

3 Gunas and the Order of Creation

“The order of creation, huh? I gotta tackle that one?!” *Michael Sapiro, Satsang Yoga Teacher Training*

Consciousness exists. In the Sankhya philosophy this is called *Purusha*. Consciousness became aware of itself and created an infinite amount of forms to portray its indefinable and intangible image. This is Nature and all Her attributes, which is called *Prakriti*. *Prakriti* is the mirrored image of what is unnamable and unfathomable! Tough to talk about too! Like in the *Tao De Ching* they say there is no way to talk about such a force that transcends concepts and words and thoughts. So they wrote a book about it anyway! And here I am!

Imagine a light shining off a mirror. We see the reflected light and mistake that for the source. In Yoga, the sages saw the truth (as did Buddha, Jesus, Moses, a janitor I knew once and any other Mystic of the ages) and began to search for ways of knowing the absolute light that shines within. And they did so by first understanding their nature, or *Prakriti*. Once they understood how Nature and Her elements are all a part of and inseparable from the Light, they could sit in that knowledge, move past it and become One with what they found. (The 8 Limbs provide one method of studying our nature in order to transcend it. The last stage is *samadhi*; where our knowledge is left behind for a true experience of this Light.) So we are offered, through the lessons and teachings of these sages, methods of discovering how our own *Prakriti* comes about and how to transcend it. Why transcend it? Because it traps us in the ***concepts of our experience*** rather than helps us ***be the actual experience***.

And actually, transcendence is what we are seeking; not being trapped in our physical nature but being open and able to live in our Divine nature.

From *Prakriti* come the 3 gunas, the qualities inherent within all Nature. These are Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas; the pure, active and destructive forces of Nature. *Purusha* itself has no attributes or qualities and that is why to get there we must carefully study its reflected image. And knowing the 3 gunas is the foundation for beginning our studies. (Later in the course we will study the next stages of creation which include the 3 Doshas, Pitta, Vata, and Kapha, the 25 attributes of our existence, the sense and motor organs.)

3 Gunas are the qualities of our inherent Nature. This nature is the physical representation of the Divine on Earth. The gunas represent the qualities all that exists for the senses and for the mind to experience. The 3 gunas inform the way we perceive and experience the world. However many forms *Prakriti* there are, they are only the mirror image of what created them, *Purusha*. So in this sense, all things are the image of God, not just humans. Because the greater consciousness exists within all things and all things have the form of what's inside, we are gifted with what we are seeking in every face, soap bubble, shooting star, the sound of a crying baby . . . Do you see this? What do you see when something “upsetting” is in front of you? Or a beautiful song is played? Are you listening to your judgments or experiencing the Divine within?

Our trouble comes from thinking the forms are important and so we get caught in our desires, either running to or from what gives us pleasure or pain. Looking for certain

forms to “give” us happiness or throwing away forms that “cause” us pain. When we learn how each of the 3 gunas informs our lives we have the ability to transcend them, because we will no longer need them. When we become aware how we trap ourselves in our wants and desires we can then cast them away and practice new, healthier choices. A common example is when we quit smoking; for a while we might eat more than usual during the cravings and might even gain a little weight. Then the cravings slow down and our eating becomes normalized. Because we had the wisdom to stop smoking maybe we add more vegetables to our dinner, knowing that our health is building, and so on, till we’re exercising regularly, getting good sleep and have a balanced diet. There comes a time when all our decisions are made without thought and our choices are made for us. We no longer need the thoughts that prompted change (we don’t carry a “I will quit smoking” sign with us once we quit!) and we learn that the original wisdom of finding balance was always present for us.

Let’s explore the 3 gunas now. We have sattva, rajas and tamas or the balancing, active and passive force; acceptance, pursues change, is inert and destructive; balance, passion and darkness; grounded, moving and static. Rajas is not always a negative action, because sometimes we need to push ourselves to make a positive change. But know that when we act, we are in the rajasic phase. If we want more sattva, forcing our way into it with rajas won’t work! And lying dormant, giving up and being static, as a tamasic person would be, won’t work either!

Transcend all three. Start by choosing sattva and notice how rajas and tamas affect you. Every guna has a place and purpose in our lives. We can use each guna to build up to our transcendence. Maybe we started doing drugs to stop our emotional pain and from this we had a deepening experience of ourselves, maybe even by accident. So we start from tamas, a place of ignorance and darkness. And from this place we decide, maybe even in anger, to make a change in our lives, so rajas starts working. Rajas is needed to move ourselves from one place to another. Even if we spend most of our lives in the rajas state, and we do since we generally don’t lead a monk’s life, we have the choice to use rajas to move us closer to a sattvic life. Those moments of light and love where we fully accept ourselves and the world around us is a place of sattva. Accepting our pain as a gift, using pleasures to heighten our experience of the divine, not just to fulfill selfish desires, is a form of sattva. However, if we do not experience sattva we have very little chance to transcend even this state. Because eventually we do not want to be controlled by these qualities of Nature, rather, we would like to be the ones in control.

On tamasic days we don’t want to get out of bed; we would rather stay under the covers and “just stay depressed.” Our rajas would move us out of bed and start the day; we would feel motivated to change our situation, maybe do some exercise and eat a breakfast (or just get out of bed and rush to work.) Our sattvic nature would be the force behind choosing what is good for us rather than the destructive. We would accept our sadness for the day, feel love for ourselves no matter what we were experiencing and then chose the most caring and compassionate way to treat ourselves, including what we ate, how we talked, etc. Our first goal is to choose the most sattvic life-style.

One more example: Smoking till we get cancer is tamasic; saying “no way, I’m fighting this cancer is Rajasic; and accepting our cancer without struggle is sattvic.

(Not smoking in the first place is also sattvic!) Giving up cigarettes is sattvic in nature and rajasic in action. Understanding the gunic process is dynamic, as is the life of the gunas. Very rarely do the gunas exist independently. If sattva is moving toward transcendence we consider that to be rajasic sattva and if our sattva destroys impurities we consider that to be tamasic sattva. Sattvic rajas is the quality of aggressively pushing our spiritual beliefs on other (sattva would be the belief and faith and rajas is the way we move within or discuss our faith.) Tamasic rajas is the quality of holding firm to our lower and self-centered beliefs; where we do what we want because we want it! Sattvic tamas is the quality of those who practice the more destructive and decaying elements of their faith. So spiritual people caught in the dark side (Darth Vader is the spokesman for this quality!) Finally, rajasic tamas is the driving force behind all destruction and despair. Dr. Frawley writes that all sexual perversion comes from this quality. Here we find people without hope choosing the most damaging and destructive life styles. (Please refer to Dr. Frawley's description of these 3 gunas and their traits in *Yoga and Ayurveda*, chapter 3, p. 30-32.)

So here ends our introduction to the 3 gunas and their characteristics. Our awareness of, and the ability to transcend, our own Nature begins with a clear understanding of the 3 gunas. May we know our true Nature and have the faith to become It.

It is with great pleasure and deep gratitude that I offer some verses from the *Shvestashvatara Upanishad*:

What is the cause of the cosmos? It is Brahman?
From where do we come? By what live?
Where shall we find peace at last?
What power governs the duality of pleasure and pain by which we are driven?

Time, nature, necessity, accident, elements, energy, intelligence—
none of these can be the First Cause.
They are effects, whose only purpose is to help the self rise above pleasure and pain.

In the depths of meditation, sages saw within themselves the Lord of Love,
Who dwells in the heart of every creature,
Deep in the hearts of all he dwells, hidden
Behind the gunas of law, energy, and inertia.
He is One. He it is who rules over time, space and causality.

The world is the wheel of God, turning round
And round with all living creatures upon it rim.
The world is the river of God,
Flowing from him and flowing back to him.

On this ever-revolving wheel of being
The individual self goes round and round
Through life after life, believing itself
To be a separate creature, until it sees its identity
With the Lord of Love
And attains immortality in the indivisible whole.

He is the eternal Reality, sing the scriptures, and the ground of existence.
Those who perceive him in every creature merge in him
And are released from the wheel of birth and death.
All is change in the world of the senses,
But changeless is the supreme Lord of Love
Meditate and be absorbed in God.
Wake up from this dream of separateness.

Know God and all fetters will fall away.
No longer identifying yourself
With the body, go beyond birth and death.
All your desires will be fulfilled in him
Who is One without a second.

Know God to be enshrined in your heart always.
Truly there is nothing more in life to know.
Meditate and realize this world
Is filled with the presence of God.

(This Upanishad continues with metaphors of God's presence in all things; like oil in sesame seeds and butter in cream; or as I say the essence of a flower in the seed. If you are interested please read Eknath Easwaran's translation of *The Upanishads*. These texts are also appropriate and recommended for the student of Yoga.)