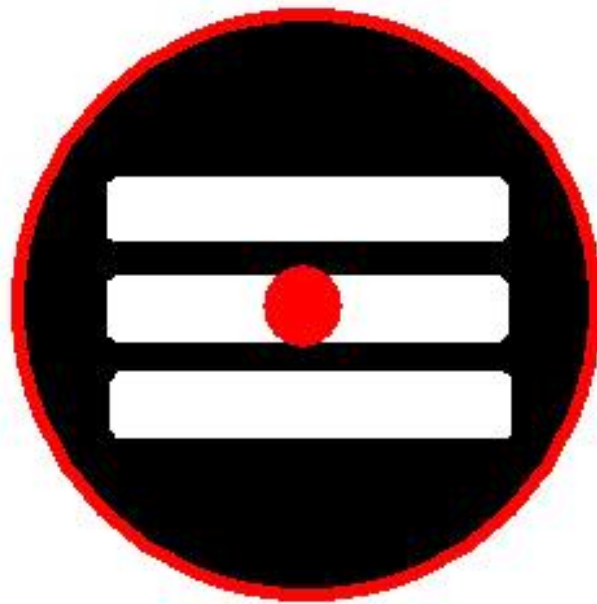


# 'GUNAS'

The Triadic Key to  
Yogic Psychology



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## BEYOND BIPOLAR PSYCHOLOGY

Along with the decline and loss of the centuries-old Western physiology of 'humours' or 'humors' such as 'bile' or 'phlegm' (hence the phrase 'in good humour') went the decline too of a psychology and characterology of the four basic human moods or 'temperaments' – the *melancholic*, *sanguine*, *choleric* and *phlegmatic*. Earlier medical understandings of the *humours* have long-since been replaced by a purely biological physiology of *hormones* and neurotransmitters in the brain. Similarly, an age-old psychology and characterology of the four 'temperaments' has been superseded by an ever-increasing host of psychiatric 'disorders' and/or genetic 'dispositions'. As a result, the whole language of Western psychology has become thoroughly *dualistic* - a dualism that pervades the everyday language and experience of the human being. Thus we speak of feeling 'positive' or 'negative', 'good' or 'bad', 'cheerful' or 'sad', 'high' or 'low', and of our 'energy', 'motivation' or 'mood' going 'up' or 'down'. Western psychiatry, in its own current terms, is dyadic or 'bipolar' ('manic-depressive'). Worse still, the very use of the modern psychiatric term 'mood disorder' shows how we have come to associate 'moods' as *such* with 'disorders' such as 'anxiety' and 'depression' - instead of understanding them as *underlying tones and colourations of feeling*. Moods in all their variety – understood as basic chords of feeling that shape, tone and colour our whole *awareness* of ourselves, our bodies and the world around us - are no longer recognised as an integral and indeed necessary dimension of human experience - comparable to deep musical chords. Instead they are confused and identified with their surface expression as emotional or somatic states, forms of behavioural disorders or chemical imbalances of the brain. This is like confusing our experience of the deep, inwardly felt meaning of music with the emotional labels we might apply to it, or even reducing the

felt qualitative meaning of music to its measurable, quantitative 'effect' on specific regions of the brain. In the light of the dualism or 'bipolarity' that rules not only modern Western psychology but most people's everyday emotional experience of life, we may be thankful that Indian yogic philosophy has left us with a deeper spiritual physiology and psychology – a triadic language of three basic and innate 'Gunas' or 'qualities' – called Tamas, Rajas and Sattva. These are understood - like the 'humours' of old - not just as basic qualities of human nature but also as basic qualities of nature as such. In their different combinations, they are understood as elemental constituents of matter making up the natural universe as a whole - and giving shape to our individual human nature in particular. Each of the three Gunas – Tamas, Rajas and Sattva – can balance, colour, dominate or alternatively transform and transmute into one another. Each individual's mood is always an embodiment of a different combination of the three Gunas - each of which constitutes a fundamentally different way of feeling ourselves and relating to the world.

**Tamas** (black, meaning 'darkness' or 'obscurity') is felt as dullness or darkness of mood, and as physical inertia, heaviness or lethargy.

**Rajas** (red) is felt as agitation, desire, impulse, intent and passion, and is expressed as physical tension, agitation and activity in all its forms.

**Sattva** (white) is felt as pureness, radiance, calm clarity, balance and buoyant lightness of being.

**"The Gunas ... successively dominate, support, activate, and interact with each other. Sattva is buoyant and shining. Rajas is stimulating and moving. Tamas is heavy and enveloping."**

*Ishvarakrishna Samkhyakarika*, translated by Gerard J. Larson

The triadic nature of Guna psychology is important because it is simply *truer* to human nature than the bipolar Western psychology. A simple example will suffice: if we cannot feel dull, heavy and fatigued (Tamas) how can we rest or enter into deep sleep – thus allowing us to process our experience in our dreams and to wake up feeling once again clear and bright (Sattva) and refreshed with renewed vitality and power of action (Rajas)? In waking life too, if we cannot tolerate ‘Tamasic’ states in which our consciousness feels dull, murky or clouded - or if physical inertia, lethargy or fatigue did not restrain us from getting lost in the whirl of everyday desires, drives and activities (Rajas) then we would not feel the need or take the opportunity to rest or meditate our lives. Our Rajasic vitality itself is thus drained but not renewed. Nor do we have the chance to discover the intense Rajasic desires or emotions that often lurk under the surface of ‘dull’ or ‘dark’ Tamasic states - or to regain a ‘Sattvic’ clarity of awareness – and with it the guidance of clear insight and direction for our lives. Instead we simply experience Tamasic states as ‘abnormal’ or ‘unhealthy’, labelling them as disorders such as ‘depression’, fighting them mentally and/or with the aid of medications to ‘keep ourselves going’ despite them (Rajas) or to stay positive (Sattva). As a result however, we end up either in even deeper and darker Tamasic states - or in truly unhealthy Rajasic states of ‘stress’, ‘anxiety’ or manic hyperactivity. Psychiatry sees Tamas as abnormal and recognises only combinations of Rajas and Sattva as healthy – hence the extreme alternation of Tamas and Rajas called ‘bipolar’ disorder. Yet all three Gunas have their role to play in a natural cycle - like the cycle of waking, dreaming and sleeping states. True wakefulness has an essentially Sattvic quality, dreaming a Rajasic quality and dreamless sleep a Tamasic quality. Yet life is richer than any categories. Thus both our waking and dream lives combine all three Gunas in ever-changing permutations. In this way the Gunas make up the rich and colourful continuum of our lived experience.

# MORE ON THE THREE GUNAS

## 1. TAMAS

Symbolised by the colours black or dark-blue Tamas is a quality of awareness reflecting the realm of latent, murky, obscured or 'occult' knowledge and power. In physical nature it finds expression as gravity and inertial mass. In human nature it is felt essentially as a downward-pulling sense of inertia and heaviness. If and when it dominates the individual however, it may be experienced somatically as 'fatigue', 'lethargy' or 'lack of energy', experienced mentally and emotionally as 'dullness' of mind, 'negativity' or 'depression', expressed outwardly as 'laziness' or 'sloth', or embodied as physical weight or obesity. It finds positive expression as dignified 'gravitas' or 'groundedness', as depth or 'weightiness' of character, the ability to 'bear', 'support' or 'pull' weight and to sink one's awareness down meditatively into the depths of one's body and being. Essentially it is potential action and awareness experienced darkly or obscurely. Theologically it is associated with the primordial darkness and power of the primordial mother goddess known as 'The Great Black One' (Maha-Kali). Temperamentally it is the Guna uniting the 'phlegmatic' with the 'black bile' of the 'melancholic'. Anatomically and medically it is associated with the bowels, abdomen and womb. Psychiatrically it is labelled as mild or severe depression. Sociologically it can find negative expression as the destructive potential of spiritual ignorance, generalised political apathy, the dullness of routinised work, lack of empathy and lifeless personal relationships. People search to compensate for Tamasic existence either through Rajas - hyperactivity and busyness, revelry in drugs and consumerism or mindless entertainment or through bland Sattvic states of spiritual harmony, peace and calm.

## 2. RAJAS

Symbolised by the colour red, Rajas has essentially to do with the emergence of the vital impulses to outward action and motion ('emotion') that lay latent, obscured or blocked in Tamas. Rajas finds expression as the very process of 'emergence' (Greek 'Physis') that is the root meaning of the term 'physical', and with 'energy' in the root sense of 'action' or 'activity' (*energein*). That is why the Rajas Guna is principally associated with red-blooded vitality or passion, with the impulse to act, and also hot-blooded anger and rage - with 'seeing red', and with the aggression necessary to release blocked action or communication. Temperamentally it is the Guna uniting the sanguine

with the choleric. Anatomically it is associated with the genitals and heart, blood and menstruation, psychiatrically with mania and paranoia. Sociologically it can find negative expression as rapacious greed and pervades the active realms of sport, politics and business.

### **3. SATTVA**

Symbolised by the colour white, Sattva is a reflection of the clear light of awareness out of which alone truth, clear insight, direction and 'right action' can arise. As a natural quality this Guna is associated with radiance, light and lightness, and thereby also with the expansion and expansiveness of space. Its root meaning is 'being' (Sat). This Guna is favoured by many pseudo-spiritual types - being associated with perfect 'brightness' of spirit, 'balance' and 'well-being'. Yet the flip side of the 'balance' or 'well-being' experienced through the Sattva Guna can be a mere bland emotional equanimity, lack of empathy and blankness of mind - albeit disguised as meditative 'calm' and 'tranquillity'. Alternatively it finds expression as an idealisation of asceticism and 'spiritual' transcendence at the expense of full-blooded vitality, embodied presence and depth of soul. Just as 'black' is not intrinsically the colour of 'evil' so is white not intrinsically the colour of 'goodness' and spiritual purity - for it is also the colour of fearful pallor, of ghosts and skeletons - and, in the East, of death itself. Temperamentally the Sattva Guna unites the phlegmatic with the sanguine. Anatomically it is associated with the lymphatic and immune systems, medically with anaemia and anorexia, and psychiatrically with schizophrenia. Sociologically it is associated with the realm of institutionalised religion and the search for inner peace and harmony through 'spirituality'. Commercial media advertisers are very keen and clever exploiters of both the Sattva and Raja Gunas - whether it be through emphasising the Rajasic qualities of such commodities as cars or alcoholic drinks, or the Sattvic qualities of 'well-being' associated with 'healthy' foods, cosmetics, over-the-counter medications etc.

## MEDITATING THE GUNAS WITH THE NEW YOGA

Each of the Gunas can be passively experienced or suffered in many different ways, not least as mental-emotional and somatic states of 'dis-ease'. Thus the Tamas Guna may be experienced as 'just functioning' on a minimal level, as dullness of mood or as a black hole of 'depression'; Rajas as desire, vitality and dynamism or as agitation, anxiety or hyperactivity, and Sattva Guna as brightness of mood, well-being, clear-headedness or spiritual emptiness. Each moment of each day we can identify the Guna or combination of Gunas colouring our mood. None of the Gunas, in themselves, is a 'cause' of pain or pleasure, suffering or joy, limitation or liberation – these come about only through our *relationship* to the Gunas, and through their relationship to one another within us. It is important to be aware and affirm all our Gunic states as natural states of being. Only by allowing ourselves to be more *aware* of the Gunas can we both embrace and transcend them through that very Nirgunic awareness. Only by giving ourselves time to feel the *direct bodily sense* of each of the Gunas – not just interpreting or experiencing them in purely psychological or mental-emotional terms - will they naturally transform into another, thus freeing us from the negative ways in which we might otherwise indirectly experience them – for example as so-called 'negative' emotions. Thus if, instead of just labelling a feeling as 'anxiety' for example, we understand it as the expression of 'Raja' Guna – attending to and staying with our direct bodily and *sensual* experience of it – it will gradually transform itself into another Guna. By (a) recognising our state of being as the expression of a specific Guna or 'quality' and (b) feeling and affirming it as a *sensual* quality, we achieve the traditional yogic goal of *transcending* the Gunas in the light of pure awareness (Nirguna). We do so by *transforming* our relationship to the Gunas - and with it our daily experience of them.



## **'GU-RU' AND THE FOURTH GUNA – 'NIRGUNA'**

Our awareness of a Guna is not itself tinged by that Guna, but free of it. Paradoxically, though the three Gunas are themselves felt qualities or colourations of awareness, the pure awareness of them is itself a 'fourth' Guna, one free of and beyond all Gunas – 'Nirguna'. Nirguna is characterised by a sense of the colourless *translucency* of pure awareness as such. The pure 'white' of the Sattva Guna is but the best *reflector* of the translucent, colourless light of pure awareness - of Nirguna. For light as such is not white - or any colour. That is why true transcendence of the Gunas does not come about simply by identification with the pure whiteness or 'goodness' of the Sattva Guna. It is also why Shiva, whilst being the personification of pure awareness and Nirguna, is also associated with all the Gunas. As the Swan (Hamsa) Shiva is white. Yet Shiva is also the Vedic 'Rudra', a name, which, like the Tamil word 'Civa', means 'reddening'. Shiva is identified too with Tamas in the form of the blackness of the Shivalingam - that form which symbolises the emergence of all forms from formless darkness. Then again there is the iconic portrayal of Shiva with a blue neck. This is a mythic symbol of how he freely chose to swallow the Tamasic 'poison' churned up from the ocean by the other gods - and was capable of transforming it. Dark blue is another symbol of Tamas. Light blue is the colour symbol of the colourless itself – of the sky and higher air or 'aether' of pure awareness that is Nirguna. This is symbolised by Shiva sitting atop Mount Kailasha, breathing the aether of pure awareness. According to the Guru-Gita, the syllable 'Gu' in 'Guru' refers to transcending the Gunas, whilst the syllable 'Ru' means devoid of form or quality. 'Gu-Ru' is one who transcends the Gunas or 'qualities'. This can be achieved by sustaining a pure, quality-free awareness of them, whilst at the same time feeling and affirming them all within the clear light and space of that awareness.

## THE GUNAS AS BASIC RELATIONSHIPS TO BEING

Behind the symbolism and experienced reality of the three Gunas and Nirguna lies a particular experience of AWARENESS in relation to BEING. The three Gunas express a triadic 'ontology' of awareness (from Greek *ontos* – being) that is central to The New Yoga as a new interpretation of the triadic or 'Trika' school of Tantra.

1. **TAMAS, BLACK** – the essentially Tamasic dimension of pure awareness is the experience of it as a negation of Being and of beings - as NON-BEING. Yet Non-Being is not a black hole of nothingness or an annihilating void but the of all our hidden, obscured, unknown or unrealised *potentialities* of being - in contract to the *actualities* of our being and existence that belong to the realm of Being ('Sat').

2. **RAJAS, RED** – the essentially Rajasic dimension of pure awareness is the active COMING-TO-BE or BECOMING of our potentialities of being out of the realm of NON-BEING that is Tamas. Out of pure awareness arises the autonomous power of action and actualisation that is felt as Rajas – the impulse to BE and BECOME all that we potentially ARE.

3. **SATTVA, WHITE** – the essentially Sattvic dimension of pure awareness is the experience of awareness as an affirmation of BEING ('Sat'), feeling one's very being brought to light, illuminated by, reflecting and radiating the light of pure awareness.

4. **'NIRGUNA', COLOURLESS** – The Nirgunic dimension of is the experience of its pure, colourless, transcendent and translucent light. Whereas through Tamas, awareness is experienced as NON-BEING, through Rajas as BECOMING or COMING TO BE, and through Sattva as BEING, as Nirguna it is experienced as that light that first brings all beings to light from the darkness of NON-BEING - letting them both BE (Sattva) and BECOME (Rajas) all that they potentially are (Tamas).

## FROM THE BHAGAVADGITA

### **Krishna said:**

Sattva or goodness, Rajas or activity, and Tamas or inertia; these three Gunas of mind bind the imperishable soul to the body, Oh Arjuna.

Of these, Sattva, being calm, is illuminating and ethical.  
It fetters the embodied being,  
The Jiva-atma, by attachment  
To happiness and knowledge, O Arjuna.

O Arjuna, know that Rajas  
Is characterized by intensity,  
And is born of desire and attachment.  
It binds the Jiva by attachment  
To the fruits of action.

Know, O Arjuna, that Tamas, the deluder of Jiva,  
Is born of inertia.  
It binds by ignorance, laziness, and sleep.

Oh Arjuna, Sattva attaches one to happiness,  
Rajas to action, and Tamas to ignorance  
By covering the knowledge.

Sattva dominates by suppressing Rajas and Tamas;  
Rajas dominates by suppressing Sattva and Tamas;  
And Tamas dominates by suppressing Sattva and Rajas,  
O Arjuna.

### **Arjuna said:**

What are the characteristics of those  
Who have transcended the three Gunas,  
And what is their conduct?  
How does one transcend these three Gunas, O Lord Krishna?

**Krishna said:**

One who neither hates the presence of  
Enlightenment, activity, and delusion  
Nor desires for them when they are absent; and  
The one who remains like a witness;  
Who is not moved by the Gunas,  
Thinking that the Gunas only are operating;  
Who stands firm and does not waver; and

The one who depends on the Lord  
And is indifferent to pain and pleasure;  
To whom a clod, a stone, and gold are alike;  
To whom the dear and the unfriendly are alike;  
Who is of firm mind; who is calm  
In censure and in praise; and

The one who is indifferent  
To honour and disgrace; who is the same  
To friend and foe; who has renounced  
The sense of doership; is said  
To have transcended the Gunas.