

CHAPTER 16

GUNAS: A PATH TO SPIRITUAL REFINEMENT

Dr. D.C. Rao

The goal of Hindu spiritual practice is being able to live in the world and yet be above it. By recognizing the all-pervasive presence of the Divine and understanding our relationship with the world, we can engage in the world without being agitated and distressed. This blissful state can be achieved only by a mind that is highly refined, one that is no longer blinded by ignorance, selfish desire and fear. Hindu scriptures offer many ways to refine the mind and gain freedom from the bondage of worldly attachments. One of them is based on the philosophical concept of *gunas*.⁷¹

Gunas are best understood as building blocks of nature. Everything in the whole created universe is composed of *gunas*. This applies to physical matter as well as subtle energies. Rocks, plants, animals and human beings all represent a varied combination of *gunas*. Only Pure Consciousness, known as *Brahman* or *Atman*, is our true nature and is free of *gunas*. The particular combination of *gunas* in each living being determines its personalities and behavior. Unlike other parts of creation, human beings have the capacity to modify the play of *gunas* in their lives, refining their minds through mindful awareness and practice. Understanding the pattern of *gunas* in the make-up of our personality is a path to refining our minds and evolving spiritually.

One of the literal meanings of the word *Guna* is ‘rope.’ It is the *gunas* that constitute the vast variety of objects and experiences in the world, to which we react with attachment or aversion driven by the pattern of *gunas* in our own personalities. This is how we are bound –by these ‘ropes’-- to worldly matters and remain ignorant of the divinity in our true nature.

Hindu scriptures use a three-fold classification of *gunas* that may combine in an infinite range of variations:

- *Sattva*: purity, knowledge, peace, contentment, clarity, humility, cheerfulness, inspiration, etc.
- *Rajas*: agitation, restlessness, desire, anger, greed, arrogance, ambition, competitiveness etc.
- *Tamas*: inertia, ignorance, darkness, sloth, stubbornness, fear, dullness, lack of motivation etc.

All three *gunas* are present in each of us to varying degrees and, at any time, one or the other might influence our thinking to a greater or lesser extent. To the extent that we allow the *gunas*

⁷¹ Chapter 14 and parts of Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Bhagavad Gita* are devoted to explaining this concept.

to drive our interactions with the world, that prevents us from realizing our own essential nature as eternal and blissful. The impediment created by our *gunas* is relatively small with *Sattva*, more with *Rajas* and much more with *Tamas*. The purity and clarity of *Sattva* make it easy for us to connect with the Light within; the agitation of *Rajas* disturbs our minds, which makes it more difficult; and the darkness and sloth of *Tamas* obscures the Light completely. Overcoming the barrier created by *Sattva* is described as the equivalent of blowing smoke away from fire; overcoming *Rajas* is like having to wipe dust off a mirror; and overcoming *Tamas* is like having to wait patiently for a baby to be born.⁷² The goal of spiritual practice is to gradually overcome the *Tamas* by increasing *Rajas*; then to replace *Rajas* with *Sattva*; and finally to transcend all the *gunas* altogether.

The primary benefit of studying the concept of *gunas* is that it provides us with a tool to monitor spiritual progress in our daily lives. The Bhagavad Gita itself shows how this concept can be applied by illustrating the behavioral influence of each *guna* in many different activities of our daily lives.⁷³ Food, for example: when *Sattva* predominates, we choose food that is pure, substantial and healthy; when *Rajas* predominates we choose food that is highly flavored, dry and causes pain; and when *Tamas* predominates we choose food that is stale, impure and unhealthy. Another example is charity: when *Sattva* predominates, we engage in charity as a duty and direct it discreetly to a worthy cause; when *Rajas* predominates we give reluctantly, but with ostentation and in expectation of a return; when *Tamas* predominates, we help unworthy causes in an insulting manner. In every aspect of our lives, our behavior is determined by the particular *guna* or combination of *gunas* that happens to predominate in us at that time. Introspection and reflection soon reveal to us which *guna* best characterized our own behavior in a given situation. We can identify our persistent tendencies and assess whether or not they are in our best interest. This shows us a clear path toward self-improvement.

The path of spiritual improvement lies in consciously modifying our behavior to reflect *sattva* rather than *rajas*, and *rajas* rather than *tamas* so that we purify our minds and progress towards the goal of connecting with our true nature. When we are dominated by *tamas*, feeling dull and lacking motivation, the remedy is to get engaged in any kind of activity so as to activate the *rajas* in us. When we feel agitated and are driven by greed or desire, it is a sign of *rajas*; the remedy is to calm our minds by deep breathing or meditation and recall the pain caused by ignorance and attachment. That will bolster the *sattva* in us and control the scope of *rajas* and *tamas*.⁷⁴

By recognizing the play of the different *gunas* in our behavior, we can identify our flaws without the self-condemnation that cripples personal growth. Although we are endowed with a combination of *gunas* at birth based on our actions and spiritual development in previous lives,

⁷² See *The Holy Geeta*, commentary by Swami Chinmayananda on *Bhagavad Gita* verse 3.38.

⁷³ See *Bhagavad Gita* 14.6-18; 17.4-22; and 18.20-39. The main points are summarized in the Appendix: "How to identify Gunas". Also see "Not too loose, Not too tight, Just right" by Swamini Vimalananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2011. ISBN 978-81-7597-208-7.

⁷⁴ See *Srimad Bhagavatam* 11.13.1

we have the capacity to modify our behavior and upgrade the profile of our *gunas* in this life. It is this objectification of our *gunas* that enables us to observe and modify our behavior without debilitating guilt. Being more accepting of our own less-than-perfect behavior helps us to better understand the behavior patterns of others and be more forgiving of their actions towards us.

The more mindful we are in identifying our dominant *guna* and the more diligent in upgrading our behavior, the more we refine our minds and prepare it for spiritual understanding. *Gunas* are no more than attributes of our personality, not part of our intrinsic nature or our true Self. *Gunas* are subject to change; my Self is not. While spiritual discipline is designed to maximize *Sattva* in our personality, the ultimate aim of spiritual practice is to transcend the *gunas* altogether and break away from their bondage –even from the silken rope of *sattva*. The *Bhagavad Gita* describes how an enlightened person transcends the *gunas*, becoming totally unperturbed by the ups and downs of life.⁷⁵

APPENDIX: How to Identify Gunas

⁷⁵ See *Bhagavad Gita* 14.24,25. Also see *Srimad Bhagavatam* 11.22.6

APPENDIX: HOW TO IDENTIFY GUNAS

	SATTVA	RAJAS	TAMAS
KEY [Bhagavad Gita verse #]	Purity, knowledge	Agitation, false projections	Inertia, ignorance
ATTRIBUTES [BG 14.11-13]	Light, upward movement, clarity, purity, inspiration, warmth	Activity, movement, agitation, restlessness, throbbing	Darkness, heaviness, inertia, downward movement, lack of clarity, sloth, dullness, stupidity
EMOTIONS	Faith, devotion, humility, contentment, cheerfulness, peace, detachment, yearning for liberation	Desire, Anger, greed, hypocrisy, arrogance, jealousy, egoism, envy, ambition, competitiveness,	Sloth, lack of enthusiasm, stubbornness
BONDAGE [BG 14.6-8]	knowledge and happiness	action	Negligence, sloth and sleep
WORSHIP [BG 17.4]	Gods	Demi-gods and demons	Ghosts and spirits
FOOD [BG 17.8-10]	Tasty, soft, substantial, that promote life, health, joy	Bitter, sour, spicy, dry, burning, causing pain, grief, disease	Stale, tasteless, putrid, impure
ENTERPRISE (Yajna) [BG 17.11-13]	Without desire for fruit; according to scriptures; firm faith in duty;	Seeking fruit; hypocritical; ostentatious;	Fail to observe scriptures or right practice; without faith;
TAPAS [BG 17.14-19]			
a) PHYSICAL	Service to betters; Purity, straightforward, non-injury;	To gain honor, ostentatious, fickle and transitory	With foolish obstinacy; causing pain; with object of hurting others;
b) SPEECH	Causes no agitation; truthful; pleasant; beneficial; scriptural study;		
c) MIND	Serene, kind, silent; self-control; purity of motive		

CHARITY [BG 17.20-22]	as a duty; at fit time and place; worthy cause; expect nothing in return;	Expect return; reluctant;	Wrong place or time; unworthy cause; without respect;
RENUNCIATION BG 18.7-9	Performing right action while abandoning attachment and fruit of action;	Abandoning actions that are painful or may cause discomfort;	Abandoning obligatory duties;
KNOWLEDGE [BG 18.20-22]	Sees the One reality in all; undivided in the divided	Sees plurality in the world; conscious of distinctions;	Clings obstinately to a false view or a partial view as if it were the whole
ACTION [BG 18.23]	Action as required; No attachment; no desire for fruit;	Longing for fruit; ego boosting; with much effort	Careless of consequence; based on misconception;
ACTOR [BG 18.26-28]	Unaffected by success/failure; non-egoistic; enthusiastic;	Passionate, desire for fruit; greedy, harmful, impure, full of delight/grief;	Unsteady, vulgar, unbending, cheating, malicious, lazy, despondent, procrastinating
UNDERSTANDING [BG 18.30-32]	Knows Dharma correctly	Confuses dharma and its opposite	Perverted understanding of dharma
STEADFASTNESS [BG 18.33-35]	Restraining mind, prana and senses by Yoga	sustains duty, pleasure, wealth, Craving fruit of action	Clings to sleep, fear, grief, depression, arrogance
PLEASURE [BG 18.37-39]	Born from within; Like poison at first, nectar in the end;	Born from sense pleasure; Like nectar at first, poison in the end;	Delusory from beginning to end; born of sleep, indolence, negligence;
REBIRTH [BG 14.14-15]	Pure world of the learned	World of activists	World of the stupid
FRUIT [BG 14.16]	Pure	Pain	Ignorance
RESULT [BG 14.17]	Knowledge	Greed	Carelessness, delusion
EVOLUTION [BG 14.18]	Upward	Static	Downward