



THE QUESTION OF DATING

By Rita Bruce

Dating is a difficult and controversial subject by nature. We have talked with young adults from various countries, and many are troubled and confused over this issue. Not only are the young adults confused but so are some of their coordinators. They write me and ask, "What does Swami say about dating?" This question has been asked by more than one young adult coordinator. In response, I would like to share with you Swami's teachings on the subject as well as some of my experience.

Swami says, *In the modern world, youth should know the nature of true love. Many from abroad mix with persons of the opposite sex, calling them 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend.' If you really love each other, you must get married and not continue living as 'friends.'* A few years back, a foreign youth was sitting under a tree with a crestfallen face. He was just in his late teens, and when questioned by Swami, he said that his second wife had deserted him, and he was anxiously thinking of his child that she bore. If at this age he had worries, imagine what would happen when he became older? Some young people, even before they are twenty years of age, get married, divorced, and re-marry again, and get separated from wife and child too, and later feel sorry for themselves. They do not realize the value of human life, which is both rare and sacred. (World Youth Conference, July 17, 1997)

Dating Today

Let us characterize the term dating. Dating today does not mean a coy look, a kiss on the hand, a box of chocolates, flowers, and chaperones. Dating today is much more than holding hands.

In a young adult workshop on relationships and marriage I asked the question, "Why do you want to date?" A young adult male said, "I want to live with a female before marriage to make sure that we are compatible." Then I asked this young man, "What happens after you live with someone and then discover that you are not compatible?" He responded, "I'll find someone else. There will always be another bus that comes along." What a revealing statement. I then asked, "What do you think happens to the woman that you no longer want?" The reply was, "Someone else will come along." I asked the group of young men, "Does anyone have another answer to this question." There was silence.

Then I asked the young women, “What happens to the woman who was rejected?” The group in unison responded without hesitation, “She will be very hurt.” It seems that women identify more with their feelings, and their reason for dating is many times entirely different than the men’s. Again, most women tend to look for a commitment, a marriage partner, someone to share their life with who is trustworthy.

Both sexes of course have feelings. If a man who loves deeply is rejected instead of being the one who rejects, he also feels hurt. But men who are very young are not always in touch with their feelings, which may be overshadowed by their hormonal drives.

Young women many times are looking for a one-and-only marriage partner, while young men tend to be looking for a partner, not necessarily a lifetime commitment.

Recent data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth said, “Among unmarried, non-cohabiting respondents ages 19-35, 41 percent of men agreed that they would like to live with someone before getting married, compared to 18 percent of women. Moreover, men’s approval of cohabitation appeared to depend less on marriage plans than women’s. A greater percentage of men than women agreed that “it would be all right for me to live with someone without being married, even if we had no interest in marriage.”

“Cohabitation has become an integral part of the courtship process, and even adolescents are expressing an interest in cohabiting at some point in the future.” (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano, 2005)

This is not surprising if you look at the content of advertising, movies, television, and so on. What do you see? You usually see one male surrounded by more than one female. It is rare to see the reverse, but who knows, for the more that today’s women move toward behaving like men, the more they adopt their behaviors.

So instead of women bringing the morality of men upward, they have taken on more of the negative habits that in the past were ascribed to men, such as going to bars for “happy hour,” smoking, drugs, staying out all night, drinking, and sexual misconduct. They also dress and flirt conspicuously to attract male attention.

Media content and programming cannot and should not be discounted by young adults or parents. The “progressive” attitude portrayed in the media of seeking pleasure at any expense, “to do whatever one wishes,” is increasingly repeated in most societies. Many, especially the young, are *not* being taught discrimination, nor are they adept at identifying the messages coming from the media and how these messages affect them. They just automatically react to—and eventually identify with—what they see and hear. They accept whatever their peers are doing without realizing the consequences of their actions.

I have asked various young adult groups to hold debates on the pros and cons of dating. The results have been almost identical everywhere.

Young adults list the *pros* as: Attraction, companionship, and being able to test compatibility before committing to marriage.

They list the following *cons*: Feelings of guilt, risk of emotional injury, rejection, unwanted pregnancy, educational distraction, fear of being hurt again, and sexually-transmitted disease.

The pros and cons of dating and the discussions in our workshops with young adults have been repeated around the world and brought out the same responses. Young people are all getting programmed by the same type—or should I say *hype*—of immorality. The question I have to ask is, “Where is the power of discrimination in all of this?”

What else does Swami say about dating? Swami does not usually speak on this issue publicly, but in private he makes some very clear statements. In an interview with some American youth, Swami said, *If you see a girl that you are attracted to, talk to her parents and inquire if you can marry her.* This advice to me implies *no dating*.

At the risk of sounding realistic, I would offer seriously an alternate suggestion: if you are interested in someone and wish to get to know each other, do so with a parent or responsible adult chaperone. Definitely don't ask your friends to be chaperones, because they will not give you the protection that you need. Why not involve your family? If you go on a date chaperoned by your mother and/or father, you will also get a chance to see how the dating partner responds to your parents or chaperone.

I encourage young people to go ahead and have good, healthy, fun, but in the company of your families. Only if there is an ulterior motive, will you seek to avoid a chaperone. But be aware that dating *alone* is a step toward losing your purity. Today you cannot afford to be naïve and think nothing will happen to you. It simply doesn't work that way any more. Think this through carefully. If you date alone, the deck is stacked against you. You run the serious risk of intimacy proceeding further than you intend it to, and you are placing yourselves in harm's way.

A new study on premarital sex has been published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Public Health Reports*, by Lawrence Finer, Director of Domestic Research of the Guttmacher Institute. Dr. Finer observes that “over the past decade, increasing amounts of advocacy, findings and programmatic efforts have focused on encouraging Americans to abstain from intimacy until they marry. Based upon a study on the probability-sampled National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a set of nationally-representative surveys conducted in 1982, 1988, 1995, and 2002, showed by age 20, 75% of respondents had had premarital sex. In short, the answer is no, the abstinence until marriage message is not taking root.”

Swami's Advice

Once in the early 1990s Swami spoke to the students in Brindavan before they went home for the summer holidays. Robert, my husband, was inside Swami's house and heard the following: *When you go home you will be asked to sing bhajans at many aunties' homes because you know all the latest bhajans. But sing in your home and at the Sai Center. Don't go anywhere else.*

He continued, *First you go to sing bhajans, and you see a girl, **you look**. The second time you go, **you introduce yourself to the girl**. The third time you go, **you slip her a note** asking if you can take her to the movie. **You take her to the movie . . . and then there is crying in Swami's interview room**. Her parents want your parents to give permission for you to marry the girl.*

Swami has just described the entire evolution of dating. This story is his absolutely clear advice on dating, and it is for all ages. Not only young people, but many divorced couples face the same situation and these same consequences. Even in our Sai Centers, men and women must remain separate. It is essential when men and women work together on a project that you make sure that you are in a group. We must be aware that among devotees, all of us have different degrees of self-control, and temptation can be present. There is a constant need for all of us to observe the guidelines for behavior that Swami has given us, regardless of age.

Swami also told this story: *A husband brought home a businessman for dinner and introduced him to his wife. Several weeks later, the husband brought the same man home for dinner. The third time the man came to visit, he came on his own. The husband was gone on a business trip, and the businessman asked the wife to go to a movie. After that there was crying.*

Swami asked this question, *Whose fault was it?* Swami said, *It was the husband's fault, because he should not have brought the business man to his home.*

In relationships of dating, often what happens is that one partner will be ready to leave the relationship and the other will not. This is part of the normal process of selection. The person who wishes to leave is less affected emotionally, while the rejected person feels pain and hurt, unless it is a mutual separation. This dilemma points out a major problem with dating, based on why people date in the first place.

Why Do People Date?

Many people date to have companionship, to have someone to share their experiences with, and to avoid feeling alone. Unfortunately, what often happens is just the opposite. The pain of an eventual separation can cause feelings of loneliness to escalate, because you have experienced some moments of togetherness, and now all that is gone. Then there is the guilt from having shared too much of oneself.

It is also natural to try and look for someone else, but the consequence of having multiple relationships is that with each failed relationship, we pile on more hurt and guilt, and often suppress more and more of the pain within us. In fact, we tend to deny that it exists.

If you get into this situation, by the time you get married, your ability to engage positively and openly in the relationship may be impaired, overshadowed by your negative experiences. This causes you to hesitate to share completely of yourself, because you fear being rejected again. You may think, "I hurt so much. I don't want this pain again, so I'll protect myself. I don't want my spouse to know what I really think and feel." But it is our inner thoughts and feelings

expressed with love and honesty that deepens the trust between two spouses and creates a strong lasting relationship. You share together the ups and downs of life, and this builds trust. You trust one another to be there during the good as well as the not-so-good experiences of life. Trust and truth are essential in marriage, as well as in any relationship. They are the foundation. If we cannot trust one another to be honest and truthful, the foundation of the relationship gets eaten away through ever-growing holes of suspicion. If you make up one-half and your marriage partner, the other, how then can one lie to the other? In such a case there will be no unity, no honor, and ultimately no relationship. We may not like what we sometimes need to hear from our spouse, but at least it is his or her truth. Without truth, you cannot rely on the other person—and vice versa; your relationship is doomed before it has begun.

If you are living with a person without a commitment of marriage, you are living an illusion. If you are living with a person who is promising marriage but without a commitment, you are being told a lie. Where is the truth and trust in empty words, promises unfulfilled, and deeds not performed?

This is a powerful reason for not dating. You will say, “But Auntie, all of my friends are dating. I will miss out on all the fun. I don’t want to sit at home alone. I want to be accepted and popular.” Yes, I understand your feelings. That is exactly what happened to my husband and I when we became Sai Baba devotees. We lost all our friends because we no longer ate meat, drank alcohol, went dancing, and did the social things that our friends did. And we believed that some Indian guru was God. We were laughed at. My family thought we were going to hell because we gave up the family religion. I do understand peer pressure.

But we had to make a conscious decision. We asked ourselves, “What are we trying to achieve in this life? What is the purpose of life, especially since we are privileged to know God exists and is on earth in human form?” There is simply no contest between the permanent bliss and happiness we can achieve by applying Sai Baba’s teachings, as opposed to temporary pleasure.

You may think, Auntie, you are so old that you don’t understand our lifestyle, our needs; your ideas are old-fashioned and unrealistic. But I ask you, what does age have to do with being hurt? Age does not remove the memory of past pain when you were rejected. Nor does age mean that you no longer have any feelings. Nor does age stop others from rejecting you. Peer pressure exists for all ages; it’s not exclusive to youth.

One underlying motive for caving into peer pressure is a need to be accepted. But the question is, “Who is accepting whom?” You are searching for someone else’s approval, and that person is also busy looking for your approval—and neither one is giving. What approval can we give if it does not exist within us? If you do not accept and love yourself; you cannot give the same to someone else. You need to love yourself in order to give love to someone else.

What Is the Solution?

How can we correct this problem? The solution is simple. Accept ourselves; love ourselves. Then there is no need to give others control over us. When we go along with the peer crowd,

and it is against our moral principles, we slowly diminish our self-esteem and love of self. Guilt undermines our self-esteem. The teachings of Sai Baba give very clear guidance. We must develop our ability to listen to the inner voice of the conscience in order to learn to discriminate what is right and wrong.

The love we seek from each other requires a sacrifice of self without wanting anything in return. Swami says, *Love is only expressed through service*. Our Beloved Sai models for us how to give this kind of pure and unconditional love.

It is not easy to admit our mistakes. Most of us tend to hide and deny what is true. We don't want to face our shortcomings. But I have to ask, why not? Avoiding a problem only increases its strength. The effort we make to understand and correct our mistakes removes the karma we have already created. On the other hand, running away from our problems only keeps them alive, possibly to return in the next life. What a terrifying thought!

If the same problem keeps recurring in our life, then we can conclude it is a *significant* karma that we have come to remove. In this case, the sooner we deal with our situation, the quicker the karma may be dissolved.

So what stops us from examining ourselves? We are trying to protect our image. We want to look good. But if we were perfect, we would not be here. It is an illusion, this idea of not having any faults. We are in the classroom of life for the extreme purpose of looking at ourselves and analyzing our problems. In fact, this is how we learn and expand our consciousness.

How can we know what is the right or wrong thing to do? How can we develop the discrimination we need? The first thing to do is find a quiet place, then tune into our conscience. We surround ourselves with Sai Ma's love, the love of a thousand mothers. We sincerely ask our beloved Sai to show us the truth, so we can change. We continue by asking for his guidance and strength to help us to overcome our karma. We come back and do this again and again.

Remember, God loves us very much. In this self-examination process, you have to be honest with yourself about your inner state. If you are peaceful, then you will have harmony within; if not, then you may be denying a problem within yourself. Examine both your feelings and your behavior, as these will be your best clues that something is bothering you. Don't be afraid to acknowledge your emotions—how you really feel about yourself and about your actions—for emotions are our truth serum. Bear in mind that if your feelings are denied and not recognized, they will still express outwardly in your words or behaviors anyway, whether you are aware of those feelings or not.

The only person whose approval we need to seek is God's. No one else is important. In reality, who is approving of whom? Swami says, *The only reason for tears is the loss of God*. Seeking approval is usually based on need fulfillment. I have a need, and you fulfill it for now. But when there is no longer a perceived need, the relationship is at risk unless the couple has a firm commitment in marriage to work through it.

Young adult women speak to me about relationships they have been in for years, living with someone but not married. Eventually the relationship ends and they end up crying in my arms, emotionally devastated. They thought that their boyfriend would eventually marry them. I have to say, "Don't count on it!" This is a case of temporary need fulfillment. Understand, dear sisters, that if an honorable man is interested in you, he will not hurt you. And if he/she thinks that you are the one, he/she will make a commitment; if not, the relationship can be judged to be based on pleasure and sensual gratification—temporary values yielding a temporary result.

Sai says, Men set no limits or restraints on themselves. They do not care to ponder over where they should go, why they should go there, nor how they should behave. —Ladies Day Discourse 11-18-1995

Sai also says, A woman should know her limits. She should not hanker after too much liberty in her movements. Women suffer most when they are moved by this desire. When she breaks all rules and runs unbridled into freedom, she becomes dangerous to the reputation and good name of both families—that of her parents and that of her parents-in-law. —Sai Chandana 11-23-1985

Why, oh why, do you think Swami separates the sexes? He knows about the attraction between males and females. He created it! Do you realize that this separation is for your own good? He does this out of his love for you, because he knows the consequences of your raging hormones. Do you think God doesn't know about this?

He is omnipresent and knows everything about you, don't doubt this. I know for a fact that he knows everything I do, because he has told me in interviews. He told me things that no one else knew. You may think that you are fooling your parents, but let me assure you, without a doubt, you are not fooling your divine parent, Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

The question of dating is complicated and of widespread concern, as it touches every person in every family. I encourage you to think deeply and honestly about its implications and to pray avidly for the development of divine conscience and discrimination, and to be an instrument and example of right action.

—Rita Bruce