

The Ascetic Practice of Eating Sweets: Transcribing Oral Narrative

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Swamiji, the Hindu holy man whose storytelling was central to my dissertation and first book, sometimes spoke about the concept of *tapasya*—determinedly focused austerities. *Tapasya* implies great self-restraint, physical endurance, dedication and concentration; it is often undertaken with a goal in mind. *Tapasya* generates *tapas*, heat, transforming a practitioner and granting power. Hindu mythology and folklore are filled with examples of people—particularly religious ascetics, but others too—whose rigorous *tapasya* caught the attention of Gods and Goddesses who then granted boons. Western representations of Hindu holy people particularly fixated on the spectacular aspects of *tapasya*, producing a great abundance of imagery of Hindu ascetics with long matted locks in odd positions—standing on one leg, raising an arm in the air, sitting close to fires, lying on beds of nails, and so on (Narayan 1993). But also regular people might undertake forms of *tapasya* for short times to attain particular worldly goals like jobs or children or the well-being of families: for example, by fasting, doing recitations, sleeping on the ground, and being celibate (cf. Pearson 1996).

Sitting in fixed positions for hours while listening to Swamiji's words through a headset, rewinding and replaying tapes, trying to grab at those speeding words and fix them into English on paper, I couldn't help but think that transcription was yet another form of *tapasya*. Transcribing is such an exhausting and rigorous practice, in fact, that many of the tapes I made over the course of some months in 1983 and again in 1985 still remain untranscribed. Or else, they remain in quickly written transcriptions filled with typing errors. I like to hope that other researchers are more efficient than I have been, but I suspect that I'm not alone in carrying around untranscribed recordings from prior projects.

In the early 1980s Swamiji lived in the upper storey of an apartment building in Nasik Road, Western India. He usually met visitors in a front room with green linoleum floor and an altar bright with Gods, Goddesses and Gurus at the far end. He tended to recline in an aluminum deck chair beside the altar, shoulders relaxed, legs stretched out towards his visitors who touched his bare feet for blessings. He wore faded orange cloth, sometimes wrapped around his neck and ending just below his knees, or else wrapped around his waist, with a second cloth around the shoulders for more formality. He was then in his sixties, and had gone through cataract surgery that left him wearing thick glasses with black frames. His round face and scalp were either clean shaven, or progressively shaggy with a white beard and wavy hair. During the hours that his doors were open to visitors, people from the town, the villages nearby, and other parts of India and abroad arrived in a nearly constant stream to seek his blessings and advice. Often, Swamiji told them stories. Sitting cross-legged on a cotton rug

nearby, tape recorder at my side, I tried to understand storytelling as a form of religious teaching for my dissertation.

From Swamiji, I taped almost eighty folk narratives and many hours of his life history. The labor of transcription was so overwhelming, though, monopolizing my time, that when a story did not fit the theme I was beginning to focus on, I just made a note of its existence rather than going through with a whole transcription. Only about a third of the narratives I taped are now transcribed in my files. For the dissertation, I chose to highlight folk narratives with a reflexive theme of holy men like Swamiji, and I drew on just eight stories. I also selected portions of transcriptions from his life story, but a British devotee, Titus Foster, was able to make fuller use of these for a spiritual biography of Swamiji.

Even what is not transcribed remains part of the background knowledge for a project, and a resource for possible future projects. In my files and among the boxes of cassettes lies a wealth of material: more stories, metaphysical musings, instructions for spiritual practices, and entire families of recipes. The recipes have always been a particular challenge for me to think through. Swamiji loved to cook, and believed that feeding people was a way of honoring the deity inside them; I, in my early twenties, had no intention of spending much time in kitchens focused on what I understood as a conventionally female role. I politely taped as Swamiji relentlessly spoke about cooking, issuing variations of recipes for everything from kinds of breads (fried, rolled, patted, of different flours, etc.) to kinds of rice (tamarind rice, lemon rice, yogurt rice, rice with lentils, etc.) to ways of cooking different vegetables or making different sweets, including chocolate. I made obliging if insincere sounds of following along, and proceeded to reassert my own agendas in what I chose to transcribe.

Since the book has been published, the tapes mostly lie undisturbed. Every now and then I pull one out and listen when I drive. I periodically consider a daily routine of more transcription, or hiring a bilingual transcriber. But what is a challenge for me would be a hugely daunting feat for anyone who didn't know Swamiji or the situation. First, on all the tapes there are often some other sounds loudly competing for attention: most often Swamiji speaks as a male singer chants the Durga Saptashati epic, but sometimes he speaks as news blasts out in Hindi and then in English. Second, Swamiji holds forth in an idiosyncratic form of Hindi, mixing in village Marathi from the area he'd lived for years, traces of his mother tongue (Kannada), and also some English words. Third, he is frequently speaking with his false teeth missing or with tobacco tucked in a cheek, so his voice juicily slurs. Fourth, he continually embeds references to whoever is present in his audience and many turns of speech only make sense by recollecting the context.

Even as I dread transcription, I value how the close listening summons presences and reassembles faraway spaces. When I listen to tapes from the early 1980s, Swamiji's rumbling voice moves forward, carrying me into scenes of stories I can barely recall. I also remember the scene beyond the stories: the comforting acceptance that he embodied, the sense of rapt community among listeners, how light slanted through the curtain behind the deckchair in which he reclined, the fragrance of sandalwood incense and ripening bananas, the almost stinging sweetness of milk *pedhas* he sometimes distributed. My body recalls the

taut earnestness and sore shoulders of a younger self sitting in a sari many hours a day.

I arrived in Swamiji's apartment carrying not just a tape recorder but also my advisor Alan Dundes' training to collect folklore texts in another language through transcriptions based on systems established by Malinowski and Boas: transcription in the original language, with each word transliterated into English in a line just below, and then just below that, each word translated too. A free form translation came after. This was of course all very fine for proverbs and rhymes I had collected for Alan Dundes' assignment of forty items of folklore as a term project. But when it came to Swamiji's narratives, I reinterpreted "transcription" to mean a grammatical translation, conveniently leaving out three intermediate steps of transcription in the Devanagari script, transliteration into English, and word to word translation. I also took the liberty of sometimes smoothing out tenses. So, for example, leaving out the Devanagari script, the story I will present below begins like this:

Ek katha hai. Samajh liya? Ek Pandit tha. Roj panchang padhta tha.
One story is. Understand? One Pandit was. Everyday almanac readings did.
"There is a story. Understand? There was a Pandit. Everyday he'd give astro-
logical readings from the almanac."

But in following the story as told by Swamiji, I am immediately blocking out the competing sounds of the "Argalastotram" or "Hymn of the Bolt" sung along with the Goddess epic which regularly unfolded from a tape player near Swamiji's altar. On this tape, a male voice invokes the Mother Goddess who is also Swamiji's chosen deity: "*rupam dehi jayam dehi yasho dehi dvisho jahi* (Give me your form, give me victory, give me fame, destroy my enemies)" requests the refrain. In addition, I'm blocking out my own breathless English translation for the handful of young Western disciples who happened to be present on that day. If I was really being true to all that I hear on the tape, I would need to transcribe a score with several bars running along simultaneously:

1. Swamiji's story in colloquial Hindi, complete with intonations and emphases
2. Goddess epic in Sanskrit
3. Kirin's translation in English, imperfectly delivered on the spot, sometimes corrected
4. Listeners' responses, especially laughter, and interjections in a variety of languages
5. Sounds from outside room, especially the honking of passing traffic

Then there is the question of where to include movement. Often lying back in his deckchair, Swamiji dramatized his characters through facial expressions or gestures. People around him vigorously nodded; others came and went. I am especially grateful for even rough early transcriptions that recount gestures. Sometimes, hearing a tape I can recall the movements in the room, but not always.

In my transcriptions, then, I wanted to evoke Swamiji's stories as not only sequences of words, but also the larger situations in which the stories emerged,

along with his actions, asides, interactions, and the responses of listeners that shaped the tales (cf. Fine 1984). I admired Dennis Tedlock's groundbreaking experiments in transcriptions that included pauses and silences, showing the rhythms and poetics in narratives (Tedlock 1983). While Tedlock's transcriptions looked like poems on the page, the garrulous flow of Swamiji's retellings evoked the form of stories to me, and I sought to reproduce the shape of familiar written narratives like fairy tales or short stories. In giving the story precedence, Swamiji's actions, and everything else around the story (including my presence), seemed to become bracketed. I followed my own intuition in working out a form that seemed right.

Here is an example of one of Swamiji's stories. He referred to this as "Laddoo Tapasya," which roughly translates as "The Ascetic Practice of Eating Sweets." This is from a tape labeled July 1, 1983. My notes made soon after tell me that the listeners, assembled on mats spread out across the green linoleum facing the altar, included visiting devotees from North India, Gupta Sahib and Meena Gupta, two American and one British woman with Indian names and wearing saris, and a few local men whose names I did not know. I didn't fully understand what had precipitated this story; perhaps it was directed specifically at someone in the audience, but I never knew for sure.

I have already glossed some of the meanings of *tapasya*. In addition, it might be helpful for readers unfamiliar with India to know that Pandits are ritual specialists of Brahman backgrounds, with a knowledge of sacred texts and perhaps astrology too. Shankarji is Shiva, the Hindu God of destruction who makes new creations possible. Here he is also addressed as "Mahadev" or "Great God," and "Bhagavan" or "God." Parvati, Shiva's wife, is frequently depicted as headstrong in her compassion for human beings, and the discussions between the two over whether or not to give a boon to humans is a frequent folktale motif. A Gunda is a rowdy character: a ruffian, hooligan, and thug, bringing in a flavor of Bollywood drama to the folktale setting.

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There is a story. Understand?

There was a Pandit. [Kirin starts to translate, in low, whispered English.]

Every day he gave astrological readings from the almanac (*panchang*).

[The devotional chant from the recorder is vying with Swamiji's voice. "Give me your form, give me victory, give me fame, destroy my enemies" implores the male singer. Swamiji starts to elaborate on the astrological readings, then asks that the volume be lowered, then brought up again. He resumes with the hymn still audible in the background, and Kirin, empowered as translator, speaks up more clearly.]

Every day his stomach needed to be filled from that astrological reading. Because Brahmans sometimes can be a little poor, they don't have so much money. So each day, he'd go out and visit other houses in the village. "Today, this is the Tithi, auspicious lunar date, this is the Nakshatra, the constellation, this is the Yog, the correct time." He'd say a little of this and that this until eve-

ning and people would give him grain in return. He would do Sankalpa, or ritual resolves. He'd continue to go from house to house until evening. Then he brought home all the food he had collected. His wife cooked it, and they'd eat. This is how their life proceeded.

The Panditji's wife was a little younger than him. Then she aged. All her teeth fell out—like mine. [Smiling, Swamiji displays his bare gums.] Her hair turned white. She became an old woman. Some people's backs hunch with age, and this happened to her. Their mouth sinks inward.

When the Panditji went out to do astrological readings, he visited many houses and saw many beautiful women. It seemed to him that his wife was so old, she was no longer nice to look at. "What can I do? This is my destiny. I can't abandon my wife. So many wealthy men have such beautiful wives. They wear so much gold, they have such 'beauty'."

He resolved, "I must make my wife beautiful. How can I do this?" He was a Panditji, he looked through book after book. "Now I'll undertake a certain Anusthan, a special ritual observance."

[What's "*anusthan*?" Kirin falters while translating. "Recitations," clarifies Swamiji.]

"I'll repeat certain mantras so my wife becomes beautiful. I'll please Bhagavan so my life will change. What's the point of begging alms everyday? I should become a wealthy prominent person." [Swamiji coughs rheumily.] And in this way, he decided to perform austerities to please Bhagavan.

The Panditji lived on a mountain like our Saptashringi. Just opposite there's the mountain Markandeya. Even further on there's a mountain that looks like a fort. No person ever comes to that mountain. [Swamiji is describing the mountain sacred to the Goddess where he lived for many years, the opposite mountain where the Goddess epic (continuing in the background) is said to have been composed, and a more distant mountain.]

He thought—this Panditji was a man like me [Swamiji indicates his own girth]—he thought, "If I'm hungry how can I do *tapasya*? For this reason, I should eat something." But what is there to eat on a mountain? So the Panditji did a few extra consultations, collected some extra food. He told his wife, "Make me one or two bins full of good *rava laddoos*, rich semolina sweets." From different houses, he asked for ghee. She added sugar, she added raisins, she added cashews, and she made big *laddoos*. [Swamiji holds up his hand, indicating hefty, tennis-ball sized sweets.]

When these were made, the Panditji went up to the Fort Mountain. There is a cave there. Water flows just beside it. No person ever comes there. He sat in the cave to perform his practices, and praise the gods. Now and then, when he was a little hungry, there were *laddoos* in his bin. [All laugh.] He'd take out a *laddoo*, eat it [Swamiji holds up his hand; in mock absorption, he chomps at the imaginary sweet], and then he'd drink a little water. This was his ascetic practice! He kept doing this and the days passed. This went on for a few days, and he still had a good stock of *laddoos*.

Then, one day Shankarji and Parvati were traveling somewhere by “aero-plane.” [Laughter erupts from all listening with Swamiji’s use of the English word for a celestial vehicle.] They were going from Kashi to Bombay and possibly on to Oakland. [“Gayatri,” who has lived in Oakland, especially laughs.] On the way, they passed over this Fort Mountain.

Parvati asked, “Who is performing *tapasya* here? Who’s sitting here? No one ever climbs his mountain, who is the person sitting down there?”

Shankar said [bemusedly], “He’s just a Brahman. He’s sitting there eating *laddoos* as he does his *tapasya*. He’s doing a special practice. He’s repeating ‘*Om Namah Shivaya*.’ And then he’s immediately eating *laddoos*. He’s drinking water. And he calls this a fast.”

“That’s alright,” said Parvati. “Even if he’s eating *laddoos* and drinking water, he’s doing some kind of *tapasya*, isn’t he? We must grant him something. Let’s go to him and find out what’s going on.”

Shankarji said, “Forget about him. Let’s move on.”

Parvati said, “No, no!” This is the nature of women. “We absolutely must go there.” And then, a husband goes along with a wife. “Alright, let’s go,” said Shankarji.

They descended. They went to the cave and met with the Brahman. They asked, “What boon do you desire? We’re pleased with you. Tell us what this *tapasya* is that you’ve been performing?”

The Panditji said, “Mahadev, I’m very happy. I’m filled with joy to see both of you. Give me this boon....” He forgot what he wanted. “What can I ask from you? I’m very happy.”

Then Shankar said—he picked up three pebbles and gave them to him—“If you place a pebble on the ground and make a wish, this will come to pass.”

The Brahman took the three pebbles, decided his *tapasya* was over, and came home. When he arrived home, the first thing he saw was his wife. He felt sad, “Wha-a-at is this. I’ve returned from so much arduous *tapasya* and she’s just the same.

He called his wife. *Ai-ai-ai-ai* [Swamiji opens his toothless mouth, hunches forward and squints], she came to him. He told her, “Now clean up the house. Get everything ready. I’m going to make you very beautiful.”

She said, “What do you mean you’ll make me a ‘beauty’?”

He said, “What’s it to you? Just clean up the house.”

She cleaned up the house, then came to him. *Ai-ai-ai-ai*. She stood in front of him.

The Brahman picked up a pebble and waved it over her head. “Oh Mahadev, if your promise is true, make my wife into the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Immediately, his wife’s hair became black. Her teeth reappeared. She stood up “straight.” She had vigor and beauty.

He thought, "Well, now my wife is beautiful. I still have two pebbles left. Now what should I do? If someone sees her, they might steal her away. I'm just a poor Brahman. What will I do with her?"

So he told his wife, "Stay inside this room. Don't go wandering outside. Some other man assault you and carry you away. Don't let anyone see you. A valuable possession must be carefully kept. Don't go out. Just stay in this room."

She sat in the room. Everyday, he'd go out to read horoscopes, putting a lock on the door. He'd be out reading horoscopes all day until evening. He gave her some pots, "You can pee in these, you can shit in these [Laughter from the group], but don't go outdoors. I'll come and clean up later."

He filled water and gave this to her. He washed her clothes and passed them in. She just stayed indoors, eating. He'd lock her up and go out every day.

So this went on. How long can a person sit indoors? She sat and sat, and one day she noticed a window in the room. She opened the window and settled beside it, looking out. One day one of the town's worst Gunda ruffians saw her.

"Why does that Panditji, that Brahman, have such a beautiful woman?" He wondered. "He locks her up and leaves every day. This is not his wife. This must be a mistress. That's why he keeps her locked away."

So when the Pandit had gone off to read the almanac, this Gunda had a lot of other hooligans. They came in a gang of a hundred thugs. They broke the lock, they forced the door open, they took the wife, and set off. They took her to a large house, and they kept her there.

Soon after, the Panditji came home. "The house has been broken into. The door is lying open. What's happened?" He asked the neighbors. They said, "Such and such a man came and bore her away. Don't go after him, else he'll kill you."

"He'll kill me?!" The Pandit said. He went directly to the man's house. He saw him sitting on the upper storey. The Pandit threw abuses. The henchmen who looked after the place came and tried to stop him. The Gunda said, "Where do are you think you're going? Why are you here? We'll kill you. We'll shoot you."

He said, "You'd better free my wife, else I'll destroy you."

The Gunda said, "I won't let her go."

The Brahman said, "Ok, if you don't let her go, I won't let you off either."

The Gunda said, "It's better that you leave and just go home. Otherwise we'll beat you up and that will be the end of you."

"Is that so? Well wait and see what I can do to you." The Pandit took out the second pebble. [Swamiji lifts his hand a lot, carefully bringing it down to the ground.] "Oh Bhagavan, you are all powerful. May my wife turn into a tiger and may she eat up that ruffian."

At once she became a tiger. She caught hold of the Gunda. She struck him dead. The others saw this and ran away. She began following the Panditji. He brought her home.

When they got home, the Panditji looked at her: “What do I do now? Now I’m a man. And she’s become a tiger. How will we pursue our family life together? If you have a beautiful wife, she catches people’s eyes. It’s difficult to look after her.”

He took out his third pebble. “Oh Bhagavan, make my wife an old woman just as she was before. Let her be an old woman again.” And he set the pebble down on the ground.

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Swamiji concluded, “The meaning of this is that those who eat and drink, who don’t really exert themselves in *tapasya*, their fruits are just like this. Nothing happens. *Tapasya* done without real exertion is like this. The Pandit ate and drank and did his *tapasya*; his fruits were equivalent. He ate *laddoos* and received no real fruits; the fruits just vanished. Nothing happened. *Tapasya* is when you really exert yourself. This is what bears fruit.”

Almost immediately, Swamiji moved into another story that echoed many of these themes but from a different perspective. In this second tale, the Pandit was a wandering storyteller who only sought donations of money earned by the hard work of exertion; the king earnestly listened and decided that he had no such money, so went out in disguise to work as a laborer. He gave the storyteller the few coins he had earned from his own toil, but then, everyone else in the month-long audience had to give even less so as not to upstage the king. The disappointed storyteller had to continue traveling to another kingdom but he attempted to send the little he had earned home to his wife through some merchants. Honest earnings from real exertion, Swamiji said, “swing and bud and blossom.” While the Pandit in the first story was left empty-handed, the Pandit in the second story found himself with unforeseen abundance.

Laddoo tapasya seemed to dramatize cutting corners in focused practices. Could wanting to only summarize the delights of a story be equivalent to eating delicious *laddoos*, without the painstaking, self-abnegating effort of submitting to the regimes of a detailed transcription? The efforts of transcription are so enormous that it can indeed seem easier to summarize in one’s own easy wording from memory rather than replay recordings again and again for an exact turn of phrase or tone of voice or background sound.

Undertaking transcription, one usually has a goal in mind that shapes the kind of transcription one seeks. For me, following stories in a lived context made the story line come first, with everything around it—including my presence—segregated into brackets. But looking back at my transcriptions in *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, I can see that the text is perhaps overly cluttered with brackets and parentheses. The brilliant folklorist, linguist, translator and poet, A.K. Ramanujan, who reviewed the book in manuscript form, gently told me when we first met that he felt my presentation of Swamiji’s stories was “too anthropological.” He pointed to the common anthropological practice of placing words from the original language in parentheses as a cluttered form of claiming ethnographic authority. I responded that I especially relied on original terms in parentheses when I couldn’t find an exact word, but he urged me to push harder

with the translation itself, seeking to give it an aesthetic form that could stand on its own. He suggested that I could discuss key cultural terms separately or add a glossary. The compact elegance of Ramanujan's own retellings of Kannada folktales he collected is a reminder of how transcriptions and translations need not be overly sprinkled with words from original languages (Ramanujan 1997). But as Ramanujan was more interested in aesthetic texts than performance contexts, the issue of how to weave together narrated and contextual realities, balancing both, is one for which I continue to seek models. I have tried again in my collaboration with the storyteller Urmila Devi Sood (Narayan 1997) and yet again in a family memoir (Narayan 2007).

The "trans" part of transcript takes one across domains, whether between copies (as in handwritten manuscripts transcribed) or between lived realities and their representation. Moving from enunciated narratives to written representations can never provide exact replication. At best, written transcriptions of oral events can only faintly suggest the abundance of sensory memory saturating the sounds. Yet the grueling process—the *tapasya* of trying again and again to be true to what one heard—generates insights at multiple levels. Even if transcriptions are imperfect, they offer the possibility of reentering past moments with more considered insights. Transcriptions enable us to bottle time, containing fleeting words in more lasting forms that can be poured out and savored by new audiences. And so, rather than listen yet again to the story, trying to refine this essay even further, I send it onward.

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