

# The Gift of Consciousness

## PATAÑJALI'S YOGA SŪTRAS

BOOK ONE: SAMĀDHI PĀDA

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योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥ १.२ ॥

YOGAŚ CITTA-VṚTTI-NIRODHAḤ

Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness.

ŚABDA JÑĀNA:

**Yoga:** concentration

**citta:** consciousness

**vṛtti:** fluctuation, modification

**nirodha:** control, cessation, stilling, restraining

The second sūtra takes us from initiation to definition. It lays out the process and goal of Yoga as intended by the ancient sages. It also introduces the notion of citta (consciousness)—a concept which is central to all of Patañjali's teachings. Implicit in this sūtra is an understanding of the many different forms and functions of the mind. Through the practice and study of Yoga, the seeker learns to transform consciousness, moving from more raw and unrefined states of awareness, towards the quiet abiding of the Self. During this process the center of gravity within the psyche shifts from the ego and personality towards the transcendent Self within.

In sūtra 1.2, we are told that Yoga involves the stilling of the mental processes and the control of the fluctuations of the mind-field. As we learn to work with and calm our changeable nature, the source of consciousness underlying this turbulence will reveal its splendor. The first form of Yoga proper, which is known as cognitive trance (samprajñāta samādhi), relates to the stilling of the most harmful mental processes. On the other hand, the ultimate aim of Yoga (asamprajñāta samādhi or ultra-cognitive trance) arises from the cessation of all mental fluctuations. In cognitive trance, the yogin is united with wisdom and intuitive knowledge (see *Chapter 10: Yoga as Mystical Trance*). However, asamprajñāta samādhi represents the highest kind of inner freedom; it is a state of liberation wherein the puruṣa (Self) is completely separated from any kind of conditioned consciousness.

The present aphorism asserts that if we follow the path of practice that Patañjali delineates, we will be able to transform our minds from a state of distraction and dispersion (vikṣipta) to a state of refined concentration. By way of integrated practice, the seeker attains meditative absorption which leads to a variety of super-conscious states. These modes of heightened consciousness will not unfold until the heaviness of tamas (darkness, inertia) and the agitation of rajas (desire, passion) have subsided. The guṇas (qualities) act as veils covering the life of the spirit. However, once a sufficient amount of satto-guṇa (light, clarity) is present, the seeker is then ripe to attain various super-conscious states. These states can be directly linked to the two forms of Yogic trance (samprajñāta samādhi; asamprajñāta samādhi). Both kinds of samādhi represent a radical shift in the individual's psyche accompanied by experiences of great lucidity.

To come to either one of these types of Yoga, the seeker first engages in disciplined practice and also strives to develop discriminative awareness. Yogic methods require that we work to change certain mental patterns and behaviours. However, in trying to do so it often becomes clear that our minds are not actually under our conscious control. In many cases, we may notice that the personality and ego have become the focus of our development instead of the Self. The mind then responds in ways that are neither our choice nor our preference; rather than being masters of our minds, we have become the victims of it. This realization is often quite painful, but in certain ways it is a prerequisite for the practice of Yoga. Knowing that we have been separated from a greater source of peace, awareness, and wholeness, we hunger for the guidance that can bring us back to our Selves. Yoga helps us to step away from a state of self-alienation and to move instead towards our greater potential.

To understand this movement from fragmentation to wholeness, we can consider the image of the citta as a lake. The waves on the lake can be equated to the different fluctuations of consciousness (vṛttis). Sometimes, the waters may be rough and turbulent, filled with these waves, while at other times the surface may be smooth and placid so that one can easily see to the bottom of the lake. The Self can be compared to a golden coin which lies at the bottom of this lake. It is ever-present, yet the discovery of this wealth depends upon a quieting of the surface waters (the vṛttis). By the practice of Yoga, such a stilling occurs, and we gain access to that treasure which was always there, simply waiting to be found again within.

## CITTA: Consciousness and the Three Guṇas

In order to analyze the mind, its processes, and their inhibition, Vyāsa and Śaṅkara outline the psycho-spiritual theory of the guṇas.

In their commentaries, they portray the process of control and restriction (nirodha) as a profound purification from tamasic to sattvic consciousness until, ultimately, the practitioner transcends the guṇas altogether.

<p>प्रख्या Prakhyā Illumination/ Light</p>	<p>प्रवृत्ति Pravr̥tti Activity</p>	<p>स्थिति Sthiti Stasis/ Darkness</p>
<p>सत्त्व Sattva Clarity and Awareness</p>	<p>रजस् Rajas Movement and change from one state to another (transformation)</p>	<p>तमस् Tamas Resistance, inertia, darkness and limitation</p>

### COMMENTARIES ON SŪTRA 1.2 EXPLORE CONSCIOUSNESS IN RELATION TO THE THREE GUṆAS:

**Vyāsa:** “Cittam hi prakhyā-pravr̥tti-sthiti-śīlatvāt triguṇam.”

**Translation:** Consciousness has aspects of illumination, movement, and stasis and thus it (consciousness) can be seen to be made of the three guṇas.



## CITTA: Consciousness and the Three Guṇas

**Citta-vicāra:** a portrait of pure consciousness coloured by the three essential modes of nature (guṇas).

**The term “guṇa” can be translated as:** quality, subordinate, inferior, that which binds.

### TAMO-GUṆA CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS:

**Vyāsa:** “Tad-eva tamasa-anuviddham adharma ajñāna avairāgya anaiśvarya upagam-bhavati.”

**Translation:** When that mind is influenced by tamo-guṇa, then the consciousness is inclined towards: adharma (misalignment with higher law), avairāgya (non-detachment), ajñāna (ignorance), and anaiśvarya (weakness, helplessness, lack of power).

### RAJO-GUṆA CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS:

**Vyāsa:** “Rajo-mātrayā dharma-jñāna-vairāgya aiśvarya upagam bhavati.”

**Translation:** The mind influenced by a trace of rajas is inclined towards: dharma (duty, virtue), jñāna (wisdom), vairāgya (detachment) and aiśvarya (energy, power).

When the force of tamas has dwindled, then rajas shines forth. Śaṅkara compares this to the light of the sun bursting forth after rainclouds have passed over.

### SATTO-GUṆA CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS:

In this state of mind, the veils of tamas and rajas have been removed. Then, consciousness rests in itself (sva-rūpa); the Seer is established in its own nature (sūtra 1.3).

This state is known as cognitive trance or samprajñāta samādhi. In the classical commentaries, cognitive trance is linked to the one-pointed, sattvic mind.

This state of mind is characterized by four main factors:

- ✦ It reveals the nature of things as they are (clarity of sight).
- ✦ It attenuates the afflictions (kleśas).
- ✦ It weakens the bonds of karmas.
- ✦ It prepares the ground of consciousness for the arrested state of mind.

In this condition (cognitive trance), the practitioner understands the distinction between sattvic consciousness (the higher mind) and the Self (puruṣa).

## CHAPTER 3

# YOGA AS PURIFICATION: From Darkness to Light

### **The Psycho-Spiritual Theory of the Guṇas: Facts and Essentials**

In essence, we are all the same. The principle of light shines within each and all. Pure consciousness is our abiding nature. But how this light is veiled and how we all come to be so unique in spite of our inherent unity—this is the mystery of human existence. How can we understand our differences in character, temperament, proclivity, and thought? What are the powers that lie behind and drive the myriad vṛttis (fluctuations of mind)? How is it that we come to lose contact with the abiding intelligence within? According to Patañjali and traditional systems of Yoga, the answers to such questions are held in the psycho-spiritual theory of the guṇas (the three essential modes of nature). This framework is one of the enduring gifts of wisdom within Yogic psychology. As Vyāsa writes in his commentary on sūtra 1.2, our consciousness has the functions of illumination (prakhyā), activity (pravṛtti), and inertia (sthiti); it can therefore be said that the citta is composed of the three guṇas, each of which corresponds to one of the above mentioned functions. Without understanding the mind's inherent forces of sattva (light and intelligence), rajas (activity and desire), and tamas (darkness and regression) we cannot comprehend our differences, nor can we fully grasp the kind of transmutation of consciousness that is presented throughout the sūtras themselves.

From this perspective, Yoga holds not only dimensions of concentration and de-conditioning (as mentioned in *Chapter 2*), but also a necessary aspect of purification and self-reflection. Although the Self resides within each individual being, its presence is often hidden underneath layers of conditioning, whether it be in the body, mind, emotions, or behaviour. In order to bring forth and actualize our full potential as human beings, it is necessary that we clear away certain patterns in our minds and lives that tend to hold us back. This process of purification and inner growth can be compared to the work of a gardener—weeding, watering, and caring for a garden so that plants and flowers may grow and flourish. “Purification” refers not only to the dismantling of that which limits us and covers our underlying intelligence, but also to the care for and integration of the many aspects of our being.

If we are to continue with this metaphor of a garden, the guṇas would then represent the soil from which we can either grow and flourish or wither and wilt. Accordingly, the state or the quality of this “soil” (the guṇas) can be assessed by each Yogic aspirant in their own lives. An inquiry into the ways in which these energies operate in our lives as well as their relative predominance is crucial in order both to clarify and then gradually shift certain forms of thought and behaviour that may keep us from psycho-spiritual growth. If we do not reflect upon and come to know the exact nature of the veiling—that which covers our ability to heal—it is extremely difficult to transform the many patterns of the body-mind complex. In creating an understanding and awareness of the guṇas, the possibility for positive change becomes imminent. We would expect that a moist and rich “soil” will likely yield a

fruitful harvest, whereas not much can grow from a stagnant and dry field. In the same way, a proper balance of the three guṇas creates an optimal foundation for the spiritual endeavor. This kind of self-reflective analysis in regards to the unique constellation of tamas, rajas, and sattva in each of our lives can thus help us both in a process of self-understanding and Self-actualization.

In the Yoga tradition, a full understanding of these essential modes of nature is considered to be the highest and greatest of all knowledge—it is the wisdom which holds the power to set the abiding inner consciousness free. This theory of the guṇas is, therefore, found throughout Vedic teachings. In Āyurveda (Indian natural medicine), Jyotiṣa (Vedic astrology), and Yogic psychology the approach to a particular problem or difficulty as well as the corresponding recommendations for practice and healing are determined based on this conceptual background. All actions, feelings, cognitions, and experiences can be seen through the lens of the guṇa theory. The particular expressions of human experience are thus greatly influenced by the constant interaction of these three forces.

Knowledge of the guṇas is further enhanced by a study of the various constituents of reality as outlined in the doctrine of Sāṃkhya philosophy. Although Yoga and Sāṃkhya represent two distinct schools of Indian thought, Yoga nonetheless takes as its foundation many aspects of the Sāṃkhya worldview, including the importance of the triguṇa (three guṇas). As it says in the *Mahābhārata*, “There is no knowledge like Sāṃkhya and there is no power like Yoga” (12.304.2) (See *Chapter 4: Yogic Psychology* for an outline of the Sāṃkhya doctrine). In the following, we will first consider the different natures of the guṇas themselves and then examine how their distinct influences can affect our various life goals as well as our efforts to realize the Self within.

## **Tamas: The Veiling Power of Darkness**

The greatest threat to consciousness and psycho-spiritual growth is the force of tamo-guṇa. “Tamas” is most often translated as darkness. It is a veiling and blinding power that keeps the Self hidden from view and is closely associated with confusion, Self-alienation, inertia, and the many faces of delusion. One of the central characteristics associated with the onset of tamas is “moha”, which means infatuation or the loss of proper judgment. At its worst, tamo-guṇa completely obliterates the discriminative faculties of the higher mind, leaving us vulnerable to distorted perception and action. It is thus seen as the yogi’s most formidable inner enemy. Each of the guṇas can be linked to one or more of the five habitual states of mind listed in the previous chapter. In particular, tamas holds a strong connection with the mūḍha mind—that consciousness which is over-identified with a base form of life and consciousness.

Although it is said that tamas holds a greater influence at the level of the body, its energetic and emotional impact can nonetheless be seen and felt at all levels of our being. It is particularly connected with unconsciousness and mechanical action and relates strongly to the many “blind spots” in awareness that each individual has to accept and work with in order to bring about positive change. The Chinese yin-yang symbol elegantly portrays this interweaving and interpenetration of the forces of darkness and light in the field of consciousness. Only through an expanded awareness and skillful action can the balance shift from darkness to light, from the unconscious repetition of harmful patterns to greater self-insight and development.

## Awakening Medicine

The implications of tamas can be considered in a number of ways. Beginning at the level of the gross, tamas relates to somatic blockages, but it can also come to permeate more subtle layers of our being including our mental-emotional landscape. Depression, fear, and grief are common manifestations of tamas, leaving the body-mind complex in a stagnant and frozen state. A variety of symptoms such as heaviness, dullness, and apathy, are common signs of its dominance. Although it is natural for each person to experience the traces of tamas after a night's sleep, or in the wake of traumatic life-events, tamas becomes problematic when the heaviness drags on, bringing "the small mind... the impotent will... the disinclination to act, the shrinking from endeavours and aspiration" (Aurobindo 2001, 111). Ideally, an individual under the sway of tamas should not continue in this predicament for too long without therapeutic assistance and proper counsel. Even the act of sharing with a trusted one, talking about the difficulties and problems at hand, can bring some movement to a oppressive, shameful, or saddening situation.

In regards to tamas, the perspective for healing is always one of awakening and reorientation. There is no mild and gentle medicine that can lift its heaviness and its regressive pull. The Vedic approach to overcoming tamas is unfailingly connected with tapaḥ (self-discipline) in one form or another. From an Āyurvedic point of view, such an approach could include pañca karma (five techniques of dramatic purification) or the use of stimulating herbs. An āsana practice meant to address tamas, could include vigorous back-bendings or numerous rounds of Sūrya Namaskār (Sun Salutation). The approaches to overcoming tamas are many and varied, but the underlying quality of such medicine is the same. Tamas blocks the flow of the life-force energy and the clarification of the inner mind. Only a fiery approach is able to enkindle again the light and wisdom within.

Various spiritual traditions assert that a good teacher needs to be both hard like a diamond and soft as wax depending on the situation at hand. Fierceness in teaching methodologies is mostly applied when tamas is the dominant force in the student's mind and body. This kind of approach is clearly illustrated in the first chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This chapter is literally known as "The Yoga of Despair" (Viṣāda Yoga), and as the work commences, we find Lord Kṛṣṇa reprimanding the great warrior Arjuna.

Arjuna finds himself caught in self-pity and fear, having to face his own family and teachers on the battlefield. From an ordinary, human perspective, his situation is truly awful and his sense of depression justified. But Kṛṣṇa views his friend's despair somewhat differently, taking into consideration Arjuna's soul and its journey through his present and previous lives. Instead of encouraging the young hero to shrink away from his task, Lord Kṛṣṇa commands him to take up his *sva-dharma*, which is his allotted duty. Skillful action and the capacity to perform one's *dharma*—these are the solutions that Kṛṣṇa offers in response to Arjuna's despair. He teaches from a truly compassionate heart, revealing the permanence of the Self and the illusions of veiled intelligence, unnerving Arjuna with a stern soul-speech that is only the beginning of a profound journey of teachings. Throughout the epic of the *Bhagavad Gītā* we witness the many faces of wisdom which Kṛṣṇa uses to bring Arjuna to Self understanding and ultimate Self-realization. However, the first medicine he presents—right action—is consistently relevant to all seekers who find their hearts clouded and their intelligence veiled at one time or another. If properly applied, this approach allows for suffering to become a springboard for true transformation.



## Rajas: A Double-Edged Sword

There is within the mind a principle that is primarily responsible for change and transformation. This power is called by the name of rajas or rajo-guṇa. It is the one quality that is absolutely necessary in order to overcome tamas. When rajas functions in an optimal way, it allows for the ascent of consciousness and the shift from a lower state of mind to a higher and more sattvic (light) state of being. This form of rajas relates to the vikṣipta mindset (see Vyāsa's commentary on sūtra 1.1) in which the individual is, for a period of time, able to focus on spiritual matters. On the other hand, when rajas is functioning in a more limited manner, it brings us downward, deeper into states of confusion and back under the sway of tamas. Here, we can link rajas to what Vyāsa calls the kṣipta state, wherein the individual's consciousness is driven outside him or herself in a multitude of directions.

As the principle behind all movement and initiative, rajas is thus the energy of transformation for both good and ill. It is the essential mode of nature responsible for our growth as well as our regression. The main qualities associated with rajas illustrate its paradoxical nature. This assortment of characteristics includes desire and passion (kāma), effort (īhā), action (kriyā), strength (bala), and energy (śakti). However, various classical scriptures recognize that desire itself is the very essence of rajo-guṇa.

The life of our desires and the quality of rajas itself come into focus when examining the impact of this particular guṇa in our lives. In working with and refining rajo-guṇa, we can learn to engage in a process of mindful Self-inquiry (smṛti-sādhana) in order to understand the psychological and spiritual bearing of this particular guṇa. Is it allied with the regressive influence of tamo-guṇa? Or, more optimally, is it receiving the balancing power of satto-guṇa? Is it operating in alignment with the Self, or is it purely ego-bound and pleasure driven? Questioning the motivations behind our desires as well as the means we use to fulfill them, we begin to bring awareness to the many manifestations of rajas in our lives. The dynamic and complex force of rajas holds the potential to take us in many directions—sometimes creating tremendous sweetness in our lives through the joys of skillful action, while at other times presenting us with the bitterest of realities when our choices and behaviours stray from dharma.

## Finding Balance: Sattva Guṇa

Just as there are forces of darkness and regression within, so there exists in each one of us an irresistible hope-bearing light. This inner light is called by the name of sattva or satto-guṇa. As a principle of clarity and peace, it is the essential mode of nature responsible for health and balance. An abundance of sattva allows the yogin to enter a one-pointed state of concentration, thus linking it to the ekāgra mindset (see Vyāsa's commentary on sūtra 1.1). This sattva propels us towards inner growth and is most clearly present in the higher faculties of mind—the discriminative intelligence (buddhi) and the intuitive mind. Through its light and wisdom, sattva guides the seeker towards the inner mind and the Self. All noble sentiments and qualities, such as compassion, honesty, integrity, discrimination, and love, are regarded as sattvic. It is thus the force of higher consciousness that connects us with virtue, goodness, and the divine. In Sanskrit, consciousness itself is called sattva.

In the absence of this quality, we operate through the lower domains of the mind and neglect our inherent potential. However, when sattva is activated and solidified, the aspirant is able to move inward and upward on their journey. The Yogic methods of the eightfold path (Aṣṭāṅga Yoga) which Patañjali outlines in his second pāda, all point towards the cultivation and optimization of sattva. It is

only through the presence of this particular guṇa that we can gradually transcend the many facets of illusion. Satto-guṇa is not only a desired quality of mind, but also the essential mode of nature that helps us to sustain health and well-being. In each of our lives, Sattva is thus seen a health-promoting and sustaining factor.

From yet another perspective, it is the clarity and wisdom of sattva that allows an individual to perceive their sva-dharma and act accordingly. While tamas and rajas can veil our heart and intelligence, sattva-guṇa helps us to come into greater alignment with life in its many dimensions. No matter how different our individual paths may be, the force of sattva remains essential in order to bring honesty and integrity to our attempts to actualize our life goals. This does not imply that we will necessarily attain all that we strive for, but rather that by developing the qualities of sattva we are able to live authentically and courageously, engaging in life from a place of greater clarity.

Sattva is, no doubt, the highest and finest quality of our prakṛti (nature). As such, it is deeply connected with the wisdom of the higher mind and can help us to access this inner intelligence. Satto-guṇa, therefore, remains as the only mode of nature that is clear enough to aid us in trying to hear and understand the subtle cues of the Self. With the minimization of tamas and rajas, the sattvic mindset relates to the ability to see reality as it is and to act accordingly.

To truly transcend prakṛti, we must first come to know it intimately—exploring, delving into, and refining its many manifestations in our lives. With the support of sattva, we cultivate the ability to know ourselves and to accept the great mysteries of life. There is no way that one can reach mokṣa (liberation) and inner freedom without the blessings of a clear intellect and a calm and abiding mind. In sūtra 1.48, such a highly developed consciousness is referred to as truth-filled (ṛtambharā). Through the wisdom inherent in this state, the yogi grasps the distinctions between the many different forms of prakṛti and also between prakṛti and puruṣa. At the time of such realization, the power of consciousness rests in its original nature, and even the virtues of sattva are transcended in the presence of the true Self. Here, the yogin enters into the niruddha state in which the guṇas are no longer in operation and the consciousness abides in itself (sūtra 1.3).

## **The Four Pillars of Spiritual Life**

Looking to Vyāsa and Śaṅkara's ancient commentaries, we find yet another way to consider the effects of the guṇas on our lives. In light of Patañjali's definition of Yoga (sūtra 1.2), Vyāsa and Śaṅkara emphasize four virtues that uphold the Yogic quest. These could, indeed, be called the four pillars of spiritual life. They are: dharma (duty, virtue), jñāna (wisdom), vairāgya (detachment), and aiśvarya (energy, sovereign power). If upheld, these qualities lead us towards peace and inner freedom. In Patañjali's terms, they carry us towards the shores of ecstatic consciousness, towards samprajñāta Yoga (the Yoga of wisdom—cognitive trance) and asamprajñāta Yoga (the Yoga beyond wisdom—ultra-cognitive trance). To reach these states of Yogic trance is naturally a gradual process. It involves a deep purification and inner transmutation which brings the seeker from tamo-guṇa consciousness to sattva-guṇa consciousness and beyond.

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## The Darkening Force of Tamas: The Crumbling of the Four Pillars

*That same pure consciousness, when clouded by tamo-guṇa, is inclined towards: adharmā (going against duty and virtue), ajñāna (lack of wisdom), avairāgya (lack of detachment), and anaiśvarya (lack of energy).*

*(Author's translation of Vyāsa's commentary on sūtra 1.2)*

In examining the process of purification and inner change from the standpoint of the guṇa-theory, the force of tamas remains as the most powerful hindrance to the seeker's inner development. It involves a profound veiling of heart and consciousness and is therefore seen as the mode of nature that is most detrimental to the maintenance of the four above mentioned virtues. It is also regarded as the most destructive influence in regards to the seeker's inner life and path. These pillars crumble when tamas is domineering and informing the seeker's perspective. Rather than bringing the wished-for transformation, tamas easily leads to a descent into unconsciousness, misalignment, and mechanical action. In his commentary on sūtra 1.2, Vyāsa indicates that when the force of tamo-guṇa is prevalent, the four sacred principles are no longer upheld, and we find their negation in adharmā, ajñāna, avairāgya, and anaiśvarya.

### Adharma: Forgetting our Life's Purpose

To grasp the concept of adharmā, we first need to understand what dharma actually means. The Sanskrit word dharma has many meanings, yet they are all interrelated. Like the different facets of a pyramid, each aspect of dharma is essential in forming the integrity of the whole. Just as all sides of a pyramid are required to form a firm foundation as well as the pinnacle of the structure, each of the many definitions of dharma is vital to the seeker's understanding of both the rudiments and heights of spiritual life. In examining one particular face of dharma, the beauty of impeccable duty is revealed. Seen from another view, dharma connects the aspirant with virtues and precepts given in scripture; this knowledge-base provides all seekers with general guidance, but also speaks to each individual's unique destiny and calling. Yet again, dharma relates to a variety of spiritual ideals that the yogin strives to embody in their quest for inner peace and harmony. According to the inherited wisdom of many different religious traditions, we need guidelines for living that are both wise and uplifting. We have all incarnated with a purpose that we must try to fulfill. In its broadest sense, dharma concerns our behaviour towards our fellow human beings, towards the divine, and towards ourselves in regards to certain principles of inner discipline and self-control. To strive for the betterment of our inner life and to cultivate an ethical approach to daily life and action—these lie at the heart of all sacred, dharmic precepts. Learning Yogic practices without an ethical foundation and a proper understanding of dharma, renders the teachings meaningless to the individual practitioner as well as those around them.

The word dharma comes from a Sanskrit root that means “to establish”, “to hold on to something”, and “to continue something”. When the regressive force of tamas clouds our consciousness, the opposite tendency comes into being. At such times, we fail to “hold on” to that which brings meaning and purpose to our lives. Instead of aligning our awareness with a higher principle, we lose perspective and thus act in ways that may actually be detrimental to our chosen life-direction. All of us may find ourselves faced with certain situations or triggers that, for whatever reason, leave us feeling drained, exhausted, confused, and despairing. It is no small wonder that at such a time, we may feel like abandoning the actions required for healing, growth, and reorientation. Either we do not know what

approach to take or, if we do, it simply seems far too challenging to implement. In this state, we may experience a soul-wrenching confusion regarding our dharma. When overcome in such a way, there can be a tendency to relinquish self-discipline and practice, leaving our actions (karmas) incomplete. Our dharma is deeply interrelated with our karmas (our daily actions), thus a downward spiral in one of these principles necessarily entails the decline of the other.

Exactly how this darkness manifests for each individual can take many different forms. There are times when the voices of doubt, depression, and grief, prevent us from growing. Sometimes, heaviness and laziness paralyze our being and keep us from engaging in positive action. Finally, we may at times be caught in the forces of illusion and self-deception, unable to choose and perform our actions skillfully. Ultimately, tamas draws the individual away from a life of authenticity and meaning, stifling them instead with the restrictions of a limited perspective.

In mythology, the energy of tamo-guṇa is given many faces. Regardless of its particular mask, tamas always acts as a force that keeps the seeker from progressing and from seeing the reality of their situation. We see this veiling influence clearly portrayed both in temptation-myths and stories of the archetypal dark night of the soul. In both these kinds of narrative, tamas can lead to either disaster or soul-piercing growth. The final result of our encounter with this darkness depends entirely on how we approach it and whether we are willing and able to learn from the painful lessons it may bring.

### **Ajnāna: The Loss of Wisdom**

Vyāsa writes that the second pillar of spiritual life that is seen to erode in the presence of tamas is that of jñāna or wisdom. In fact, when tamas dominates, not only does jñāna disintegrate, but its opposite (ajñāna) also arises full-force. Jñāna is the living and felt knowledge of the heart and spirit. It is the understanding that there is a difference between the fluctuating life of the body-mind complex (prakṛti) and the eternal light of the Self (puruṣa). Wisdom helps us to focus on that which is real and permanent, thus weakening our tendency to completely identify with our ever-changing thoughts and emotions. When tamas descends upon us, it is as a cloud blocking the sun; the higher Self and the intelligence within are often lost or forgotten. When tamo-guṇa is strong, we become excessively identified with the body, the expectations of the ego, and the many pairs of opposites that fill our lives. One day we are happy as life unfolds according to our plan, and the next we are disappointed or upset because our expectations are not met. Hot and cold, success and failure, pain and pleasure—when overwhelmed by tamas, these become the barometers of how we feel and act. In such a state of ajnāna, the higher perspective of the mind is completely obscured and the loss of wisdom becomes most apparent.

### **Avairāgya: The Chains of Attachment**

As the third pillar of spiritual life and the second wing of practice (sūtra 1.12), vairāgya (detachment) is that capacity which steers us away from distracting influences (see *Chapter 6: The Many Faces of Detachment*). It is closely connected with discriminative power, right priority, and integrity. Vairāgya is like a sword that can cut through our entanglements and the predicaments that consume us. From a more subtle perspective, it can also be seen as a priority that is set from the perspective of the Self rather than from that of the ego. It is a capacity that enables us to commit wholeheartedly to our path



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and to persist in our endeavor no matter what obstacles and temptations come our way. Every time we say “yes” to something or somebody, we are simultaneously and implicitly saying “no” to other options. For each one of us, there is only twenty-four hours in a day, and we are constantly making choices about how to spend our time and energy. We cannot do everything or be everything, and if we are to follow a spiritual discipline in earnest, then our lives and priorities must reflect this inner calling. It is an illusion if we believe that this path is compatible with so-called “normal life”, if we think that we can take up the practice of classical Yoga and still maintain all our former activities and ways of being. Stepping fully into the practice of traditional Yoga, we wake to hidden realities and the deeper meaning of life itself. In the wake of such an initiation, sacrifice follows, and the aspirant may then make a kind of archetypal movement or journey away from the group-mind. At such a time, we must venture to look deep within and examine the motivations behind our choices, for our course should not be determined by what others think, nor even by our own preconceived ideas.

When *tamas* is prevalent, however, our attachments gain more power over us, and we may lose our capacity to say “no”. More seems to be better, and we can be easily convinced to take part in actions that are truly destructive from a karmic and spiritual perspective. Excessive and unhealthy attachment enforces our bondage to outer objects and people, and as our level of entanglement increases, the soul is left in a prison of our own making. *Tamas* has the capacity to suck dry our discriminative abilities and so invites a vicious circle of destructive thoughts, behaviours, and attachments.

## **Anaiśvarya: Loss of Energy**

Just as a car needs gas in order to function, we too need a stable and strong source of energy to fulfill our dharma and strive towards the Self. Positive momentum, grounded in the force of our energy, as well as healthy self-discipline are mandatory in our efforts to meet the many demands of daily life. Śakti or aiśvarya is that which fuels our endeavor and blesses us with strength. According to Āyurveda, we are born with a certain quantity and quality of ojas (spiritual energy and general immunity), but how this energetic storehouse is controlled, increased, and refined, depends upon many factors. Sādhana (spiritual practice), Yogic lifestyle and diet, and right relationship are all aspects of our lives which, when properly cultivated, allow our energy to flourish.

In his commentary on sūtra 1.2, Vyāsa notes that when *tamas* prevails, we tend to suffer a loss of energy. At the same time, our motivation to engage in those activities which give us health and strength is greatly reduced. The seeker then fails to perform their nitya karma—their obligatory daily routines. Such neglect may first manifest in small ways, such as sleeping in, avoiding daily practice, or perhaps eating heavy or fast-food. These kinds of habits can quickly accumulate, creating stagnation and sluggishness at all levels of our being. Before too long, the heart darkens and the mind becomes clouded. If we are blessed, we might have a teacher or mentor that notices our downward spiral and helps us to re-establish our former, healthy routines. Traditional teachings maintain that at such a time the teacher must embody rajo-guṇa—the force of transformation and action—in order to effect change. This form of instruction is thus informed by a kind of blazing energy that helps the student to cut through the haze of tamo-guṇa in order to find right action.

## The Shining Fullness of Rajas: Refinding Our Path

Because of its dual nature, rajas is portrayed quite differently in various scriptures. Some of these texts emphasize the more negative aspects of rajas, while others focus on rajo-guṇa as it manifests when chastened by a sufficient amount of sattva. The commentaries accompanying Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* tend towards this latter, more positive view of rajas.

In fact, both Vyāsa and Śaṅkara connect rajas to the second stage of the Yogic journey—what they describe as a journey out of the valley of darkness (see commentaries on sūtra 1.2). This is a phase of reorientation, and it relates to rajas in its quality of shining fullness. As the sun breaks through clouds of darkness, so too does rajas help the seeker to return to the light, re-entering the path of dharma (duty, virtue), jñāna (wisdom), vairāgya (detachment), and aiśvarya (energy).

Many stories within the Vedic tradition speak to this breakthrough from tamas to rajas. One particularly illustrative tale centers around the positive rajas of Gaṇeśa—the elephant headed deity who is also known as the remover of obstacles. The story begins with the despair of the sage Guru Vyāsa. This great man found himself in a state of utter hopelessness, for he had written many books on spiritual matters, but no students, no fellow seekers acknowledged or shared his concern for such wisdom. Feeling that no one was interested in mokṣa (Self-realization) and that his work was simply useless, he prepared to throw all his books into the river Ganges. He packed these sacred scriptures onto a donkey and set out on his mission. On his way, however, he met the sage Nārada, son of Brahma, who inquired into Vyāsa's sorry state. Rather than tossing all his hard work into the river, Nārada proposed that Vyāsa acquire a scribe to aid him in his endeavor. In fact, he suggested that Vyāsa should have the assistance of Gaṇeśa himself. Coming to his senses, Guru Vyāsa accepted this proposal and made a vow to complete his work. Gaṇeśa offered his services to Vyāsa under the one condition that Vyāsa dictate the work to him unceasingly, without any pauses. The great sage agreed, but in turn required that Gaṇeśa not only transcribe his work, but also try to understand his teachings as he wrote.

In the coming days, Gaṇeśa proved to be the best of all possible scribes. He brought to his duty uninterrupted dedication, forging on no matter what obstacles appeared, no matter what sacrifices were necessary. However, after some time, Gaṇeśa ran out of ink. Without flinching, he broke off one of his tusks and continued writing with his own blood. Due to his remarkable efforts, Gaṇeśa transcribed what is now known as the first part of the great epic of the *Mahābhārata*. The work was completed, and Guru Vyāsa's wisdom was, thankfully, shared with humanity, benefiting and guiding generations of seekers.

This story portrays the highest and most helpful manifestation of rajo-guṇa. We can say that Guru Vyāsa found himself overwhelmed by a cloud of tamas, his vision narrowed by a darkness that we are all bound to encounter at some point or another on our paths. Sage Nārada, as a teacher, represents higher wisdom and clarity (sattva), and thus helped Vyāsa to see a solution to his predicament. It was, however, Gaṇeśa who brought to Guru Vyāsa's situation the necessary push and fire of rajas (action). Through the timely advice of Nārada (sattva) and the powerful dedication and action of Gaṇeśa (rajas), Vyāsa fulfilled his dharma and completed his work. This tale illustrates the phenomenal potential that rajas holds to help us forward on the path when it is brought under the guidance of sattva.

Because of rajas, we are able to act wisely in the world—we are able to take initiative and to fulfill our life's purpose. We find the courage and stamina to live with integrity, surrendering our personal will to divine will and higher law (rta). With the force of rajo-guṇa positively activated in our lives, the four pillars of spiritual life (dharma, jñāna, vairāgya, and aiśvarya) become re-established, and the journey towards Yogic ecstasy can thus continue. With the strengthening of rajas, the yathā śakti (the original supreme energy) comes to bless the seeker and pushes him or her towards the realization of their inherent potential. As the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches, we cannot be attached to inaction. Only by fully entering the path of action, can we finally learn to renounce action. The first step must come before the second.

In regards to the guṇas as well, there is a proscribed order, a series of steps and stages we must take in the process of purification and practice. Vyāsa and Śaṅkara recognized the importance of this sequence by writing extensively on the guṇas in their commentaries on the second sūtra of Patañjali's work. In order to progress on the Yogic journey, an initial examination of the triguṇa (three guṇas) is absolutely necessary. First, tamas needs to be addressed, then the right quality of rajas must be cultivated, until finally we are ready to receive the blessings of sattva. Although sattva is the guṇa that comes closest to the wisdom of the Self, it remains distinct from this transcendent principle. As sattva increases, we open to the light of intuitive knowing, but eventually move beyond even this, towards the abiding consciousness within.

## Sattva Guṇa: The Gateway into Yoga

When both the tamo-guṇa and rajo-guṇa modifications of mind have been purified, the mind-field then operates at its highest level of vibration and in its greatest clarity. According to the ancient commentaries, this kind of consciousness is the gateway into Yoga proper. It is the only state that is subtle and clear enough to provide a glimpse of the Self, the puruṣa. It leads to a variety of ecstatic trance states that are connected with the inner realms of wisdom, intelligence, and intuitive knowing. To reach this stage of sattva-guṇa consciousness, the aspirant must allow his or her personal identity and the dross of the mind to burn in the dual fires of practice and detachment (Usharbudh 1986).

When this "burning" occurs, the dullness and restlessness associated with tamas and rajas are purified. As Usharbudh writes, "Here the buddhi, which is the pure sattva of mind-field, becomes as purified as gold, dwelling in its own nature" (1986, 106). Some souls are said to be blessed based on their previous merit (puṇya), coming into this life with a remarkable disposition (sva-bhāva) that already holds tremendous strength, clarity, and sweetness (sūtra 1.19). Others must engage in hard inner work to establish these virtues within the field of the body-mind. For most of us, the four pillars of spiritual life become established gradually by the accumulated effect of integrated practice. They develop partly through the cultivation of discriminative vision (viveka) and also through increasing contact with the inner mind. As we come to better understand our dharma, it becomes energetically impossible to go against its dictates and guidance. We simply cannot afford to stray or linger any longer. However, until we realize dharma face-to-face in inward contemplation, its sacred laws may remain unclear to us, and we may still find it easy to rationalize our waverings of purpose. It is helpful and sometimes necessary to obtain external direction as to how we should act, but to receive such instruction from the still, small voice within is a radically different and powerfully transformative experience.



An understanding of the guṇas can profoundly alter our perspectives on psychology and spiritual life. More importantly, knowledge of the nature and functions of tamas, rajas, and sattva can help inform our approach to practice and personal development. We are, necessarily, changeable beings, and the teachings on the guṇas take into account the shifting nature of our minds. No single approach is sufficient to move us from Self-alienation to Self-realization. Understanding the complex matrix of behaviours and feelings associated with each of these three modes, we become better able to assess and so work with whatever condition we may find ourselves in. Although Yoga aims at one-pointed concentration and ultimate liberation, it offers philosophies and practices that can guide the seeker towards greater peace and awareness at every stage of life and growth.

