



The Bhagavad Gita and the three qualities of nature

Chapter 14 of the Bhagavad Gita, titled "Gunatraya Vibhaga Yoga" or "The Yoga of the Division of the Three Qualities," is one of the central chapters of the text, in which Krishna explains to Arjuna the three qualities (guna) of material nature: Sattva (purity, harmony), Rajas (passion, activity), and Tamas (ignorance, inertia).

At the beginning of the chapter, Krishna declares to Arjuna that he is about to expound the supreme wisdom, by knowing which one establishes oneself in His Being and attains final liberation, never having to reincarnate again, even after the great Pralaya or final dissolution, with the beginning of a new cycle.

Everything that exists at this level arises from the interaction between Purusha and Prakriti, Spirit and Nature, who are the parents of all things and beings. The three Gunas emanate from Prakriti and are responsible for the bondage of the embodied soul. This is why Krishna continuously speaks about them, emphasizing that everything that happens in the material world is caused by the interactive dance between these forces, which can be imagined as three subtle, conscious energy vibrations, each with specific and distinct features.

Krishna explains that Prakriti is the source of everything, including the physical body, the mind, and all material elements. This energy operates in creation through its qualities or gunas:

- **Sattva:** The quality of purity, light, and harmony. Those dominated by Sattva seek knowledge, wisdom, and peace. This quality leads to happiness and spiritual realization but can also create attachment to happiness and knowledge.
- **Rajas:** The quality of activity, desire, and ambition. Those dominated by Rajas are driven by action, the desire for success, and material pleasure. However, this quality also leads to restlessness, anxiety, and attachment to the results of actions.
- **Tamas:** The quality of darkness, ignorance, and inertia. Those dominated by Tamas are lazy, confused, and prone to destruction. This quality leads to illusion, depression, and degradation.

The three gunas profoundly influence a person's mind, character, and behavior. The combination of these gunas in an individual determines their worldview and actions.

The text emphasizes that the spiritual seeker must confront these three powerful forces of nature to achieve enlightenment. Transcending the gunas is a crucial step in the spiritual journey. Additionally, the consciousness with which an individual leaves the body determines his future rebirth: a sattvic departure leads to higher astral worlds or loka, a rajasic departure to worlds dominated by action and achievement of material pursuits, while a tamasic departure results in rebirth into degraded families, places, and situations—or even, in cases of truly malicious and ignorant lives, into animal bodies.

Patanjali, in his Yoga Sutras, discusses the gunas in the second chapter, though he uses different names:

Patanjali Yoga Sutra 2:18: *Prakasa Kriya Sthiti Silam Bhuta Indriya Atmakam Bhoga Apavarga Artham Drsyam.*



"That which is seen possesses qualities of luminosity, movement, and inertia; it consists of elements and sense organs whose purpose is (to provide the Self with) experience and liberation."

He uses code words to refer to the three gunas:

- **Prakasha** (luminosity) corresponds to **Sattva**.
- **Kriya** (action, movement) indicates **Rajas**.
- **Sthiti** (inertia) corresponds to **Tamas**.

Due to the great importance of this topic it is worth to better explain what gunas are though an excerpt of my book "Kriya Yoga Manual".

According to Samkhya philosophy, nature or Prakriti contains three energetic and vibrational qualities, or gunas, which form the foundation of everything that exists in the material universe:

- **Sattva**: Represents light, purity, truth, lightness, and spirituality.
- **Tamas**: Represents inertia, darkness, heaviness, ignorance, and illusion.
- **Rajas**: Represents activity and movement; it is neither good nor bad by itself. If used wisely, it moves towards sattva, becoming rajo-sattva. If it moves towards tamas, it becomes rajo-tamas.

Before creation, Prakriti existed in a potential state, with the three gunas in perfect balance. This was the state of unmanifested Nature, which Vedanta calls the "night of Brahma." When the gunas began to move and their proportion within nature diversified, creation as we know it took place, marking the "day of Brahma."

The spirit through the three gunas appears as (1) the creator of Bhrama (rajas, activity), (2) the keeper of Vishnu (sattva, nourishing quality), (3) the destroyer or Shiva (tamas, dissolution).

Herebelow there are some of the universal laws relating to gunas:

- The gunas exist in Prakriti. Purusha, the Universal Spirit and its individual emanations or souls, is beyond their influence and laws.
- All three gunas are always present in varying proportions. Even if we are very sattvic, there are always also raja and tamas in some proportion.
- The interaction between them is not fixed but variable.
- The predominant guna at a given moment influences us the most.
- The predominant guna tends to self-perpetuate, attracting similar vibrations. If tamas is prevailing in me, I will be willing to lie down on the sofa watching soft tv programs, eating junk and tamasic food; this vibration will be getting stronger an stronger unless I take any action (raja) to get out of it.
- The entire nature below Spirit/Purusha is influenced by the gunas, including the body, mind, and emotions.
- Evolution does not proceed directly from tamas to sattva. It progresses from tamas to rajas and then to sattva.

Our sadhana should initially be aimed at elevating sattva in order to minimize the influence of the other two gunas, recurring to them only when strictly necessary, for instance to rajas when action is



required or to *tamas* when it's time to rest. Once we have purified our nature becoming mainly *sattvic*, we must then aim to transcend even *sattva* and go beyond the *gunas*, reaching the state known as *gunarahitam* or *gunatitam*. This is because as long as *rajas* and *tamas* are present, even in small proportions, they can always reawaken and exert their influence over us, reactivating dormant *samskaras*.

Another important point is that, since movement and impermanence are fundamental laws, it is incorrect to think that we cannot rise out of a low or negative vibration. We can change any situation, even a highly *rajasic* or *tamasic* one, by working on ourselves and the environment around us, for example, by choosing uplifting music or readings, surrounding ourselves with *sattvic* people, and so on.

Rajas and *Tamas* are the factors that cause disease. The effect of *Sattva*, on the other hand, is one of harmony. *Rajas* leads to a waste of energy, while *Tamas* causes decline. Usually, the two work together: a hectic lifestyle, excessive ambition, domination over others, the relentless pursuit of success at all costs, overworking, egocentrism, and the use of stimulating substances to sustain such a way of life—all these are *rajasic* qualities. Eventually, they lead to exhaustion, withdrawal, excessive attachment, and an overwhelming sense of possession, which are *tamasic* qualities.

All three of these qualities exist within us in different proportions. Just as with physical constitution, there are seven possible combinations (Pure *Sattva*, Pure *Rajas*, Pure *Tamas*, *Sattva-Rajas*, *Sattva-Tamas*, *Rajas-Tamas*, and *Sattva-Rajas-Tamas*).

Elevating Sattva

On the journey towards awakening, the yogi must purify their system as much as possible and decisively cultivate a *sattvic* state.

1. **Diet:** It is important to understand the qualities of foods and the vital energy they provide. *Sattvic* foods are light, fresh, and natural; they enhance vitality, health, and happiness. These include whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, sprouts, herbal teas, nuts, seeds, legumes, whole grain bread, fresh fruit and vegetable juices, ghee, fresh milk and its derivatives (considered *sattvic* if unprocessed and sourced ethically), honey, and raw sugar; foods that are "living essence". *Rajasic* foods (stimulating) include spices, eggs, coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar and its derivatives, onions, and garlic. *Tamasic* foods (inert) are of lower quality and include meat, fish, canned food, overcooked food, refined sugars and flours, processed and contaminated food. Alcohol, drugs, tobacco, sodas, and snacks are also *tamasic*, as they damage health, cause physical imbalance, and hinder mental clarity. *Sattvic* foods, mainly from the plant world, tend to be alkaline, offering high vibrational energy essential for maintaining health and well-being. *Rajasic* foods have a medium to low vibrational quality, are often acidic, and can overstimulate and irritate the nervous system. *Tamasic* foods are low in vibrational quality, rich in toxins that acidify and damage the body, creating the basis for disease.
2. **Impressions:** Be mindful of what you expose yourself to, what you read, watch, and engage with, including conversations, books, movies, and media. Avoid *tamasic* influences such as violence, sensuality, gossip, and anything that goes against *dharma*. Also, be mindful of what you express outwardly. As Yogananda advised: "Do not think, see, hear, or touch evil". Do not judge; cultivate positive thoughts and high-frequency emotions such as unconditional



- love, gratitude, forgiveness, kindness, and joy. Develop awareness of the Self as the immutable witness in all moments and maintain a sense of the divine presence at all times.
3. **Posture:** Frequently check your posture throughout the day. Are you restless? Do you tend to slump? Or do you sit upright, light, and aware? Are you relaxed, using only the muscles necessary for a specific action, or are you tense and engaging unnecessary muscles?
 4. **Sleep:** Sleeping 6–7 hours per night is sufficient for most people. Analyze the quality of your sleep, is it deep and peaceful or agitated and restless? Avoid sleeping too much or too little, as both increase rajas and tamas.
 5. **Environment and Purity of Space:** The place where you live and study should have a sattvic atmosphere. The images and objects around you should inspire peace and pure thoughts. Anything that promotes agitation or negativity should not be present. Keep your space clean, orderly, and free from anything impure.
 6. **Family Harmony:** In your household, there should be love, respect, kindness, mutual understanding, cooperation, and a sense of harmony. Discord should have no place, as it creates a negative atmosphere.
 7. **Sadhana:** Meditate for at least 30 minutes daily, or more if possible—ideally twice a day. Throughout the day, cultivate awareness of the Self (your true nature, the silent and unchanging witness behind all actions) and the presence of the divine. Practice asanas and pranayama to maintain purity in your bioenergetic system. Live as a true yogi, aware that you are walking the path toward awakening. Eliminate everything that is not essential. Avoid pushing yourself beyond your limits (rajasic) or being lazy (tamasic) in your spiritual practice.

Beyond Sattva

The law of the gunas states that as long as we are under the influence of maya, even if sattva predominates, the other two gunas will always be present, even in a dormant state. This means that we must remain vigilant, as under favorable conditions, they may become active again, pulling us back on our path and keeping us bound to illusion.

The ultimate goal of the sadhaka is to go beyond the gunas, transcending even sattva, reaching the state of gunarahitam, or complete liberation from the gunas. Only then can one be sure of never falling back.

Returning to the Gita, Krishna offers a simple yet profound solution to attain this state of Gunatitam or Jivanmukta: to fix the mind on God. Since He is beyond the gunas, by surrendering to Him, one elevates from the material level to the divine. Those who transcend the three gunas attain liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) and unite with Krishna, reaching a state of pure consciousness and eternal bliss.

Arjuna asks Krishna to describe the characteristics of those who have surpassed the gunas. Krishna explains that such beings remain balanced and undisturbed by the fluctuations of the material world. They understand that everything is a manifestation of divine energy under God's control. They are unaffected by joy or sorrow, success or failure, and the dualities of existence. Instead, they remain firmly rooted in the Self, living from a center of unwavering balance, peace, and equanimity.

Krishna concludes by reaffirming that devotion (Bhakti) is the most powerful tool for overcoming the influence of the gunas and attaining liberation.



This chapter offers a deep understanding of human nature and the spiritual path. It highlights how our minds and behaviors are influenced by material forces and provides a way out through connection with the divine. Ultimately, as emphasized throughout the Gita, devotion and knowledge are the key tools for transcending material limitations and attaining inner peace and, eventually, spiritual realization or Moksha.