

Tapasya: Resistance and Progress

The studio where I teach hatha yoga in Virginia is a serene place. Small fragrant plants are tucked in the corners of the room, and their scent subtly insinuates itself into the yoga classes, melting any lingering signs of stress in the faces of the students, most of whom have just finished a long day of work. Yoga is a very new idea to the majority of the students; most know little more about the practice than that it challenges them in unaccustomed ways and that they leave the class shining and smiling - a big change from how they entered.

The studio is decorated with quotes and pictures that, like the scent of the flowers, hint at the benevolence of the practice. I look at my favorite quote at the beginning of my own hatha yoga practice, for inspiration. "Discipline," it says, "is remembering what you want." This is what draws my students - and me - to the practice. Like the inscription at Delphi that admonished Socrates "Know thyself," this is an oracle, my wise counsel. We're here doing this practice to know ourselves better, and to know and experience what it is that we truly want.

Yoga teaches that what we truly want is to know and experience our true Self, beyond the experience of our own ego. Another word for this intention is self-transcendence. Of course, *every* effort a human being makes has an element of self-transcendence to it, insofar as we extend beyond accustomed limits to achieve a goal. But in yoga our efforts are unique, for they are not outer-directed. The true intention of yoga is to go beyond our normal experience of self; and the fruit of that intention is ultimately an awakening to the presence of God that can be experienced in every act and event of our lives. Yoga, including hatha yoga, means turning within to experience that presence time and time again.

Time and effort have taught me that the process of this awakening is a journey of many steps, and that self-transcendence takes many forms. The process as a whole is known as **sadhana**. And an integral part of the process is what, for better or worse, has come to be known as austerity - or **tapasya**. Yet austerity in the yogic sense is not a negative form of self-denial, but rather an affirmative effort that transforms and enlightens. Hatha yoga, though it may at times seem more like a luxury, is a quintessential form of this kind of austerity.

Tapasya is an opportunity for self-transcendence, one that does involve some difficulty and challenge. The challenge is more than merely physical; one's limited sense of self doesn't just accept being transcended without putting up a fight, and that's where austerity has earned its reputation as being a difficult process. The root of the word *tapasya* is *tapas*, which literally means "heat." This is specifically the kind of heat generated by the friction and conflict associated with change. Tapasya is akin to the fever that the body generates in its battle with disease. In hatha yoga in particular, the practice works up a kind of fever as heat arises from *inner resistance* whether the physical resistance of a muscle to a stretch, or an emotional resistance to the demands of a pose.

It's something of a truism in the 'hot' forms of yoga that increasing the temperature of the room heats up the practice, so that one's muscles melt and become flexible more easily. Some even tout the health benefits of practicing in intense heat - confusing to some degree the health benefits of yoga with those of a sauna, while ignoring the hardship placed on the body from doing a hard practice in stressful conditions. This external heat is not the heat of yoga, and is 'tapasya' in only a very trivial and artificial - and sometimes unhealthy - sense. Some heat is beneficial - *and* yoga has always stressed moderation and warned against faddish concepts. The work of yoga takes place inside.

The resistance that produces the fire of yoga comes from within - to some extent physical, but really speaking,

it's more mental and emotional. I've had a long relationship with resistance in its many forms in my hatha yoga practice. Sometimes the resistance is direct and unequivocal - a defiant (and not entirely well-reasoned) "No!" - and sometimes it is cushioned and concealed by rationalizations - such as "I'm not into this today; this isn't what I need." It's always a good thing to say 'no' to whatever threatens to be harmful to us; it's quite another simply to react with defiance (or to lose heart). In the latter case, a dialogue is started within as the practice pokes around in one's subconscious, provoking such reactions. In this process of self-inquiry, I discover elements of my own nature that I might not discover otherwise. Some of the elements I respect as wisdom; some become grist for the mill of tapasya.

We may be assisted to some extent by being 'pushed' and challenged by a teacher. Yet tapasya is one's own inner process, and you have to sign on to and consent to the process at every moment and step along the way. You can't surrender the process over to someone else and let yourself be pushed around willy-nilly for the sake of having an intense 'breakthrough.' 'Boot camp' is for soldiers, not for yogis. Soldiers surrender an important part of thought and will over to their commander for the sake of acting as a unit; yogis are meant to explore more deeply their own processes of thought and will, not abdicate them.

In yoga our resistance comes up from our inner authorities, when patterns of energy, thought and feeling that have become habitual are challenged by the practice. I have plenty of such patterns; a good example is my work with my everyday posture. A good part of my hatha yoga practice has been directed toward working with my posture for quite important reasons, and the process has indeed been an austerity.

Posture defines us in several ways. We can recognize someone from a distance just by posture, for posture expresses that person's unique energy. Yet posture not only defines, it can also confine. Before beginning yoga I had become quite stoop shouldered. Asthma was largely the cause of my collapsed posture, since the episodes would tighten my chest right at the throat. My posture was self-protective; it was as if my throat was being attacked, and any attempts I made to change my posture would often trigger even more asthma. The condition also had an emotional element, which turned upon a deep sense of vulnerability that led me to bottle up feelings rather than expose them to censure. My shoulders served to protect the cork in the bottle.

Of course I sought medical advice and looked into my diet, all of which helped a great deal. But the dynamic of the condition had already written itself into my posture, and medicine couldn't reach that. Posture is our comfort zone, even when it takes an enormous amount of extra energy to maintain it. My posture inflicted additional pain by causing tension in the overworked muscles of my shoulders and upper back. Even as my body cried out for change, it also resisted change. Some muscles had become tight, others weak, so regardless of my efforts to open my chest I was constantly pulled back to the same shape the moment I became unconscious of my posture.

The posture was more than physical. I noticed its connection to a kind of darkness in my mood, an introversion that was both shy and somehow resentful. As I worked in the gardens of the ashram in India, the sun would beat down upon my shoulders, exaggerating my rounded and protective posture. The grumbling of my mind increased exponentially. Several times I saw this mood reflected in my posture when saw myself in a window, and I realized, "If I continue to look this way, I'll continue to feel this way. The moment I stood upright to smile and appreciate the day, the mood vanished entirely - at least until I fell back into my accustomed posture.

More often than not, however, when I was confronted with opportunities to think and respond and even stand differently, my reaction would be "This is just the way I am." I had established my safety zone and didn't like to be nudged out of it, even if I did want to change. Self-acceptance is often a healthy sign of

maturity, but some patterns cause so much grief and all-around unhappiness that they merit rethinking and remolding. This, I recognized, was one such pattern. The question was, How to change?

Tapasya is the process of this remolding; it is the choice to find a better way, the transformation of our conscious energy into more constructive patterns. Hatha yoga provided the context for this process. It uniquely fit the bill, since it is an individual practice aimed at steady, noncompetitive transformation through a process largely free from comparison and judgment, one that thereby spares me much of the burden of my own defensiveness. The choice was a good one because, as a practice, the postures, or asanas, of hatha yoga provide new forms, new conduits for shaping patterns of energy, as well as cultivating new and better attitudes toward oneself and one's body. And the work with my posture had a direct effect on my mood as well, beginning to pull me out of myself as my body opened in the poses.

At the same time, it was a fiery process, far less "safe" than I had thought it would be. I felt the power of the asanas, especially in the resistance they generate. These postures challenge our settled patterns, and the process can be painful, difficult, and frustrating. But the asanas are also a constructive means to work with these difficulties. Rather than attack my stooped shoulders directly, hatha yoga gave me a number of postures that moved and stretched them in ways that felt good and helped me to understand them better. This in itself changed my feeling about the poses, so that even when I met with physical resistance and impossible stiffness, it seemed like a worthwhile cause.

Emotional resistance did come up too, and I often burned with a surprising amount of anger and resentment. But my attitude toward myself in the face of these feelings was different; it was not defensive or even judgmental, because perhaps for the first time I recognized that what was coming up was not "me," but patterns of reacting to situations that could be changed. As embarrassing and unpleasant as the feelings were, "I" was not on trial, so I could let them be and move on with my practice.

The postures also poked at my asthma, and I did suffer asthma attacks in which my lungs contracted and hurt. But the practice taught me to breathe more fully and evenly, patiently opening my lungs to the breath. I found that this relaxed and progressive deepening of my breathing burned up the congestion, slowly freeing me from the attacks.

This was tapasya, which was challenging and transforming my normal way of being. And I found that the asanas didn't just break the patterns that were draining my energy; they also worked to collect and contain my energy, bottling it rather than letting it flow out wastefully. When doing the asanas, I could feel that energy rumbling inside. A different blueprint was being assigned; the asanas were replacing old fuses and bypassing old and weak wiring as that energy blazed along new paths. This is tapasya in the classic sense. The "burning" associated with tapasya is not just the fire of anger and resistance to change. The burning comes from a consolidation and expansion of energy, from containing, conserving, and redirecting the creative fire of my own consciousness.

This tapasya is different from repression. Repression temporarily denies the expression of a tendency and puts it out of our awareness until it finally explodes, venting its pent-up fury in inappropriate ways. Tapasya is a very conscious process of creative action and contemplation that depends almost entirely upon our own intention, attitude, vigilance, and self-awareness. This is the kind of effort that draws grace. What we keep hidden from ourselves is precisely what holds us back, for it is our unconscious tendencies that limit us the most. In the process of sadhana, nothing ultimately stays hidden, whether a desire, tendency, or urge. Through every form of spiritual practice, everything is brought to light, and new forms are applied. The energy we had once invested in harmful patterns is then transmuted into higher forms of expression and experience through this divine alchemy.

A key element in the process is grace. Grace is in one respect a power of inner illumination that brings greater perception and understanding, and it comes as a gift. Tapasya is the process of dealing with what comes to light through grace. When it comes to tapasya, or acts of austerity, it seems in general that once we do *not* give in to reacting to a difficulty in a habitual or unconscious way - once we are made conscious of it - our mind is somehow freed to become more focused, perceptive, and established in its own power.

A friend shared one dramatic example of the power of tapasya. His son came down with the chicken pox and was warned by his doctors not to scratch the sores on his face no matter how they bothered him. The boy took this to heart and looked for ways to deal with his persistent discomfort. He began to watch the trees outside his window and formed a relationship with them, holding silent conversations with them as the days passed, even while what he suffered from the pox was excruciating. In truth, he was going more deeply inside himself to discover his connectedness with his surroundings, awakening to the presence of Consciousness all around him. This took him beyond his awareness of his physical suffering, and as his face progressively cleared, his father noticed how dramatically the experience had changed him. The boy had become far quieter, focused, perceptive, and contented than he had ever been, and this subtle maturity stayed with him, long after the disease had passed.

Hatha yoga offers similar, though less dramatic, opportunities for self-transcendence. A pose can put me in a situation that is at first quite uncomfortable. Yet when I look for ways to “live” in the pose by exploring and understanding it, rather than simply bearing with it until the timer says I can come out, the quality of my own mind is altered dramatically. It is far more relaxed, focused and at peace - and somehow expanded. I notice a kind of sparkle to my surroundings, as if the room and the plants had been breathing with me in the pose. I begin to perceive the Shakti or energy that permeates not just my own efforts, but also the life of all that is around me.

Grace is tangibly present as a kind of silent partner in the process. It is the energy that bears me up and takes me through even when my mind is thrashing about for an excuse to stop. Grace also lets me know when I have had enough, particularly when the mind tries to push too hard. And grace raises me to a higher level of perception: the fruit of grace is always a sense of peace, fulfillment, and connectedness, regardless of how I may otherwise tend to judge my practice.

For those who have a taste of this fruit, tapasya becomes a passion. Tapasya does involve pain and difficulty, but the pain is not the point. In acts of tapasya, love and the affirmation of your own goodness and worthiness are the forces that move you to scatter your own darkness. Tapasya is spiritual passion, the love of true freedom in which you burn and love the flame. In this passion love and resistance, desire and aversion, courage and fear rub like sticks to kindle your heart with a desire to be transfigured, to forge ahead in spite of the heat. This passion is not a burden; it is the soul's delight.

Resistance is at the root of the discomfort we feel in this burning, yet I've learned to welcome my own resistance, because it is resistance that makes the whole process work, whether in opening myself in a hatha yoga pose or in opening myself to life through my sadhana as a whole. The experience of tapasya teaches that love and resistance are the two principles behind the “aerodynamics” of the soul. If love is our wings, resistance is the air that lifts us into flight. Tapasya is the process of remembering our true Self and opening our wings. Grace is the miracle of flight that happens when our wings catch the wind of our own stubborn resistance to change. Effort, resistance, and grace lift us high to view the landscape of our lives, to admire its beauty, and to love it with a greater sense of mastery, wisdom, purpose and direction, and a clear awareness of the presence of grace. This experience of freedom, of loving and of being borne by grace, is the true gift of tapasya.