

Tapas

Tapas is one of the dharmic actions described in the XVIIth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where it is developed through a triple point of view: body, speech and mind. It allows us to understand *tapas* as a concept deeply beyond the mat practice of Yoga:

«14. Worship given to the godhead, to the twice-born, to the spiritual guide, to the wise, cleanness, candid dealing, sexual purity and avoidance of killing and injury to others, are called the *askêsis* of the body.

15. Speech causing no trouble to others, true, kind and beneficial, the study of Scripture, are called the *askêsis* of speech.

16. A clear and calm gladness of mind, gentleness, silence, self-control, the purifying of the whole temperament - this is called the *askêsis* of the mind.

17. This threefold *askêsis*, done with a highest enlightened faith, with no desire for fruit, harmonised, is said to be sattvic.» (*Bh.G. XVII.14-17*).¹

Here we find how *tapas* requires self-awareness of our daily behaviour.

In Patañjali's *Yoga Sutra*, *tapas* is part of *Kriya Yoga* (Y.S. II.1), that «is practised for attenuating *Klesas* and bringing about *Samadhi*» (Y.S. II.2),² and is one of the observances of *Asthanga Yoga* (Y.S. II.32). As a *niyama*, *tapas* is crucial in the process of purifying the body and the sense organs: «Perfection of the sense organs and body after destruction of impurity by austerities.» (Y.S. II.43).³

In the *Yoga Yajnavalkya* *tapas* is taken in a more specific way: «Those who are well versed in *Tapas* say that drying the body [...] in accordance with the Vedas, is the best *tapas*».⁴

And we find also in other books of the yogic tradition, that *tapas* is manifested as silence or some other ascetic practices, such as walking over fire, leaving an arm in the air for decades...

In all these cases it is connected with the idea of will power. According to Sri Aurobindo, *tapas* «is the concentration of the spiritual will for a specific purpose».⁵ And if we focus on the information given in the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Yoga Sutra* we realize that it is expected to be an action common to all beings, a common observance we all must practise whilst being aware of the right measure. Some of us need more *tapas*, others less, according to age, constitution, temperament... *Tapas* in deficit leads to indulgence, *Tapas* in excess feeds desire and the ego. The answer is the middle way. But it's difficult to achieve the right measure! It requires a lot of awareness and *vairagya*.

So let me now illustrate this reflection with my own experience.

When I first went to Zinal for the EUY Zinal Congress, in 2008, my Yoga practice was a little crystallized. I was very engaged in Yoga, but my practice was probably too mild for a 29-year-old girl with a lot of earth in her physical constitution and a certain amount of gentleness to all beings (I had already been vegetarian for a decade). That was when I met Philippe Djoharikian and the *kriya* practice at the top of the mountain before sunrise. It was deeply transformative, even though at the time I could not understand why.

In the following years, I brought this experience to my personal practice and, even though I don't live in the Swiss mountains, I started a process of cleaning and strengthening through all the fire generated by the practice and it kept me engaged. I was able to experience what Taimni says: «the systematic practice of *Tapas* generally begins with simple and easy exercises which require the exertion of will power and is continued by progressive stages with more difficult exercises, the object of which is to bring about the dissociation of the vehicle from consciousness.»⁶

1 Sri Aurobindo, *Bhagavad Gita and its message* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1977), pp. 247-249.

2 I.K.Taimini. *The Science of Yoga. The Yoga-Sutra-s of Patañjali* (Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House: 2010), p.129.

3 *Ibidem*, p.249.

4 Mohan, A.G. (Tranl.), *Yoga Yajnavalkya* (Madras: Ganesh & Co.) p. 44.

5 Sri Aurobindo, *Lo Yoga Della Bhagavad Gita* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1990), p. 314.

In 2011 and 2012, again at the EUY Zinal Congress, I met Walter Ruta and it was a return to the luminous yogic source of some of my teachers in Portugal: Sri Sri Sri Satchidananda, the Silent Yogi of Madras. It was the completion of a cycle and the opening of a new one that took the form of a spiral, the vibrant spiral that accompanies the very spiral of life. In the words of Walter Ruta, «*Tapas* is being receptive to the cosmic force of creation».⁷

Since then, I have followed Yogi Walter with total trust and surrender, but, I must say, these have not been smooth years. In fact, they have brought many challenges: resignation from my job to dedicate myself to Yoga; marriage, which led me to share time with my husband rather than alone; a risky pregnancy that took away from me some *asana* and *pranayama* exercises I was used to doing; three years of breastfeeding that took me away from my daily routine of *shat karman* and now a pandemic that has turned the whole world upside down and forced us to do something unthinkable before, online yoga classes! Nevertheless, these years have been really excellent for working on *tapas*! And this practice on and off the mat is bringing me profound changes at all levels, and a deep gratitude, even though I know the job is not completely done yet. It can never be done completely.

To calibrate *tapas* is a life challenge. As I said before, it requires a lot of awareness and detachment, that's probably why Patañjali presents *tapas* along with *svadhyaya* and *Isvara-pranidhana* as «preliminary Yoga» (Y.S. II.1).⁸

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6 I.K.Taimini. *The Science of Yoga. The Yoga-Sutra-s of Patañjali* (Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House: 2010), p. 226.

7 Walter Ruta at EUY Zinal Congress of Yoga, 23rd August 2011.

8 I.K.Taimini. *The Science of Yoga. The Yoga-Sutra-s of Patañjali* (Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House: 2010), p. 127.