

Tapas (Sanskrit)

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Tapas (*tapas*, Sanskrit: तपस्) means deep meditation,^[2] effort to achieve self-realization, sometimes involving solitude, hermitism or asceticism;^{[3][4]} it is derived from the word root *tap* (Sanskrit: तप् or ताप) which depending on context means "heat" from fire or weather, or blaze, burn, shine, penance, pain, suffering, mortification.^{[5][6][7]}

In the Vedic literature of Hinduism, fusion words based on *tapas* are widely used to expound several spiritual concepts that develop through heat or inner energy, such as meditation, any process to reach special observations and insights, the spiritual ecstasy of a yogin or **tāpasa** (a Vriddhi derivative meaning "a practitioner of austerities, an ascetic"), even warmth of sexual intimacy.^[4] In certain contexts, the term is also used to mean penance, suffering, austerity, pious activity, as well as misery.^[8] The fusion word *tapasvini* (Sanskrit: तपस्विनी), for example, means a female devotee or pious woman, "an ascetic, someone practicing austerities", or in some contexts it can mean poor, miserable woman.^{[9][10]}

In the yogic tradition it is the fire that burns within that is needed for the sanyasi to achieve the very difficult goal of enlightenment, to foster self-control, one mindedness and focus, simplicity, wisdom, integrity. It is used to develop and discipline the body, mind and character; control of mind; satisfaction of all desires - through discipline of body, correct speech, telling only the truth, correct thought, non violence, correct action, love for all, devotion to God, developing the ability to remain tranquil and balanced in every situation, act without any selfish motive or thought of reward, with an unshakable faith in God.



Tapasya - Jain meditation in progress.^[1]

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History

The earliest discussions of *tapas*, and compound words from the root *tap* (Sanskrit: तप) relate to the heat necessary for biological birth.^{[11][12]} Its conceptual origin is traced to the natural wait, motherly warmth and physical "brooding" provided by birds such as a hen upon her eggs - a process that is essential to hatching and birth; the Vedic scholars used mother nature's example to explain and extend this concept to hatching of knowledge and spiritual rebirth.^[13]

Some of the earliest reference of *tapas*, and compound words from the root *tap* (तप) is found in many ancient Hindu scriptures, including the Ṛg Veda (10.154.5), Satapatha Brahmana (5.3 - 5.17), and Atharva Veda (4.34.1, 6.61.1, 11.1.26). In these texts, *tapas* is described as the process that led to the spiritual birth of ṛṣis - sages of spiritual insights.^[11] The Atharva Veda suggests all the gods were *tapas*-born (*tapojās*), and all earthly life was created from the sun's *tapas* (*tapasah sambabhūvur*).^{[11][14]} In the Jāiminiya-Upanisad Brāhmaṇa, life perpetuates itself and creates progeny by *tapas*, a process that starts with sexual heat.^{[15][16]}

According to Walter Kaelber,^[11] and others,^{[15][18][19]} in certain translations of ancient Sanskrit documents *tapas* is interpreted as austerities, penance, asceticism, or mortification; however, this is frequently inadequate because it fails to reflect the context implied, which is of sexual heat or warmth that incubates the birth of life. The idea of linking austerity, exertion, fatigue and self-renunciation to the ancient idea of heat, brooding and inner devotion, comes from the observed labor every mother puts in caring for its embryo and delivering her baby, regardless of the life form; The concept and reference to 'egg hatching' is replaced in Sanskrit texts written in later centuries, with simply 'brooding' or 'incubation'.^{[20][21]}

In ancient literature of Hinduism dedicated to love, desire, lust, seduction and sex, the root of the word *tapas* is commonly used. For example, in Atharva Veda, a mantra recommended for a woman who wishes to win or compel a man's love is, 'Love's consuming longing, this passion this yearning, which the gods have poured, into the waters of life, I kindle for thee (*tam te tapāmi*), by the law of Varuna.'^[22] Desire (*kāma*) is homologized with the concept of *tapas*, to explain the feelings and inner energy that leads to sexual intercourse.^{[23][24]} Agnicayana, Satapatha Brahmana and other ancient texts similarly use the root of the word *tapas* to symbolize emotions, biological stages and a mother's effort from conception to the birth of a baby.^[25]

Sanskrit *tapasyā* (neuter gender), literally "produced by heat", refers to a personal endeavor of discipline, undertaken to achieve a goal. One who undertakes *tapas* is a *Tapasvin*. The fire deity of Hinduism, *Agni*, is central to many Hindu rituals such as *yajna* and *homa*. *Agni* is considered an agent of heat, of sexual energy, of incubation; *Agni* is considered a great *tapasvin*.^{[17][26]} From *tapas* the more widespread word *tapasyā* was derived, which is used in all three genders and was mentioned in Katyayana-Shrauta-Sutra, Baudhayana's Dharma-shashtra, Panini-4.4.128, etc.^[9] Monks and gurus in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism practice *tapasya* to obtain *moksha*, or spiritual liberation.



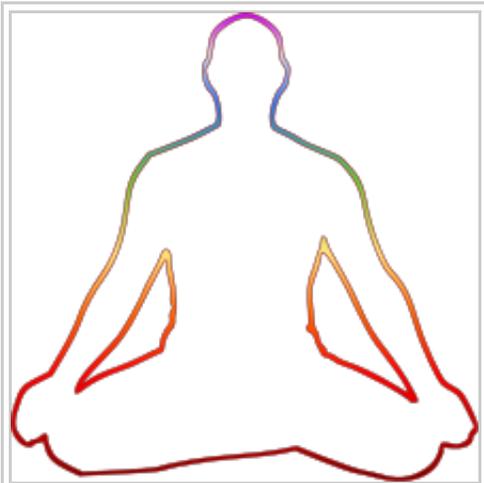
Agni, the fire deity, is common at Hindu rituals such as weddings. *Agni* is considered a great *tapasvin*, and symbolizes the heat and patience necessary to recreate and incubate life.^[17]

The concept of *tapas* as symbolism for spiritual rebirth begins in the Vedas.^{[27][28]} Atharva Veda verse 11.5.3 compares the process of spiritual rebirth of a student in care of his or her teacher, with the gestation process during the biological birth of a baby in a mother's womb.^{[29][30]}

David Frawley (in his book "Yoga and Ayurveda"^[31]) defines Tapas as the spiritual transformation in which Tejas transforms Ojas to produce Prana. He defines Prana, Tejas and Ojas to be the subtle aspects of Vata, Pitta and Kapha (Doshas) respectively.

Tapasya, is also the name of the father of Manu in the Rigveda. The *tapo-raaja* ("king over austerities") is a name of the Moon.

Application



Yoga requires *tāpas* (meditation, calm reflection, exercises, brooding).^[32]

Yoga, a practice that aims physical, mental and spiritual purification in Hinduism, is closely linked with *tapas*. The disciplined and concentrated practice of yogic arts and exercises are a form of *tapas*. Patañjali, widely considered as an ancient authority on yoga, suggests yoga as a way to reduce impurities, confusion and ignorance in or about one's body, mind and spirit. In his Yoga Sūtra, Patañjali urges that realizing the full meaning of Yoga requires *tāpas* (meditation, calm reflection, exercises, brooding), *svādhyāya* (study of self), and *īśvara-pranidhāna* (reflect on universal oneness of life, God, quality of action).^[32]

A vow to observe brahmacharya, silence or fast is the commitment an individual offers to complete the objectives of tapas.

In the ancient scriptures of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism holy men, women and heroes undertake tapas to obtain a spiritual goal of realization, or salvation.

Brahmacharya

Tapasya is part of a stage of life, called brahmacharya^[33] - a monk or nun like celibate lifestyle. At the mind and spirit level, meditative tapas involves focusing upon the Supreme Brahman - the central principles of reality and universe.

Vedic literature correlates and joins *tapas* with *dīksā*. Diksha is the initiation and incubation of a student, by his or her teacher, in the principles of knowledge; diksha sometimes starts with a ceremonial ritual before *Agni*, the fire deity.^{[33][34]} The Vedic literature suggests *diksha* requires *tapas*, and *tapas* is enabled by the state of brahmacharya. This state sometimes includes *tapas* such as *vrata* (fasting, sacrifice of food), *sram* (philanthropic social work, sacrifice of income), silence (sacrifice of speech), and asceticism (bare minimum living, sacrifice of comfort).^[33] Oldenberg notes that Brahmana scripture suggests that the Brahmachari should carry tapas to the very tip of his existence, which includes not cutting his hair, nail and beard.^[35] Thus, during this process of spiritual rebirth and *diksha*, the *tapas* observed by a Brahmachari may include silence, fasting,

seclusion, chastity, as well growing of hair, beard and nails; in other cases, the *tapas* may include simply reduction in talk, noise, amount and types of food consumed, and other human activities. The goal of *tapas* is to help focus the Brahmachari on meditation, observation of reality, reflection and spiritual rebirth.^[33]

Brahmacharya and *tapasya* is so interrelated that some modern literature incorrectly consider it as synonymous.^{[36][37]} In Hinduism, brahmacharya is one of the four stages of life; while *tapasya* is an on-going learning process during all four stages of life. During the brahmacharya stage, typically the pre-adult youth stage, a brahmachari (bachelor, monk, nun) retains his or her sexual energy, focuses on learning, knowledge, understanding and cleansing of ignorance. Once cleansed and matured with self-knowledge, the individual graduates from brahmacharya stage with better understanding, he or she is ready for responsibilities, career, and sexual partnership of *grihastha* stage of life in Hinduism.^[38]

As adults, individuals may re-enter brahmacharya stage as tapasvins to resolve physical, emotional or spiritual questions. This is sometimes done with a teacher (guru). Tapasvins simplify and manage what they eat to cleanse their body. Vegetarianism and ahimsa towards all living beings is practiced to eliminate anger, destructive impulses and avoid the foolishness of hurting others. Fasting is accompanied by avoiding all cooked foods, especially spices and meats. Only fruits and roots are considered acceptable, and one may strive to reduce the quantity one consumes. The eating regimen is combined with exercises, community service, reflection, conversation, discussions and meditation.

Famous Ancient Tapasvins

Several ancient myths and legends of India are related to *tapas*.

Bhagiratha

He was an ancient Indian king who brought down the River Ganges to earth.

Bringing Ganges back to Earth was a near impossible task and required many years to be spent in tapas and prayer. The Kosala kings of successive generations could not do this while managing their duties as kings. As a result, the sins of the thousand princes multiplied in their destructive energy, and began resulting in natural disasters. The kingdom began to lose its peace and prosperity, and by the time Bhagiratha ascended the throne, he found it impossible to attempt to govern in this situation, that had only one solution.

Turning over the kingdom to trusted ministers, Bhagiratha set off to the Himalayas to perform an arduous tapas in the extreme climate. For one thousand years, he performed an excruciatingly harsh penance to please Lord Brahma. At the end of the thousand years, Brahma came to him and told him to ask for anything. Bhagiratha asked Brahma to bring down the river Ganges to earth so that he may perform the ceremony for his ancestors.

Brahma asked Bhagiratha to propitiate Lord Shiva, for only He would be able to break the Ganges' fall. It was the largest river, and it would be impossible for anyone save Him to contain the destructive impact of this event.

Bhagiratha performed tapas for Lord Shiva, living only on air. The compassionate Shiva appeared only after a year's penance, and told Bhagiratha he should not have to perform tapas to accomplish a noble goal such as this. He assured Bhagiratha that he would break Ganges' fall.

Ravana

According to the Ramayana, as a young man Ravana undertakes a terrible penance, lasting over 1000

days to please Lord Shiva. When Shiva does not appear before him, Ravana begins to cut off his head, wherein a new head takes form out of his yogic power. He continues meditating again for a thousand days, then cutting another. When he is about to cut for a tenth time, Shiva appears. He grants Ravana's request for immeasurable strength and knowledge of weapons.

Ravana then undertakes another penance for 1000 days, endeavoring to please Lord Brahma. Brahma tells Ravana that he cannot grant him the immortality he desires, for none of the created are immortal. But Ravana obtains invulnerability against all celestial beings and living creatures, save man and monkeys.

Vishwamitra

King Kaushika undertakes fasting and meditation for thousands of years to become the equal of Guru Vasishtha, a Brahmarishi. He steadily rises to become a Rajarshi, or a royal saint after a thousand years, but is not satisfied.

Even harder penance wins him the status of rishi, and rising to the brahmin order from the kshatriya order. But that is not enough for him. He strives harder to control his sensual passions, including the sexual urge which ruined his tapas when he consorted with the apsaras Menaka, and the anger which led him to attack Vasishtha and turn another apsaras Rambha into stone.

After over 10,000 years, Lord Brahma rewards Kaushika's fearsome penance with the title of Brahmarishi, the highest of all brahmins and holy men, and equal to Vasishtha. However now, Kaushika has dissolved his anger as a result of his tapas, and is named *Vishwamitra*, meaning *Friend of the Universe*, prepared to help anybody who sought his help. During his journeys, several times he gives all his *TapoShakti* (Energy gained after doing severe Tapas) to several people who sought his help and who he deemed as worthwhile. As a result, he earned the name Vishwamitra (Vishwam means Universe and Mitra means Friend).

Buddhism and Jainism

The meditation undertaken by Siddhartha Gautama founder of Buddhism and Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, earned Mahavira the exalted state of Moksha. Their tapas was the source of their teachings.

Tapas continue to motivate Buddhist and Jain monks who consider it a part of their study of their religion.

Modern Tapasvins

Modern Hindu mendicants pursue tapas - meditation and study of religion in ashrams across India and the world. Many hundreds of monks and mendicants base themselves around the holy sites of Hinduism, or in hermitages around the Himalayas to observe their vows and penance in as religious an environment as possible.

See also

- Asceticism
- Soma
- Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism

- Meditation, Nirvana, Brahmacharya, Moksha
- Satyagraha, Gandhism

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External links

- India—Fakir with Monkeys (<http://www.wdl.org/en/item/392/>) is a photograph with documentation that includes Frank G. Carpenter's writing about tapas.

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