

Mastering the Gunas

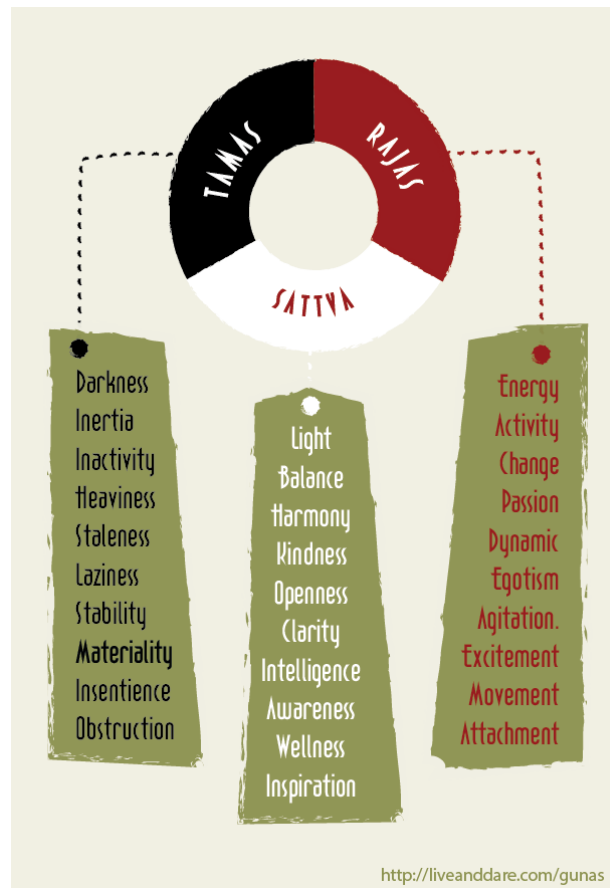
The Bhagavad Gita's Guide to Self-Transformation

The [Bhagavad Gita](#) – which is a great wisdom scripture, and can be considered the *Bible of India* – speaks of the **three gunas**. These are the three basic characteristics or attributes that exist in all things, including your body and mind.

This topic can get very philosophical. However, in this post I'm focusing only on the psychological aspects of the *gunas* in human moods, emotion, and behaviour. This is an integral part of the [psychology of Yoga](#).

Once you understand how the *gunas* work, you will be able to better understand and navigate your inner world, and to work with what life is giving you.

The three gunas



In terms of movement: inertia, movement, balance.

In terms of colors: *tamas* would be black (the absence of all colors); *rajas* would be the different colors (although traditionally it's represented as red); and *sattva* would be white (the synthesis of all colors).

Every thing can be classified like this. For the purposes of this post, let's analyze some moods/emotions, and group them according to the *gunas*.

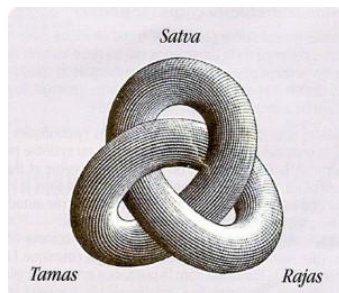
Tamasic states: laziness, disgust, attachment, depression, helplessness, doubt, guilt, shame, boredom, addiction, hurt, sadness, apathy, confusion, grief, dependency, ignorance.

Rajasic states: anger, euphoria, anxiety, fear, irritation, worry, restlessness, stress, courage, rumination, determination, chaos.

Sattvic states: delight, happiness, joy, peace, wellness, freedom, love, compassion, equanimity, empathy, friendliness, focus, self-control, satisfaction, trust, fulfilment, calmness, bliss, cheerfulness, gratitude, fearlessness, selflessness.

Got the picture?

But it's more complex than that...



In reality, however, things are not so *black and white*. Every phenomenon (mood, person, action, thought, etc.) contains a predominant *guna*, as well as a smaller dose of the other two *gunas*. That is also why we can transform one emotion into another, like transforming anger into compassion. Even in anger we can find some *sattva*.

Therefore, some emotions can be either *tamasic*, *rajasic* or *sattvic*, depending on the **intention** behind them, and **how** they are expressed.

For example, a suicide bomber in a terrorist attack may be said to have *tamasic courage* (based on ignorance and hatred). A man that risks his health and comfort to obtain wealth or fame has *rajasic courage* (based on desire). While a man that sacrifices his ego or personal interest for a larger cause has *sattvic courage* (based on compassion and the greater good).

Let's take laziness as another example. *Tamasic* laziness is when you don't have energy to do anything, and are attached to comfort. *Rajasic* laziness is when you are so engrossed with your activity that you are unable to stop and evaluate what's happening. *Sattvic* laziness is when you are so fulfilled with a sense of satisfaction and peace that you can't be bothered doing anything else.

Intentions are at the heart of this. Change the motivation and the context of a given emotion or action, and you will change its quality!

Working with the gunas

You now have a basic understanding of what the *gunas* are, and how to look for their manifestation inside and outside of you.

Now... while this is a fascinating subject, you may be asking yourself: "What to do with all this?"

As conscious beings, we have the ability to manipulate the presence of *gunas* in us and in others. And we do this by two means:

- What we choose to pay **attention** to and to **consume**
- How we choose to **act**

In other words, our **attention** and our **intention**.

Consuming Sattva

Our body is fed by food, water, and air. Our mind is fed by thoughts, feelings, and the input from the five senses.

So... Are you feeding your body and mind with *tamas*, *rajas*, or *sattva*?

Use the three *gunas* to understand the effects of the

- food you eat,
- movies you watch,
- music you listen,
- people you spend time with,
- places you go to,
- websites you visit,
- interests you pursue,
- etc.

The principle is quite simple: the more you are exposed to *sattva*, the more *sattva* will grow in your mind and heart. Likewise if you are feeding on *tamas* and *rajas* instead.

Some people say you are what you eat. That's true. But you are also what you think, what you do, what you read, etc. We are a **combination** of the qualities of our thoughts, actions, and inputs.

As you go about in life, pay close attention to how you feel **during and after** consuming a meal, movie, text, conversation, idea, etc. Do you feel more calm, inspired, confident, wise, energetic, or clear? Or do you feel more tired, confused, restless, emotional, sluggish, anxious, or depressed?

So much for the five senses level.

On a subtler level, you need to also be mindful of the quality of your thoughts and emotions. Are your thoughts making you paralysed (*tamas*), agitated (*rajas*), or calm and empowered (*sattva*)?

The same with your emotions.

You may not have a choice about what thoughts and emotions show up, but **you do have a choice about which ones you pay attention to**. They are the ones that will linger, grow, and multiply.

Acting Sattva

Sattvic words, thoughts and actions increase *sattva* in the world – and also in yourself. The same happens in the case of the other *gunas*.

Action that is virtuous, thought through, free from attachment, and without craving for results is considered Sattvic; Action that is driven purely by craving for pleasure, selfishness and agitation is Rajasic; Action that is undertaken because of delusion, disregarding consequences, without considering loss or injury to others or self, is called Tamasic. — Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18, verses 23–25

If you want to know what is the predominant *guna* behind your action, ask yourself these two questions:

- **Why** am I doing this?
- **How** am I doing this?

Ideally, you want both the intention behind the action, as well as the execution of the action, to be *sattvic*.

Intention alone is not enough. A person that is doing dodgy businesses, in order to support his family, has a *sattvic* intention but a *tamasic* execution. As the saying goes, *the road to hell is often paved with good intentions*.

Anybody can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not easy. – Aristotle

The *gunas* and self-transformation

Understanding the *gunas* helps you see things more clearly. It helps you understand the quality of things you are engaging in, and of your thoughts and actions.

Then it's all about making **conscious choices** on what you consume, what thoughts you pay attention to, and how you act. In fact, the secret of spiritual growth could be summed thus: Learn to love and delight in *sattva*, and understand the pain of *tamas*.

The conditioning of your lizard brain – who seeks pleasure and shuns pain – will take care of the rest for you!

Step by step

It is very hard to go from *tamas* directly to *sattva* – so use *rajas* as a step in between.

For example, if your dominant moods at this point in life are tamasic (like exhaustion, depression, etc.), your aim should be to first get rid of *tamas* and get your *rajas* flowing. You can do this by raising your energy levels through activities like physical exercise, cold showers, better food choices (or even fasting), less TV, socialising with active and positive people, or traveling to a new place.

From *rajas* it is then easier to arrive at *sattva*, by balancing out the excitement and learning to appreciate the more subtler pleasures of peace, harmony, contentment, moderation. At this point, meditation, self-reflection, journaling, etc., can help you move into *sattva*. But if you are too *tamasic* and try these things, you may get sleepy or bored.

This reminds me of an vital insight that some spiritual teachers seems to miss – that it's easier to move into egolessness (the “enlightened state”) from a healthy ego than from a broken one. That is why working on yourself (be it through therapy, relationships, or self-reflection) is much needed. Like NisargadattaMaharaj says, “You cannot leave a mess behind and go beyond – it will pull you back”. But that's a subject for another post

Your goal



The whole spiritual discipline of Yoga can be said to be *transforming* *tamas*, *balancing* *rajas*, and *developing* *sattva*. The same with other wisdom traditions, although they may not speak of this process in terms of the *gunas*.

In fact, [meditation](#) and other [spiritual practices](#) are all great techniques for developing a *sattvic* mind and heart. And going on a spiritual retreat is like a *tamas* and *rajas* **detox!**

So, what should your goal be?

If you are looking for a good life, aim for a predominance of *sattva* and a positive presence of *rajas* . On the other hand, if you are serious about enlightenment, aim for 100% *sattva*.

This is the way I see it:

- **Priority 1:** Transform *tamas* – get rid of as much “junk” as you can.
- **Priority 2:** Balance *rajas* – cultivate energy and movement in a balanced way.
- **Priority 3:** Develop *sattva* – develop peace, contentment, and self-awareness.

And all of these is a moment after moment practice.

Develop the habit of asking yourself “*What is the quality of this action I want to take?*”. The same with the thoughts that popup in your head, the emotions that arise, and the things you consume through your five senses.

Finally, don’t beat yourself up about *tamas* and *rajas*! Be patient, but vigilant. You will still fall into them many times, either consciously or unconsciously. Personal growth and spiritual transcendence are lifetime journeys – a marathon, not a sprint. Besides, if you beat yourself up for the “mistakes” you make, you will only dive deeper into *tamas*.

The insights that I share in this post have served me as a map in my own journey for nearly two decades. May it be helpful for you too!

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