



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

May 2017 Contemplation:

Exploring Yoga's Multidimensionality #5

Aliveness in Technicolor

By Swami Nirmalananda & Rukmini Abbruzzi

“Get up. Organize the kids, breakfast and lunch boxes. Take them to school and go to work. Barrel through the day, stop at the market on the way home and cook dinner. Manage their homework and school projects while doing laundry. Then crash on the couch. Repeat. Daily. That was my life before yoga,” says Swami Nirmalananda.

The American lifestyle specializes in rajo guna — speedy, stressful and fueled by caffeine, featuring multitasking and hair-trigger reactivity. Predictably, exhaustion kicks in at the end of the day, or you simply drug yourself with alcohol, food or other substances so you can succumb to tamo guna — tired, lazy, even blissfully numb, with your get-up-and-go having gotten up and gone.

But there's a third option: sattva guna — peaceful, with a clarity of mind and sense of ease. Sattva makes you able to be active or restful, but without the churning of rajo guna or the density and resistance of tamo guna. These three qualities pervade all that exists, though one will predominate.

Spring has sprung in the northern hemisphere. It's just becoming warm enough to shed your winter coat and boots. If you dare, you can stand outside barefoot, with new grass tickling your toes and a gentle breeze brushing your skin. Prana, the energy of aliveness, makes the leaves unfurl and flowers burst into bloom. Prana is creating the world in a riot of different colors, shapes and textures by taking on the three qualities: clarity, activity and density — sattva guna, rajo guna and tamo guna respectively.

Gardenias express sattva guna with their round, fragile petals. Tiger lilies express rajo guna, especially the bright red ones with their pointed petals and leaves. They're more fiery and sharp. In the damp dark of the forest floor, mushrooms express tamo guna. They're closer to the ground, thick stemmed with heavy caps and grow in the dark.

While one guna predominates, the other two gunas are always present. It takes all three qualities to bring anything into existence. While the gardenia bloom is sattvic, the green leaves are thick and heavy, expressing tamo guna. Rajo guna is also there, keeping the plant alive and reproducing itself through its flowers and seeds.

You have all three qualities. Prana, energy coalescing into individuality, becomes you by taking on the colorations of the gunas in a particular proportion that's unique to you. Every human being is different due to their unique ratios. You may be predominantly rajasic: fast fiery, always busy and running on adrenaline. If you are more tamasic, you're more relaxed about things, go with the flow or don't go at all. You like to take your time, especially since there's really no need to get worked up about things. Or you could be more sattvic: wanting your environment to be spacious, clean and quiet. You like light foods and manage your life so there's little or no stress, so you can focus on peace and happiness, maybe even spiritual endeavors.

While you have your predominant nature, there's also an interplay of the gunas throughout your life and throughout your day. In certain parts of the day, you're more rajasic, getting things done. At other times, you come to a complete stop. Perhaps it's when you get home from work, or in the late afternoon when you need a pick-me-up because tamo guna is predominating. There's a time of day where you're more sattvic, usually in the morning, when you first wake up, which is why yogis meditate in the morning. Your sattvic quality puts you in sync with Consciousness, giving you easy access to a meditative state.

You might prefer one guna over the others. Especially as a yogi, you can get enamored with sattva guna, wanting peace and purity in your life. Many of the meditative traditions emphasize sattva for the quality of your mind as well as your lifestyle.

Your mind is like the water in a lake. Wind or a passing boat churns the water, and you cannot see down to the rocks and little fishes at the bottom. Rajo guna is at play. After the boat is gone or the wind dies down, the water becomes smooth, but the silt from the bottom is churned up so you cannot see through

the density, tamo guna. When the silt settles to the bottom, the water is clear all the way through. You can easily see the rocks, fishes and grasses. That's sattva guna.

When rajo guna is churning your mind, all you can see is your fast, turbulent thoughts. When tamo guna predominates, it's peaceful, but the density means you can't see through your mind to what's deeper within you. Tamo guna takes over because of exhaustion, illness or depression, even due to resistance or stubbornness.

Cultivating a sattvic mind gives you an opportunity to look into your own depths, to explore the Consciousness that you're made of. All of yoga's practices help you cultivate a sattvic mind and lifestyle. Yet even sattva guna can limit you, Patanjali warns:

Tad-vairaagyaad-api do.sa biiija-k.saye kaivalyam

By non-attachment even to that [a sattvic mind], the very seed of bondage
is destroyed and thus follows kaivalya. — Yoga Sutras 3.51

Do you want to be enlightened? The sage assumes that's why you're doing yoga. He says you only get there when you're not attached, not even to a sattvic mind. This means that while you're dependent on things around you to be a certain way, to create your inner state, you stay bound. Even being dependent on having a sattvic mind is a trap.

When your mind is sattvic, you're nice to everybody. You don't feel the need for anything; you're not resisting or desiring anything. You're content where you are. It sounds pretty good! But if you're sattvic because you're living in a peaceful environment or because the people in your life make you happy, you're still bound. You must manage everything and everyone so that nothing rocks your boat. You have to be in control all the time. Thus you lose one of the essential qualities of sattva — ease.

Worse, everything could be flowing so smoothly that you get lulled into complacency. You're happy with a sattvic life. It's comfortable, pretty and even easeful. You're so settled with it that you miss the bigger goal — your own Divinity. Sattva guna is a pretty trap, a gilded cage, but it binds you nonetheless.

Yoga says no guna is better than the others. You have all the qualities of nature functioning within you. Rukmini shares, "Learning about the gunas, I realized I could work with them to my advantage. I catch the wave of rajo guna and use it to accomplish things. I allow the sattvic quality of early morning to support my meditation and yoga practices. When I'm experiencing tamo guna, it's a sign that I need some rest."

Whether your mind is dense, churning or clear, it's still only your mind. YOU are the one who has this mind. Yoga pivots your attention to look inward, deeper than your mind, to experience the Self. Thus you know, not merely your pranic aliveness, but your own Self, the Source of your aliveness. You're living life from a deeper level inside.

Then you can perceive your mind without getting caught in it. You can honor it and utilize it as the glorious tool that it is, while you know that you are MORE. You are Shiva, the One Divine Reality that is everything that exists, and is beyond everything that exists. *Svaroop*[®] yoga specializes in giving you this inner knowing.

I dare you. Go outside barefoot, in the grass or mud. Stand in Tadasana, with your big toes side-by-side and even out the weight in both feet. Stand for 5 minutes, and experience the qualities of nature and the aliveness arising within you. Who is experiencing the breeze in your hair, the sun in your eyes? You are the One who is looking through all eyes. To know and be the One that you are, do more yoga.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "EXPLORING YOGA'S MULTIDIMENSIONALITY," OUR THEME FOR 2017, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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