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## **Tapas : The Yoga Discipline of Self Knowledge**

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Tapas, austerity or discipline, is the first of the last three Niyamas of Ashtanga Yoga that constitute Kriya Yoga. The two others are Svadhyaya, Self enquiry, and Ishvara Pranidhana, or surrender to the divine will or to Reality. Patanjali states in the Yoga Sutras that perfection of Tapas leads to the removal of the impurities of body and mind and that in combination with Svadhyaya and Ishvara Pranidhana it can lead to Samadhi. Why is this so ??

In his *Science of Yoga* (p 129), I. K. Taimni points out that Tapas is related to the will, Svadhyaya to the intellect and Ishvara Pranidhana to the emotions. Elaborating on this, it appears that these three Niyamas are also related to Body, Mind and Heart and to Truth, Wisdom and Love. Their practice thus leads to a holistic development of the Sadhaka, of the practitioner on the spiritual path, eventually leading him to Samadhi.

Hence, if we should never forget to contextualize all the Yamas and the Niyamas within the broader context of Ashtanga Yoga, of the eight limbs of Yoga, exploring Tapas is particularly interesting as it is the basis of Kriya Yoga ... and ultimately, if understood differently, maybe also its final goal, as we will develop in the following pages.

Tapas is often translated as austerity. It is related to heat, to the heat that will purify the sadhaka. The idea is that Tapas creates the necessary heat to burn out our impurities in the same way as gold is purified by fire. Tapas is also said to bake the Sadhaka's clay pot, his body, in order to enable it to receive and to hold "higher experiences". Tapas is the austerities that light and sustain the fire of purification. In a broader sense, it is the discipline that is necessary for spiritual evolution, which opens the gates to consciousness. On an ultimate level it may be the manifestation of "skill in action".

In this short introduction, we have already realized that Tapas is linked to action, and even to skill in action, and to change, to heat, to fire, to purification. Let us explore this ideas a little further by relating them to the Yoga Sadhana experience in Ananda Ashram.

In Ananda Ashram, the day starts every morning with an Aarathi. Watching the fire teaches a lot. First of all, fire is lit through friction that produces heat. So first there is an action : getting a match out of the match box and cracking it against it. This creates heat and out of this heat spring some sparks which if they are sustained turn into a fire. The fire itself can continue to burn only as long as it is fed. While it does, it gives light and warmth. And depending on the burnt materials, it gives more or less waste material in the form of more or less “dirty” smoke, left overs etc. While it is burning, a very inspiring feature of fire is that it keeps on changing. It recreates itself at every moment. This reminds us that we too are not as solid as we seem and that we actually also recreate ourselves at each moment. So the burning fire can appear as a symbol of consciousness, that is constantly recreating, rediscovering itself through a transformation of the gross (that which aliments the fire) into the more subtle, light and warmth.

During the Aarathi it is especially inspiring to open up to the Fire’s teaching while chanting Shiva’s Gayatri Mantra :

Aum Than Maheshaya Vidmahe

Vakvi Shudhaya Dimahi

Thano Shivaha Prachodayatey Aum

(I am aware of that powerful eternal goodness and auspiciousness manifesting as the Divine Lord Shiva. This blue-throated Neelakanta who drank the Hala-Hala poison has the power to purify speech. May this eternal goodness inspire me and stimulate me).

Verse two says “Vakvi Shudhaya Dimahi”, “I invoke the one who purifies speech, Vak, the Word, the Logos, the primordial sound.” In many traditions, the primordial sound is seen as the cause of the manifested universe. This primordial sound is linked to the passage from the unmanifest to the manifest, from the One to the polarized, from Unity to Duality and ultimately Diversity. As is said in Chinese thought : from Wuji, the unmanifest, came Taiji, the ultimate peak of manifestation which is the primordial polarization. Out of this came the five elements and ultimately the “ten thousand things”. On a certain level, this manifestation is the move from the “pure” to the “impure”

from the “integrated” to the “disintegrated”. It is the passage from Vidya, knowledge to Avidya, non-knowledge. It is thus also the root of suffering as it is the birth of the “poison of duality”. By keeping this poison in his throat, Shiva, the incarnation of Eternal Goodness, but also of evolutionary change, makes it ineffective. The poison of duality has no effect on he who is pure, on he who is constantly engaged in evolutionary change, who is not getting caught up in the forms created by duality but who keeps on recreating himself at each moment – or rather who lets himself being recreated at each moment in the cosmic Lila, in the cosmic dance performed by Shiva. In other words : he cannot be harmed by the poison of duality, of existence, he who is like fire, constantly burning, constantly sacrificing duality to transform it back into Light and Warmth, Love and Wisdom and ultimately Reality, Sat.

Fire teaches us to understand Shiva who is Eternal Goodness and Eternal Change ... and who is also the root Guru of all the Yogis and is thus very closely related to Tapas. We start to get a glimpse of how profound the question of Tapas is. Tapas is what may help us in the beginning to purify ourselves in order to transcend the poison of duality. Then it may become the expression of ultimate action, of action coming from beyond duality, rooted in Reality. It is what permits us to identify with Shiva to become one of His manifestations, to realize “Shivo Ham”. It also leads us to understand the beautiful first verse of the Ishta Upanishad, that is chanted every Sunday at Sri Kambliswamy Madam :

Om. Purnamadha Purnamidam  
Purnat Purnam Udachyate  
Purnasya Purnam Adaya  
Purnam Eva Purnam Avasishyate Om.

(“The absolute pure consciousness is perfect. This manifested universe also is perfect. After manifesting this perfect universe that perfect Absolute verily remains perfect.”)

In this mantra, purity is linked to perfection. When something is pure there is no room for impurities. But purity can be approached in two ways: in a static or in a dynamic way. Static purity consists in having something pure and being careful that it does not get spoiled by anything. It is like pure water kept in a bottle. Dynamic purity could be illustrated through a flowing mountain stream. The water is running, running and running. And thus it remains pure and purifies what is on its passage. So purity can be attained either through perfect immobility or through constant flow,

through constant motion. Sat contains both. But on the relative level of manifestation, things start to clog up, to decay, to rot once they are not animated anymore by the powerful streams of Life.

If Water is a wonderful symbol of Life constantly flowing down and manifesting, Fire is a wonderful symbol of Life reintegrating its source or its origin. It is a symbol of “evolutionary change” as Amma calls it. Both Water and Fire can be understood as fundamental mediators between the “Up” and the “Below” and as the agents of purification.

In the Bible, Jesus says “Let the dead bury the dead ...” This leads us to an interesting question in light of our present explorations. What does it mean to be dead and what does it mean to be alive ?? How can dead people bury other dead people ?? What is implied in these words ?? May it refer to our consciousness ?? It can be said that the more conscious we are, the more alive we are. The more unconscious we are, the more dead we are. In the ten commandments, Christians are told not to kill. If this can be understood on a gross level, it can also be taken in its deeper meaning : we must not kill the Spirit, consciousness within us. We are alive only to the extent that we are like fire : that we are “consciousness of every moment”, burning all the habits that have crystallized in us, sacrificing them and transforming them into warmth and light, into Love and Wisdom, thus ultimately leading us to the discovery of Sat, of Truth or Reality. Indeed, Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, a Christian Master, used to say that Truth is a Medal of which one side is Love and the other Wisdom. To the extent that you have both, Truth manifests.

For human beings, the Sun is maybe the most perfect example of a Being that is alive. He is a representative of Sat, as he is the central point of our solar system around which everything revolves. His life is so intense that it manifest as a big ball of fire dispensing his heat and his light, his Love and his Wisdom to all. So how to become like the sun ?? How to become a source of light, of warmth and of Life ?? How to burn, to flow, to be ?? The answer to these questions lies in Tapas.

At a first level, Tapas is what permits us to overcome our inertia, Tamas. We have to start to become conscious of our situation and evolve beyond pure stimulus – response actions, beyond the pleasure and pain principle. We have to change our old, “dead” habits for new, “alive” ones. Tapas is the framework, that can manifest as our “inner voice” or as a spiritual path, that can permit us to rediscover all we do at each moment and to react to it in a dynamic of evolutionary change, of change that makes us alive. On this very basic level, Tapas can serve as a “punching ball”. We are doing things a certain way and now we add this discipline, this framework, that enjoins us to restrain certain actions and to carry out others, as do the Yamas and the Niyamas on the Yogic Path.

Confronting our way of life with this framework leads to friction. As anybody who has seriously tried to learn something has experienced : at the beginning it is always very difficult. It is only little by little, as we deepen our practice of an art, a science, a language or any other activity that it actually becomes not only easy, but even enjoyable and a stepping stone for new discoveries. Just think of a baby learning to walk. How many falls. Then little by little it manages its first steps. Then when walking is mastered, running and jumping are explored. And how many new possibilities are opened up through the mastering of these capacities !!! But it all starts with a lot of resistance, with a lot of friction. It is this movement, this friction that creates the heat that eventually allows sparks of consciousness to sparkle. And if the spark is caught it may become a flame which in turn will be burning as long as it is sustained. If we put a lot of combustibles into it, the flame may even turn into a huge fire. And we may burn finer and finer, more and more subtle materials leading to more and more intense fire and to less waste.

From the initial movement to the brazing fire, all are expressions of Tapas. How to understand these different levels ??

It seems that to start with, the understanding of Tapas, of Discipline, must be quite down to earth and also quite strict, quite external. It is like with any thing we want to learn. In the beginning stages we must accept a certain number of rules and play by them. Only little by little by becoming proficient, do we start to understand their meaning and can we start to really question them and at some point maybe even dismiss them as other rules will take the place of the former ones according to the new stages we may have reached.

A man once went to see the Buddha to ask him how he could discipline himself. The Buddha advised him to take black and white stones. Whenever he did something bad he should put a black stone on a heap. For every good action he should put a white stone on another heap. At the beginning there were many black stones and almost no white stones. Little by little there were as many black as white stones and after a while there were more white stones than black stones. Eventually there were only white stones left. Our man, through conscious living and changing his patterns of action had succeeded to “become alive”, to reduce his Papa, demerit, and increase his Punya, merit. But where to go from here ?? Would that be the end of Tapas, the end of discipline ?? Obviously not.

Once our basic nature has been changed, and a certain Tapas has become natural to us – so that it is even inappropriate to talk of Tapas as such – a new kind of Tapas emerges. If in the initial stages it

was for instance very necessary to strictly follow certain rules for our own development, for example “meditating” or doing a Hatha Yoga session every morning and evening, this becomes problematic later on. Indeed, if at the initial stages we would be justified not to go out and lend a friend a helping hand at our Tapasya timings – as we would then never follow through with our discipline – this attitude does not hold anymore once we realize that we are not the only ones having problems, but that they are other beings with whom we coexist and with whom we have to work. So how to continue to work on one’s own conscious evolution, including the others and not shutting them off, from our path ?? At this level Tapas, although still requiring some special exercises, starts to become more internal. We have to develop our awareness of situations, of the factors involved, the motivations etc. Little by little Tapas understood as “austerities” that can be “separate” from the rest of one’s life transforms into Tapas as constant discipline, as a 24 hours occupation. It turns into an aspiration towards skill in action in whatever we do ... even when we sleep.

This prospect may appear a little frightening as there seems to be no more space left for ourselves (note ; our selves not our Selves). There is no more time for “holidays from Reality”. Life starts to be lived with full intensity at each moment. The more we evolve the more discipline becomes natural ... but also, the more all pervading. It is quite clear that symbolically speaking the temperature now starts to rise drastically. We have come out of the movement and friction plane and have entered the burning plane. We have started to become a flame. And the continuous work with ourselves and with others helps to feed this flame and to make it grow more and more ... which in the process also bakes our bodies progressively. Indeed the body needs to be fundamentally transformed in order to be able to sustain such an intense life.

At this stage it becomes especially important to explore the proper interplay of exertion and of relaxation. As the Buddha advised a student asking him about the proper way to meditate : your mind must be like the string of a Veena. Neither too loose, as then it cannot be played, neither too tight, as then it would break. I like the ideal proposed by Chinese internal martial arts : Wu Wei, action in non-action. We have to learn to act without acting. In Yogic terms : we have to become Karma Yogis who let that what has to happen happen through us without clinging to it.

In Buddhist thought there is an interesting idea of the six Paramitas. The six Paramitas are often translated as the “Six perfections” that the Bodhisattva, the spiritual seeker on the path of enlightenment has to practice. But it may be more appropriate to rather translate Paramitas, according to their etymology, as the “actions gone beyond”, the “actions that have reached the other

side”, that are not informed by duality. The six paramitas are giving, discipline, patience, energy, meditation and transcendental knowledge (Prajna). It is said that these six actions actually only really become Paramitas when Prajna is developed and thus, when the practice of the five other actions is informed by Prajna. Until Prajna has developed, they are but a mimicking of the Paramitas ... but an efficient one as they contribute to the emergence of Prajna which then informs them and makes them truly transcendent.

Similarly it seems to me that until we have become “truly alive”, Tapas does remain external to us to a certain extent. It is a specific effort that we are making and is thus tainted by duality. But through constant practice and never ceasing effort we little become really alive and then we may naturally “shine”. What may still look as Tapas, austerities or discipline, from outside will in fact only be the pure expression of what we are, of Reality as purely reflected in our being. As we mentioned in the beginning, quoting Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, Tapas is what purifies our bodies and mind. Once they are completely pure, they can reflect Sat, Reality, they can let Life flow fully, intensely without hindrances. Little by little our actions are not informed anymore by our “ego”, our personal point of view, but they reflect the larger picture of Sat.

To sum up, we could say that Tapas is the path from unconsciousness to consciousness. It starts with the beginning of an upward movement and then continues with the practice of the “punching ball”, with friction that little by little wakes us up from Tamas. Then, we start to burn and to become alive. We start to become sources of Love and Wisdom. Ultimately Love and Wisdom lead us back to their source, Truth, and we reintegrate Sat, and “are”.

And things start to get very simple again : “Eat when you are hungry and sleep when you are tired” a Zen Koan says. And another one points out that : “Before I studied Zen a mountain was a mountain and a river was river. When I studied Zen, a mountain was no longer only a mountain and a river only a river. Now that I understood Zen a mountain is a mountain and a river is a river.”

In order to be able to walk the path of Tapas while beware of the trap of abandoning it and the trap of overdoing it, we should meditate this last little story :

A student went to a Master to learn his art and asked him:

- How long will it take me to learn your art ??
- Twenty years.

- And if I really commit to it seriously ??
- Ten years.
- And if I drop everything else, and just work work and work.
- Then I am not sure if you ever will succeed. But maybe minimum thirty years.