who then approach him for sex. Brahma escapes these demons by casting off a body at Vishnu's command. Prabhupada comments in his purport to 3.20.26,

"It appears here that the homosexual appetite of males for each other is created in this episode of the creation of the demons by Brahma."

We may note the following points in regard to this *Bhagavatam* story:

1. The story does not describe mutually consensual homosexuality, since Brahma fled the lusty demons.

2. The story does not give any rule, injunction, or prohibition regarding homosexuality. Indeed the very word *homosexuality* does not appear in the *Bhagavatam*.

3. It is not clear from the original *Bhagavatam* story that the demons were true homosexuals. I will explain this last point in greater detail.

¹² MB 8.49.48-49

*duñkaraà parama-jñānaà tarkeëättra vyavasyati
çrutir dharma iti hy eke vadanti bahavo janāu
na tv etat pratisūyāmi na hi sarvaà vidhēyate*

By close study of this story, we find that in fact the demons who approached Brahma were at most bi-sexual, and that even this bi-sexuality is quite ambiguous. I shall first outline the basic story, then discuss its complexities.

This is the basic story:

1. From his buttocks, Brahma creates very lusty “godless” beings who approach him for sex.
2. Brahma is first amused, then angered, and at last frightened. As the shameless demons chase him, he flees.
3. Brahma takes shelter of Vishnu and begs the Lord to protect him.
4. Vishnu sees Brahma’s wretched condition and orders him to cast off his “dreadful” body.
5. Brahma casts off his body. The demons see it as a gorgeous woman. Completely enchanted, they approach the “female” and try to win her favor.
6. The demons thus took twilight to be a beautiful woman, and with lust and confusion, seized her.

It is important to keep in mind that this incident occurs within a patterned creation narration in which Brahma creates various kinds of beings, and then gives to each, one of his bodies.¹³ The godless demons who chased Brahma for sex were apparently attracted to the specific part of his body that manifests female beauty. Both in the *Bhagavatam* text itself, and in the commentaries of the great Acaryas, we find unanimous evidence that these demons were actually lusting after women:

a) in their commentaries on this incident, three great commentators --- Sridhara Swami, Vira Raghavacharya, and Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakur, all describe these demons as *stri-lampata*, “lusting after women.” Thus when the *Bhagavatam* first

¹³ Here is the sequence:

- 1) 3.20.18-19 From his shadow, Brahma creates the “coverings of ignorance of the conditioned souls.” This creation somehow becomes a body of Brahma. Brahma doesn’t like this ignorant body and casts it off. Yaksas and Raksasas arise and sieze this body, which becomes the night.
- 2) 3.20.21 From light, Brahma creates the demigods who take possession of his “effulgent form of daytime” which he “dropped before them.”
- 3) 3.20.23-37 From his buttocks, Brahma creates the godless demons. He casts off a female form of twilight and the demons possess it.
- 4) 3.20.38-39 From his “loveliness,” Brahma creates Gandharvas and Apsaras, who take the moonlight body that Brahma gives up to them.
- 5) 3.20.40-41 From his sloth, Brahma creates the ghosts and fiends and gives up to them his yawning body.
- 6) 3.20.42-43 By his invisible form, Brahma creates the Sadhyas and Pitas, and the Pitas take possession of that invisible form.
- 7) 3.20.44-45 By his own reflection, Brahma creates the Kimpurushas and Kinnaras who sieze that form.
- 8) From his mind, Brahma creates Manu and gives up to him his human form.
- 9) 3.20.53 Thus to each of his sons Brahma “gave a part of his own body.”

mentions this incident and describes the demons as *atilolupan*,¹⁴ “excessively lusty,” Sridhara Swami states that this lust was for women.¹⁵

b) Vishnu Himself, at 3.20.28, orders Brahma to give up his “dreadful body.”¹⁶ Sridhara Swami explains that Brahma’s body was “dreadful,” *ghoram*, because it was “contaminated by lust.”¹⁷ Acarya Vira Raghava agrees that Brahma’s body was dreadful in that it was the form of “excessive lust”¹⁸

c) Sridhara Swami also explains in his commentary on 3.20.28 that “in all cases, giving up a body is meant to say giving up a particular mental state. Thus it is to be seen that the word *ca*, “and” [in this verse indicates] that Brahma had to rectify each of these mental states.”¹⁹

d) the *Bhagavatam* also states at 3.20.31 that upon seeing Brahma’s cast off body in the form of a beautiful woman, “all the demons were fully enchanted.”²⁰

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the godless demons created by Brahma all felt extreme lust toward women. A question arises as to whether they approached Brahma in a straightforward homosexual way, or whether they were attracted to a female aspect of Brahma’s cosmic body, since Brahma gave up to them a body in the form of a beautiful female. Keep in mind that the *Bhagavatam* itself states at 3.20.53 that Brahma gave them a “part”, *amsha*, of his body, and Sridhara Swami states that this part was in fact an aspect of Brahma’s mental state, specifically the state of lust. Thus according to the *Bhagavatam* and Sridhara Swami, the demons lustfully rushed at Brahma who then seems to have given them what they wanted: a beautiful female. Therefore it is clear that the demons had a strong heterosexual appetite, as well as an ambiguous attraction to a lusty female aspect of Lord Brahma.

Thus this story does not provide an unambiguous, clear account of homosexuality, nor any rules for dealing with it.

We do find a sort of gender irregularity in the life of King Sudyumna, which is narrated in the *Bhagavatam*, ninth canto. Here is the basic story:

Upon entering Lord Siva’s forest, King Sudyumna is at once changed into a woman, who then marries a man and begets a child with him. Sudyumna’s guru, Vasistha

¹⁴ Bhag 3.20.23

*Devo ‘devän jaghanataù sâjati smätîlolupän
Ta enam lolupatayä maithunâyäbhipedire*

¹⁵ ÇS: *atilolupän stré-lampaöän*

¹⁶ Bhag 3.20.28

*So ‘vadhärya kärpäëyaà viviktädhyätma-darçanaù
Vimuïcätma-tanuà ghoräm ity ukto vimumoca ha*

¹⁷ ÇS: *ghoräà käma-kaçmaläà sva-tanuà vimuïceti uktavän iti çeñau.*

¹⁸ VR: *ghoräm atilaulupya-rüpäm ätma-tanum ätmano bhävaà vimuïcety äheti çeñau.*

¹⁹ *Sarvatra tanu-tyägo näma tat-tan-mano-bhäva-tyägo vivakñitau. Grahaëaà ca tat-tad-
bhävâpacittir iti drañöavyam.*

²⁰ 3.20.31

upalabhyäsurä dharma sarve sammumuhuù striyam

Muni, then begs Lord Siva to change Sudyumna back into a man. Siva grants that the king will become a man and rule his kingdom every other month, but that every other month he will remain a married woman.

It is significant that the Sudyumna's citizens did not approve or welcome this arrangement. The *Bhagavatam* states: *nābhyanandan sma taà prajāù*.²¹

The Sanskrit verb *abhi-nand* means “to welcome, approve, applaud, acknowledge etc.” Thus the citizens did not welcome, approve, acknowledge, applaud etc their king who every other month became a woman.

Further, it seems that King Sudyumna himself was embarrassed about his monthly gender change. Sridhara Swami and Vira Raghavacarya both comment that every month, the king would conceal his situation (of changing his gender) out of shame. Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura agrees that the king would conceal his situation.²²

Clearly the king was not homosexual in the modern sense. But this story does demonstrate an important fact about human psychology: people in general do not welcome or applaud gender irregularity. Yet this story, like the previous one, does not present an explicit, unambiguous description of homosexuality, nor does it offer any specific rule for dealing with it. Recall that Prabhupada states in his *Bhagavatam* purport to 3.20.26:

“It appears here that the homosexual appetite of males for each other is created in this episode of the creation of the demons by Brahma.”

Yet although homosexuality is said to have existed since the dawn of creation, the *Bhagavatam* does not explicitly describe nor proscribe it. Thus according to Krishna's own statement [MB 8.49.49], since we do not find a specific, explicit, unambiguous set of rules for dealing with homosexuality, we must engage in spiritual reasoning about it.

Moral reasoning on homosexuality

It is a basic principle of Krishna consciousness that this material world is a perverted reflection of the eternal spiritual world. Our temporary bodies are shadows or reflections of our eternal, spiritual bodies. And Krishna Himself is the Supreme Person with a supreme eternal body. Sacred texts like *Srimad-bhagavatam* and *Bhagavad-gita* reveal in detail the nature, behavior and activities of the Supreme Lord Krishna, and so we possess an absolute objective standard against which we can measure our own behavior. This is especially true because we not only have information of Krishna's activities in the spiritual world, but we also know of His activities in this material world where He descends as an *avatara* to demonstrate *dharma*, proper behavior, by His own life on earth, and through the lives of His pure devotees who assist Him.

²¹ Bhag 9.1.40

*Ācāryānugrahāt kāmaà labdhvā puàstvaà vyavasthaya
Pālayām āsa jagatēà nābhyanandan sma taà prajāù*

²² ÇS: *nābhyanandad strétve lajjayā mäsam mäsaà niléyavasthänät. Niléya:* concealing, hiding.
VR: *mäsam mäsaà strétvena lajjayā saäléyavasthänäd iti bhävaù. Saälé:* lie down, hide, cower,
lurk, be concealed.

VC: *nābhyanandan strétve sati mäsaà niléyavasthänät*

Thus we can say that the absolute, objective and eternal standard for conjugal relationship is that such a relationship should develop between a male and a female who possess, respectively, male and female qualities both in body and mind. Further such conjugal relationships must be dedicated to transcendental devotional service and must ultimately aim at pure spiritual love, free of material lust.

In this world we find some degree of impurity in almost every conjugal relationship. Still the appropriate pairing of male and female, in body and mind, even in this imperfect world is, in one sense, a closer reflection of the eternal standard than we find in irregular sexualities which do not reflect absolute standards.

Lord Krishna states in the *Bhagavad-gita* 7.11, that He is present in sexuality which does not oppose dharma. Srila Prabhupada teaches that sex is ultimately meant for devoted procreation in the service of God. Even if most *grhastha* devotees struggle with this standard and, in practice, restrict themselves to the easier version of the rule -- no sex outside of marriage -- the higher standard is still the ideal to which all serious devotees should aspire. The fact that many or even most *grhasthas* find it difficult to always act on the ideal platform does not at all invalidate, nor even diminish the value of the ideal.

A mundane example serves to illustrate this point: because American society, even in the face of widespread hypocrisy, preserved the ideal of social and legal equality, the American Civil Rights movement was able to appeal to this ideal in the pursuit of racial justice. Similarly, it is essential for the progress of its members that ISKCON preserve the spiritual ideal of sex for procreation between an appropriate man and woman who are bound by the sacred vows of matrimony.

But how should ISKCON deal with homosexuality? Let us consider the issue in the light of Vaishnava moral philosophy, focusing on the various moral tensions that must be balanced.

Conclusion

Justice dictates that souls surrender to God, giving up all sins. Mercy dictates patience and understanding. Ultimately we must do what is best for the individual devotee and for the society of devotees. Although to some extent there will inevitably be tension between the wishes and needs of society and those of the individual, we must ultimately find a way to encourage and inspire individual devotees with special difficulties, and at the same time maintain the sanctity of standard moral and spiritual principles. ISKCON must balance justice and mercy, the ideal and the real. ISKCON must defend the importance of moral acts, but ISKCON must also do that which will bring about beneficial consequences.

Prabhupada emphasizes that Krishna consciousness is a *gradual* process. He taught this, literally, hundreds of times. Here are two samples taken from hundreds of statements he made on the subject:

“Everyone has to cleanse his heart by a *gradual process*, not abruptly.” [Bg 3.35 Purport]

“The duty of the government, therefore, is to take charge of training all the citizens in such a way that by a *gradual process* they will be elevated to the spiritual platform and will realize the self and his relationship with God.” [Bhag 6.2.3 Purport]

Let us keep in mind what the English word *gradual* actually means. Here are some definitions from standard dictionaries:

Gradual: “proceeding or developing slowly by steps or degrees; proceeding in small stages; moving, changing, or developing by fine or often imperceptible degrees; changing slowly.”

Some people feel that to encourage gay monogamy is to encourage homosexuality. To test this argument, let us apply it to another sinful activity: drug abuse.

In fact there are many sincere Vaishnavas around the world who struggle with some form of substance abuse. If ISKCON follows the example of other religions and offers programs to help faithful members overcome such problems, and if recovering devotees are praised and encouraged when they reduce their use of drugs, does that mean that ISKCON is encouraging, condoning or justifying the use of drugs? Obviously not.

Similarly, to encourage devotees who are struggling to regulate, reduce and eliminate sinful sexuality in any form is not to praise or encourage sinful activities. The truth is the opposite: we are praising and encouraging the reduction and *gradual* elimination of such activities.

In the case of a devotee grhastha couple, sex within marriage but not for procreation is clearly sinful, at least in a strict sense. Yet sometimes devotees state that “no illicit sex” means “no sex outside of marriage.” Indeed that is the standard that many respected grhasthas are able to follow. Why do we thus condone a sexual act which is, in the strictest sense, sinful? Surely because it is the lesser of two evils, the greater evil being sex outside of marriage.

The question then arises: is the policy of choosing the lesser of evils valid only for heterosexuals, or it is also a necessary strategy for homosexuals? Keep in mind that Prabhupada emphasizes that Krishna consciousness is a *gradual process*, that is a process that proceeds slowly, step by step. The notion of a gradual process logically entails the further notion that gradual steps in the right direction are just that: steps in the right direction. And a spiritual society must encourage all its members to take steps in the right direction.

Finally, we must keep in mind the ultimate moral principle, found in the *Padma Purana* and quoted in the *Sri Caitanya Caritamrta* 2.22.113:

“Vishnu is always to be remembered and never to be forgotten. All injunctions and prohibitions can only be servants of these two.”²³

Srila Prabhupada writes in his purport to this verse: There are many regulative principles in the shastras and directions given by the spiritual master. These regulative principles should act as servants of the basic principle -- that is, one should always remember Krishna and never forget Him.”

Similarly, Lord Krishna Himself states at the end of the *Gita*, 18.66:

“Giving up all moral/religious principles and come to Me alone for shelter. I shall protect you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear!”

Thus considering Vaishnava moral philosophy, as taught by Krishna Himself and by His pure devotees, ISKCON must encourage sincere devotees who at times, in good faith, and within reasonable limits, choose the lesser of evils in order to stabilize

²³ CC Madhya 22.113, quoting *Padma Purana*
Smartavyaù satataà viñëùù vismartavyo na jätucit
Sarve vidhi-niñedhäu syuù etayor eva kïikaräu

themselves on the spiritual path. This principle applies to human sexuality among mutually consenting adults.