

Dear James,

I am doing fine and trying everyday to operate from fullness and it is working so far. I am a little embarrassed to tell you this but my sex vasana is kind of strong and it is agitating my mind. I don't have casual sex and haven't had sex in a long time but there are many thoughts about it and I would like to get rid of them.

James: if you don't act on them with the understanding that sex stands in the way of your spiritual growth, the desire will eventually be reduced to a manageable level. If these cravings are mostly biological, they will continue but fade gradually as you age. If they are a compensation for a psychological need i.e. if you feel lonely or empty and sex relieves the feeling, then if you remind yourself that you are full and turn your attention away from the craving toward the self, the craving will gradually become manageable.

Mark: This is where it gets confusing for me. I am OK living by myself but at the same time a part of me that wants a companion. The problem is that I know i will never be "in love" with another person because I love everyone equally. Having said this, there are some people I like to associate with more than others...so maybe there is a possible relationship in the future. Who knows?

James: Nothing wrong with the desire for companionship; the issue is finding a good companion. There are women who do not need to be in love and who not want someone who is 'in love' with them. And there are quite a few women who would like someone with a strong spiritual vasana like yours. It is quite remarkable that you have this kind of unconditional impersonal love.

Mark: If I become celibate and stop thinking about sex altogether I worry that I will lose out on my masculine nature. I am afraid that I will become a kind of impersonal zombie. When I think about it from fullness I am fine, but otherwise I am nervous because I think I will lose the Mark I know. What do you think?

James: Being celibate does not mean not being masculine or feminine. I have several celibate men friends and who are quite masculine and have other male friends.

James: In general I do not think that physical celibacy is a good idea unless you have the temperament of a renunciate. Mental and emotional purity are more important. It seems the mental stuff, the craving, disturbs you. If this is the case I would recommend that, as my guru, who was a wise and funny man, used to say when asked this question, you should 'sin intelligently,' meaning indulge yourself judiciously. If you go out to a buffet, you do not have leave for fear of eating everything. You can pick a few nice dishes and enjoy them without indulging like a pig. I can identify with what you say because I also had this conflict and resolved it with this idea. The Buddha called it 'the middle way.'

A 'sin' is a behavior or thought that creates conflict in the mind. This conflict is not necessarily due to the action itself, in this case sex and the desire for sex, but the way the person understands the issue at hand. So if you get the right understanding, you can solve your problem. What is a good way to see it?

In the first place, sex is a very natural pleasure producing activity. Although what I am about to say applies to all pleasures, sex is an exception in the sense that it produces very intense pleasure. This causes the mind to dwell on it. However, when the mind dwells on something too much, attachment occurs and if your goal is a pure mind...as it would be if you were going for liberation...attention will go to the sex thought and not the self thought with predictable consequences. You will get nice and sexy but you will not get free. All this you know. On the other hand, if you decide willy nilly to attack a sex vasana head on with a vow to maintain celibacy, you will also create conflict. So it is necessary to occasionally give the Devil his due.

But how would this work so that you can keep your mind on the self and at the same time not deepen your sex vasana?

Casual sex is good or bad depending on your goal. Masturbation is good or bad depending on your goal. A committed long term relationship between mature mutually appreciating adults is good or bad depending on your goal. To the self it is all the same, as long as dharma is not violated and, oddly enough, even if it is.

Casual sex can be good for a spiritual seeker if he or she is cautious, because you satisfy the vasana without the concomitant attachment to another person, freeing your mind to meditate on more important things, although you can get attached to the feelings. For a spiritual type the problem with sex is attachment, not the sex. A casual attitude toward sex is pretty healthy, I think. But sex can be bad spiritually if it is not done in a loving way. Lust is one of the seven deadly sins for good reason. But the energy of sex, the shakti, is very beneficial for the body/mind, particularly the body...unless the mind does not understand why it is interested in sex.

Masturbation can be good for the same reason that casual sex can be good; it gets the vasana out of the way temporarily so that the mind can go back to its contemplation on the self. Woody Alan said, 'masturbation is making love with someone I care very deeply about. 😊 But it can be bad because it is too easy to develop the sex vasana and it is fundamentally a frustrating activity, since it is a lonely activity and you are denying yourself the pleasure of the energy of the opposite sex. If you are going to have sex, you ought to do it right and enjoy the whole enchilada. Masturbation is a convenience, but it is a waste of time and energy.

So, when the vasana becomes an issue, as it seems to be in your case, it is time to get control of it by putting it in its rightful place. It is natural to think of celibacy when this happens, but celibacy is easy or difficult depending on the individual's attachment to the idea of sex. If the vasana is strong, the best solution is to get a partner who you love and respect and with whom you can communicate as a friendly adult and do sex with love. You are lucky you are over the 'in love' business. This is the samsaric approach and only leads to suffering.

Assuming a good partner, have sex occasionally and go about your business normally. Do your work as karma yoga, do your relationship as karma yoga and see sex as karma yoga. See your partner as the self and take the pleasure and the pain as Prasad and remain cheerful and grateful that God gave you someone who likes to give you pleasure and whom you can serve in this way. In the old days when the gurukula system was popular, the guru almost invariably insisted that

the seekers get married, even if the sex vasana was not strong, because it is important to see first hand the limitations inherent in sex. Once it is clear that it only temporarily solves the problem it purports to solve, attachment to it dissolves and you can take it or leave it. This is what my guru meant by intelligent sinning. There is nothing wrong with it, unless there is something wrong with the way you see it.

But it is not always easy to find someone who understands your nature and your goal. Most people want to be the other person's goal and they take sex seriously, so there are always problems. And the spiritual types who you might be interested in usually have hang-ups about sex or are not very interested in it, although they will go through the motions. There is a good reason why religion and yoga counsel celibacy and the sublimation of the sexual energy into higher pursuits. The energy that you put into sex, or any activity, comes from the same source as the energy that motivates the quest for moksha. So if it goes into short term freedom i.e. the freedom from desire that is the goal of sex, it will not go into long term freedom. By that I mean freedom from everything.

So the relationship you have with sex depends on what sex means to you. Is it sex for sex's sake or is sex a substitute for yoga, i.e. is it an attempt to make yourself feel complete and whole? Whether Mark is celibate or not is not really the issue. He will gain a certain understanding when he confronts his sex vasana with a program of celibacy and this should solve the problem. If I had a crystal ball I would tell you whether the celibacy idea is a good one or a bad one, but nobody knows the answer, because there is no answer, until you see what this sadhana does to you or for you. As for losing your masculinity, I don't see the connection, unless you have doubts that you are a man. You will just be a celibate male. Plus, celibacy as you are thinking about it, is not an absolute state. You can change your mind...or not...when you understand the sex thing completely. If you lost your masculinity when you went celibate, it stand to reason that it would come back when you weren't. It does not make sense that an action, like celibacy, should change your nature. I was celibate for one or two years here and there and I am just as masculine as I was when I was young.

In my case, I associated sex with being in love and went for it in a big way when I was in my Twenties and I suffered like a dog. I suffered so much that I became dispassionate almost overnight with reference to sex and from then on sex never got in the way of my spiritual path. I had good sexy relationships (with women I loved) here and there as I went along, some quite brief, some that lasted several years. I went into them without expectations for security and I went out of them without attachment. They were always subordinate to my contemplation and appreciation of the self. And when the vasana started to get in the way, I just quit and put my mind on the self, not that I did not see the self in sex...because by this time I had non-dual vision.

Sex is a zero-sum game. The upside and the downside cancel each other. You get intimacy, but you lose your freedom to attachment. When you don't have it, you have your freedom, assuming your mind does not crave for it, but you lack intimacy. So the problem is always the mind and what it understands or fails to understand.

Celibacy is also a zero-sum game with an upside and a downside. The problem is not whether or not 'you' are celibate but whether or not you identify with celibacy or non-celibacy. It is best to see that you are celibate by nature. How? See yourself as the self. As the self you are pure. You are free of all urges. They do not contaminate you. If you feel contaminated, you have the wrong idea of who you are. But to the degree that there is still identification with Mark, you need to understand the nature of sex.

This should give you some thing to chew on but I am copy copying into this email a few paragraphs from my new book about this topic. See if it does not make things clearer. I also am adding a chapter on love from my new book as an attachment which might contribute to this discussion.

Hi James,

Thank you so much for giving me such an in depth analysis on my question on celibacy. I am looking forward to your new book..but I have a question for

you...what do you mean by karmic drag. In the excerpt you sent me you said that lack of orgasm leads to karmic drag...what does this mean?

James: I meant that if you have sex without orgasm i.e. generate sexual energy by contact with someone, it requires a lot of concentration and an investment of emotion. It is essentially an emotional state. You are expressing desire. When you generate strong emotions, it wears out the mind and the body to some degree. This is what I meant by a karmic drag. There is a high at first and when the love making ends, the sattvic/rajasic energy, the love bubble, continues for some time and then changes to tamas. This is not very noticeable when you are young, but as you age and you notice it. It is not bad, but there is a downside, in the sense that the mind loses its sattvic quality.

Mark: I understand the rest of the topic fairly well now. My upbringing mitigates against the idea of casual sex. The only way for me to be sexually active is if I find a partner who is committed and both of us treat the relationship as karma yoga. We will see what happens...

James: The most important factor is the karma yoga attitude. This will neutralize the attachment that comes when you act out the vasana. It may be difficult at first but it works perfectly. You get to work out your vasana and not reinforce it. Sex becomes a sadhana. Obviously, it should not become your only sadhana. You should practice this attitude with reference to all your activities. I am happy that this discussion was useful.

All the best,

James

P.S can you keep the content of this email only between you and me? thank you....

Mark