

THE

ATLANTIC MONTHLY:

A Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, and Politics.

*VOL. LIV. — NOVEMBER, 1884. — No. CCCXXV.*



perature, quick pulsations of the heart, and short, panting respirations, will die in two or three days if it is deprived of food, and very soon suffocates in close air. A tortoise, which has an extremely sluggish circulation of the blood and breathes only three times a minute, can live for months without food, and be kept for hours in a vessel hermetically sealed and yet produce a hardly perceptible deoxygenation of the air in which it is confined. A toad may remain a whole day in the exhausted receiver of an air-pump without the slightest injury or apparent inconvenience to it. It is facts like these which the yogi observes and applies to his spiritual discipline. He studies and imitates the habits of reptiles and hibernating animals in order to acquire the powers which they possess, and even lets them regulate his diet. The turtle and the water-lizard, the Himalayan marmot, the badger, and the bear prescribe his food. In conformity to their tastes he eats a few soft and succulent roots and fruits, lettuce and other lactiferous plants, rice, wheat, barley, milk, sugar, honey and butter, and scrupulously abstains from salt and every kind of sour.

Again, the yogi avoids all contact with metals. It is well known that hardware merchants, particularly in cold weather, need a greater amount of sustenance than dealers in woolen goods and other non-conducting substances. Metals, as the best conductors of heat, disturb the equilibrium of temperature between the body and the surrounding air, and thus excite the senses and strengthen the consciousness of individual existence which the yogi seeks to destroy. Such an environment would therefore be fatal to ascetic contemplation and that complete concentration of thought by which absorption in the Supreme Being is to be attained. This lesson is also learned from hibernating animals, which make their beds of non-conducting materials. The yogi profits

by their example and prepares his couch of kusa grass and wool.

The exhalation of carbonic acid, or, what amounts to the same thing, the consumption of oxygen, is supposed to be diminished by the low and continuous muttering of certain monosyllables, the chief of which is *om*, although *bam*, *ham*, *lam*, *yam*, and several other words are also used. *Om*, however, is considered most effective for hypnotic purposes and may be regarded, in this province, as an example of the survival of the fittest, since it is now almost exclusively employed. This exercise is called *japa* and is designed to produce slower and deeper breathing, somnolence, and the emancipation of the soul from the dominion of the senses. The yogi is convinced that the longer he can make the interval between his pulmonary respirations, the nearer he approaches the goal of his spiritual aspirations. Herein lie the significance and sacredness of the mystical syllable *om*.

*Tapas*, which is usually translated *penance*, expresses in reality a very different conception. It means *heat*; not as some writers affirm, because heat is one of the principal causes of pain, but because it is preëminently a purifying agent, purging all things and burning up the dross. Devotion, in the Christian sense of the term, is a feeling wholly foreign to the heart of the yogi. He is never what we call a pious man. His austerities are not intended to please or propitiate the gods; on the contrary, there is nothing that excites so great fear in celestial minds as the persistent *tapas* of the Indian saint. It was Satan who tempted St. Anthony with visions of voluptuous women; but, in the old Aryan legend, it was Indra who sent heavenly nymphs to disturb Visvâmitra in his ascetic practices and finally succeeded in seducing him through the charms of the beautiful Menakâ, who became the mother of Sakuntalâ. Even the boy Dhruva so frightened the gods