

## YOGA, MEDITATION ON *OM*, *TAPAS*, AND *TURIYA* IN THE PRINCIPAL UPANISADS

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Mircea Eliade in his treatise on Yoga, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, begins by stating that, “Four basic and interdependent concepts, four ‘kinetic ideas,’ bring us directly to the core of Indian spirituality. They are *karma*, *maya*, *nirvana*, and *yoga*.” He goes on to write that “A coherent history of Indian thought could be written starting from any one of these basic concepts; the other three would inevitably have to be discussed.” Regarding the development of yoga during the period of the Principal Upanisads, I suggest that the concepts of yoga, meditation on the syllable *Om*, *tapas*, and *turiya* are similarly interdependent and that an analysis of one of them would lead directly to analyses of the other three. The synthesis of these ideas comes in the Maitri Upanisads, but discussions of them exist in the earlier Upanisads as well. In the Maitri Upanisads we find the assertion that meditation on the syllable *Om* is the means that takes awareness to *samadhi* where the practitioner experiences *turiya*. In this paper I will briefly discuss the evolution of yogic practices from Vedic sacrifices to their current incarnation in Western hatha yoga and then analyze the Principal Upanisads to examine how the ancient external communal sacrificial fire rituals became internalized. The common thread that weaves through the lineage of yogic practices is *tapas*, which culminates in realizing the fourth state of consciousness, *turiya*; in the Principal Upanisads one of the primary forms of yoga and *tapas* becomes

meditation on the syllable *Om*.

The term yoga derives from the root *yuj* and means “to bind together, hold-fast, or yoke.” This implies union or unification of the body, mind, spirit, and divine; in terms of Vedanta it can be stated as the union of the Atman and Brahman. Yoga appears to date back as far as the Vedas: Feuerstein states that “In its oldest known form, Yoga appears to have been the practice of disciplined introspection, or meditative focusing, in conjunction with sacrificial rituals.”<sup>1</sup> However, the practices of the ancient rsis are better known as *tapas*. Feuerstein writes that

The earliest term for Yoga-like endeavors in India is *tapas*. Literally, this ancient Sanskrit word means “heat.”... The term is often used in the Rig-Veda to describe the quality and work of the solar orb (or its corresponding deity, God Surya), or of the sacrificial fire (or its corresponding deity, God Agni). In these contexts it is frequently implied that the heat of sun and fire is painful and distressing in its burning intensity. We can see in this the root of the subsequent metaphoric usage of *tapas* as psychic heat in the form of anger and aggression, but also as fervor, zeal or painstaking self-application.

Thus the word *tapas* came to be applied to the religious or spiritual struggle of voluntary self-discipline through the practice of austerities.<sup>2</sup>

Feuerstein goes further to propose that this austerity and asceticism also contains “a strong magical component.”<sup>3</sup> B.K.S. Iyengar adds to this definition of *tapas* in stating that,

*Tapas* is derived from the root ‘*tap*’ meaning to blaze, burn, shine, suffer pain or consume by heat. It therefore means a burning effort under all circumstances to achieve a definite goal in life. It involves purification, self-discipline and austerity...

*Tapas* is the conscious effort to achieve ultimate union with the Divine and to burn up all desires which stand in the way of this goal.<sup>4</sup>

In analyzing the transition of *tapas* from the Vedic period to the Upanisads, Kaelber proposes a distinction between two types of *tapas*, namely, the *tapas* of external sacrificial

rituals and duties such as almsgiving in contrast to the *tapas* of meditation which has the goal of realization of Brahman. Kaelber notes that this distinction is based on the introduction in the Upanisads of reincarnation. Thus, there is a devaluation of sacrificial *tapas* (which he calls ‘lower *tapas*’) and a greater emphasis placed on individual transcendental *tapas* (which he calls ‘higher *tapas*’) in the Upanisads. “The *tapas* that is exalted in the principal Upanisads is a form of *tapas*, different from the first, associated not with traditional sacrifice and conventional mortification but rather with meditation, and relatedly, with a direct knowledge of reality itself.”<sup>5</sup> Kaelber also notes that “*tapas* (is) increasingly associated with ‘actionless’ meditation and mental concentration.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, Kaelber emphasizes that *tapas* is at the same time the means and the end because knowledge or realization of Brahman eliminates any subject/object distinction:

Through *tapas* and knowledge one is aware of Atman/Brahman, which is itself *tapas* and knowledge. The means of “knowledge” is one with the “object” to be known. This may be stated even more dramatically: The meditative *tapas* of the ascetic is not simply a means of apprehending ultimate reality; it is ultimate reality itself.<sup>7</sup>

Deussen adds that “everything that is great in the universe is dependent on *tapas*... By *tapas* the ruler protects his kingdom, the gods have escaped death...”<sup>8</sup>

As we will see in our analysis of the Upanisads, one of the ways of practicing *tapas* becomes meditation on the syllable *Om*. Similar to Kaelber’s above equation of *tapas* with ultimate reality, Brahman, we will note how the primordial sound *Om* and the breathing associated with yoga and meditation are also at one with ultimate reality. What we will concentrate on is the internalization of the yogic rituals in the period of the Upanisads. As Feuerstein states, “the Upanishadic sages turned unanimously to meditative practice, or

inner worship (*upasana*), as the chief means of obtaining transcendental knowledge. In contrast to this, the meditation practiced by orthodox brahmins continued to be intimately bound up with sacrificial rituals.”<sup>9</sup> Although the goal remained similar - to transcend ordinary states of consciousness and phenomenal reality, *maya* - the means and focus changed dramatically in the period of the Upanisads. More specifically, “In a certain sense, Yoga may be looked upon as internalized asceticism. Where the earlier ascetic stood stock-still under the burning sun in order to win the favor of a deity, the yogin or yogini’s work occurs primarily in the laboratory of his or her own consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> This echoes Hume when he writes that

The final solution of the practical problem which the Upanishads offer, namely Yoga, is the outcome of that conception of strict unity which started the speculations of the Upanishads and which urged them on from cosmology to intelligent monism, and from an external to an internal unity.<sup>11</sup>

The link that developed during the Upanisads between *tapas* and achieving unity is *turiya*. As we will see in the Mandukya and Maitri Upanisads, four levels of consciousness are delineated: waking, sleeping, dreaming, and “the fourth,” (*turiya*) which is “ungraspable, having no distinctive mark, non-thinkable, that cannot be designated, the essence of the assurance of which is the state of being one with the Self.” Mand. 7 Deussen writes that the “suppression of consciousness of objects and union with the eternal knowing subject which is brought about by the yoga and is coincident with absolute wakefulness, is designated as the ‘fourth’ state of the atman by the side of waking dreaming and deep sleep.”<sup>12</sup> Radhakrishnan adds that *turiya* is “symbolized by the Aumkara, with its parts of A-U-M, the waking, the dreaming and the sleeping states. It is not an exclusive self, but the

common ground of all, their basis of identity.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Yoga as a philosophical system develops in the Upanisads through *tapas*, which evolves to become internalized and which focus on meditation on the sacred sound *Om*; in turn the sacred sound *Om* leads to the practitioner to a higher state of consciousness, *turiya*, which unites the practitioner with ultimate reality.

After the Principal Upanisads came the formalization of Yoga as a *darsana* or viewpoint by Patanjali. There are, however, differences between the Yoga Upanisads and Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. Feuerstein states that “the metaphor of union does not at all fit the system of Classical Yoga, as formulated by Patanjali in the second century C.E. In Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, the basic scripture of Classical Yoga, there is no mention of a union with the transcendental Reality as the ultimate target of the yogic endeavor.”<sup>14</sup> As Patanjali states at the beginning of the Yoga Sutras, the primary goal of yoga for him is the cessation of the fluctuations in ordinary states consciousness. Eliade writes:

The purpose of Patanjali’s Yoga, then, is to abolish the first two categories of experiences (respectively produced by logical and metaphysical error) and to replace them by an “experience” that is enstatic, suprasensory, and extrarational. By virtue of *samadhi*, the yogin finally passes permanently beyond the human condition - which is dramatic, produced by suffering and consummated in suffering - and at last obtains the total freedom to which the Indian soul so ardently aspires.<sup>15</sup>

There are two specific distinctions between Samkhya and Yoga that should be noted: firstly, Patanjali’s yoga is theistic, revering the a supreme God. Secondly, “while according to Samkhya the only route to salvation is that of metaphysical knowledge, yoga granted considerable importance to the techniques of meditation.”<sup>16</sup> Eliade states the distinction more strongly when he says that,

The objective of yoga, like that of Samkhya, is to abolish normal consciousness for the benefit of a qualitatively different consciousness that can thoroughly understand metaphysical truth. Now for yoga the abolition of normal consciousness is not so easily to be accomplished. In addition to the philosophy, the darsana, it also entails a “method” (abhyasa), an asceticism (*tapas*): in short, a physiological technique.<sup>17</sup>

Following Patanjali and the Yoga Upanisads came the Bhagavad Gita, which Feuerstein considers to be “undoubtedly the most popular work on Yoga.”<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, in the fourteenth century, the hatha yoga tradition began, influenced by Tantra and Buddhism. However, like the *tapas* of the Vedic sacrifices, the aim remains similar: as Feuerstein observes, “the experience of ecstatic union occurs in the embodied state. The *hatha-yogin*, therefore endeavors to steel the body - to “bake” it.”<sup>19</sup>

Before I move into an analysis of the Principal Upanisads I will conclude this brief overview by mentioning that the emphasis on *tapas* or generating heat in the body continues today in the practice of hatha yoga in the West. Although the religious or spiritual ramifications are seldom mentioned, in hatha yoga today there is usually a period of “warming up” the spine through sun salutations which generate heat through movement and through the exploitation of opposites. This will be discussed further when we look at the Maitri Upanisads.

Although the Katha Upanisad “is widely held to be the old Upanishad that deals explicitly with Yoga.”<sup>20</sup> we will first briefly look at the Brhadaranyaka, Chandogya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Kausitaki, and Kena Upanisads before concentrating on the Katha, Svetasvatara, Mundaka, Mandukya, and Maitri Upanisads.

## **BRHADARANYAKA UPANISAD**

The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad is considered to be the earliest Upanisad. It is primarily concerned with the cosmological ramifications of the sacrificial horse ritual. “The horse sacrifice was a major ceremony performed in honor of a successful king to ensure the continued prosperity of his rule.”<sup>21</sup> Regarding the history and evolution of yoga the sacrifices discussed in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisads are examples of what Kaelber considers lower *tapas*, but more importantly there is an emphasis on the superiority of breath among the bodily functions. In Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 3.9.1 breath is practically deified: after discussing the numerous Gods, Yajnavalkya resolves all 3306 gods down to one:

‘Which is the one god?’

‘Breath,’ said he. ‘They call him Brahma, the *Yon* (tya).’

B U 3.9.1

Later, after a discussion of Atman, in BU 6.1.7 breath is proven to be “most excellent” over all other body parts and functions. For the body can live without speech, eyes, ears, mind, and semen, but the body cannot live without breath.

## **CHANDOGYA UPANISAD**

Similar to the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, the Chandogya Upanisad also emphasizes the importance of breath. The Fifth Prapathaka again demonstrates that “Breath, verily is the chiefest and the best” among the vital breaths as the other vital breaths are forced to realize that breath is the most superior - because they cannot do without it. However, of greater importance to the development of yoga is the emphasis in the Chandogya Upanisad

on *Om*. The Chandogya Upanisad begins with a discussion of chants and develops the link between speech and breath, which becomes most evident in the syllable *Om*. The reason for this is due to the fact that both *Om* and breath are Brahman. Here the primordial sound is united with the one indispensable characteristic of man, breath.

In addition, *Om* is seen to be the entire world from its creation by Prajapati:

Prajapati incubated the worlds, and, when they had been incubated, the triple Veda sprang from them. He incubated the triple Veda, and, when it had been incubated, these syllables '*bhur, bhuvan, svar*' sprang from it. He incubated these syllables, and, when they had been incubated, the syllable *Om* sprang from them. As all the leaves are bored through by a pin, so all words are bored through by *Om*. This whole world is nothing but *Om*.

C U 2.24.11

In relation to what will later synthesize in the Maitri Upanisads as Yoga, the Chandogya Upanisads are very important because of the weight placed on the sacred syllable *Om*.

Later in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Khandas, Atman and Brahman are equated, this time via light: "Now, far above here the light that shines from heaven on the backs of everything, on the backs of all things, in the very highest of the high worlds - it is clearly this very same light here within a man." C U 3.13.7 This is immediately followed by "Brahman, you see, is this whole world." C U 3.14.1. Here we understand that the ultimate exists within oneself and the ultimate is the whole world; thus the whole world is at one with oneself. But for the purposes of our analysis of the evolution of Yoga, more important is the discussion of the light within:

There is the seeing of it - when one perceives by touch this heat here in the body. There is this hearing of it - when one closes his ears and hears as it were a sound, as it were a noise, as of a fire blazing. One should reverence that light as something that has been seen and heard.

C U 3.13.7-8



Here we witness the internalization of the blazing fires of the Vedic sacrificial rituals as this pervasive ubiquitous light warms the body. Although Yoga is not mentioned here, this is clearly an antecedent of the philosophy upon which Yoga is based.

### **TAITTIRIYA UPANISAD**

In the Taittiriya Upanisad there is there is much discussion that resolves to food; it appears as if everything is to be looked upon as food (*anna*). However, Feuerstein states that “It is also in this scripture (2.4.1) that we find the very first unequivocal occurrence of the word yoga in the technical sense, apparently standing for the sage’s control of the fickle senses.”<sup>22</sup> This occurs in 2.4.1 in a discussion of the correct formation of a person: “Faith (*sraddha*) is its head; the right (*rta*), the right side; the true (*satya*), the left side; contemplation (*yoga*), the body (*atman*); might (*mahas*), the lower part, the foundation.” T U 2.4.1

### **AITAREYA UPANISAD**

The Aitareya Upanisad is a short Upanisad that primarily deals with the creation of the worlds from the self, atman. In regards to Yoga and *tapas* there are no specific references. However, Radhakrishnan says of the Aitareya Upanisad that, “It is the purpose of the Upanisad to lead the mind of the sacrificer away from the outer ceremonial to its inner meaning. All true sacrifice is inward.”<sup>23</sup>

### **KAUSITAKI UPANISAD**

The Kausitaki Upanisad is interesting because in 2.1 it identifies breath (*prana*) with Brahma. The Upanisad goes on to say that “Of this same breathing spirit as Brahman, verily, indeed, the mind (*mana*) is the messenger; the eye, the watchman; the ear, the announcer; speech, the handmaid.” K U 2.1 Then in 3.2 the Upanisad identifies breath and life: “Life is the breathing spirit. The breathing spirit, verily, is life.” It then states that with *prana* “one obtains immortality,” which is a logical conclusion seeing as Brahman is immortal.

### KENA UPANISAD

The Kena Upanisad is a very brief Upanisad that is of interest because it stresses the essential unknowability of Brahman and it also mentions *tapas*. Regarding Brahman, it states that,

There the eye goes not;  
Speech goes not, nor the mind.  
We know not, we understand not  
How one would teach It.  
Other, indeed, is It than the known,  
And moreover above the unknown.

KE U 1.3.

Then after discussing Brahman the Upanisad concludes with some practical instruction:

Austerity (*tapas*), restraint (*dama*), and work (*karman*) are the foundation of it (i.e. the mystic doctrine). The Vedas are all its limbs. Truth is its abode.

He, verily, who knows it (i.e. the mystic doctrine) thus, striking off evil (*papman*), becomes established in the most excellent, endless heavenly world - yea, he becomes established!

KE U 33, 34

## KATHA UPANISAD

The Katha Upanisad is the first Upanisad to specifically discuss Yoga as a method. According to Feuerstein, the Katha Upanisad “marks the transition between the post-Vedic esotericism of the earliest Upanishads and the Pre-Classical Yoga of the Epic Age. With this work, Yoga became a recognizable tradition in its own right.”<sup>24</sup> The first reference is a mention by Death speaking to Naciketas; Death says that “through the Yoga-study of what pertains to self, The wise man leaves joy and sorrow behind.” KA U 2.12 The Upanisad then discusses *Om* as a means to Brahman because, in fact, it is Brahman.

The word which all the Vedas rehearse  
And which all austerities proclaim  
Desiring which men live the life of religious studentship  
That word to thee I briefly declare.

That is *Om*!

That syllable, truly, indeed, is Brahma!  
That syllable indeed is the supreme!  
Knowing that syllable, truly, indeed,  
Whatever one desires is his!

KA U 2.16-17

After discussing atman and the “Naciketas sacrificial fire as an aid,” the Upanisad establishes the volatileness of the senses, which it makes analogous to wild or vicious horses.

He, however, who has understanding,  
Whose mind is constantly held firm-  
His senses are under control,  
Like the good horses of a chariot-driver.

KA U 3.6

Those who are unable to control the senses are doomed to *samsara*, reincarnation. Here we begin to see the synthesis of the previous Upanisads: the Katha Upanisad establishes our ontological state and provides us with a means to transcend that state. It also provides us

an incentive to undertake such a task, i.e, not to be born again. Finally Yoga is summarized as follows:

When the five perceptions are stilled,  
together with the mind,  
And not even reason bestirs itself;  
they call it the highest state.

When senses are firmly reined in,  
that is Yoga, so people think.  
From distractions a man is then free,  
for Yoga is the coming-into-being,  
as well as the ceasing-to-be.

KA U 6.10

Eliade notes that the Katha is particularly important because of its emphasis on immortality, gaining liberation, freedom from death, which is only possible for a man who is able to master his senses.<sup>25</sup>

### MUNDAKA UPANISAD

The Mundaka Upanisad is interesting because it discusses both *tapas* and *Om*.

Mundaka 1.8 establishes the essential importance of *tapas*:

By austerity (*tapas*) Brahma becomes built up.  
From that, food is produced;  
From food - life-breath, mind, truth,  
The worlds, immortality, too in works.

Mund U 1.8

In this passage Hume translates *tapas* as austerity and Olivelle translates it as heat. Both translations are viable in relation to the evolution of yogic practices. However, it is interesting to note that here *tapas produces* Brahman; Brahman is *born from tapas*. Thus we see the importance of *tapas* - or generating heat - for the yoga practitioner.

Aside from the section in the Mundaka Upanisad relating to two birds, the second most often cited section regards *Om*.

The mystic syllable *Om* is the bow. The arrow is the soul.  
Brahma is said to be the mark  
By the undistracted man is It to be penetrated.  
One should come to be It, as the arrow (in the mark).  
Mund U 2.2.4.

Through meditation on the sacred syllable, Brahman can be realized, for it helps to harness the senses of the distracted man. Then the Third Mundaka states that the Atman “is obtainable by truth, by austerity (*tapas*), By proper knowledge, by the student’s life of chastity.” Mund U 3.1.5 Here we can again see the importance of *tapas* and meditation on *Om* in realizing Brahman.

### MANDUKYA UPANISAD

The Mandukya Upanisad is important because it clearly develops the concept of *turiya* and the relation between the four states of consciousness and *Om*. Eliade states that “the Mandukya marks the triumph of a long labor of synthesis - that is, the integration of several levels of reference: Upanisadic, yogic, “mystical,” cosmological.”<sup>26</sup> The Upanisad begins with the mystical word *Om* being identified with time-Brahman: “*Om!* - This syllable is the whole world... the past, the present, the future - everything is just the word *Om*.” Mand 1 *Om* is vital to Upanisadic thought because it represents its three components A, U, M, and a fourth that is greater than the sum of its parts. Iyengar elaborates on the ramifications of the syllable *Om* by saying,

The letters A, U, and M symbolise respectively speech (*vak*), the mind

(*manas*), and the breath of life (*prana*), while the entire symbol stands for the living spirit, which is but a portion of the divine light...

They stand for the three *gunas* or qualities of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, while the whole symbol represents a *gunatita*, one who has transcended and gone beyond the pull of the *gunas*.

The letters correspond to the three tenses - past, present and future - while the entire symbol stands for the Creator, who transcends the limitations of time...

The A, U, and M depict the three stages of yogic discipline, namely, *asana*, *pranayama* and *prayahara*. The entire symbol represents *samadhi*, the goal for which the three stages are the steps.<sup>27</sup>

Eliade believes that the symbolism of A, U, M, and its implied “fourth” is extremely important to what follows in the *Mandukya*: “This fourfold division opens the way to a daring homology; the four states of consciousness are related to the four “quarters” of the *atman-brahman*, the four elements of *Om*, and if Sankara’s commentary is included, with the four *yugas*.<sup>28</sup>” Thereafter the *Mandukya* outlines the four states of consciousness, namely, waking, dreaming, sleeping, and the fourth, which is described as “without an element, with which there can be no dealing, the cessation of development, benign, without a second.” Mand U 12 The next line that follows is “Thus *Om* is the Self (*Atman*) indeed.” Eliade believes that the relationship between *turiya*, the fourth state of consciousness, and *Om*, as implied by *Mandukya* 12, is the link between us as humans and our realization of *Brahman*. He writes, “Total reintegration - that is, return to unity - is, for Indian thought, the supreme goal of every responsible life.”<sup>29</sup> Feuerstein echoes this in his discussion of the *Mandukya* when he says that “What this Yoga stands for is the radical nondualist practice in or as the Self, without contact or contamination by the so-called objective world.”<sup>30</sup> He goes on to say that *turiya* “can be attained in every moment that the mind is obliged to relinquish the illusion that there is a world of multiplicity outside itself and, instead, is

brought to rest in the native state of Selfhood.”<sup>31</sup>

### SVETASVATARA UPANISAD

The Svetasvatara Upanisad discusses release from *samsara* through Yoga, meditation, and *tapas*. Eliade states that “Nowhere else is the identity between mystical knowledge and immortality more frequently expressed.”<sup>32</sup> In Svetasvatara 1. 15 the all-pervading Atman is “apprehended in one’s own soul, If one looks for Him with true austerity (*tapas*).” The importance of controlling the mind and quieting the body’s vital forces is mentioned before the rules and results of Yoga are explicitly delineated for the first time:

8. Holding his body steady with the three (upper parts) erect,  
And causing the senses with the mind to enter into the heart,  
A wise man with the Brahma-boat should cross over  
All the fear-bringing streams.
9. Having repressed his breathings here in the body, and having his movements checked,  
One should breath through his nostrils with diminished breath,  
Like a chariot yoked with vicious horses,  
His mind the wise man should restrain undistractedly.
10. In a clean level spot, free from pebbles, fire, and gravel,  
By the sound of water and other propinquities  
Favorable to thought, not offensive to the eye,  
In a hidden retreat protected from the wind, one should practise Yoga.
11. Fog, smoke, sun, fire, wind,  
Fire-flies, lightning, a crystal, a moon-  
These are the preliminary appearances,  
Which produce the manifestation of Brahma in Yoga.
12. When the fivefold quality of Yoga has been produced,  
Arising from earth, water, fire, air, and space,  
No sickness, no old age, no death has he  
Who has obtained a body made out of the fire of Yoga.
13. Lightness, healthiness, steadiness,  
Clearness of countenance and pleasantness of voice,

Sweetness of odor, and scanty excretions -  
 These, they say, are the first stage in the progress of Yoga.  
 14. Even as a mirror stained by dust  
 Shines brilliantly when it has been cleansed,  
 So the embodied one, on seeing the nature of the Soul (Atman),  
 Becomes unitary, his end attained, from sorrow freed.  
 15. When with the nature of the self, as with a lamp  
 A practiser of Yoga beholds here the nature of Brahma,  
 Unborn, steadfast, from every nature free -  
 By knowing God (deva) one is released from all fetters!  
 S U 2. 8-15

For our purposes, the lines from this passage of primary importance are “One should  
 breath through his nostrils with diminished breath, Like a chariot yoked with vicious  
 horses” and

“...a body made out of the fire of Yoga.” Here we see the role of *tapas* and the function that  
*tapas* provides. Feuerstein states that “The Shvetashvatara Upanisad recommends  
 meditation by means of the recitation of the sacred syllable *om*, called the *pranava*. The  
 meditative process is described as a kind of churning by which the inner fire is kindled,  
 leading to the revelation of the Self’s splendor.”<sup>33</sup> Here we should also note the emphasis  
 placed on correct posture which will become even more important both in the Maitri and  
 in later discussions of the evolution of hatha yoga regarding *asanas*. Finally, what is also  
 particularly notable about the Svetasvatara Upanisad are the results of Yoga while one is  
 still involved in the cycle of *samsara*, namely, lightness, health, steadiness, clearness of  
 countenance, pleasantness of odor and voice, and scanty excretions.

### MAITRI UPANISAD

The Maitri Upanisad synthesizes all of the earlier Upanisadic thoughts on Yoga,  
*tapas*, meditation on *Om* and *turiya*. It begins with a discussion of the Vedic sacrificial



fires: “That which for the ancients was (merely) a building up of (sacrificial fires) was, verily, a sacrifice to Brahma. Therefore with the building of these sacrificial fires the sacrificer should meditate upon the Soul (Atman).” MA U 1.1 Here we note the internalization of the external *tapas*; the sacrificial fire becomes the “fire of Yoga.” We then see the importance of *tapas* and meditation:

‘Brahma is!’ says he who knows the Brahma-knowledge.

‘This is the door to Brahma!’ says he who, completely absorbed, meditates continually.

Therefore, by knowledge (*vidya*), by austerity (*tapas*), and by meditation (*cinta*) Brahma is apprehended.

MA U 4.4.

Originally a greater emphasis was placed on knowledge (*vidya*) than on *tapas* and meditation, but by the time of the Maitri Upanisads the values of *tapas* and meditation have risen to equal that of *vidya*. *Tapas* and meditation are now equally important to realizing Brahma.

Thereafter the importance of the sacred syllable *Om* is reiterated:

There are, assuredly, two forms of Brahma: the formed and the formless. Now, that which is the formed is unreal; that which is the formless is real, is Brahma, is light.

That light is the same as the sun.

Verily, that came to have *Om* as its soul (atman). He divided himself (*atmanam*) threefold. *Om* is three prosodial units (a+u+m). By means of these ‘the whole world is woven, warp and woof, across Him.’

For thus it has been said: “One should absorb himself, meditating that the sun is *Om*..”

MA U 6.3

This section is very interesting because it equates light - similar to the light mentioned in the Chandogya Upanisads - with the sun, which also generates heat and could be considered to be the primordial form or the root of *tapas*. Brahman is light which is the

sun which is heat - all of which are comprised of the sacred syllable *Om*. Thus, the whole world is interconnected through this tripartite syllable and its fourth, higher dimension. Here again we get an insight into the relationship between *tapas* (heat) and the sacred syllable *Om*.

Then the renowned “sixfold Yoga” is outlined:

The precept for effecting this (unity) is this: restraint of the breath (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), meditation (*dhyana*), concentration (*dharana*), contemplation (*tarka*), absorption (*samadhi*). Such is said to be the sixfold Yoga.

MA U 6.18

There is speculation regarding the possible relationship between the sixfold Yoga of the Maitri Upanisad and Patanjali’s eightfold Yoga. Patanjali’s eightfold path of Yoga is comprised of restraint (*yama*), practice (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), restraint of breath (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and absorption (*samadhi*). These categories are remarkably similar to those of the Maitri Upanisad.

Next the results of this sixfold Yoga are stated:

‘Verily, when a knower has restrained his mind from the external, and the breathing spirit (*prana*) has put to rest objects of sense, thereupon let him continue void of conceptions. Since the living individual (*jiva*) who is named “breathing spirit” has arisen here from what is not breathing spirit, therefore, verily, let the breathing spirit restrain his breathing spirit in what is called the fourth condition (*turya*).’

MA U 6.19

Here the importance of *prana* (breathing spirit) and its capacity to affect or “put to rest” the senses which distract the practitioner from the Real is emphasized. When the *prana* is used properly it leads to the fourth level of consciousness in which the Self is realized.

Meditation on *Om* and proper breathing are the means of taking awareness to *samadhi* where one experiences this state, *turiya*. The Maitri Upanisad then goes on to give even more specific yogic instructions:

**By pressing the tip of his tongue against the palate, by restraining voice, mind, and breath, one sees Brahma through contemplation.’ When through self, by suppressing the mind, one sees the brilliant Self which is more subtle than the subtle, then having seen the Self through one’s self, one becomes self-less (*nir-atman*).**

**MA U 6.20**

Another subject that dates back as early as the Chandogya Upanisads and is developed in the Maitri is the “channel” that allows the subtle body to manifest itself from the gross body:

**There is a channel called the Sushumna, leading upward, conveying the breath, piercing through the palate. Through it, by joining (*yuj*) the breath, the syllable *Om*, and the mind, one may go aloft. By causing the tip of the tongue to turn back against the palate and by binding together (*sam-yojya*) the senses, one may as greatness, perceive greatness. Thence he goes to selflessness. Because of selflessness, one becomes a non-experiencer of pleasure and pain; he obtains the absolute unity (*kevalatva*). For thus has it been said:-**

**After having first caused to stand still  
The breath that has been restrained, then,  
Having crossed beyond the limited, with the unlimited  
One may at last have union in the head.**

**MA U 6.21**

By joining the breath, mind, and sacred syllable *Om* with the correct posture, prana is moved from the base of the spine to the head. However, this intricate theory of energy movement is not further developed in the Principal Upanisads.

**The definition of Yoga as oneness and unity is reiterated in Maitri 6.25:**

**Whereas one thus joins breath and the syllable *Om***

And all the manifold world-  
Or perhaps they are joined!-  
Therefore it has been declared (*smṛta*) to be Yoga ('Joining').

The oneness of the breath and mind,  
And likewise of the senses,  
And the relinquishment of all conditions of existence-  
This is designated as Yoga.  
MA U 6.25

This is directly followed by another reference to heat. Here the heat is stated to be the "fire of his stomach" and is used as a sacrificial fire to burn the breaths that accompany the sacred syllable *Om*.

'Verily, as the huntsman draws in fish with his net and sacrifices them in the fire of his stomach, thus assuredly, indeed, does one draw in these breaths with *Om* and sacrifice them in the fire that is free from ill.

Furthermore, it is like a heated caldron. Now, as *ghee* in a heated caldron lights up by contact with (lighted) grass or wood, thus, assuredly, indeed does he who is called non-breath light up by contact with the breaths.

MA U 6.26

Regarding Yoga, the Maitri Upanisad concludes that if one practices it successfully for six months, Brahman will be realized:

If a man practises Yoga for six months,  
And is constantly freed (from the senses),  
The infinite, supreme, mysterious  
Yoga is perfectly produced.  
MA U. 6.28

## OBSERVATIONS

The evolution of Yoga and yogic practices from Vedic sacrificial fire rituals to internal breathing exercises can be seen in the Principal Upanisads. The key to this evolution is *tapas* which means both austerity and heat. However, Eliade conflates these seemingly disparate translations by stating that the austere practices of ascetics such as

fasting and standing in the sun generated heat. He goes on to say that “*tapas*, which is obtained through fasting, through vigil kept in the presence of fire, etc., is also obtained by holding the breath.”<sup>34</sup> In the Upanisads we witness the transition of the external sacrifices to internal practices that generate heat. Although it is only mentioned briefly in the Maitri Upanisad, this heat is used to move energy up the body to the “channel” that links the subtle energy to the pervasive and ubiquitous Brahman. It was later developed that this energy moves through “*cakras*” which are only briefly mentioned in the Principal Upanisads. Hume says that,

It is evident that, in using the term *nadi*, the writers of the Upanisads had in mind those same vessels that are so elaborately described, in later Hindu writings on Yoga and related subjects, as channels of variously specialized vital energy in the subtle ‘etheric’ vehicle that coexists as a counterpart of the gross physical body in the composite human organism. In fact, the Maitri Upanishad actually mentions the name of the Principal channel, *Susumna*, which is so frequently referred to in connection with the companion channels *Ida* and *Pingala* in later texts.<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, the emphasis on *tapas* or generating heat in the body continues today in the practice of hatha yoga in the West. Although the religious or spiritual ramifications are seldom mentioned, in hatha yoga today there is usually a period of “warming up” the spine through sun salutations which generate heat through movement and through the exploitation of opposites, such as reaching the arms up while grounding the feet down or moving the hips in one direction and the torso in the opposite direction. Eliade quoting Vyasa says that “*Tapas* consists in bearing the ‘pairs of opposites,’ as, for

example, the desire to remain standing and the desire to remain seated; the absence of words (*kastha mauna*) and the absence of gestures that could reveal one's feelings or thoughts."<sup>36</sup> There is much interesting research to be done regarding the evolution of yogic practices from how they existed in the period of the Principal Upanisads to their current state of hatha yoga, which exploits opposites in order to generate heat. David White writes that "All aparent oppositions - between god and man, between male and female, etc - here become consumed as it were in the fires of yogic austerities (*tapas*) conceived as the internalization of the sacrifice."<sup>37</sup> Thus, we can understand how the Vedic fire rituals became internalized in the Principal Upanisads as the yoga practices of breathing exercises, mediation on *Om*, that generated heat (*tapas*) and led to the fourth state of consciousness (*turiya*) which dissolved the illusion between individual self and Atman/Brahman.

## NOTES

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