

YOGA AND ALIGNMENT

FROM THE UPANISHADS TO B.K.S. IYENGAR



GITTE BECHSGAARD
AND GILLIAN McCANN

yoga. As anyone who has practiced meditation knows, stopping the mind from dwelling in either the past or the future is a challenging task. In this way, *santosha* is preparation for accessing healing states of consciousness when we come fully into the present.

Virya and tapas: the necessity of energy and determination

The next two *niyamas* ensure that the state of *santosha* is not one of complacency. The word *virya* is derived from the root *vir*, which means strength and vitality. This clear energy is necessary for movement on the yogic path. The emphasis on *virya* also stands in contrast to the popular perception of yoga as a form of relaxation. In fact, the opposite is true, as spiritual practice flounders on a lukewarm approach.

The Yoga Sutras highlight a direct connection between a mental attitude of enthusiasm and the ability to maintain the path with mindfulness (sutra 1.20). In this regard, faith comes first and is followed shortly by heroic energy (*virya*). In *The Gift of Consciousness* (2013), Bechsgaard defines this *niyama* as energy, courage, strength and “enthusiasm leading to sustained effort” (241). The need for sustained effort is unsurprising as this principle applies to any long-term activity. All important aspects of life require discipline, focus, structure, sacrifice and commitment.

The Yoga Sutras outline a variety of obstacles and their accompanying psychosomatic symptoms. These challenges range from illness, to doubt and lack of will power (sutras 1.30–1.31). Even subtle obstacles, such as having difficulty making positive spiritual shifts in consciousness, are mentioned. This can manifest in a variety of ways including feeling lethargy, doubt and scepticism.

In contrast, *virya* describes a clear, unblocked energy that moves us forward. Without such a concentrated and powerful energy, the likelihood of falling back is great. *Virya* provides an optimistic and clear internal drive that immediately seeks out solutions rather than declaring defeat. *Virya* combined with *santosha* is a powerful combination of deep optimism and clear energy. Luckily, the practices themselves contribute to greater energy and so can create a virtuous cycle.

Tapas is a concept that ties in tightly with *virya* and emerges from the oldest strata of the Vedic tradition. In the creation hymn of the *Rig Veda*, we are told of “the life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat” (3.10.129). The idea of heat as a creative and purifying energy has remained constant for thousands of years, being shaped and developed in different schools of thought.

The word *tapas* is generally translated as heat and is part of the larger logic of asceticism that runs throughout the Hindu traditions. The symbol and element of fire are both central, seen from the beginning in the figure of the god Agni, who is the messenger of the gods. Fire also connotes witnessing, transformation, purification and creation.

Through practices of *tapas*, negative karma is burned off and the individual purified. There are a wide variety of practices that constitute *tapas* with some of the most common being fasting, pilgrimage and a vow of silence. These acts of self-sacrifice purify the mind and body and result in energy and clarity along with an ability to manifest one’s ideas in the world.

There are numerous stories in the epics describing characters who want to build spiritual power and undertake various forms of *tapas*. In the

Mahabharata, Arjuna practices penance in order to be given a boon by the gods. The epic describes Arjuna's asceticism as embodying the "incandescence of *tapas*" (Peterson 2007, 224) Arjuna then uses the energy and force bestowed by the practices to fulfill his own *dharma*. As a warrior (*kshatryia*) and householder, his concerns are different than those of a renunciant whose goal is liberation, but the same underlying logic applies to both.

In the yoga tradition, *tapas* also refers to the fiery and burning nature of commitment that is needed to break through long-held patterns of the body, mind and emotions. A fierce determination and focused commitment is implied by this term (Bechsgaard 2013, 216). Discipline, like asceticism, is often misunderstood in contemporary culture. From the point of view of the spiritual path, it is a recognition that a scattershot, unfocused approach does not work. When challenges occur, it is *virya* and *tapas* that keep us going and move us through despondency, inertia and doubt.

The concept of *tapas* can be understood in many ways, and includes everything from posture practice, to sense control, to diet and lifestyle. Other practice elements that fall into this category have traditionally included service (*seva*), performance of duty (*dharma*), harmonization, control of sexual energy and fasting. As Iyengar (2005) writes, "tapas is the blazing desire to burn away the impurities of body, senses and mind" (257).

The burning power of *tapas* was meant to reduce the impact of heaviness (*tamas*) or overactivity (*rajas*) and aid in controlling the senses. As Shankara writes, "the objects of the senses are a net, by which the mind is caught like a fish in a net, this is not destroyed without *tapas*" (Leggett,

2006, 176). Without *tapas* there is a strong tendency to remain entangled in distraction and unimportant aspects of life. However, an important caveat is added by many of the ancient commentaries; *tapas* should in no way upset or disturb the mind nor should it weaken or harm the body.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, we find a section describing *tapas* in its healthy form, as well as its misguided expressions and motivations. According to this text, *tapas* needs to be three-fold, consisting of bodily austerities, austerities of speech and mental austerities (17.14–16). In *Light on Pranayama*, Iyengar (2019) likens this to burning the dross from metal: “By the fire of yogic discipline the *sadhaka* (disciple) burns up within himself the impurities of desire, anger, greed, infatuation, pride and envy” (36–37). In this way, all aspects of the self are refined and purified over time.

Fanaticism can be a result of an unhealthy approach to yoga practices. When one’s mindset is rigid and psychologically weak at its core, it is a problematic guide when seeking balanced *tapas*. In the contemporary Western world of spirituality, we have to be careful not to confuse traditional forms of *tapas* with a psychologically driven self-deprivation or an expression of narcissism and self-involvement. These shadow forms of *tapas* can result in suffering and emotional dysregulation. These practices were not meant to be an end in themselves but rather the path to higher goals of increased insight and consciousness.

The aim of *tapas* is refinement of the human being and cultivation of character at a spiritual level. Though there are an array of techniques, they all train us to think beyond ourselves and purify the poisons of mind and ego. As stated in Vyasa’s commentary, a person “without self-discipline

cannot attain perfection in yoga” (Hariharananda Aranya 1983,113). As with any approach, the fruits of the practice are a clear, calm mental state alongside an energized state of mind and body. When the mind, body and emotions are integrated in this way they are prepared for the next stage of the journey.

Svadhya: the need for self-reflection and study

The *niyama* of *svadhyaya* refers to the practice of spiritual study and self-reflection. Study is referred to as the “the highest austerity” in the Upanishads (Klostermaier 1994, 77). The reading of scripture is a necessary corollary of embodied practices, and the two are mutually constitutive of practice. From the yogic perspective, there is a recognition that study is itself part of the larger practice of self-discipline and *tapas*.

Svadhaya also contributes to the lifting of the veil of ignorance (*avidya*) and providing right knowledge. Scripture offers a condensed form of the wisdom developed within the religious tradition. Through self-reflection, the text is brought into daily life. Iyengar (1991) makes clear that the sacred books of all traditions have the same purifying and positive impact (39).

An uncultivated mind can be harmful both to the self and others. As Jung (1968) writes with dry wit, it is the “insufficiently cultivated” mind that is most sure of itself: “once this petty reasoning mind, which cannot endure any paradoxes, is awakened no sermon on earth can keep it down” (16). It is the mark of the developed intellect to recognize the vastness of knowledge and as a result to have a sense of humility. It is also the mark of the developed consciousness to be able to hold paradox and not fall into