

## Thinking, Talking and Treading the Path of Tapas by Julie Carpenter and Mrinalini Rao

We are poised at the edge of the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter here at Anaikatti. Behind us are 17 Chapters of *Bhagavad Gītā*, Arjuna's questions having kept *Kṛṣṇa* busy teaching, while the battle of Kurukṣetre awaits. As one follows Arjuna's line of questioning, and hears how *Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa* chooses to answer, the obstacles to gaining the knowledge are exposed. Words, carefully selected by Pujya Swamiji to unfold the *śāstra*, chip away at tightly held notions that maintain the mistaken belief that all that is here is other than oneself. Pujya Swamiji's clarity of vision brings to bear the full blessings of the *sampradāya* and *śabda-pramāṇa*.

Chapter 16, *daiva-asura-sampat vibhaga yoga*, discussed becoming and unbecoming dispositions. The final verse of that chapter introduced the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter by saying:

*tasmāt śāstram pramāṇam te kārya-akārya vyavasthitau  
jñātvā śāstra-vidhānoktam karma-karttum iha ārhasi.*

Therefore, *śāstra* is the means of knowledge for you (Arjuna) in the determination of what is to be done and what is not to be done. Knowing what is said by the mandates of the *śāstra*, you are obliged to perform action here (in this world).

Amongst many important topics discussed in Chapter 17, we here summarize the discipline, *tapas*, regarding the body, speech and mind.

A common understanding of *tapas* is the severe affliction one's body for some gain or, for the purpose of causing harm to another. This is known as *tamasika tapas*. So, can *tapas* be said to be that which is only publicly performed for the sake of receiving honour and respect? Certainly not! This is *rajasika tapas*. What other reason is there for performing *tapas*? *Antaḥ-karaṇa śuddhi*, preparation of the mind for those engaged in the *sattvika* pursuit of self-knowledge.

Everyone is endowed with *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in varying degrees. When *sattva* is predominant knowledge takes place due to alertness and concentration. When *rajas* is predominant activities are undertaken as a result of mental and physical restlessness, and longing. When *tamas* is predominant, there is sleep, absence of activity, dullness and delusion. Known as *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, dynamically manifest in everyone's orientation.

This brings to mind the story of the sincere seeker who asks her guru, 'oh revered guriji, there are three entities in my heart called *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, they fight all the time. Who do you think will win?' The guruji smiled saying, 'my dear child, the one you feed'. The student became silent. After sometime she looked up, and asked, "how to 'feed' and practice *sattvika tapas*?"

Those who are interested in *antaḥ-karaṇa śuddhi* and not expecting or desiring any other result, observe physical, verbal and mental *sattvika tapas* with *śraddha*.

*Sattvika tapas* that is related to the body, means regularly offering worship to *Īśvara* in some form; being respectful to *brāhmaṇas*, teachers and wise people; external cleanliness – both of one's body and the environment in which one finds oneself; straightforwardness, described by Śaṅkara as alignment between thought, word and deed; *brahmacaryam*, leading a life of discipline living and studying *śāstra* at the *guruklam*; and *ahiṃsa*, not hurting other beings.

With regards to *sattvika tapas*, speech is another area where there is “acres of room to grow” a phrase used by Pujya Swamiji. What is the purpose of speech and how does it become *tapas*? Śāṅkara says, that a sentence is used to create an understanding. When *tapas* is involved, speech must have four characteristics.

The first is *anudvegakaram*, speech that does not cause agitation or hurt. Second is *satyam*, truth. We may think that we are speaking the truth, however, without verifying that what is being said is indeed true, we may unintentionally sometimes colour the truth with our own subjective views. The third, *priyam*, means speech that is pleasing. If one cannot think of something pleasing, then it is better to refrain from speaking. Fourth, speech should be *hitam*, beneficial to the listener. Śāṅkarācārya gives an example of *sattvika* speech in his *bhaṣya*. He says, “My dear child, be calm, follow the daily study of your *veda* and *karma yoga*, and then all good things will happen to you.” It is worth noting that speech must meet all four criteria, if one or more is not present it is not considered to be *vāk tapas*.

With reference to *tapas* of the mind, it is a discipline that helps one acquire and maintain mental cheerfulness, *mana prasāda*. The emphasis on ‘mental’ cheerfulness differentiates it from merely an external expression of cheerfulness. Some people may express a cheerful countenance while internally they are experiencing acute emotional pain. Cultivating mental cheerfulness requires that one have a *prasāda buddhi*, that is a glad accepting attitude towards oneself, towards others and towards all situations. All *karma-phala* is from *Īśvara* alone. Keeping this in view it is easier to accept what comes. As Pujya Swamiji pointed out, ‘if *prasāda buddhi* is there, there will be *manah prasāda*’. He added that this is easier to accomplish when one lives one day at a time.

Bhagavān *Kṛṣṇa* also brings the word *maunam* to the discussion of *mana tapas*. What does *maunam*, a discipline whereby one does not verbally interact with others for a period of time, have to do with *mana tapas*? *Maunam* is brought in here to show the correlation between *vāk tapas* and *manas tapas*. The pressure to talk, irrespective of the listener’s desire to listen or interact, is resolved before the words leave the mouth. One’s *vak tapas* may become easier if one resolves the pressure to talk prior to speaking!

*Saumyatvam*, is a reflection of mental cheerfulness in one’s countenance. The *tapas* involves bringing the mind back to a pleased condition when you are displeased, which in turn brings about a smile. This is not a forced expression, rather it is the natural result of a change of thought. Connected to the ability to bring the mind back to a pleased condition is *ātma vinigraha*, mastery over the mind. What does it mean to have mastery over the mind? As Pujya Swamiji so succinctly says, it is “making the mind available for oneself”. If one is constantly dwelling on guilts, hurts and inadequacies, whether one’s own or those of others, one’s mind is not fully available for what is going on at this moment.

The last characteristic of *mana tapas* is *bhāva samśuddhi*. This is a clean, deceit free intention in one’s interaction with others.

May we all cultivate these three-fold *tapas* with *śraddha* for both our own maturity and the benefit of all those with whom we interact. It is just as Pujya Swamiji says, “The big picture is infinite. When one is focused on the absolute reality everything falls within the big picture and cheerfulness can be retained.” Om Tat Sat.