

Tapas: The fire in your practice

by Yoganand Michael Carroll

In the Sanskrit dictionary, *tapas* is defined as heat, as fire, and also as a verb meaning "to hurt" or "to cause pain." Within the parameters of yoga, tapas was interpreted by Swami Kripalu as a friction produced by going against the grain. Whenever you do something that you wouldn't normally do, that's tapas.

Ordinarily, when we do something that doesn't feel good, we stop doing it. But yoga practitioners will sometimes go against the grain, or the habit patterns, in a way that creates discomfort. Tapas is the action that results in this discomfort, as well as the feeling of discomfort itself.

The practice of tapas is often misunderstood, and if it isn't done appropriately, it can be damaging and debilitating. The idea of disciplining ourselves, of making ourselves do something that at least part of us doesn't want to do, can trigger feelings of shame and guilt, or make us feel that we're undeserving.

Some traditional scholars have translated tapas as "penance," experiencing pain now to atone for something wrong we have done in the past. And by consciously creating pain now we reach enlightenment more quickly. Though not wrong, this interpretation does not support the intention of yoga's foundational texts.

The Bhagavad Gita speaks of two kinds of tapas, demonic and divine.

Those who practice severe tapas without following the sacred lore, with hypocrisy and egotism, impelled by lust, and attachment; senselessly torturing the elements in their body and also Me who dwell within the body; know these ignorant persons to be of demonic nature. (17:5-6)

The honoring of gods, saints, teachers, and the wise; purity, honesty, celibacy, and nonviolence; these are said to be the tapas of the body. Speech that is not offensive, truthful, pleasant, beneficial, used for the reading and teaching of sacred texts is called tapas of speech. Serenity of mind, gentleness, silence, self-restraint, and the purity of mind are called the tapas of thought. This threefold austerity practiced by yogis with supreme faith, without a desire for the fruit, is said to be divine tapas. (17:14-17)

Historically, most yoga traditions divided their paths into two levels, with a tapas for each level. The first level involves a life-enhancing or life-affirming tapas, or *pravrittidharma*, whose goal is to help practitioners feel happier and healthier. Today this might look like disciplining ourselves to eat better, or to exercise frequently, or to lose weight for health reasons. We can also practice a tapas of the mind or a social tapas, disciplining ourselves

to avoid judgmental thoughts or to do service in our community. This kind of tapas makes someone a better or more spiritual person.

The second level of tapas is known as life-transcending tapas, *nivrittidharma*. Life-transcending tapas reveals that you and I don't really live in the world as it is. We live in an imagined world, a collective dream or story, constructed by society's values and our own worldview. Yogis who entered this tapas would retreat from the world and practice restraints that allowed them to see through conditioning to ultimate truth, and these were the yogis who wrote the Yoga Sutra, the Upanishads, and other guidebooks to yoga. Life transcending tapas brings us face to face with existential questions. They make us see the futility of working what the yogis would have called "transient goals" like power, wealth, or fame.

Cultivate indifference to everything, having given up desire, which is the enemy: prosperity, which is harmful, and the conditioning which generates desire and prosperity. Look upon friends, land, wealth, houses, wives, gifts, and other such marks of good fortune as a dream or a juggler's show, lasting only a brief time.

Ashtavakra Samhita, 10: 1-2

Swami Kripalu was a strong practitioner of life-transcending tapas. He ate one meal a day, lived in seclusion, meditated for 10 hours a day—he spent his life going against the grain. Like him, many yogis throughout history have practiced tapas in a way that looks crazy to us—starving themselves, doing pranayama for eight hours a day for many years—and have developed what seem to us strange and magical powers: the ability to read people's minds, be in two places at once, walk through walls. This is what is said to happen when the walls between the self and what we think of as "reality" crumble.

In ancient times, there was a clear delineation between life-affirming and life-transcending tapas. Householders would practice life-affirming tapas, and renunciates would practice life-transcending tapas. No one would go into a practice of life-transcending tapas without guidance, because when life-transcending tapas begins to work, it can be very disorienting. Kripalu Yoga, as it was developed by Amrit Desai, lacks a clear distinction. It was designed to integrate elements of both renunciate and householder paths.

But if you're not ready for this level of practice, renunciate tapas can cause depression, paranoia, even emotional and mental paralysis. Every few months, I am contacted by someone who took a program at Kripalu or another yoga center, that involved life transcending practices. The person completed the program, went home—and something in their life fell apart. A student in my program on the Bhagavad Gita came to me during the program and said, "These teaching seem so right, and if they are then I have nowhere to go when I leave here. My job isn't real, my family isn't real, society isn't real. I have nothing to go back to." This is exactly where renunciate tapas is supposed to lead. But for someone with worldly responsibilities it is not appropriate and traditionally, teachers

would not let householder students get close to this place.

So how do we approach this very powerful practice of life-transcending tapas without a traditional student-teacher structure, and without retreating into a cave? I don't have an answer for that. What we can do is recognize what's appropriate for us. Think of it this way: You own a four-wheel drive car, but you've been driving it all these years without shifting into four-wheel drive. Once you realize that option is there—once someone tells you, "Here's the lever"—then you can use four-wheel drive when you want to, but you don't have to use it all the time. You can shift in and out, depending on the timing, the terrain, and what you need right then.

The four traditional fruits of yoga are wealth or security, pleasure, a sense of meaning and connection to others, and liberation. Life-affirming tapas offers the first three of these. We all want to live with security and enthusiasm, we want to enjoy our lives, feel connected to others and live with purpose. Life-transcending tapas is directed toward liberation, and that path isn't appropriate for many people in the world we live in.

However, a little bit of that work can be very valuable. To know if it's working, look at the results. If a person has a strong practice and is discouraged, if their energy is depleted, if they've lost enthusiasm, the tapas is bringing up more than is appropriate. The most important thing is to be in control, to make a conscious, compassionate choice about what is right for you.

Yogis who are practicing life-transcending tapas realize that some days, life is wonderful, and some days, it's not. The idea of "good" and "bad" is moot. Some days you'll walk in ecstasy and some days you'll be in depression. You realize that there's nothing out there that doesn't go up and down—and you can fight it, or you can watch all of it, including yourself, go up and down, without trying to change it or making it anything other than what it is. Being undisturbed by the ups and downs is like letting the ripples on a pond fade without adding new ones. Without the ripples we see a whole different world.

Yoganand Michael Carroll is a Master-Level teacher in the Kripalu Yoga tradition. Through many years of intensive study and practice of the Kripalu approach to yoga, Yoganand has gained a profound facility to distil and interpret esoteric yoga texts and techniques. After studying with Kripalu Yoga masters in India and America, Yoganand taught at Kripalu Center for more than 15 years before founding Radiant Well-being Yoga Center in North Augusta, South Carolina, where he leads Kripalu and Pranakriya Yoga Teacher Training and a variety of other programs. Yoganand is registered with the National Yoga Alliance as an E-RYT500 level teacher.