



January 2012 Contemplation Theme

Tapas: The Hard Stuff

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There are easy parts to life, but hard parts come along in spite of your efforts to avoid them. Yoga says you must tackle the hard stuff, not merely handle the tough stuff when it comes up, but to look for the challenges and even create them for yourself. This is called tapas, the third of the niyamas.

Tapas is familiar, clearly defined in familiar phrases: keep your nose to the grindstone, do or die, work like a dog, burn the midnight oil, get on the stick, hang in there, keep your chin up, and when the going gets tough, the tough get going. In yoga, it's the same and it's different.

With tapas, you're jumping into the middle of a series of contemplation articles, which began with the yamas — lifestyle practices that uplift the way you deal with the world. The five yamas lead to the niyamas — lifestyle practices that uplift the way you deal with yourself. Yamas are about your external process and niyamas about your internal process: outside and inside. Together they leave no corner of your life untouched, shining light into every shadow.

The first two niyamas are shaucha (purity) and samtoshā (contentment). This means when you select your tapas (the challenge you are going to work on), your decision is not arising out of impure motivations or a sense of discontent or neediness. You make a choice about which hard stuff you're going to tackle without beating yourself up and without trying to overcompensate. The process is straightforward:

- 1) Take an intelligent look at yourself.
- 2) Discern what would be the next step for you
- 3) Decide to do it.
- 4) Then you do it.

Tapas is usually translated as austerity, a word that may inspire you to avoid the practice. Yet tapas is very important because when you do it, you are transformed in a short time. The proportion of effort expended to benefits gained is very much in your favor.

The Sanskrit word tapas means heat, referring to the heat that comes from the sacred fire (yajña), performed today as in Vedic times. I am intimately familiar with this fire from many experiences of it, both in India and America, but especially because I faced the fire in order to be initiated as a swami. It burned away things I'd wanted to be free of for a long time. Tapas will do the same for you.

The extended meaning of tapas includes the inner fire that keeps you going in your own process, and specifically means the heat that comes from friction — the friction of your own limited sense of self rubbing against God. Which of you will be burned away?

Patanjali promises great fruits from tapas:

Kaayendriya-siddhir ashuddhi-kshayaat tapasah. Yoga Sutras (2.43)

Tapas provides perfection of your body and sense organs due to the gradual destruction of impurities.

Physical perfection is a primary goal for many yogis, primarily because pain is highly motivating. For many, beauty is the key motivator. While these motivations bring students to all styles of yoga practice, Svaroopa® yoga specializes in giving you the deeper inner experience of Self, so it's actually the bliss that brings you back to class. While this sutra doesn't explain what inner bliss does for you, those benefits span the entire spectrum of physical healing, beauty, peace, happiness and ultimately enlightenment, far beyond Patanjali's promise.

Thus Patanjali's description is somewhat superficial, though he is pointing out an important cause-and-effect relationship. When you do tapas (the hard stuff), not only your body but also your senses are purified and improved. This means your ability to see and hear are refined, so you perceive the world

more clearly, which makes you able to understand it in a new way. You enjoy taste and smell more, your sense of touch is enhanced, and your ability to speak and to be active in the world are empowered. All from tapas.

So, what do you have to do? It's very simply – you do the things you don't want to do. If you enjoy getting up before the sunrise, it's not tapas for you, but if early morning yoga practice would be hard for you, it's your tapas. If you would have difficulty improving your food choices, it's tapas for you, but not for another yogi who loves eating food that is “good for you” regardless of the taste.

It sounds a little bit like New Year's resolutions, an important yogic ritual. To resolve to do something is different than intending to do it, planning to do it, wishing it would happen, or even hoping for the desired result. When you resolve to do something, it gets done, no matter what gets in the way. Your heart is in it. You really care about it. You apply yourself.

Certain yogic disciplines are well known since ancient times. If you don't set yourself to them, you may find them happening quite naturally, including:

The 3:30 am wake-up call — meditation is calling your name.

Early to bed — ready to go to bed with the sun (or soon after).

Simplicity — how much of anything do you really need?

Living lightly — matching your food intake to what you need, not what you want; or empty out your purse (or your car).

Silence — cultivating inner silence by finding opportunities for outer silence.

Going without — giving up comforts and pleasures, even giving up things you consider to be necessities (even when they are not).

Generosity — giving time, energy and/or money to those you want to support, but giving more than the easy amount.

Doing more — tackling a practice or a project, or holding yourself to a higher standard.

You get nowhere in life without tapas. You cannot complete your education, buy or rent a home, keep a job, grow a garden, raise a child or stay married without tapas. There is a hidden secret in the practice of tapas: the karmic effects. The law of karma says that everything you do has repercussions. When you “pick your poison,” doing tapas in the arena you choose, the benefits extend into every area of your life. This principle is well known in India, where a person will undertake an arduous climb to a holy site so that they can get a good job. It works!

I remember giving things up for Lent when I was a child, a form of tapas. Yogis embark on similar periods of intense practice, perhaps by attending a yoga training or retreat — truly tapas! You can create a similar “intensive” for yourself by tackling a pose you don't like to do, working on it daily for a month, or perhaps giving up television and doing yoga during that time for a week or a year.

The key is that you decide what you're going to do. If it's an easy decision, it probably isn't really tapas. But if you pick something that is too hard, you might not be able to actually do it. So pick a challenge you know you need, but one that you can actually do. Tell your yoga-buddies, so they can encourage and support you. But I must warn you of one seductive aspect to tapas: when you meet the challenge you've set for yourself, you might find that you like it so much that it becomes part of your lifestyle. I used to hate the 3:30 am wake-up call, and now I love it!

Do more yoga.

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