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An accidental falldown is one thing, but. . .

Submitted by jswami on July 8, 2006 - 1:42pm.

Must there not be some limit on how much we can forgive and excuse?

(A letter and reply)

Dear Jayadvaita Swami,

Re: Can one who has sinned be a saint?

Throughout our books and their purports the word “accidentally” is often used to describe the event for the “falldown” or “sin” of the devotee.

But what is written in purports about “intentionally” or the event where one says “I’m going to get out of this chair and go over there and ..”? And they get out of that chair intentionally over and over again to do their deeds. There must be some measured limit on the quality and quantity of sin for this “accidentally.”

I have forgiven my friends in the movement who “accidentally” have fallen down…

But I’m confused, as I am sure many others are, about the open door that is extended to “devotees” whose repeated evil acts were not one of sleeping with the whores, but of murder, racketeering, rape, and the intentional destruction of children’s minds and character.

These types of premeditated evil acts are very difficult for someone like me, who being in “the illusion” himself, has an impossible time seeing these acts as being committed by a devotee “temporarily overwhelmed by illusion.”

There must be some measured limit on the quality and quantity of sin for this “accidentally.”

Please illuminate me if you have time to respond. Thank you.

Regards,
Nityananda Rama

REPLY

Dear Nityananda Rama,

Thank you for your very pertinent question.

First of all, just to dispose of another issue before we get to the core philosophical question at hand:

We would benefit by reminding ourselves that the accounts we hear of evil deeds a devotee has performed are often seriously unreliable or verifiably exaggerated or false.

Leaving deliberate lying and truth-stretching aside, the work of Elizabeth Loftus and other researchers investigating how memory works has shown that memory can be notoriously bad. Even when people sincerely intend to tell the truth their memory can be influenced by all sorts of variables—their complex inner feelings, the way questions are worded, the expectations of authorities and peers—and this can put their testimony at odds with objectively verifiable facts.

Sometimes we hear a deeply affecting story, unaware that others present at the time of the event have given a very different picture, or that important features of the story—features likely to give us a very different impression—have been left out.

Of course, what we hear may often be accurate and true. But lots of what we hear simply isn't.

Now, on to your question.

Throughout our books and their purports the word "accidentally" is often used to describe the event for the "falldown" or "sin" of the devotee.

But what is written in purports about "intentionally" or the event where one says "I´m going to get out of this chair and go over there and .."? And they get out of that chair intentionally over and over again to do their deeds. There must be some measured limit on the quality and quantity of sin for this "accidentally"…

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These types of premeditated evil acts are very difficult for someone like me, who being in "the illusion" himself, has an impossible time seeing these acts as being committed by a devotee "temporarily overwhelmed by illusion."

There must be some measured limit on the quality and quantity of sin for this "accidentally."

First, let's look at "accidentally" and "intentionally."

Sometimes we may commit a sin with no intention of doing so and without even knowing it. For example, we might offer polluted food to a saint, not knowing that the food had been polluted. Or while serving as a policeman we might accidentally shoot the wrong man. This is what we might call "purely accidental."

Then again, there are sins we commit in the course of our profession. Srila Prabhupada gives the examples of the *brahmana* who performs animal sacrifices, the merchant who lies, and the *sudra* who serves the orders of a bad master.

Sometimes we do what we think is right—we are acting intentionally—but it later turns out wrong. In many districts of West Bengal, international welfare workers dug wells that have now turned out to be the cause of a huge epidemic of arsenic-induced disease. The work was intended, the harm was not. And yet the work has caused terrible suffering for thousands of people.

Then there are sins we commit not because we don't know what we're doing but because, even though we know, we lose control of ourselves. We know that drinking liquor is sinful, but someone invites us to have a drink, and because of a past habit we go for it. Or we know that illicit sex is sinful, but still, dragged by lust, we go visit a prostitute.

As mentioned by Arjuna in *Bhagavad-gita* (3.36), *anicchann api varsneya balad iva niyojitah*: Even without wishing to do so, one may commit a sin, as if forced. And Krsna tells Arjuna that this is due to the power of lust.

Would you call this kind of sin "accidental" or "intentional"? From one point of view, it's accidental. One doesn't *want* to sin, but somehow one feels overwhelmed. On the other hand, the sin is performed knowingly, and with some features of intentionality also. One picks up the glass with the intention of drinking it. One visits the prostitute with the intention of having sex with her.

And, by the power of lust, one may do this again and again, all the while knowing it's wrong and all the while wishing one were strong enough to overcome one's sinful desires.

So sin is messy business. We know there is a difference between sins committed "accidentally" and those committed "intentionally." And we'd like to divide sin easily into neat categories of "intentional" and "accidental." But it may not divide so easily.

Nonetheless: Whatever sins one may have committed—accidentally or intentionally—can be nullified by pure devotional service, and especially by the chanting of the holy name. Our scriptures declare this again and again.

namno hi yavati saktih
papa-nirharane hareh
tavat kartum na saknoti
patakam pataki narah

"Simply by chanting one holy name of Hari, a sinful man can counteract the reactions to more sins than he is able to commit." (*Brhad-visnu Purana*)

As stated here, there is no limit to the sins that can be eradicated by the power of the holy name of the Lord.

Similarly, Krsna says in *Bhagavad-gita* (4.36):

api ced asi papebhyah
sarvebhyah papa-krt-tamah
sarvam jnana-plavenaiva
vrjinam santarisyasi

"Even if you are considered the most sinful of all sinners, when you are situated in the boat of transcendental knowledge you will be able to cross over the ocean of miseries."

Who can be delivered? Not just the somewhat sinful, or the occasionally sinful, or even the very sinful, but "the most sinful of all sinners."

- Valmiki, a murderer, became a pure devotee of the Lord.

- Mrgari, who had enjoyed half-killing animals and watching them writhe in pain, became a pure devotee of the Lord.
- The *Caitanya-bhagavata* says of Jagai and Madhai, "There is not a sin that they had not committed. Although born in brahmana families, they consumed liquor and beef, robbed, stole and burnt other person´s houses." Yet they became pure devotees of the Lord.
- King Rahugana offended Jada Bharata, but later became a pure devotee of the Lord.
- Dhruva Maharaja, although already a pure devotee, needlessly slaughtered thousands of innocent Yaksas. Yet when he stopped he was forgiven, and he was still accepted as a pure devotee of the Lord.
- Although Akrura and Krtavarma were pure devotees, they became implicated in the plot to kill Satrajit. And still they are accepted as pure devotees of the Lord.

As Krsna says in *Bhagavad-gita* (9.30):

api cet su-duracaro
bhajate mam ananya-bhak
sadhur eva sa mantavyah
samyag vyavasito hi sah

"Even if one commits the most abominable action, if he is engaged in devotional service he is to be considered saintly because he is properly situated in his determination."

ksipram bhavati dharmatma
sasvac-chantim nigacchati

kaunteya pratijanihi
na me bhaktah pranasyati

“He quickly becomes righteous and attains lasting peace. O son of Kunti, declare it boldly that My devotee never perishes.”

But one point Srila Prabhupada stresses again and again: To commit sins with the notion that one can nullify their reactions by chanting the holy name is the worst of offenses. The sinful person who thinks he can get away with sinful life by chanting the holy name is entirely different from the person who commits sins, regrets them, and finally becomes saintly in his behavior.

Even if a devotee has acted abominably, if he remains fixed in devotional service and does not try to use the holy name of the Lord as an instrument for justifying his sins, he has to be regarded as a saintly person.

The scriptures say so.

Jayadvaita Swami

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Nityananda Rama replied:

Submitted by jswami on July 10, 2006 - 10:53pm.

Your answer is perfect in every way. Thank you so much. It’s so timely that I think you may publish this with or without my name if you wish.

I’ve printed this off and will carry it around in my daily planner for a long time so I can read it again and again.

Regards,
Nityananda Rama

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Sin or aparadha?

Submitted by Pandu das on July 10, 2006 - 5:12pm.

Dear Jayadvaita Swami,

Hare Krishna. Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

Thank you for your clear analysis of this aspect of sinful behavior and the return to grace. However, I’m not sure it is applicable to the problem that Nityananda Rama Prabhu is trying to understand.

Is it not true that the brutal abuse of the children of Vaishnavas in Srila Prabhupada’s gurukulas should be classified as Vaishnava aparadha and guru aparadha rather than as mundane sinful activities?

It seems to me that those who were involved in the child abuse in the gurukulas committed aparadha against the Vaishnava children, their parents, Srila Prabhupada, and ISKCON as a whole. If that is the case, then, as I

understand it, the perpetrators need to obtain forgiveness, and if unable to get it, need to fully surrender to the Holy Name to obtain His mercy.

If I am incorrect in this assessment, can you please explain my error?

Thank you. Hare Krishna.

Sincerely,
Pandu das

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Abuses and aparadhas

Submitted by jswami on July 13, 2006 - 11:36am.

Dear Pandu,

I agree with you that brutal abuse of Vaishnava children constitutes a Vaishnava *aparadha.*

We have the example of Suruci, the wife of King Uttanapada. She offended her stepson Dhruva Maharaja and later had to suffer for it, not because Dhruva was a Vaishnava but because he later *became* a Vaishnava. *Aparadhas* have their consequences.

I also agree with you about what an offender ought to do: obtain forgiveness and, if unable to get it, fully surrender to the holy name.

Now, do you think it would be worthwhile to examine what we mean by “brutal child abuse”? These days the term “child abuse” seems to cover a broad territory, encompassing everything from punishing a kid with a smack to forcing children into repeated acts of sodomy.

Some distinctions might be worth observing.

Clearly, adults who try to satisfy their lust by sexually using children are at the most abominable depths of degradation and offense.

What about adults who impose heavy discipline?

These days, the prevailing wisdom seems to be that one should never, ever strike a child. Yet that wisdom (if that’s what it is) has prevailed (if in fact it has) only perhaps in the last decade or so.

If one visits historical sites re-creating colonial American villages (as I did when a child), one can still see in the schoolrooms such pedagogical tools of discipline as the cat-o’-nine-tails, a small whip with nine leather cords with knots on the end. If a child got too unruly, we are told, the teacher might well give him the cat.

These days, of course, we can hardly understand how a teacher could have been so cruel. Yet the children of early America survived it. And whether their psyches and their later character turned out worse than those of modern children raised with liberal permissiveness could perhaps, if we stop to think about it, be an open question.

Let’s move on to the 1950’s, when I was a child. My father, I believe (comparing him with the fathers of my cousins and friends), was an exceedingly mild disciplinarian. Exacting punishment was not, I think, a task he looked forward to. Yet every now and then when I’d been terribly bad, creating havoc and defying all my mother’s attempts to deal with me, her final recourse would be to say “Just wait till your father comes home.” And that could mean, finally, that I’d find myself in my room on the bed with my pants down and my father taking off his leather belt and giving my butt a few stinging whacks. (And my family, I should add, was on the somewhat upper side of middle class.)

Was my dad a child abuser? If I'm now a Vaishnava, is he destined to suffer horrible reactions for his "Vaishnava *aparadhas*"?

Moving from history to scripture, do our scriptures forbid that children be physically punished? Apparently not. If our scriptures have any rules forbidding parents or teachers from getting tough with their kids, I'm not aware of them.

Do I want to bring back the cat-o'-nine-tails? Of course not. But nor am I ready to insist on punishing devotees for acting in the context of the times in which they acted, rather than the norms of twenty or thirty years later.

I don't want to trivialize what some of our children went through. The trauma of sexual abuse must be unimaginable. And, sexual abuse aside, one could easily sympathize with the plight of a little kid sent out to a boarding school in the middle of Uttar Pradesh (or Texas or West Bengal), with a makeshift curriculum, bad or inept teachers, a mean principal, no parents, and a feeling of being trapped, with no one to turn to.

(I'm told the schools and their staff had their bright side too. But one dares speak of this only at the risk of being labeled an apologist for "child abusers," "perpetrators," and "predators.")

I think it's useful to make a distinction between people who turned children into objects for their own warped passions and people who tried to serve their spiritual master and the society of devotees by taking on a difficult task they weren't trained for and who, in the course of their service, made what they themselves later admitted to be serious mistakes.

Let us regret our errors of the past and do our best to correct and make amends for them. And if we truly believe we must avoid Vaishnava *aparadhas,* let us do our best to keep from adding new ones to those already committed.

Sincerely,
Jayadvaita Swami

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Satisfying everyone

Submitted by Pandu das on July 15, 2006 - 12:21am.

Dear Jayadvaita Swami,

Hare Krishna. Thank you for your thoughtful reply. I'm glad to see that I'm not totally off base with this.

I personally have never had any contact with the gurukulas, so all I know about them is what I've read. I first came to a Hare Krishna temple in 1996 after I bought Bhagavad-gita As It Is (1983 edition, by the way) in a used bookstore the year before. So my situation is somewhat different than many devotees. I'm trying to learn about what happened in order to understand ISKCON's history and discover how I can best serve Srila Prabhupada's mission.

I'm a father to four daughters; the oldest is 9 years old. I cannot guess what I would have done if I came to ISKCON 20 or 30 years earlier, but my wife and I are happy to homeschool them now. I remember at one of my first Sunday programs, at the Toronto Hare Krishna temple, you gave class and announced that no one should become a father, a guru, et cetera, unless he can make sure his dependents shall not take birth again. I had heard that before, but I'll always remember when you said it because I felt it was somewhat of a challenge to me. So I'm doing my best, and I pray that Krishna will make up the difference.

They're good girls, but sometimes their behavior calls for extra discipline or punishment. I don't mind it because we know that whatever I do, I'm doing it to help them. I think that's a key point. On rare occasions I

feel it's necessary to give a spank, but I've never given more than one or two at a time, and never with any chance of hurting them. Because they're good kids, knowing I'm displeased is enough to impact them. After the spank I give them a little time alone and then go talk with them until they understand what's expected of them and why.

I believe this works because my wife and I make sure they always know we love them. It makes all the difference. Because they always know they're loved, we're able to really teach them to the limit of what we've learned. It's not just might makes right. It's that love conquers all.

I've also worked in daycare (ages 5 to 14) and taught nature at day camps, so I know that not all kids are well behaved; and sometimes being surrounded by a bunch of kids all the time can be quite disorienting. Still, that doesn't lessen the responsibility of the teachers, and I can't remember ever wanting to hit someone's child. Especially when the teacher is representing Srila Prabhupada, and when the children are like Srila Prabhupada's grandchildren, I think we ought to expect a very high standard of conduct by the teachers. It's very important because not only are the children themselves the future, their care has many indirect impacts. It's hard to preach to people who've heard about what happened in ISKCON gurukulas. It's disturbed my own faith and my ability to participate in ISKCON at times.

Regarding what constitutes abuse, there is definitely some grey area, and I would have to draw the line based on the motivation of the authority. Normally a responsible adult would act to control children for their own good, and that should prevent any real violence. Sometimes adults lose their own self-control when dealing with children and act to satisfy their own senses. That is when abuse happens. It's simply the fluctuating dominance of the modes of material nature acting the way they normally do, but when children are involved the effect is magnified.

So now the question is what to do. A lot of devotees are calling for punishment of the teachers, and so now the test is on us. We have to act in the mode of goodness, balancing the needs of everyone involved to make a positive result. My karmi job is to determine appropriate punishment for polluters, giving the punishment, and tracking the rectification. It's somewhat different from this issue, but one thing I know is that it can be tough to know just what degree of punishment is right. In my job the victims often aren't aware of the problem, but in ISKCON it seems like almost the whole society feels acutely victimized. This makes it all the more difficult. We expect our leaders to somehow balance punishment, mercy, justice, and rectification. It's not easy, but our Vaishanva leaders have to do it.

The only way I can imagine a real solution is to find the root of the problem and correct that. Of course, it is that we are not Krishna conscious, or at least not enough. (Or maybe it's just me.) Ultimately that is what we need of our leaders, to help each and every one of us to become Krishna conscious. I think Narada Muni gave a good example in dealing with Nalakuvera and Manigriva. It's the only way everyone can be satisfied, if Krishna is satisfied. That was the task of the gurukula teachers, and it is the perennial responsibility of ISKCON's leaders. Just as Krishna's punishment is transcendentally auspicious, His representatives' punishment must bring us all closer to Krishna consciousness. We are all being punished by material nature, as much as we have forgotten Krishna. Lets find a way to work together to fix that problem once and for all. Hare Krishna.

Sincerely,
Pandu das

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Thank you, Pandu

Submitted by jswami on July 20, 2006 - 10:50pm.

Thank you for your thoughtful and balanced reply.

Hare Krishna.

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I Beg Your Pardon....

Submitted by chaitanyamangala on July 13, 2006 - 8:05pm.

Dear Jayadvaita Swami,

Hare Krishna.

You have been posting on your website a series titled, “Can One Who Has Sinned Be a Saint?” In this series you highlight verses and purports that focus on how people who perform sinful acts can redeem themselves by chanting the Holy Names. The premise is that sincere prayer to the Lord will burn up all negative reactions. These quotes accurately convey what to do if one becomes polluted by sinful activities and wants to become freed from them.

There is ample philosophical support that if in the course of doing their duties Vaishnavas transgress material laws the mercy of the Lord may mitigate their reactions. Some scriptural references imply that under certain circumstances devotees may not be subject to the same laws as nondevotees. However, scriptures also state that devotees would not break these laws anyways because they understand the negative implications of doing so. We have seen many examples in the history of ISKCON where devotees have not been exempt from the reaction of breaking material laws.

I would like to broaden the discussion and consider how to remedy a situation when a Vaishnava commits vaishnava-aparadha. I think this is closer to the heart of what devotees are asking to be addressed. For example, Nityananda Rama’s question to you asks what the limitations are for forgiveness and at what point it ceases to exonerate and becomes more a pretext used to rationalize the responsibility one devotee has to another.

There is a difference between what one could do in the event of an accidental fall down and what one should do in the case of vaishnava-aparadha. The practice of “chant away sins” and “not subject to the law” are clearly not sufficient in this case. For instance, consider the stories of Jaya, Vijaya, and the four Kumaras; Jagai, Madhai, and Lord Nityananda; as well as Durvasa Muni and Ambarish Maharaja. In all of these situations the Supreme Lord says amnesty is not His to give. That has to come from the offended devotee. While the offenders may still be considered Vaishnavas, they will not have properly atoned or be able to fully revitalize their Krishna consciousness until they have pleased - and are forgiven by - the offended Vaishnava.

Who says so? Scriptures say so.

For example, in the purport of SB 4.26.24:

“The conclusion is that if Krsna consciousness is covered by material sins, one can eliminate the sins simply by chanting the Hare Krsna mantra, but if one pollutes his Krsna consciousness by offending a brahmana or Vaishnava, one cannot revive it until one properly atones for the sin by pleasing the offended Vaishnava or brahmana.”

The concluding sentence for this purport is crystal clear:

“A vaishnava-aparadha cannot be atoned by any means other than by begging the pardon of the offended Vaishnava.”

Seeking the essence,

Chaitanya Mangala dasa

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Dear Chaitanya Mangala,

Submitted by jswami on July 16, 2006 - 11:10am.

Dear Chaitanya Mangala,

Thank you for your valuable, carefully considered letter. It seems you and Pandu Dasa have been thinking along the same lines. I suppose, in fact, you must have written your letter before his came online.

I think my reply to his letter also responds to the main points you've raised in yours. On the essential teaching you've highlighted, we all agree. So I don't have much more to say.

I would, however, like to add one point. If a true Vaishnava offends another, by the grace of Krishna that offender will soon realize his mistake, sincerely regret it, and beg forgiveness from the Vaishnava he has offended. And the offended Vaishnava, by the grace of Krishna, will sincerely forgive the offender.

Having carried many grudges in my heart at various times in my life, I can testify that carrying such resentments, however justifiable, is burdensome and painful. They anchor us to the pains of the past. And when at last we are able to let go of those resentments and forgive whoever has offended us, the heart feels lightened and cleansed, and now we are able to move forward

The offender purifies his heart by repentance, the offended by forgiveness.

Thank you again. Hare Krishna.

Jayadvaita Swami

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