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It Starts with that First Slap

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We've encountered much talk lately in Time, Newsweek and on TV about the taboo subjects of wife beating, date rape and even sexually abused children. Things once not even whispered about behind closed doors are now out in the open. No more secrets.

Of course, it never was much of a secret, for all those involved knew-husbands and wives, their friends, the kids, close relatives and neighbors. Knew but said nothing. If the neighbors are making too much noise at a party, no one hesitates to complain. But if that same neighbor is beating his wife, nothing is done. No knock on the door. No call to authorities. We never allow a fist fight in a public place, but we do permit, by our silence, such heinous things in the home. In the spirit of standing for ahimsa and not permitting violence, when you see a man slapping his wife or a parent hitting their child, call the cops. Don't protect the wrongdoer. Don't think no karma is attached to inaction. It is no longer acceptable to turn up the TV to drown out the screams and sobs of a wife being beaten.

Recently, the California case of O.J. Simpson has released an immense outpouring of sympathy for abused women. It took a world famous athlete to bring forward an infamous worldly behavior. It is an admirable trait that an uncensored press can come forward to awaken a nation's conscience. In a way, the images and stories that are appearing are not unlike Indian epics or Greek plays that seek to establish morals by depicting tragic happenings, or Italian operas which conceal morals in melodrama. All in all, the world has not changed that much.

As hard as it is to discuss wife abuse and why it happens, people are doing it openly and without shame. We see graphic, real-life pictures of battered wives speaking out in magazines and on television. The big question is, will it ever end? Maybe not, but we can end the cultural sport where father and mother watch their son slap down then drag his wife across the room by her hair.

A man who strikes his wife in an effort to make her cower, to control her, actually karmically does the opposite. His brutality turns on him, becomes his disadvantage. Her love and dependence weaken and her psychic bonds to him unravel. After that, she has the spiritual upper hand, is more free from him than ever, less under his control than before that first slap.

It does not matter how much they fight with words-the name-calling, insinuations, insults and arguments. That's all part of the play of married life and may be fairly intense when their astrological compatibility is not as perfect as it might be. But that first slap changes everything! It is that first slap that brings papa, that degrades and demeans, that makes her his enemy and not his friend. This is not acceptable. Kids cannot accept it. Wives will never forgive it. Families should not accept it, even to defend beloved sons. It is not less violent just because it happens behind closed doors. All who know of this crime and who do not speak up for dharma are accomplices. Like a thief or rapist, they are enemies of a stable society.

"What can I do?" you may ask. You can refuse to remain silent. You can object, as I did recently upon finding in my own community three cases of wife abuse. Imagine if devotees performing sadhana can succumb how easy it must be for others. There is help available. Peer pressure, elders, police, counselors and shelters are there and much more.

It's like the olden days, when people first started objecting to slavery. Everyone knew in their hearts it was wrong, but no one dared go against the conventional wisdom that it was "necessary." Finally, humankind came to its senses and stopped it. It was no longer acceptable. In that same way, we are now coming to our senses about spouse abuse and child abuse.

What is the difference between beating a woman or raping her? Not much,

really. Violent harm is done. Her body has been violated, moved by his body against her will. A sin has been committed, equally as psychologically serious. Kukarma for the man, bad consequences, results from that first slap. Prayashchitta, penance, must be performed to mitigate the backlash of his actions, lest they seriously affect his next birth.

The first push, bruised wrist, pinch without mercy, slap or bleeding lip tells her nerve system that "this is no place for me to be." Her fear takes over reason, and the process of breaking up the family nest begins. His future is jeopardized as she instinctively withdraws her shakti. He struck her to show that he is the boss and that she cannot control him. But in fact he appointed her as another boss that may well torment his consciousness the rest of his life and bring to him sorrows to equal her own, now or in his next birth. It, of course, is the birth dharma of Hindu elders to rule society with a firm hand and demand of their younger male generation that they never defile themselves by giving that first slap.