

Things My Mother Never Told Me

Part III of Q&A with Brahmachari Uddhav Chaitanya

Are omens and superstitions for real? For example, one tradition says not to step out of the house on the day of the solar or lunar eclipse.

Yes, many omens are for real, like this one about the eclipses, and not mere superstition. Some may be old wives' tales or family traditions.

Is there a list of valid omens (to beware of) written somewhere?

I don't know. But why worry? It is wiser and easier to have more faith in God than in superstitions and omens.

But most people don't know about the advice given for the days of the eclipses. Are they all living dangerously?

Yes.

So we should all be panicking?

Not panicking, just correcting.

What about all the people in the world who aren't familiar with the Vedas and Hinduism? Are they 'gone cases'?

I don't know about that, but BLNL: Better Luck Next Life.

Seriously, how important is it to follow this kind of advice?

Stay home. Seriously. Look, all this I have not studied in *shastras*, although I know it's in there somewhere. I happen to know about the advice to be followed at the time of eclipses because this is what my family followed from when I was a kid. So this is what I am going to share with you.

On the day of the solar or lunar eclipse, the radiation from the corona of the sun or the moon, respectively, is harmful. It is the same energy that flows on all other days. But, just as light through a prism breaks into seven distinct colors, each of a different frequency, so too, on the day of the eclipse, this same energy changes in frequency. The frequency by itself doesn't have any positive or negative effect, but it is our reaction to the frequency that makes the effect in our lives positive or negative.

Eclipses affect everyone and everything because everyone and everything is made up of the same five elements of space, air, fire, water, and earth. The five elements react to different frequencies in different ways. So just be careful during eclipses.

Here are some traditional observances—as much as is feasible for you, do it: Before the eclipse, take a shower. During the eclipse, do *japa*. At this time, it is also advised not to drink or eat. The food in your refrigerator (your junkyard), or on your counter or table—put *darbha* or *munja* grass on every single item, whether it is dry, wet, oil, or pickle. This is probably done to protect the food from radiation. After the eclipse, take a shower.

So by my not stepping out, my four walls protect me from the negative energy out there?

No. The four walls don't protect you; that's why you take a shower. Water is a great purifier and washes away negativities. This is also why you do *japa* during the eclipse—to protect yourself from negativities.

Some vegetarians say that consuming onion and garlic should be avoided. Why is this said, especially since various sciences extol the medicinal effects of garlic?

First of all, every element on this Earth, in this creation, has medicinal value. But the scriptures advise against the intake of onion and garlic because both of these have a high sulfur consistency. This sulfur element is what makes one more prone to mental agitations. For this reason, both onion and garlic are considered to be *rajasik*.

Using onion and garlic as medicine, according to prescription, may help stabilize one's health and balance, but the point the scriptures make is that if you always keep yourself healthy and your habits *sattvik*, you will not need these two elements to re-stabilize your system. And yes, there are many ways to have perfectly balanced health without consuming onion and garlic. When in doubt, it is safer to follow scriptural guidelines over your own self-experimentations and their resulting consequences.

There are contradicting views about women performing *pujas* or entering temples during their menstrual cycle. Can you shed some light on this?

Woman, by nature, is inherently pure. However, because her physical body is relieving itself of toxins during her menstrual cycle, she is advised to not go to the temple or participate in *pujas*. It is not that men don't have such toxins; it is just that they release their toxins in a different manner.

During her menstrual cycle, a woman is extra vulnerable and weak because these toxins and their release, both, drain her of vital energy. Though it is advised for her to not be around a lot of people at that time, because of her strong vibrations—and for the same reason, not to enter her temple, or chant, or perform worship (*manasa puja* can be offered)—she is advised to best make use of this time by spending it in quietude and meditation. Self-study for women at this time can also be difficult due to strained efforts in concentration. But by channeling their energy through meditation and allowing toxins to release of their own accord, women can revitalize themselves and also shelter their environment. The bottom line is that this time can be looked upon as another opportunity to spend time remembering God, and one can only benefit from this.

Nowadays, with their increased responsibilities and duties, this kind of withdrawal may not be possible for many women, so it is understandable that they do what they can. But spending as much time as possible in quietude and meditation will help a woman better protect herself and her environment. Note that the scriptures advise everyone, regardless of gender, to not spend

a lot of time amidst people whenever there is an onrush of overpowering or negative energies within.

It is said *tapasya* grants great power and helps protect against negativities. What is *tapasya*?

A good name for your newborn.

Noted, but getting back to the question . . . most people understand *tapas* as *prayaschitta*, or penance for a wrongdoing, not as a voluntary discipline.

There are two words commonly used in the scriptures—remember them both: *titiksha* and *tapasya*. *Titiksha* is perseverance with a smile. *Tapasya* is self-induced discipline. The highest *tapasya*, says Shri Ramana Maharshi, is “*Aham apetakam*,” which means throwing away the ego or the dissolution of the ego. *Pa* means “to hold” and *apa* means “not to hold” or “to throw away,” like *apana vayu* (exhalation).

Tapas is performed to discipline the mind and the body. Discipline here does not mean torture. The sole purpose of self-induced discipline is self-purification. The understanding of *tapas* as merely a *prayaschitta karma* is incorrect. Doing *prayaschitta karmas* to correct yourself when you have done something wrong is good and necessary to improve and purify yourself, to bring you closer to the Self-realization. All *prayaschitta* is *tapas*, but not all *tapas* is *prayaschitta*.

Tapas does result in some level of discomfort, but you are ready and willing to undergo this because you see it as sublimation, not suppression. It is a purification process to help you grow subtler in your vision and way of life; you practice your austerities by choice.

Practice *yama*, or “discipline with respect to the world,” and *niyama*, or “discipline with respect to yourself.” To find out what *tapas* is right for you, ask your *sadguru*. If you don’t have a *sadguru* in your life, follow *dama* and *shama* as your *tapas*. *Shama mano-nigraha*: control the mind. *Dama chakshuradi bahyendriya nigraha*: control the ten sense organs.

But how much to control? Everyone's level is different.

First understand the word 'control.' It doesn't mean throttling your mind or your sense organs. It means using them in an appropriate, balanced, healthy, and harmonious manner. Use your mind and sense organs in their respective fields of interaction. And when your work is done, withdraw them without retaining any of the crap of the world in your system.

But all this control just takes the fun out of everything. It implies too much effort.

Okay, so replace 'control' with 'balance.' Feel better?

By 'control,' do you mean 'moderation'? Because there is a saying: "Too much of a good thing is never enough."

Ati sarvatra varjayet: Over-indulgence is to be avoided. But if you need to test this for yourself, feel free to indulge—see where it gets you!

Is *tapas* necessary in everyone's life?

Yes. In fact, it is very, very important.

What is the significance of spiritual seekers wearing *khadaus*, or wooden slippers?

Is this their *tapas*?

(Laughing) It's a fashion statement. There's a Swamiji who interprets it like this: *Khadaus* don't allow the spiritual seeker to quickly escape, to run away from the world, even though he wants to. The seeker is forced to stay put, deal with the world, and learn to conquer his mind.

Wearing *khadaus* is also supposed to be one way to help a seeker annihilate sexual desires. There are some nerves in the big toe that help one control such desires and *khadaus* work on those nerves. Also, if you are a hyperactive person, wearing *khadaus* reduces your hyperactivity. And because *khadaus* force you to walk slower, you learn not to do or say anything in haste, to think first and then act. There are many other benefits, but most people don't use *khadaus* nowadays because they are uncomfortable.

How do I know that my *tapasya* is going well? That I am on the right path?

Peace of mind: all is going as it should be going. Lack of disturbances: the world doesn't disturb you. If you are disturbed, for whatever reason, it means you need to do more *tapas*.

Is having compassion considered as *tapas*?

No. Compassion is toward the world. Compassion is about you in the world—this is *yama* (discipline with respect to the world). *Tapas* is *niyama* (discipline with respect to yourself). *Niyama* is about you personally.

On the spiritual path, we are told to develop compassion, but we are also asked to protect ourselves and be careful about the company we keep. How do we know where to draw the line?

Gurudev said it best: "When you deal with the world, deal with your heart. When you deal with yourself, deal with your head." The ultimate goal is to realize the Self. But until that goal is reached, you have various responsibilities to fulfill on your life's journey, because you don't live in a vacuum. While doing so, deal with every situation with utmost compassion. Where to draw the line—this is a subjective question so there can't a general statement that fits in all situations, at all times. This is the nature of the trial-and-error adventure of life.