

sparkling divinity

Eileen Delehanty Pearkes hikes into the fire zone & fights the urge to quit with *tapas*, self-discipline & purification in the 6th of a 10-part series exploring the *yamas* & *niyamas*.

images from Eileen Delehanty Pearkes' sketchbook

Four years ago, a large wildfire swept through the forested backcountry of southeastern BC. What began as a lightning strike near Kutetl Creek in the Selkirk Mountains grew into a hot, uncontrollable fire, one of the largest in the province in 2003. Initially, the fire was allowed to burn freely. As it approached human settlement, strenuous efforts to curb its spread began.

I can recall seeing dense plumes of smoke rising immediately behind a nearby mountain ridge, and hearing stories of firefighters constructing an earthen fireguard with heavy machinery. Planes buzzed overhead to drop water and fire retardant. Smoke and ash filled the air. Before it was over, 8000 hectares had been affected.

The early decision not to stamp out the blaze had quite literally backfired, though it had not been made lightly. For decades, all wildfires were com-

pletely suppressed, until scientists discovered the important ecological role that fire plays in natural landscapes. Today, wildfires far from human settlement are often left to burn. In the case of Kutetl, accumulated deadwood and other forest refuse built up from many years of total fire suppression, combined with hot weather and high winds, fueled the fire's intensity until it grew unmanageable.

The Yoga Sutras speak of fire in verse 2.43 when Patanjali discusses the *niyama*, *tapas*. The five *niyamas* form the second limb of the eight-limbed tree of yoga that Patanjali describes in this classic yoga text. The limb that precedes *niyama* is *yama*, a collection of five principles guiding the natural, ethical behaviour of a person in relation to others. The *niyamas* guide behaviour toward the self. *Tapas*, or as it is sometimes translated – self-discipline and purification – is a central practice

on the path of yoga. Fire plays its own role in the evolution of a body, mind and spirit.

Literally, *tapas* means “to burn.” Metaphorically, the term refers more broadly to any physical practice that assists the body and mind in burning away impurities, either through the creation of physical heat or through the endurance of discomfort or sustenance of effort as a form of self-discipline. *Tapas* can be the practice of asanas, or the repetition of pranayama (controlled breathing). Fasting and other dietary observances are other forms of *tapas*.

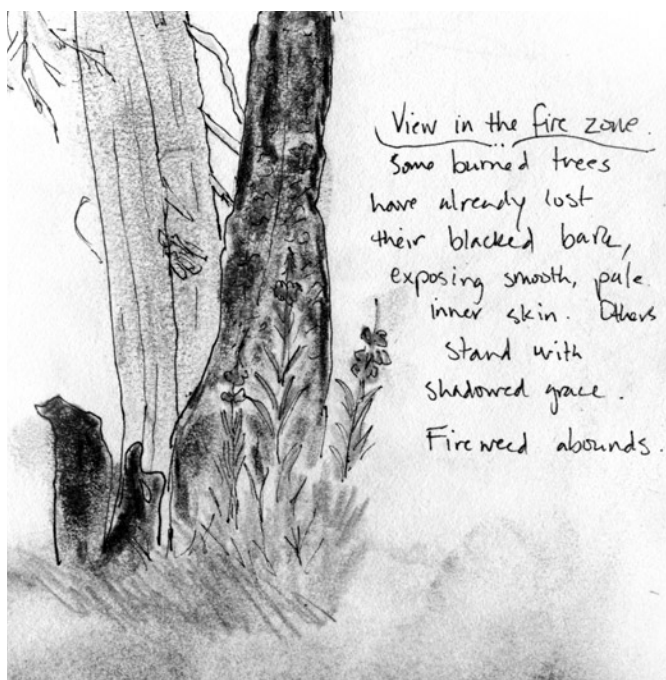
Many times in my practice of Ashtanga Yoga, I have experienced the physical and mental effects of *tapas*. The *ujjayi* breath, an inhale and exhale through a slightly closed throat, restricts the flow of oxygen just enough to compound inner heat. Abstaining from water also raises the body's temperature. Practising in a

warm room or climate adds another element of heat from the outside. Sweat, one of the body's important cooling fluids, often flows profusely.

While I have experienced these specific forms of tapas for years, I was unprepared for the role self-discipline would play when I stepped off my mat and into my hiking boots to see the Kutetl fire zone for myself. To get there, I would have to hike high into the backcountry, into a trackless and extremely rugged area. While logging roads often give access to higher elevations, once those roads end, few trails are well-marked or even developed at all.

I asked for some guidance from my friend Madeleine, a nineteen-year-old aspiring mountaineer. She agreed to guide me first to the top of the Whitewater basin, then across the alpine ridge on which Ymir mountain perches, then down into the Kutetl basin. We planned an overnight hike, with our tent pitched somewhere close to the fire zone.

We hiked slowly and steadily up a steep route through sub-alpine meadow and the rocky, forested flanks of the Whitewater basin. Inherent in the concept of tapas is a yogic desire to keep the body fit, to purify it so that higher aspects of the Divine might be experienced more clearly. Thanks to



my regular practice of Ashtanga Yoga, I was reasonably fit. We made it to the first ridge in just over an hour. I was pleasantly tired and damp with perspiration. Madeleine was just warming up. She squinted east along the ridge we stood on, to a massive spine of rock that ascended to the top of the bowl. "We'll go this way," she said, setting out with determination.

She climbed and climbed, undeterred by the rugged outcropping that stood between us and the summit. Mild messages of discomfort began to edge into my thoughts. I was more than twice her age. I had been too excited to sleep well the night before and not had much breakfast either. I watched the thoughts arrive and kept my legs moving.

Practising yoga has familiarized me with the urge to quit. It rises often as I move through difficult or demanding poses, as I chant or count my breath to a level beyond my mind's specific permission. I have learned that the urge to give up can be the mind's way of limiting progress, of keeping things safe.

A few hours into the strenuous hike, we began to grow aware of the absence of any snowmelt streams or other source to refuel our water bottles. The sun was high and the day was hot. We paused for lunch, stretched, mounted

our packs again and continued up the steep rock face. It was clear that an unseasonably hot summer without any rain had melted all of the snow, even this high, and it had dried out any smaller, seasonal creeks. This was something neither one of us had anticipated. I was more and more aware of my thirst.

After another hour of hard hiking, we reached the summit. Below us to the north and east spread the fire zone, a vast expanse of grey and whispering ghosts, the standing dead forest stripped four years earlier of every living piece of bark, branch or ground cover. From this vantage point, I read the story of flames that had spread unevenly but fiercely, advancing and retreating in response to wind, firefighting efforts or damp alpine meadows. Far below in the valley, a pink blotch marked the burned forest. Here was the iron oxide used to colour the chemical fire retardant, still visible on the bare soil.

I sketched the view and took some quick notes, then followed Madeleine off the rocky ridge into a sloping field

of large boulders. We made our way slowly through the austere terrain of high alpine. No vegetation here, no sign of life. Despite this commanding position near the top of our local world, I felt small and vulnerable.

I scanned the rugged upper slopes to the north, east and south for signs of water. No streams anywhere nearby.

"I think I see water down there," Madeleine said, pointing. I followed her finger to the valley far below, where a glinting squiggle suggested a meadow stream. I estimated the effort and time that reaching this point would require. The urge to quit rose up again.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

In *The Heart of Yoga*, T. K. V. Desikachar draws the analogy between heating gold to purify it and the practice of *tapas*. *Tapas*, I was discovering, is not just a conscious experience of specific exercises on the mat. *Tapas* can be embedded in any challenging situation that demands a mixture of austere self-discipline and focused zeal. Sometimes, when discomfort settles in, the real gold begins to show itself.

Less than half an hour after we set our sights on the faraway water source, I noticed Madeleine veer off to her left and drop briefly out of sight. I kept descending steadily, concentrating on my boots as each tired footfall sought a



stable place. Before long, she emerged from behind a tree, her face beaming.

"I've found water," she said.

In my preoccupation with discomfort, I had overlooked our descent back below the tree line. I had not noticed the way the stunted trees gathered more thickly to our left and how a band of lush vegetation spread beneath them. At the centre of this green band of growth trickled a tiny creek fed by an underground spring. Any other year it might have been rushing quite merrily along through abundant thatches of wildflower and sedge. We might have heard it or seen it easily. This year, only the keenest of spirits could find what it offered.

We lowered the small filter pump into a modest pool and filled our water bottles. We both drank deeply and filled them again. Around us, the wildflowers hummed with insect life. Above our heads, a handful of mountain chickadees chattered in the trees. Then, while Madeleine pitched our tent and the sun began to slip toward the ridge behind us, I wandered the

charred remains at the edge of the fire zone. The blackened trees, standing or lying in heaps, looked as if they had been burned only recently. Small scatterings of pink fireweed rose bravely from the ash-ridden soil. The short growing season

of the sub-alpine was making for a slow recovery.

After we cooked a simple meal of rice and lentils at our makeshift kitchen on a granite slab, we sat in the descending darkness. As we counted emerging stars, I thought about B. K. S. Iyengar's belief that the practice of *tapas* clears away impurities and kindles the spark of divinity. Inherent in the self-discipline required for purification, he says, is an inner zeal, a burning desire to reach the Divine. Immersed in the silence and space of a wild corner in the landscape, I offered up a measure of unspoken gratitude: for fire, for water and for the silvery lustre of the alpine peaks cradling an effort at once physical and spiritual, of the Earth and beyond. ॐ

Eileen Delehanty Pearkes practices Ashtanga Yoga and lives in Nelson, BC. She is the author of *The Geography of Memory* and co-author of *The Inner Green*. Her third book, *The Glass Seed*, was released by timeless books in October 2007. Eileen's exploration of the *yamas* and *niyamas* will continue in the next issue, as she interprets *satya* (or truthfulness).