

Bhagavad Gita Chapter 14: Threefold Gunas

Today we are going to explore chapter 14 of the Bhagavad Gita, The Yoga of the Threefold Gunas, Gunatraya Vibhaga Yoga. This chapter is the transitional chapter between the state of God and the state of Absolute Truth. At this stage of the journey one is now in a state of continuous revelation. I should be clear about the nature of revelation at this stage. Most of the time we think of revelation in the mental plane or the awareness plane. But at this point the mind has no action. It is the entire system that is open and the revelatory nature is as if it is absorbing totally the knowledge of existence. This revealing of the nature of the condition in which the God-merged consciousness finds itself is still evolving. It is still not fully complete because there is a stage of bewilderment after the merger with God because everything quiets.

(1:49) All the ecstasies have quieted and you are now just this space, this presence. Periodically you fall back into the feeling of devotion and ecstasies and raptures, but in between there are these spacious quietudes. And nature reveals herself; prakriti reveals herself. That which was in the way of that revelation is no longer so dense. It is permeable. In the previous chapter we oriented to the field and the knower, prakriti and purusha. Prakriti is existence; it is the creation. I call it the Tat. It is the Divine Mother, the dynamic principle of existence. These are very broad concepts that don't have relevance at the early stage of the journey except intellectually. In this chapter the consciousness of the person is no longer experiencing just content. They are experiencing energy. Everything is the energy behind the content. So if someone is angry or afraid they are not confused by the story or the situation, they can feel the energy that is behind these. In this mode of consciousness, the consciousness is actually more capable of experiencing the energies that are affecting people than the story and the content of it.

So the revelation of the energies that are behind it is now the conversation we are going to have about the three gunas. The three gunas are the modes of Prakriti. They are the means by which prakriti moves. If we can imagine that creation is like a swirling ocean of movement, then these movements can be seen as the modes of prakriti. In the Vedas, starting with samkaya, there was a recognition that there are three modes: sattwa, rajas, and tamas. They are all different vibratory frequencies from subtle to dense. Each frequency has a different impact on all of matter. There is a universal current of swirling movement. The Vedas say that intelligent life cannot arise unless there is a planet circling the sun with a moon that is a significant proportion of the size of the planet. There are multiple cycles. There is the planet rotating on its axis. Then there is the moon rotating around the planet that is rotating on its axis. And both are also orbiting the sun.

(5:40) There are these three modes of expression. This is also found in astrology. There is the sun sign, the moon sign and the rising sign. The sun sign is the essential nature of the person and the mission of the person. The moon sign is the feeling, the mood, the personality, the preferences. And the rising sign is like the earth. It is the means by which we put forward a presentation to the world which may or may not correlate to those other two expressions. This grouping together allows for the manifestation of intelligent life. We are going to speak about these three modes and what the Gita has to say about the nature of the gunas in terms of how they manifest in human experience. This has been a useful understanding for me revealed by my teacher in 1999.

We learned to both understand the gunas and track the gunas. You are finding the undercurrent in which your personality operates. The forces that are moving you and how they are moving you is below your surface awareness because we are so caught up in what gets moved rather than the movement itself. What gets moved might be a mood. One way of understanding the gunas is by your moods. If you wake up in the morning and there is a certain mood, then your mind and emotions start moving in response to the mood. Once the mind or emotions start moving in response it they reinforce whatever that mood is. The mood is the underlying energy. There can be a depressed or an energetic or a peaceful mood, which describe tamas, rajas and sattwa.

(8:32) We will see what the Gita says about this. It expands upon this information about the gunas in chapters seventeen and eighteen. Earlier the Gita said that the purpose of this path is to go beyond the three gunas. Therefore recognizing the three gunas is the first thing we have to do to go beyond them. We are now in a place of consciousness where this is possible, where before we were still being run by them. You will notice that the nature of this design is so fundamental that it will keep having its play even after realization, only the person is conscious of it. It knows when to allow it and when to control it.

Chapter 14, Gunatraya Vibhaga Yoga, The Yoga of the Threefold Gunas

The Blessed Lord said:

524. I shall again tell you that supreme knowledge which has enabled the seers to attain perfect perfection.

525. With the help of this knowledge they are able to attain My nature and are not born again even at the time of the new cycle nor are they distressed at the time of dissolution.

"Perfect perfection." Here Krishna is speaking to Arjuna about this idea of perfection. This has to do with manifestation. When the consciousness has reached a certain maturity, then it is naturally going to manifest itself into the creation. The skillfulness, understanding, and tools for that manifestation start in this chapter. They really come forward in chapters sixteen through eighteen, but this is an introduction. Understanding this body of knowledge will give you mastery over what is required so that the manifestation of truth consciousness in the world can be more perfect.

526. Arjuna, My cosmic womb is the Mahadbrahma where I place this seed and from that comes the origin of all beings.

527. This great nature is the conceiving mother and I am the seed-giving father of all forms born in different wombs.

(11:43) This principle, following the same tradition of samkaya, is that prakriti exists as a potentiality. Purusha is what animates that potentiality and converts it into a possibility, then into an actuality. In this way, "I am the seed" means that which is the source of consciousness is what animates this creation, but the creation is what moves. The seed doesn't move. This is beginning to speak of the nature of manifestation.

528. Sattwa, rajas and tamas, these gunas are born from prakriti and tie down the imperishable soul to the body.

529. O sinless one, sattwa, though pure, luminous and flawless, veils the all-pervading Being and binds the soul through attachment to happiness and knowledge.

530. Rajas is passionate by nature; it produces desire and longing for enjoyment which bind the embodied being through attachment to action.

531. Tamas is born of ignorance and deludes all embodied beings. This binds the soul with negligence, indolence and sleepiness.

These are what tie the consciousness into creation. Once the original seed begins to immerse into the creation it becomes consciousness, and consciousness is always moving. It is either moving very slowly or very fast or is completely entrapped. What we are in the Gita is the purusha, the pure consciousness, and our involvement in matter is what entangles us but it also allows us to come into existence, to experience, to evolve, to grow. This is what sucked us in and keeps sucking us in to the bound condition of matter that we are as human beings. Although we are an evolved version of matter, we are still run by the same forces that bind consciousness into stone or plant life or any other structure of existence, including electricity and fusion. It is the animating principle. But we are mostly concerned with the life force and the mind force associated with the body of the human person.

(14:48) Here we are being introduced to the three gunas. Sattwa is the most subtle, the one closest to the origin. The energy, though powerful, is uninterrupted. It is as if being in space you may be moving near the speed of light but for you it is as if no movement is occurring at all. It is vastness and the energy is spaciousness and when there is spaciousness there is a natural peace and quiet. In that peace and quiet we experience happiness as if we are back home or back with what it is that we know is the essential quality of ourselves. Because of the stillness, when things arise we see and experience them more clearly. If we are busy, we overlook so much. When we are quiet we can begin to contemplate on things and go more deeply. The sattwic state is identified with this feeling of happiness and knowingness.

The rajas state is a different frequency. There is an animating principle, a passion and drive, a move to go from here to there. It is much more restless and driven. It drives us to action. We are attached to doing things. We become the doer. We like to wake up in the morning and make plans and think about things to do. Here in the West doingness is very strong. It is less pervasive in less developed parts of the world. All enterprises, all actions—both positive and negative that come from passion—come from rajas. It is not saying good or bad. These are impersonal and can have positive or less positive attributes depending how they are expressed in each person.

(17:40) Tamas is when consciousness becomes less conscious and starts going to sleep. Because of its entanglement with matter, its energy gets absorbed into matter and it starts taking on that characteristic. Matter starts overtaking consciousness. Prakriti starts overtaking purusha. It has a veiling effect on the light of the reality of what we are. Our ability to find the will to take action or

to find the sense of peace is diminished because of that. This gives you some idea that we have the wide open spaces of sattwa, the intermediary spaces of rajas and the denser spaces of tamas.

532. Arjuna, sattwa drives one to joy and peace, rajas to action, while tamas, obscuring knowledge, drives one to error, sleep and sloth.

533. Sattwa prevails overpowering rajas and tamas. Rajas prevails overpowering sattwa and tamas. Likewise tamas prevails overpowering sattwa and rajas.

This is a very important new principle that the Gita is revealing. It is saying that one or the other of these modes can be dominant. They are all there but one will be dominant at any one time or in any one person. When sattwa is dominant it is stronger than rajas and tamas. When rajas is dominant it is stronger than sattwa and tamas. When tamas is dominant it is stronger than sattwa and rajas. One dominates even though the others are there. This is how we are able to track the gunas, by discovering which is running us at any one moment.

534. When the light of knowledge that radiates through all the gates of the body, one should know that sattwa is dominant.

535. When rajas predominates, one is overtaken by greed, activity, action drives, restlessness and craving for enjoyment.

536. Arjuna, when tamas predominates, one experiences laziness, heedlessness, delusion and is even unable to hear the inner voice.

This is expanding on what we have said before. One who is in sattwa has this radiance, they seem bright because the animating consciousness is able to come out to the surface. They tend to be bright but quiet, not the brightness that comes from rajas that has effort behind it. It is a radiance rather than a direct transmission. Rajas is more transmission. Rajas is "overtaken by greed, activity, action drives, restlessness and craving for enjoyment." Look within yourself to find those periods within yourself that no matter what is going on you can't stop moving. But it is not total bondage because you are enjoying your activity, or it is out of a necessity, a purpose like protection or getting what you want. You are often in rajas not knowing it, because the discrimination isn't there. Sattwa is the only way that you can notice that you are in rajas.

(21:54) Tamas is basically where it is too much effort and you don't want to do anything and you are not happy with anything. Even in meditation you can't feel anything. You are just a lump sitting in a chair, unable to access your inner self. Usually your body becomes more sensitive, noise irritates you and you don't like what you are looking at. It is basically where we get cranky or worse. Consciousness is being diminished. That in us which is consciousness knows it is being diminished but it has no means of accessing that diminishment. We could call that misery, not fully understanding the cause or having the wit to come out of it.

537. If the soul leaves the body when there is the dominance of sattwa, it attains the stainless ethereal world of those who know the highest truth.

538. If death comes when rajas is predominant then one is born among those attached to action. Likewise, if death comes during the preponderance of tamas one is born in the wombs of the deluded.

It doesn't sound like you want to die in your sleep. You don't want to go out on a drug high. Wanting to slip in and not have to experience anything is tamas. It is trying to separate itself from whatever that transitional experience may be. This feeds on the verse in the eighth chapter, "Thought at the time of death determines what one attains." The mood you are in or the mode that is current in your system can determine what you attain. This sounds scary because we don't have much say over these modes. They are going on continuously in the general atmosphere and each person becomes a beacon and another current of these three modes. Even if you were in sattwa, if you sit next to someone in tamas, your sattwa will begin to become veiled. Or if someone in the room is rajasic, even if you are in sattwa, the rajas will start overtaking your system and you will become more restless. So this interaction among the gunas is very complex. The ability to control this is not in our hands from the level of prakriti. It is only from the level of purusha, of consciousness, that we will be able to transcend this influence.

(25:48) It is saying that for most of mankind, what occurs to you at the moment of death determines your next life. Is it true? I haven't died yet, and when I do I'll probably have no way to tell you what it is like. And those who could tell you probably died in sattwa, and they came back and told you from the state of sattwa. Also still a crapshoot.

539. It is said that sattwa is the cause of virtuous and pure action, rajas is the cause of sorrow, and tamas is the cause of ignorance.

540. Knowledge and wisdom come from sattwa, greed comes from rajas, but negligence, delusion and ignorance come from tamas.

So you thought you were the source of your virtuous action? You thought you were the source of your accomplishments, right? You thought you were the nasty one that hurt those people and you felt guilty and ashamed by your behavior. The Gita is saying it is not you; it is these three gunas that are running you. They are taking the action. The Gita talks so much about doership and detachment from the outcome of the action. The error is to think we are actually doing the action, as if we are to blame or to credit for whatever is occurring. The error is to assume fault or cause. But we are just the effect of forces we have no say over that are much larger than us and this semblance of control is only an approximation. We are being run by forces that we don't understand, we don't even know are running us, and we believe it is us doing the action, be it for credit or blame, success or failure. We think we can control the process of how the action takes place and we are responsible for the outcome.

The Gita is hinting that it is not you who is acting. It is prakriti who is acting. You are just the enjoyer or the sufferer, whichever side of the form you want to take, or the one who gains the knowledge of it. You are just in a vehicle on a ride where you think you have control, but the steering wheel is not connected to the wheels. It is in our imagination that we think we are in control. There seems to be some semblance of control but that might be because there is something in us that is still able to be true and comes forward, and the actions that arise from that trueness may manifest something that is the intention of the origin and not us. When we align

ourselves with the original intent, there becomes a natural effectiveness. This is what we call dharma. It is not about doing anything, but rather moving into alignment with what is being done.

(29:44) I love the analogy of body surfing. It wasn't me who got me to the shore. It was the wave that got me to the shore. But the only way that the wave could get me there was for me to be in right relationship to the wave and then I could come all the way to the shore. So moving into the right relationship of these modes of actions that we are all subject to is what this chapter is pointing to, as well as the fact that it is not us that does anything. It is something else that is acting through us; nature is acting through us for reasons that are incomprehensible. So you can't know that this wrong action wasn't useful, or this good action didn't cause harm. It is the current that determines, not us.

541. If one is able to maintain the level of sattwa one goes upward. If the level of rajas is maintained it enables one to stay in the middle. However, if the level of tamas is maintained one goes downward.

Now the Gita is talking about how you can move into relationship with these modes. If the cycle of sattwa is reinforced consciously by consciousness then it grows and becomes stronger. If the cycle of rajas is consented to, then the rajas becomes dominant. If tamas is consented to, which we tend to do because by its nature we lose our choice, then it gets dominant. That is why negative thinking reinforces the negative story and positive thinking reinforces the positive story. We do have some say with what we attend to. This is why we have to work to create new habits, but once created, we need to keep empowering them. No matter how strong your positive habit is, the gunas are all still there. The negative habits are still there.

542. When one is able to see that there is not other agent than the three gunas and knows that which is higher than these gunas, he attains My nature.

543. When the embodied being transcends these three gunas which are the source of its embodiment, it is freed from the pains of birth, aging and death, and attains the state of immortality.

(33:19) Now Gita is pointing to the thing it has been pointing to all along: Know the Sat, know the Truth, know the reality of what you are. In knowing that reality you will be able to see how these forces work, and you will be able to withdraw your consent, withdraw your support, withdraw the habitual enjoyment of those things. In that process you will strengthen that which remains when it is no longer allowing itself to be engaged in the promptings of the three gunas, positive or negative, and in this way attain your original nature. Every time you apply conscious effort, that effort comes from the highest possibility that exists in nature for moving us toward the Truth. Sacrifice is the highest expression of consciousness in the world. It is always a process of eradicating itself from its identification with the content of existence.

When we restrain ourselves we strengthen that which is capable of doing that. In the interim it takes effort in order to establish in ourselves that which is the essential reality from which all this emerges. At some point this effort is not necessarily required because as the consciousness starts turning to its source, to its origin, it loses interest in those things that would normally entangle it. And these things naturally fall away as one moves into a deeper relationship to one's own nature.

Arjuna said:

544. O Lord, what are the marks of one who has gone beyond the three gunas and how does he behave? And how does he go beyond these three gunas?

The Blessed Lord said:

545. Arjuna, when one neither feels the attraction to prolong the cycle of sattwas nor also feels the compulsion to curtail the cycle of rajas or tamas in his system,

546. And remains calm, as if a witness, when the gunas are active and knows that the gunas are interacting with the gunas and there is nothing to be perturbed in it, he is said to have transcended the gunas.

There it is guys, right there: There is the formula. Arjuna is at a state of consciousness where this is bad news. He is living in this ecstasy and bliss and wants this happy high sattwic state to last forever and not fall back into that stuff. Krishna is saying that the way you handle this is by allowing them. You have to be at a very developed state of consciousness to do this because you may just be indulging yourself, pretending that you are transcending. This is the danger of the tantric path, by prematurely trying to rise up out of the rajas and the tamas without sufficient strength, and unwittingly justifying it because it is satiated. But satiation feeds the cycle. It is only in the starving of the impulse that it completes.

(37:38) In order for that to be done we cannot feed the original impulse. We have to allow it to arise without giving it more energy. For example, you may have a wonderful meditation state and you come out and there is the world of demand. You may resent going back into the world. Then you have laid claim to the sattwic state and you have laid claim to your repulsion to the rajasic state. That feeds them. Laying claim to the repulsion is the way we keep things in place. Wanting and attraction is what allows them to dissipate. But because of the nature of duality, one wanting an attraction fulfilled automatically creates a repulsion that will come up to be expressed again. So you can't allow yourself to get caught up into that mechanism that occurs between indulging the pleasure and repulsion of that we consider not pleasure. This is what the human ego does.

In this state the consciousness has to be resting in its origin in silence and stillness. But the action could be running through you. You could be angry or irritated or reactive. There has to be a strong place so that when there is the initial overtaking there is no longer a consenting to it and it winds down. No guilt or shame, just this rising, "Oh, look at that. There I am doing it again." And then letting it go. This capacity of consciousness to be resting in that witnessing or detached place is what is required and it can't be just in the mental. It has to be in the entire purified system. It has to go to the level from which the impulse arose. So purifying is the disengaging of our consciousness, attachment and identification with whatever it is. For example, take sex. If we wish to transcend that energy we have to learn over time to restrain it to the sufficient extent that even if we get overtaken, this is where we come back to. Then it completes. There is no recrimination or sense of failure. It is just what happened and nothing is added to the outcome.

(41:00) We make our error when we think we are doing so well and then something comes up and we are caught back up again. Then it is the shaming and guilt and self-condemnation that creates the karma that keeps it going. We have to find that core quality in ourselves that is not touched by these things, that knows the essential purity. This is just the vehicle that you were born into that is doing this. Then these impulses and tendencies will simply exhaust and as time goes on they will lose their energy and exhaust. So there is no longer a preference. You are not hanging onto the high state or avoiding the low state. You are no longer trying to be in a state of detachment. You can allow yourself to swim in the waters that human beings swim in and not take it personally or get overtaken.

This is the key of manifestation. Prior to this part, the best way you can stay connected to your original reality is transcendence. But if you are going to manifest you have to enter into this domain of the gunas and become skillful. This chapter is pointing to the fact that part of this skillfulness is inclusion, recognizing what is arising but not feeding it or taking action based on it. Then in time you will gain the ability to give or withdraw your consent to every level of your nature. This is the development and the perfect perfection that the Gita is pointing to. It includes everything. It rejects nothing. Yet it keeps manifesting for the highest possibility for love and truth and wisdom that is available in that moment.

547. One who accepts pain and pleasure equally, who is firmly established in the Self, who views a clod, a stone, and gold in the same manner, to whom a friend and an enemy are alike and who is steadfast is praise and censure,

548. For whom honor and dishonor, friend and enemy are the same and who has renounced the sense of doership in all undertakings, such a person is said to have transcended the three gunas.

549. Arjuna, one who serves Me with unswerving devotion also transcends these gunas and becomes fit to attain the highest state of Brahman.

550. Verily, I am the abode of the Brahman, the goal of liberation, the foundation of eternal law and the source of eternal bliss.

Thus ends the fourteenth chapter of Gita entitled The Yoga of the Threefold Gunas.

(44:38) I want to clarify that Krishna is revealing to Arjuna that there is another task that can take you to the same state, and that is through action, through service. Through selfless giving you will find yourself making service to the divine more important than the inclinations of the three gunas of your nature. You will overcome the tendency to be sucked into these things because you will be engaged in purposeful action for bringing forward the original intent into creation in whatever means is available to you. Then transcendence occurs naturally because your priorities are reorganized such that these things become lesser and not important to what is before you to be done. The Gita is always about action. Ultimately, realization is to be brought into the world and manifested. There are these two paths: the path of self-inquiry and personal mastery, and the other path of self-giving and action for a purpose greater than yourself. This completes the revelation of chapter fourteen. All glory to Gurudev.