Oscar Wilde, an Irish poet and author, made an infamous quote when he once stated: “Whenever I feel like exercising, I simply lay down until the feeling passes”. In many ways, we practice the same principle here at Ananda Ashram: we rise out of bed until the feeling of sleeping in passes, we keep quiet when we feel like chatting, we breathe deeply when we just want to lie down and we search within when the mind really wants to wander without.

Humans are creatures of habit. We resist change yet we all are aware of the constant flux in nature and the volatility of the material world. “One cannot step into the same river twice”, is a great line from Dr Ananda. Without change, there can be no evolution. Change, transformation, particularly that which is self-willed and conscious is one of the by-products of a life observed in Tapasya. Tapas, according to Swamiji in Yoga Step by Step, is equated to a disciplined life.

Discipline on its surface often has a negative connotation, that of penance, suffering, suppression of ones urges or being punished for misbehaviour. We all desire a better life, a healthier body, a thriving work career, harmonious and loving relationships, but most of the time we do not want to put in the effort necessary to cultivate their success. I like to believe discipline is related to what Ammaji has said many times in Satsanga- it is “choosing to do what is right, whether it is difficult or whether one feels like it or not.” For no other reason than it’s the right thing to do, it is our Dharma.

The word Tapas is derived from the Sanskrit word “Tap” which means “to burn or to heat”, so it implies both purification and discipline: to burn out that which is useless and impure, strengthening the self to be able to endure hardship and adversity. Purification requires self control and does often include a certain amount of pain, but the pain need not lead to suffering. Suffering is always the effect of wrong thought, the indication that an individual is out of harmony with himself. In Yoga Step by Step Swamiji also defines: “For the Yogi, a disciplined life means regularity in practice and punctuality, the ability to exist in the Now and Here.” He is reminding us to be proactive and perform our Dharma ritualistically and consciously at any given moment, to commit and adhere to one’s schedule. I have heard and read many recounts of Swamiji as a strict disciplinarian, that he believed in “Doing it now, for there may never be a tomorrow”. Self control allows an acute observation and withdrawal of the senses, in which can then be channeled directly into performing with full creativity and without distraction what one must do. Thus discipline can be a form of positive Pratyahara. This was wonderfully emphasized to us over and over by Shalini in preparation for the recent Yoga Sports Championship of Pondicherry that self control, physical awareness, grace and poise is valued more than mere “elastic gymnastics”. It is the “perfect effort, not the perfect Asana” that matters, according to Dr. Ananda. In my own experience at Martial Arts school, learning as an adult alongside young teenagers, I was inspired by the discipline inculcated into students.
firstly not in physical training but the discipline of speech and mind. One was taught not to complain, to curb one’s tongue in class and to channel one’s creativity. There were moments where a single motion required the engagement of every fiber of muscle and mind, that time “stood still” and nothing else in the world mattered. Discipline, thus, can instill a very gratifying sense of perfection.

This Martial Arts teacher was perhaps the first Yogi I have encountered in my life. But he was known as Sensei, and has said once, in parallel to Swamiji, “Martial Arts is a way of life”. Demonstration sessions in class always began with a ritual form of physical gesture of respect from both opponents. How often do we conduct rituals without understanding the purpose behind them? It was a blessing for me one day when Sensei mentioned in a private moment that a simple gesture as it is, its purpose is to instill gratitude into the young minds of students, so that respect and mindfulness is directed towards one’s opposition as without the other person one could not practice let alone progress and improve. Martial Arts was not about the fanciest back flip or taking down an opponent in a fight. In many ways, this has helped me to understand one of the Rules imposed in Ashram life- to be present in all classes, to pay respect to our teachers, our Guru’s no matter our state of health, even if one is rigid with fever and on the ground. It is to build character, cultivate strength and discipline in us- the true value of Tapasya.

Tapasya in the Scriptures is of three kinds. Of speech, it is the use of non offensive words that is truthful, purposeful and beneficial. Daily morning Aarti, mantras, Bhajans, Carnatic music, and AUM chanting, so different and new to my original concept of Yoga is in effect, one way of helping in the purification of our speech by glorifying the Divine and praising our Gurus.

Tapas of the body refers to straight forwardness, continence, and non violence. It is the conscious cultivation of valuing one’s body as a temple through which the Divine can manifest. This means the restraining of overindulgence and abuse of the body- whether it is overfeeding oneself, the use of recreational drugs, alcohol or sexual indulgence. At the same time, one should not abstain or torture one’s body, like fasting to death due to false ideals of austerity, which according to the Gita is of Tamasic nature, it can trouble the self and others and is done out of ignorance. Chapter 6, Verse 16 of the Gita states that “Yoga is not for those who eats or sleeps too little or too much.” The first month at Ananda Ashram, the experience of fasting along with Shankaprakshalana, coffee enema was the official “induction” to Tapas of the body. The Yogic diet is that of freshly cooked and clean Sattvic food, food that is easily digested, nutritious and “light” in nature. One should never fill the stomach to its fullest capacity with food- Yoga teaches that at any given meal one half of our stomach should contain solid food, one quarter water and the rest empty. Hatha Yoga, inclusive of Asanas, Kriyas, Mudras is also a form of physical Tapas, they serve to render the body as well as the mind into a fit and clean medium. Mahatma Gandhi himself devoted his life in undertaking a vow of Tapas towards food and penance of his physical body, which allowed him in turn to cultivate immense compassion, forgiveness and an implacable peace that affected the whole of India and the world.
Developing an attitude of calmness, tranquility in all circumstances, whether in joy or sorrow with self control is Tapas of the mind. The mind can be akin to tendering one’s garden- one can intelligently cultivate it or allow it to run wild. If no seeds are put in it, then an abundance of useless weeds are allowed to grow and produce its own kind. These weeds can crystallize into confusing habits which eventually solidifies into distracting and adverse circumstances. I confess that I am a chronic “emotional eater,” and whenever my mind is ever idle, my body inactive or stressed and in procrastination, bags of chips and biscuits are automatically gauged. The result is often more stress inflicting my nervous system, emotional strain from unhealthy indulgence, all produced from agitated impure thinking.

As part of our Sadhana, included in the Gitananda tradition of Ashtanga Yoga training, the following practices are various forms of Tapasya for the mind:

1. The discipline of Mauna each evening. The effects of silence is the guidance of the mind inwards, allowing one to contemplate and become a witness to one’s own thinking process, not only curbing the desire to be heard or speaking without thought.

2. Meditative sitting every dawn. This allows one to actively control the activities of the senses and direct it towards higher objects. It is Krishna which tells Arjuna in Chapter 6, Verse 14-15 of the Gita: “His mind should be quiet and without fear, he should observe a vow of chastity and control his mind and fix his concentration on me. He should sit concentrated on devotion, holding me as the highest object. Thus with the Self in constant discipline the Yogi who is able to control his mind will be able to attain the supreme form of peace that is part of Me beyond all material existence.”

3. Satsangha, which means to be in the presence of good company with other seekers of truth, also aids in the purification of the mind. Good thoughts bear good fruits, bad thoughts bear bad fruits, and one’s thoughts cannot be but elevated and expanded at the end of every Satsangha with one’s Guru.

4. Sound as a subtle tool, is used to help bring internal equilibrium. Dr Ananda has explained that different facets of tune in Carnatic music can invoke different emotions and colours as well as a specific deity. Music melody and harmony enchants the mind to loosen its grip on the world. They recalibrate our own inner rhythm so that we become open and receptive. Participating in singing with one’s body in a straight spine brings the Divine sounds straight to the heart. This is when sound and music not only relieves pain but gives the experience of dwelling in God.

5. AUM Chanting. This serves to tune our system to Cosmic vibrations, giving rise to higher mental developmental processes and brings evolution to the nervous system. It purifies the mind, awakens our soul to resonate with the Cosmos and maintain our spirit.

6. Mantras, which serve to guide and correct the consciousness, “it protects the mind” by cleansing, healing and restructuring the subconscious. It can develop the base for constructive and productive living by breaking down the neurotic habits that captivate our life force or energy. Dr Ananda once said that Mantra is the
telecommunication of the finite to the Infinite- they are passwords that can slowly open the channels from which this life force flows to awaken us to the Vijnana and Anandamaya Koshas of our being.

As we can observe, Tapasya is ultimately a mean of positive transformation, to destroy imperfections, purifying our nature and making room for spiritual growth. It is like the act of cleaning the dirty window of our minds so we can see clearly face to face our true Self. Just as diamonds are made from the refinement of coal. Or a butterfly from the caterpillar’s struggle out of its own cocoon.

This is resonated in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the Sadhana Pada, Verse 43:

KAYENDRIYA SIDDHIH ASHUDDHI KSHAYAT TAPASAH

“When Tapas or austerity is perfected, impurities of body and mind are destroyed and the body and senses become perfect.”

Thus, when the body and senses become perfect, like a clear crystal medium, consciousness is then able to flow and function freely, and light is able to flow and radiate. And if Tapas is practiced as part of Kriya Yoga (the “Unitive discipline of ritual”, combined with Swadyaya and Ishwara Pranidhana), the Sutras also reveals that the Kleshas that bind mankind can be destroyed and man can ultimately experience Samadhi.