

TAPAS IN SPIRITUAL LIFE (*)

Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – AUG 1962; Vol. 49; page 162

The idea of austerity, in an age of plentiful amenities and luxuries, is something which seems to the average man as ludicrous. He thinks of them, that abstain, as pitiable creatures. Why should not one enjoy the luxuries bountifully provided by nature or circumstances? That seems to be his question. Possibly, he thinks of them as pessimistic fools. For, who else but a fool fails to avail of an opportunity of leading an easy life? seems to be his contention. Of yore, there were the injunctions of the Sastras, which man respected, to hold him back from going headlong over the precipice of excessive indulgence. But, for some centuries now, that hold has gradually slackened and is mostly lost. Man now treats the teachings of the scriptures as the devices of the priests to cheat him of his valid rights. He, therefore, treats them with scant respect. He thinks that, so long as he abides by the law of the land, he is at perfect liberty to do as he pleases. In such a context why should he abstain? Why should he restrain? That is his idea.

Let us now see, how far this attitude of the commoner is justified. Man is not a machine that he can go on indefinitely in this manner. Even machines have their longevity curtailed, if worked incessantly and without respite. That, machines worked moderately give longer and better service is an experience within the purview of one and all. Similarly, every thinking man will concede that, this human machine also can work better and serve fruitfully, if it is not pressed into any and every kind of service. So moderation and regulation are necessary even for the person, whose idea of himself is not more than a body, and whose happiness lies in the enjoyment of the senses.

As in secular life, the body and the mind are to be carefully handled, so too in spiritual life they are to be deftly processed. There are several processes through which they have to be passed through. One such process is *tapas*. The meaning of the word *tap* in Sanskrit is, to heat. Most of us are familiar with the smelting of ores. The ores are thrown into a furnace where the heat sometimes reaches 2000°C or more. This heat melts the ore, burns away the dross, and the pure metal is let out. Man's mind is also like the ore. It has gathered, in its passage through innumerable lives, encrustations in the form of propensities. And these propensities, like the impurities of the ore, have so mingled and fused

into the mind, that their separation is a more formidable task than the extraction of the metal from the ore. The process of separation is also a more prolonged and complicated one. But until we have done it, we cannot see God, cannot know the Reality: the one aim of all spiritual life.

We must remember here, that no earthly heat can be applied to the mind as it is subtle. We have to find a subtle heat. What then is this subtle heat? It is the dwelling of the mind in the thought of God. The word *tapas*, in the sense of heat, is used here in a metaphorical sense and by usage it has come to mean right-thinking or meditation. Continuous dwelling on good thoughts helps, like fire, to burn out the dross of the mind. Mark the word 'continuous' here. Each one of us does think good thoughts sometime or other, for a shorter or longer duration, but that does not help us much to attain the covetable goal: God realization. As long as the good thoughts last, we feel an elevation of the mind and we are apt to think we have achieved our end. Soon bad thoughts lure the mind away, after which depression sets in as a reaction. Therefore, a continuous flow of the thought-current in the direction of things higher is absolutely essential to purify the mind, just as a continuous fire is necessary to smelt the ores.

Body and Mind Inter-related

Now the question may arise, if *tapas* means meditation, thinking of good thoughts, then where is the necessity of bodily restraint? To this we ask, does the body act without the collusion or connivance of the mind? No. On the other hand, human experience has been and is, that the mind acts on the body before the body functions. For instance, if a procession, accompanied with music, were to pass by your house and if at that time you were deeply poring over some interesting book would you hear the noise? No. Why not? Though your ears had heard and conveyed the message duly to the mind, the mind had shut itself off to the hearing. It, consequently, follows that the body by itself is powerless to do any action. Conversely viewed, every bodily action is done under the tacit consent or with the actual co-operation of the mind. The bodily features change with the change in the mind. Again the desires of the body in the majority of us, make the mind subservient to the body. Bodily needs or passions move the mind. Thus we find a close and inseparable relation between the two.

This relation is not a chance occurrence, not existing in the past, nor that will not be in the future. Our very physical features are representatives of the mind. We have read, how Sri Ramakrishna used to test his disciples before accepting them. He would look at their

physical features, and if he was satisfied he would further test them by taking their palms into his hands. He would move the palm of the disciple up and down, as if he was feeling its weight. And if he felt it light he would accept him. When he visited Devendranath Tagore he asked the latter to bare his chest, so that he could see how far he was advanced in spiritual life. Further, we read how strongly opposed the Master was to an aspirant's sitting with the chin on the palm of his hand. He said that it indicated a mental depression, a pensive mood. Swami Ramakrishnananda too used to upbraid his students if he found them shaking their legs when seated on a chair or bench as it showed the restlessness of the mind.

Again, take the evidence of the Sastras. *Svetasvatatropanisad* exhorts how one should sit for meditation: 'Keeping the three limbs of the body (viz. the trunk, the neck and the head)¹ erect, merging all the senses into the mind, a wise one should by the boat of Sabda Brahman (*pranava*) cross the terrible currents of *samsara*, of birth and death.'² All these conclusively prove what close affinity lies between the body and the mind.

Modes of Tapas

It is a matter of common knowledge and experience that the mind can concentrate on an external object more readily than on something abstruse. The concrete, it finds, more easy to grasp than the abstract. Swami Vivekananda, by means of a story, illustrates how the subtle *prana* can be grasped by regulating breathing, a comparatively gross function of the body: 'There was once a minister to a great king. He fell into disgrace. The king, as a punishment, confined him to a very high tower and left him to perish there. He had a faithful wife, who came to the tower at night and called to her husband at the top to know what she could do to help him. He told her to return to the tower the following night, and bring with her a long rope, some stout twine, pack thread, silken thread, a beetle, and a little honey. Wondering much, the good wife obeyed her husband, and brought him the desired articles. The husband directed her to attach the silken thread firmly to the beetle, then to smear its horns with a drop of honey, and set it free on the wall of the tower, with its head pointing upwards. She obeyed all these instructions, and the beetle started on its long journey. Smelling the honey ahead it slowly crept onwards, in the hope of reaching the honey, until at last it reached the top of the tower, when the minister grasped the beetle, and got possession of the silken thread. He told his wife to tie the other end to the pack thread, and after he had drawn up the pack thread he repeated the process with the stout twine, and lastly

with the rope. Then the rest was easy. The minister descended from the tower by means of the rope, and made his escape. In this body of ours the breath motion is the "silken thread"; by laying hold of and learning to control it we grasp the pack thread of the nerve currents, and from these the stout twine of our thoughts and lastly the rope of *prana*, controlling which we reach freedom.'³ Similarly have we, who desire liberation, to control simultaneously the body and the mind.

Our ancient sages thought deeply over this, experimented, and then gave out what they thought beneficial to posterity. Though in the Upanisads we hear quite often about *tapas*, a little clear definition of it we get only in the *Sandilyopanisad* which says: 'Tapas is the drying up of the body by the observance of the injunctions of the Vedas — vows like *Krcchra* and *Candrayana*.'⁴ One reason why the Upanisads do not define *tapas* more elaborately may be that, the preceptors were there to guide the aspirants. However, Sri Krishna in the Gita removes this ambiguity with a detailed analysis of the subject. Sri Krishna must have observed, in his time, what a parody was made of the concept of *tapas* and, therefore, felt it necessary to describe its meaning at great length. This must have not only disabused *tapas* of its harmful acquired meanings, but also warned the laity against frauds and cheats.

Sri Krishna classifies *tapas*, austerity, under three heads, viz. austerity of the body, speech, and mind. 'Worship of God, the twice-born, the preceptors, and the wise; purity (internal and external), probity, chastity, non-injury are said to be austerities of the body. Speech which causes no vexation, and is true, agreeable and wholesome; and regular study of the Vedas — these form the austerity of speech. Serenity of mind, kindness, silence, self-control, honesty of motive, these constitute austerity of the mind.'⁵ Sankara commenting on these verses says, 'Speech should be endowed with all the four qualities mentioned here. Absence of even one does not form the austerity of speech. Silence, means not absence of speech alone but also speech controlled by mind.' Sri Krishna further says, 'All these austerities undergone with the utmost *sraddha*, without any desire for enjoyment of the results, and by persons of controlled nature alone are called austerities born out of *sattva* material.'⁶

How painstakingly did not Sri Ramakrishna watch over his young disciples? He took care to see what and how much they ate. What company they kept and on what subjects they talked. Last but not least he insisted on their meditating, regularly. Whosoever spent the nights with him would be awakened in the early hours of the morning and would be asked to meditate. He stressed on continence and warned against the lure of lucre. Lust and lucre he said were the two main hurdles in the path of God-realization.

Importance and Value of Tapas

Tapas has been extolled even in the Rig Veda, the most ancient of all religious literature extant now. The Upanisads and the sages have given an eminent place for it in spiritual life. 'Seek to know Brahman by means of *tapas*, for *tapas* is (the means of knowing) Brahman,'⁷ says *Taittiriya Upanisad* repeatedly. As discipline it occupies a place of its own, declares the same Upanisad in another place: '*tapas*, learning and teaching (the Vedas)'.⁸ The Upanisad at the end of the same chapter says, 'Learning and teaching alone are to be practised for they alone are *tapas*.'⁹ The first word in our great epic, Ramayana, of sage Valmiki, is *tapas*.¹⁰

Every ancient sage required of his pupils, when they approached him for instruction, to live under him a life of *tapas* for some time — the duration depending on the progress in study and spiritual life, already made by the students. Sage Pippalada in *Prasnopanishad* said to the six pupils who approached him, 'Live again for a year a life of *tapas*, *brahmacarya* and *sraddha* and then ask about your doubts.'¹¹ In the *Chandogya Upanishad* Brahma asks Indra to live a life of *brahmacarya* for a hundred and one years, before he finds him fit to receive *Brahma Vidya*. It has been conceded by all sages that, purification of the mind is the only way paving to the descent of God's grace or for receiving His untarnished reflection, gaining which man becomes liberated, becomes immortal. And *tapas* helps a great deal towards this. It inevitably constitutes the corner stone of spiritual life. That is why the entire religious literature of the world, especially of our motherland, has enshrined *tapas* in a prominent manner.

How do the observance of austerities help one to liberation? Have we to take this on the authority of the Scriptures alone or can they be logically proved? These questions will surely trouble the moderns. Before trying to satisfy these doubts we shall also place before them some questions. Do they question their professor when they are asked to experiment in a certain way? What is their authority for their conviction? Were they logically convinced? It was written in some books that a certain scientist worked out a problem and noted down his findings. And any one else who tries, will also achieve similar results. So, here, something was taken for granted in the beginning, it was only a hypothesis for the experimenter until he reached the end of his research. Similarly our ancient sages too have given us their findings and we have to test them before decrying them as superstition; that is the scientific way of viewing things. If we fail to face the hardships therein involved, it means we are not sincere, it shows our dilettante attitude as well as cowardliness, and all decrying is to cover our inability

under the cloak of reasoning.

Now, let us take the scientist's own views. He says that the beings undergo change or metamorphosis to suit the environments. This is the theory of evolution that he presents. Now, as it is in the outside world so it is with each organism. But he says that this process is very slow. He believes that the process can be expedited under certain circumstances. That is exactly what our sages also say. They say that the *Atman* (Soul) is pure bliss, pure knowledge and absolute existence. All that lives must experience this. All that exists must go back to God from where it originated. All this suffering here is only an evolution towards, a return to, God. Our sages were interested in man's attaining this primeval nature by the expediting process. They said that, this primeval nature which bestows tranquillity on man cannot be attained by having recourse to excitement. They are poles apart. Hence, eschew all excitable things. How to do that? By cultivating the opposite virtues. Now, take the austerity of the body prescribed in the Gita, viz. worship of God and the like. None of them excite us, at least towards worldly things, if done in the proper spirit. They teach us humility, not in the sense of engendering the spirit of our unworthiness but respect for things higher and nobler. Purity makes man stand up to any vilification and not crouch before a false report. Who would not like to be dealt with in a straightforward manner? Without continence man can never attain God, that is the verdict of all realized souls without exception. Continence is the conservation of energy. An energy, which is more powerful than all the powers on earth, which gives man grit and tenacity to persevere in his spiritual quest. All these austerities tend towards bodily tranquillity. We have also simultaneously to practise the austerities of speech and mind.

Science says every action has a reaction. Our sages do not differ from them on this point. They only ask people to apply this not only in the case of mere scientific experiments but in daily life too. If our speech be harsh, the reaction will not be palatable and that will be bad for the tranquillity of the mind. We need no laboratory to demonstrate to us how perturbed our minds become when we give ourselves up to passions such as anger, jealousy and the like. Serenity of the mind is an essential requisite in our spiritual path, so that is called a part of *tapas*; it is to be cultivated. By all these methods the spiritual aspirant creates an atmosphere, an environment — to quote from the vocabulary of the scientist — wherein the metamorphosis or transmutation of the mind is accelerated until it reaches perfection, purity. The pure mind is then able to grasp the reflection of the Reality, which is the consummation of all spiritual effort. Necessity of *tapas* is therefore not inconsistent with reasoning, on the other hand, that it is the only path, seems to be

reasonable.

Misdirected and Fruitless Tapas

But as it happens in the case of all paths prescribed with all good intentions, the spirit of the injunction is forgotten and people cling to the letter alone, so in the case of *tapas* too, we find, the real purpose was forgotten and all sorts of tortures of the body came to be designated as *tapas*. Stress came to be laid on external purity and bodily suffering. Sometimes they were carried to such extremes as to inveigh against themselves. Once Swami Brahmananda was asked by a disciple as to what austerity was. He said: 'Austerities are of many types. Once I saw a man who took a vow not to sit or lie down for twelve years. When I met him, he had nearly finished his period. Only five or six months remained. Standing continuously for so many years had made his legs grow fat as they do in elephantiasis. While sleeping he held himself up by a rope. Such are not real austerities. Anyone can perform them. The body is easily controlled. But it is another matter to control the mind.' Sri Ramakrishna deprecated show in practising spiritual disciplines. He said: 'One should meditate in the mind, in a corner of the house (meaning a secluded place), and in the forest.' Sri Krishna too says that all *tapas* done without *sraddha* is *asat* (fruitless). It neither brings good here nor in the other world. Here he does not obtain the approbation of the wise and after death they yield no fruit of liberation or union with God. In the same way austerities performed with the intention of doing harm to enemies or gaining supernatural powers are not considered as *tapas* in its right perspective.

Conclusion

Spiritual life is a life of abstinence from the worldly enjoyments, for the sake of an everlasting felicity. It is, as it were, to cautiously step aside from being caught in the wheel of birth and death. Sri Ramakrishna calls that dexterity, dexterity which enables one to get away from being caught in the net of *Mahamaya*, the great illusive power of the Lord, and not that dexterity which enables one to amass wealth or lead a comfortable life. *Tapas* is a limb of spiritual life. It develops in man clear thinking with regard to the values of life. It guides the boat of our life like the mariner's compass. Yet, we must remember that, it is only the means and not an end in itself, the end being God-realization.

¹ Gita.VI.13.

² Svetasvataropanisad. 2.8.

³ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.I, seventh edition, p. 143.

⁴ Sandilyopanisad, 1.2.

⁵ Gita, XVII. 14,15,16.

⁶ Ibid.,XVII.17.

⁷ Taittiriya upanishad, 3.2.

⁸ Ibid., 1-9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Valmiki Ramayana

¹¹ Prasna Upanishad, 1.2.