

NATURE'S WEB: THE GUṆAS OF PRAKṚTI IN THE *BHĀGAVAD GĪTĀ* AND *YOGASŪTRA*

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*sattvaṃ rajas tama iti guṇāḥ prakṛti-sambhavāḥ
nibadhnanti mahābāho dehe dehinam avyayam*

Sattva, rajas and tamas:

The three guṇas, whose origins are in prakṛti.

These threads bind in the body, O Mighty-Armed One,
The eternal embodied Soul.

*tatra sattvaṃ nirmalatvāt prakāśakam anāmayam
sukha-saṅgena badhnāti jñāna-saṅgena cānagha*

Among these, sattva is without stain,

Bright and shining and free from disease.

It binds the Soul by attachment to happiness,

And by attachment to knowledge, O Sinless One.

*rajo rāgātmakam viddhi tṛṣṇā-saṅga-samudbhavam
tan nibadhnāti kaunteya karma-saṅgena dehinam*

Know that rajas has the nature of passion,

Arising from thirst and attachment.

This binds the Soul to the body,

By attachment to action, O son of Kuntī.

*tamas tv ajñānaṃ viddhi mohanaṃ sarva-dehinām
pramādālasya-nidrābhis tan nibadhnāti bhārata*

And know that tamas is born from ignorance,

Confusing all embodied beings.

By intoxication, laziness and sleepiness,

This binds the Soul to the body,

O descendent of Bharata.

– *Bhagavad Gītā* 14.5-8¹

Inevitably if one practices yoga for long enough, one starts to suspect that it has more to do with the mind than the body. As originally described in Saṃkhyā philosophy, we are all born with a particular combination of the three guṇas, “qualities” or “threads,” which determine our

individual personality. These three psycho-physical components are rajas (activity or energy), tamas (inertia or stability), and sattva (equilibrium, balance or luminescence). The guṇas are considered to be the fundamental constituents of prakṛti (Nature), and it is through a disturbance in their equilibrium that the transformation from unmanifest to manifest nature occurs.

Rajas is circular and creative; it is the feeling you get when you've had a bit too much coffee. On the positive side, it can be the energy that gets you out of bed and excited to get on your yoga mat; the impulse that inspires you to write or paint. On the negative side, it's the energy that makes your mind race too quickly and makes it difficult to concentrate and can cause aversion and pain. Tamas is heavy and enveloping; it is the feeling you get if you eat too many potatoes. It is the feeling of lethargy that makes it difficult to get anything done or can leave you feeling depressed and despairing. Tamas is descending and leads towards disintegration. On the positive side, it can encourage stillness and taking pause. Sattva is a state of equanimity, clarity and goodness. It is light and shining and causes pleasure and joy. Sattva is ascending; it is the aspiration towards integration, union, and realisation.

Imagine the guṇas as actual threads. An internal spider web of red, white and black strands that bind our Soul in our body. These threads exist in different proportions in each of us depending on our personal constitution. Rajas is fiery and passionate and red. Tamas is dark and depressive and black. Sattva is pure and white. Just as when light passes through a prism, it is divided into the colours of the rainbow, sattva contains all the colours inside, holding the one and the many simultaneously.

The colours we wear, the foods we eat, the books we read, the work we do, the company we keep – they all influence the state of our guṇas. Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* elaborate the distinctions between people with a predominance of sattva, rajas or tamas, in terms of their food preferences, faith, sacrifices, austerities and gifts. Sattvic foods are sweet and pleasant, rajasic foods are overly spicy or stimulating, tamasic foods are stale or rotten. Sattvic knowledge is when one sees the same imperishable essence in all beings. A sattvic person performs action without attachment to the fruits. Rajasic knowledge is when one sees divisions between people and things. A rajasic person acts through desire, attached to the fruits of action, desirous of recognition, and ostentation, i.e. perfection of āsana. If one lets one's passion take over in yoga practice, and lets one's anger or desire overwhelm and build, rajas can actually be increased through practice. Tamasic knowledge is when one is attached to one insignificant thought. A tamasic person acts through delusion, with attachment and devoid of faith. If one is practicing yoga but obsessed with the particular external circumstances, one can actually be cultivating tamas and using the practice to reinforce one's patterns and attachments. In order to increase sattva through yoga practice, one must consciously cultivate it. Even in a mostly sattvic state, though, one can be imagined to be covered by thin white threads. A delicate spider web, which although connected to knowledge and goodness, still ties the Soul to the body.

Over time, yoga practice is intended to lead to a decrease of rajas and tamas and an increase of sattva and eventually to a state that is nirguṇa, beyond the guṇas, where one is no longer affected by any of the qualities. In this state, the mind is one-pointed; Prakṛti and Puruṣa are One. One attains a state of pure consciousness where there are no longer distinctions between Self and other, observer and observed, Ātman and Brahman, Soul and Spirit. In a true state of yoga one sees the same essence everywhere and that joy of recognition is true happiness.

The classical definition of yoga, given by Patañjali, in *Yogasūtra* 1.2, states, "Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind."² As in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in Patañjali's yoga, as elaborated by all of his

commentators, the main goal is to move beyond the three guṇas, through a gradual process of internal focus and subtilisation. In Bhoja's commentary on *Yogasūtra* 1.2, he explains the five stages of mind through which a yogi must progress – "agitated, stupefied, distracted, one-pointed and controlled" – correlating the first three states with the three guṇas.³ Due to a prevalence of one guṇa, which can be caused by nature or nurture, birth or circumstance, the mind will be drawn towards a different state. Even the sattva guṇa, generally associated with "clarity," is characterised as "distracted" in comparison with the next two stages which are beyond the guṇas, described as "one-pointed" and "controlled." According to Bhoja, a specific order for overcoming the guṇas is prescribed. Rajas must first be overcome, then tamas and lastly sattva.

In my experience, both in practice and in teaching, this tends to be true. Most people go through a rajasic phase the first few years of practice. Practice is new and exciting; one flies quickly through, eager for more. After a few years, a tamasic phase often sets in. One finds oneself feeling lazy, tired, and heavy. During both of these phases one gets glimpses of sattva – brief moments of clarity, where the mind is calm and focused and the body feels steady. Over time, these moments grow longer and closer together. The steadiness of long-term practice comes from keeping the mind calm and present, whatever arises. It's not that the guṇas disappear, but one gets more used to the fluctuations, and doesn't let them take over as easily. Although the guṇas must continue to exist in any sentient being, the yogi is no longer held captive by them and can transcend the mental instability that they cause.

Whatever a yogi's innate constitution, part of the yoga practice is to let go of the identification with this predisposition and not place a value judgment upon it. These three threads interweave and inform each other. Instead of positioning the guṇas in a linear or hierarchical model, we can bring attention and consciousness into the interaction between them rather than attempting to simply increase one while denying the others. Otherwise, this process can become simply another form of repression and attachment. In Tantra, the guṇas are often

represented as the three corners of a triangle or the three aspects of Om; one cannot exist without the others. The state beyond the guṇas is often represented by a bindu or dot in the middle of the triangle. A still point at the centre, situated in the midst of the chaos and yet unattached or the silent moment at the end of Om.

Although initially the yoga practitioner endeavours to increase sattva, one must eventually even transcend attachment to this quality in order to move towards a state of one-pointedness. The state of absolute unity, kaivalya, the true goal of yoga, cannot be attained as long as the yogi remains attached to any of the three guṇas. According to Bhoja, the obstacles to yoga practice, as elaborated by Patañjali in the first chapter of the *Yogasūtra*, are caused by rajās and tamas.⁴ Patañjali prescribes a very specific remedy for these obstacles – “concentration on a single principle.”⁵ This is one of the reasons why dṛṣṭi, focusing on specific gazing points, is so essential in Aṣṭāṅga yoga practice. Whatever one’s natural guṇic predisposition, one can cultivate sattva and one-pointed attention through consistent yoga practice. One can learn to watch the mind’s rajasic and tamasic tendencies without giving them power. One can cultivate sattva through steady breathing and attention in practice.

sarva-dvāreṣu dehe 'smin prakāśa upajāyate |
jñānaṃ yadā tadā vidyād vivṛddhaṃ sattvam ity uta ||

When in all the gates of the body,
The light of knowledge is born.
Then it should be understood,
That sattva is predominant, indeed.
– *Bhagavad Gītā* 14.11

Another way of cultivating sattva and the “light of knowledge” is through studying Sanskrit. Sanskrit or saṃskṛta means “refined” or “purified,” it is truly the language of sattva. The study of Sanskrit is a practice – it is a meditation, a contemplation, a way of focusing the mind. The level of concentration required creates a form of dhāraṇā, of one-pointed attention. One becomes immersed in the sound – the resonance of the letters, as well as the meaning, help one to cultivate a luminous, steady state of mind. When you are translating a verse, you focus on the immediate details but ultimately they dissolve into a greater truth.

Prakṛti dissolves into puruṣa, Nature into Soul. An understanding of Sanskrit can also help to connect us to the richer fabric of philosophy from which the yoga tradition emerged. Reading the texts, puzzling over how to make sense of them within our modern lives, helps to contextualise the yoga practice. What is remarkable reading these texts is how little we have changed as human beings. How much our mental characteristics and patterns, our struggles, our desires, and our joys, have stayed the same throughout time, despite how different our external circumstances are. We are still enveloped in Nature’s web, trying to find some room to breathe amidst the threads that bind us. 🌸

¹ All translations are my own.

² *Yogasūtra* 1.2: *yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ* |

³ *Rājamartaṇḍa* on *Yogasūtra* 1.2.: *kṣiptam, mūḍham, vikṣiptam, ekāgratam, niruddham*

⁴ *Yogasūtra* 1.30-31: These obstacles are distractions of the mind, namely: physical disease, cloudiness of mind, doubt, carelessness, sloth, intemperance, delusional vision, non-attainment of the stage of Yoga, and unsteadiness even upon the attainment of Yoga. Suffering, despair, trembling of the limbs, irregular inhalation and exhalation arise along with the distractions. *vyādhi-styāna-saṃśaya-pramādālasyaśvirati-bhrānti-darśanā-labdha-bhūmikātvānavasthitātvāni citta-vikṣepāste 'ntarāyāḥ* | *duḥkha-daurmanasyāṅga-mejayatva-śvāsa-praśvāsā vikṣepa-sahabhuvah* |

⁵ *Yogasūtra* 1.32: *tat pratiṣedhārtham ekatattvābhyāsaḥ* |

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