
title: "Understanding the Gunas"
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As the *gunas* co-exist in all things so must Yoga necessarily work with them in order to have any effect.

"A yogi is one who can change their *gunas*."
Krishnamacarya.

The three *gunas* (derived from; thread, strand, twirl, wind) are the prime powers that make up and run through all the manifest universe (*Prakriti*).

They are the primary ingredients of all nature.

They are not existent in set quantities but fluctuate in varying proportions, one or another being dominant.

Variable combinations of the *gunas* accounts for all the myriad diversity in the material world.

All things are a result of the interplay between these influences.

Evolution is only possible through the tension between these forces.

All objects in the world have certain qualities which make them what they are.

The qualities of any individual object, including our bodies and minds, are due to the particular combination of *gunas* making up that object.

Their ultimate function is to create the experiences that provide us with the learning we need in order to become free/illuminated.

YS 2.18

"The world is the play of the *gunas* - the universal energies of light, motion and mass. They take form as the elements and the senses. The purpose of the world is to provide us with experience and thus lead us to liberation."
Alistair Shearer.

There are three threads/strands/twirls interwoven in the *gunas*:
these are: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

Sattva is the power that illuminates and reveals.

It is clear, calm and balanced.

It is harmony and purity.

It appears as light.

It is, according to [Samkhya - overview here]({{< ref "samkhya.md" >}}), our inherent natural state and one who is established in *sattva* is content.

sattva leads us to higher states of being.

We experience *sattva* as balance, clarity and contentment.

Rajas is the power that stimulates and moves.

It is dynamism, passion and activation.

It is that which gives force and motion.

It prompts action.

We experience it as compulsion, agitation, drive, desire, attachment.

Tamas is the power that obscures.

it is darkness, heaviness, gravity.

Tamas restrains, obstructs, envelops and binds.

It resists motion.

We experience it as lethargy, tiredness, apathy, dullness, slowness.

In spiritual practice we work to reduce the effects of *rajas* and *tamas* and to increase that of *sattva*, our natural state, and that our *tamasic/rajasic* actions are made in the light of *sattva*.

We can choose and modify our practices (and indeed our daily behaviour/lifestyle) in order to find solutions to imbalances appropriate to our own personal needs.

I will explore some of the possibilities for such in later articles.

Conclusion

Although the *gunas* only receive scant attention in the Yoga Sutras an understanding of their fundamental role in nature would have been common back when they were written and, so, is assumed in the text.

The goal of Yoga is freedom from suffering through the understanding of our hidden, true nature.

The *gunas* provide us with a model to engage with, to guide us towards that understanding, and by which we can achieve greater joy, harmony and balance in our daily lives.