

TAPAS FOR A STUDENT OF PHILOSOPHY

‘Tapas’ is a Sanskrit word often translated as ‘austerity’, but also as ‘penance’, ‘asceticism’, ‘concentration’, ‘bodily mortification’, ‘mental attenuation’, ‘devotional fervour’ and all their corresponding synonyms, a wide range of meanings.

Tapas is a seed-word. The form it takes in time and place depends on the ground in which it is seeded, the cultivation it receives and that towards which it is aimed.

1. Tapas in the Western Tradition

Tapas is a power that can be used for anything, from worldly achievements to knowledge of the Absolute. Anyone who wants to establish a career, start a family, build a business or buy a home needs to practice austerity. Just as an athlete can shape their body through austerity, so can a society be shaped through austerity. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil describes the austerity that was required to establish Rome. He recounts the sacrifices endured by Aeneas and his fellow Trojans to found a settlement in Italy and establish the ideal of *pietas* (duty) over individual desire. As he says, ‘So hard and huge a task it was to found the Roman people’.¹ Once founded, the Roman ideal lasted a thousand years. A great vision requires great austerity.

The same principle applies to spiritual endeavour. One example is the asceticism of the Desert Fathers. A few hundred years after the birth of Christ, saints like Paul of Thebes and Anthony of Egypt chose to live as hermits in the desert, denying themselves food, water, sleep, and human engagement to purify themselves so as to become more and more like Christ. One of the most extreme examples of this asceticism was Symeon the Stylite, who lived for thirty-six years on top of a pillar near Aleppo in modern Syria.

A thousand years later, Meister Eckhart understood austerity not as physical self-mortification or harsh bodily penance, but as radical inner detachment and spiritual poverty, where the soul empties itself of self-will, creaturely attachments, and even preconceived ideas of God:

When the soul gives herself to the knowledge of the very truth, to the onefold power in which God is known, then the soul is called a light. And God too is light, and when the divine light is flooding the soul, then the soul becomes united with God like a light with

¹ *Aeneid*, Book 1, Line 33. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, 1983.

light. Then that is called a light of faith, and that is a divine virtue. And where the soul is unable to go with her senses and powers, there faith carries her.²

A more pragmatic example in the Western tradition is from Plato. He identified the paramount importance of austerity for social cohesion, political integrity and international peace. In the *Republic*, Socrates distinguishes between a healthy city and a luxurious city. A healthy state of existence, an ideal life, is a frugal life based on satisfying the needs for food, shelter and modest enjoyment. Seeking luxury beyond natural and necessary wants corrupts a city, necessitates expansion and directly causes war.³

Socrates' method of inquiry itself requires austerity. Socrates declares to Adeimantus that 'we should go in whatever direction the wind of the argument carries us'.⁴ Just as a sailor finds their way by catching the wind, anyone who seeks the truth through dialogue must follow the argument. It requires focussed attention on what is being said; the sacrifice of personal opinion; a willingness to be refuted; the raising of questions and following the thread of the inquiry to its end. This is a singular and purifying practice.

In a 1986 lecture, the founder of the School, Leon MacLaren, was asked, 'What part does austerity play in the pursuit of Truth?' His answer is a key to understanding austerity for a student of philosophy:

Austerity has got a better name, which is good measure ... Life is here to be enjoyed, but in measure. The universe is full of wonderful things, of both sexes, and you cannot have it all, so measure. You take what is useful and leave what is not, that is the austerity. It is very beautiful, very simple, and that plays a very strong part indeed in the pursuit of Truth. Extreme austerities can be used certainly, but the extremities always have to be remedied afterwards because they are no use. Measure is what matters, and in the end you have to come to that measure whichever course you take.⁵

This answer provides a foundational explanation of what austerity means for a student of philosophy. It has two parts: firstly, it challenges the individual to take responsibility for choosing what is useful for the pursuit of Truth and leaving what is not, a choice not always clear and never easy, but one which becomes clearer and easier through practice.

² *Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, Trans. O'C Walshe 2009, *Sermon 52*. p. 277

³ *Republic 372a-373a*, Trans. David Horan

⁴ *Republic 394d*

⁵ *MacLaren Lectures*, Vol. 4, pp. 279-280.

Secondly, it challenges the individual to discover the measure themselves in whatever realm they act, physical, mental or spiritual, a challenge which once accepted, calls forth all the powers of common sense and reason and ultimately dignifies the individual with sovereign independence.

2. Tapas in the Vedas

As for tapas itself, it is a universal power. In the Vedas, tapas is a form of primordial fire. It is heat. In the Ṛgveda, tapas is the cosmic energy that creates the world from the One;⁶ it is creative power; it is the heat of ritual; it is the heat or power of seers (ṛṣis) and ancestors (pitṛs); it is the fire of consciousness which yields order and truth.⁷

The etymological root of the word is *tap*, to give out heat, be hot, to burn or to shine as the sun. It is generated heat, a force that intensifies, transforms, purifies, or brings something to birth. This is its meaning in the Ṛgveda. Later works such as the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Purāṇas associated that heat with austerity, asceticism and contemplative exertion.

These are not wholly separate meanings. They are transformations of a single metaphor: effort, concentration, ardour, austerity, and creation all involve the production or intensification of ‘heat’.

3. Tapas in the Bhagavad Gītā

The Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa distinguishes three types of tapas: bodily, verbal and mental.⁸ Bodily tapas consists of actions that honour the wise and maintain physical purity; it is behaviour that is morally correct, polite, acceptable and straightforward and includes sexual restraint and non-injury of others.

Tapas of speech consists of uttering only that which is true, not hurtful but agreeable and beneficial and . Austerity of speech also includes the practice of studying the scriptures (*svādhyāya-abhyāsa*).

Mental austerity consists in making the mind free from anxiety, kindness of spirit, personal reticence (born of austerity of speech), stepping back from and restraining the mind, and the absence of trickery through purity of heart (*bhāva-samśuddhi*).

The Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa explains that people undertake these austerities with aims determined by the prevailing guṇa. Under Sattwa, austerities are

⁶ RV 10.129.3: *tapasas tan mahinājāyataikam*, ‘that One was born by the power of tapas’. Trans. Jamison & Brereton, *The Rigveda*, Oxford University Press 2014, p.1609.

⁷ RV 10.190.1: *ṛtaṃ ca satyaṃ cābhīdhāt tapaso ’dhy ajāyata*, ‘Both truth (satya) and reality (ṛta) were born from heat (tapas)’. Jamison & Brereton, p. 1660.

⁸ BG 17.14-19, including Śaṅkara’s commentary.

undertaken without any hankering for results, but with supreme faith; under Rajas, they are undertaken for personal reward; and under Tamas, they are undertaken to cause pain to oneself or others.

Śaṅkara in his commentary makes it clear that in this world of empirical dealings, actions depend on individual agency. In this world, individuals undertake actions with the body, through speech and with the mind. When the knowledge of the Self dawns, all agency ceases.⁹ In the meantime, as Leon MacLaren said, ‘only the individual can desire, only the individual can labour, only the individual can know, and only the individual can choose.’¹⁰ Individuals are free to choose one action over another; one form of speech over another; one state of mind over another. While it takes observation and a little detachment to recognise that such choices can be made, it takes the power of tapas to make a choice and stick to it.

4. Manusmṛti on the Greatness of Tapas and its Varieties ¹¹

Just as the Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa distinguishes different forms of tapas, so does the Manusmṛti. Tapas depends on one’s role according to time and place: ‘The austerity for the Brāhmaṇa is knowledge; the austerity for the Kṣatriya is protection; the austerity for the Vaiśya is trade; and the austerity for the Śūdra is service.’

Regardless of time, place and function, Manu says that any heart made heavy by lawless action is brought to rest by tapas, a wondrous relief. ‘The greatest virtue in this whole universe comes from tapas.’ All the happiness in the world of men and gods ‘has austerity as its root, austerity as its middle, and austerity as its end’; ‘whatever is hard to cross, hard to attain, hard to reach and hard to do; all can be accomplished through tapas, for tapas is hard to surpass’.

5. Bhṛgu’s Tapas in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad ¹²

Book 3 of the Upaniṣad begins with Bhṛgu approaching his father Varuṇa with a formal request:

‘O revered sir, teach me Brahman.’ To him Varuṇa said this: ‘Food, vital force, eye, ear, mind, speech - these are the aids to the knowledge of Brahman.’ To him Varuṇa said: ‘Crave to know well that from which all these beings take birth, that by which

⁹ BG Commentary 18.13-15

¹⁰ Leon MacLaren, *Nature of Society*, final sentence.

¹¹ Manu, 11.234-245. Trans. Language Faculty, School of Economic Science.

¹² Tait. 3.1.1-3.6.1, Trans. Swāmi Gambhīrānanda

they live after being born, that towards which they move and into which they merge. That is Brahman.’ He practised concentration.

The Sanskrit word translated by Swāmi Gambhirānanda as ‘concentration’ is *tapah*. After Varuṇa tells Bhṛgu about six aids to the knowledge of Brahman, Bhṛgu practices tapas. Śaṅkara in his commentary has an objector who asks, ‘How could Bhṛgu accept tapas as a means, since it was not taught to be so?’ It’s a reasonable objection: his father Varuṇa didn’t mention tapas, so why would Bhṛgu go on to practice this thing called tapas?

Śaṅkara replies:

... As for singling out *tapah* (concentration), this is because it is the best discipline, for it is well known in the world that of all the means (*sādhana*) that are causally related with definite ends, concentration (*tapah*) is the best. So Bhṛgu accepted *tapah* as a means to the knowledge of Brahman though it was not taught by his father. This *tapah* consists in the concentration of the outer and inner organs, for that forms the door to the knowledge of Brahman in accordance with the Smṛti, ‘The concentration of the mind and the senses is the highest *tapah*. Since it is higher than all the virtues, it is called the highest virtue’.

Śaṅkara says that as a means to the knowledge of Brahman ‘this tapas consists in the concentration of the outer and inner organs’, *tapo bāhya-antaḥkaraṇa-samādhānaṃ*. The word translated here as ‘concentration’ is *samādhāna*. This Sanskrit word literally means ‘bringing together’, ‘integration’ or ‘settled-ness’. *Samādhāna* is settling the outer and inner organs, the senses and the mind; integrating them, bringing them together.¹³

For a student of philosophy, the highest austerity, the best tapas, is bringing the senses and mind together (*samādhāna*).

6. Further Guidance from the Mahābhārata

Śaṅkara then quotes a line from the Mahābhārata extolling single-pointedness:

manasaś cendriyāṇāṃ ca hy aikāgryaṃ paramaṃ tapah|

The concentration of the mind and the senses is the greatest tapas

¹³ See *Conversations*, Vol. 1, p. 60 and Vol. 3, pp. 91-92

The word translated here as concentration is *aikāgrya*, single-pointedness.¹⁴ The context is that Śuka has asked his father Vyāsa about the highest, most supreme dharma, to which nothing is superior. Vyāsa replies:

manasaś cendriyāṇām ca hy aikāgryam paramam tapaḥ |
taj jyāyaḥ sarvadharmebhyaḥ sa dharmah para ucyate ||4||
tāni sarvāṇi saṁdhāya manaḥṣaṣṭhāni medhayā |
ātmatṛpta ivāsīta bahu cintyam acintayan ||5||¹⁵

The concentration of the mind and the senses is the greatest tapas. That is the best of all dharmas. That is said to be the supreme dharma. (4)

Having concentrated through intelligence (*medhayā*) those senses and the sixth, the mind, by not thinking about the many things that can be thought about, one should remain as one contented in the Self. (5)

Verse 4 extols tapas as the single-pointedness of the mind and the senses. Verse 5 offers the explanation that through *medhā*, intelligence, one should unite all the senses and the mind, shun the many things that could be thought about and concentrate on that which is truly worthy of thought, remaining content in the Self.

The Sanskrit word translated as ‘intelligence’ is *medhā*. It also means mental vigour or power. It is the etymological root of the Latin word *meditatio*, from which we derive the English word ‘meditation’. Its Greek form is *mêdomai*, ‘to take care, keep watch, to attend’.

Tapas for a student of philosophy is carefully maintaining single-pointed attention (*aikāgrya*) on that which is worthy of thought.

7. Guidance from Sureśvara

Further guidance on tapas for a student of philosophy comes from Śaṅkara’s disciple, Sureśvara. Śaṅkara asked him to write a ‘vārtika’ about his commentary on the Taittirīya Upaniṣad.

A vārtika has three functions: summarise what has been stated (*ukta*); indicate what has been omitted (*anukta*); and expand on what has been explained too briefly (*durukta*). In the line of Teachers, Sureśvara is called Vārtika-kāra, the ‘maker of vārtikas’. Śaṅkara entrusted his disciple with unfolding the concentrated meaning of his commentary.

¹⁴ For ekāgratā, one-pointed attention, see *Conversations*, Vol. 4, p. 78

¹⁵ Mahābhārata [Śāntiparva 250.4-5](#)

Sureśvara composed five verses expanding on Śaṅkara's description of tapas.¹⁶ Firstly, he extols tapas by quoting the verse from Manusmṛti that 'whatever is hard to cross, hard to attain, hard to reach and hard to do; all can be accomplished through tapas, for tapas is hard to surpass'. He identifies single-pointedness of the mind and senses as *ādhyātmika-tapas*, inner or self-directed tapas.

He then proposes that tapas may also be regarded as systematic reflection (*cintana*) through *anvaya* and *vyatireka*:

anvayavyatirekādīcintanaṃ vā tapo bhavet |
ahaṃ brahmetivākyaṛthabodhāyālamidaṃ yataḥ || 19 ||

3.19 Or, tapas is reflection (*cintana*) on the subject-matter through *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, etc., since this is competent to make us understand the knowledge conveyed by the sentence, 'I am Brahman.'

Sureśvara explains *anvaya* and *vyatireka* as distinguishing that which is always present from that which is sometimes absent, that which remains when all other things are absent and that which reveals all other things when they are present. 'Being uniformly present at all times, the Self is, therefore, different from food, the vital force, etc.'¹⁷

Sureśvara provides an example of the process of *anvaya* and *vyatireka* by quoting another verse from the Mahābhārata:

ko'haṃ kasya kuto veti kaḥ kathaṃ vā bhavediti |
prayojanamatirnityamevaṃ mokṣāśramī bhavet |
vyāsaḥ prāhāta evedaṃ mumukṣormuktaye tapaḥ || 20 ||

3.20 Vyāsa has said: 'Who am I? Whose or whence? What will one become and how? An ascetic who is desirous of mokṣa should always think thus.' So for a seeker of liberation this (method of *anvaya* and *vyatireka*) is the tapas for attaining liberation.

Sureśvara's reference is to a story in the Mahābhārata where Vyāsa recounts a conversation between a nāga chief and his wife. She describes the highest dharma for different classes of aspirant. For those who seek mokṣa, absolute freedom, the highest dharma is to always direct the mind towards these questions:

¹⁶ *Taittirīyopaniṣad Bhāṣya-vārtika of Sureśvara*, Verses 3.17-21. Trans. R. Balasubramanian, 1984

¹⁷ *Taittirīyopaniṣad Bhāṣya-vārtika*, 3.8-9

Who am I? Whence have I come? What are others to me and what am I to others?¹⁸

This is similar to a description given by Śrī Śāntānanda Sarasvatī about someone seeking knowledge:

Anyone who looks at the creation and wants to know about it finds diverse manifestations. So he wants to know what force is working behind it, who has made it possible, or what is that force which has brought about such a gigantic creation in existence and keeps it going. Thirdly, he wonders what his relationship with that Creator is. These are the three factors, namely, what is creation, who is the Creator, and what is my relation to them.¹⁹

Tapas for a student of philosophy is always directing the mind to questions like these:

What is creation?

Who is the creator?

What is my relation to creation and the creator?

Who am I?

Whence have I come?

What are others to me and what am I to others?

Sureśvara proposes that such questions are to be thought about through anvaya and vyatireka. The question 'Who am I?', is a question about the 'I' that is apparently present but sometimes absent; the 'I' that remains when all other things are absent; the 'I' from which all these things come, that by which they grow, that towards which they move and that into which they merge.

Śaṅkara summarises Varuṇa's definition of Brahman as:

... that with which the beings do not lose their identity during the times of creation, existence and dissolution.²⁰

Through the tapas of vyatireka and anvaya, Bhṛgu practices cintana on this 'I' which does not lose its identity during creation, existence and dissolution. Through the concentration of the senses and the mind, he continuously reflects until he is fully satisfied.

8. Tapas Made of Knowledge

¹⁸ Mahābhārata [Śāntiparva 347.9](#). Trans. [Ganguli](#).

¹⁹ *Conversations* Vol. 1, p. 5

²⁰ Tiatt. Commentary III.i.1

Bhṛgu's practice of tapas is informed by an understanding of tapas as it was taught earlier in the Upaniṣad. In Book 2, tapas is described as the heat of knowledge through which everything is created:

He (the Self) wished, 'Let me be many, let me be born.' He undertook a deliberation (*sa tapo 'tapyata*). Having deliberated (*sa tapas taptvā*), he created all this that exists. That (Brahman), having created (that), entered into that very thing. And having entered there, It became the formed and the formless, the defined and the undefined, the sustaining and the non-sustaining, the sentient and the insentient, the true and the untrue. Truth became all this that there is. They call that (Brahman) Truth.

Śaṅkara comments:

Having such a desire, *saḥ*, He - that Self; *tapah*, *atapyata*: by *tapah* is meant knowledge since another Vedic text says, 'He whose *tapah* consists of knowledge' (Mu. I.i.9), and since the other kind of *tapah* (austerity) is out of place in one in whom all desires remain fulfilled. That kind of *tapah*, knowledge; he *atapyata*, practised. The idea is that the Self reflected on the plan etc. of the world being created. *Saḥ tapah taptvā*, He, having reflected thus; *asṛjata*, created, in consonance with such contributory factors as the results of actions of creatures; *idam sarvam*, all this; *yat idam kim ca*, whatever there is, without any exception - this universe, together with space, time, name, and form as He perceived it, and as it is perceived by all beings under various circumstances. Brahman, *sṛjata*, having created; *tat*, that, this world; what did He do? the answer is *tat eva*, into that very world, which had been created; *anuprāviśat*, He entered.²¹

Tapas is here translated as 'deliberation', a tapas which is distinct from ordinary kinds of tapas. The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad describes this as tapas made of knowledge. The commentary explains that there is no effort in this tapas because the knowledge of the Self 'consists in omnipotence, and not in effort.' Deliberation (tapas) is the spontaneous outpouring of omniscience. That very Self willed to 'be many, to be born'. He performs tapas, not as bodily austerity or ritual exertion, but as *jñānamayaṁ tapah*, tapas made of knowledge.²²

Tapas for a student of philosophy is also made of knowledge, showing itself

²¹ Taitt. II.vi.1 and commentary

²² Mu. commentary I.i.9

as disciplined, sustained thinking in the light of the *śruti*.

9. Conclusion

At the end of Bhṛgu's deliberations, after he has realised the Bliss that is the Self, Śaṅkara sums up the practice as follows:

Thus becoming pure in mind through tapas and failing to find the definition of Brahman, in its fullness, in the selves composed of the vital force etc., Bhṛgu penetrated inside by degrees, and with the help of tapas alone realized the innermost Bliss that is Brahman. Therefore, the idea conveyed by this topic is that anyone who is desirous of knowing Brahman should undertake concentration of the internal and external organs (*samādhāna*) as the most excellent practice of tapas.²³

Śaṅkara specifies *samādhāna*, bringing the senses and the mind together, as the most excellent practice of tapas. For a student of philosophy, this 'most excellent practice of tapas' includes:

- Taking what is useful for the pursuit of Truth and leaving what is not.
- Single-pointed attention (*aikāgrya*) on that which is worthy of thought.
- Enquiry into that which remains when other things are absent, and that which reveals other things when they are present (*anvaya-vyatireka*).
- Always directing the mind to higher questions.
- Disciplined, sustained thinking in the light of the *śruti*.

As Śaṅkara says,

Tapas is repeatedly inculcated in order to emphasise the fact of its being the best discipline. The idea is this: 'Tapas alone is your discipline (*sādhana*) till the description of Brahman can be pushed no further and till your desire to know becomes quietened. Through tapas alone, you crave to know Brahman.' The rest is easy.²⁴

May our desire to know the Truth be quietened through tapas.

²³ Taitt. Commentary, III.vi.1

²⁴ Taitt. Commentary, III.ii.1