

Gunas and Vasanas

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Piro: Dear James, I'm still a little confused about the relationship between the *gunas*, the *vasanas* and self-inquiry, but the question is not clear enough yet to be succinct. No doubt it will be cleared up as I continue to watch the *Vivekachoodamani* videos (which are extremely helpful).

James: The *vasanas* are tendencies to act. They are located in the causal body and are not available for perception. The causal body is composed of the three *gunas*. The *vasanas* arise out of the causal body, so a particular *vasana* is colored by the *guna* from which it arises. Desire, for instance, comes from *rajoguna*. It appears in the subtle body as the thought "I want." It causes action. "I hate you" is a thought born of *tamoguna*. It doesn't motivate action, as it is just a mood. It has to pair with *rajas* to motivate action. "I know the tree" is a thought born of *sattva*. Etc.

Piro: Your explanation of the *vasanas* and the *gunas* is helpful in getting more clear about the question that has been brewing for several days. If I may, I'd like to explore this further with you.

I know I am awareness, ordinary, always present and complete. Vedanta has revealed that and I know it's my true identity. However, certain thoughts/feelings will arise and I am suddenly acting and believing that I'm the doer again. As a person, I'm back in a time-oriented, object-oriented perspective acting out what is clearly a *vasana*. It's clear because it's familiar, like an old pair of jeans, the result of past actions manifesting as a known pattern, i.e. some old idea of limitation, such as lack of worth or the need to control. Eventually the knowledge that I am awareness "returns" (I know I haven't gone anywhere in reality), and that pattern, which may be very subtle, weakens or dissolves completely. Looking at the *vasanas*, I often see a cause-and-effect relationship, and it seems practical to try to modify the behavior or at least to see it as *karma yoga*; however, sometimes this cause-and-effect relationship is not obvious. As a *jiva* seeking a steady knowledge of my true identity, what is the best way to inquire into these unperceived *vasanas*?

James: It seems like you already have a good way, Piro. A *vasana* is just a tendency, and you have a (common) tendency to think you are unworthy, which you know isn't true. So all that's left is to identify it when it arises, negate it as untrue, take a stand as awareness and wait with the *karma yoga* attitude until the emotion associated with it disappears. Finally, appreciate the fact that it's not a constant thought and you're not on meds. Be patient; it takes time to remove bad thoughts.

Piro: The *gunas* each have a distinct quality, a "smell," so to speak, that distinguishes one from another. A *vasana* such as low self-esteem is colored by the *tamoguna*, for example (at least that's my conclusion).

James: That's correct.

Piro: My question is, if one understands and recognizes the character, the energies, of *rajoguna* and *tamoguna* manifesting in the subtle body, would it be a more effective means of knowledge to examine one's experience from the *guna* "point of view" instead of from the *vasana* "point of view"?

James: Absolutely. Looking at experience from the *guna/nirguna* point of view is called *triguna vibhava yoga*. *Gunas* subsume *vasanas*, so if you can manipulate the *gunas*, the proportions of *rajas* and *tamas* with reference to *sattva* are reduced and corresponding *rajasic* and *tamasic* thoughts are reduced. Transforming the mind with this *yoga* involves creating a disciplined lifestyle that conforms to *dharma* in every way.

Piro: Part of my confusion around the *gunas* in general is the idea that they cloud or mask the *sattvic* mind and "reinforce" ignorance, and yet these are the energies flowing in everything. Added to this idea that they have the power to confuse me is the recognition that *rajas* and *tamas* are necessary for action in this life, and that without *rajas* I wouldn't bother finishing building the house, for example.

James: They may obscure *sattva*, but they don't obscure you, awareness. Yes, *rajas* is necessary. Speaking as a *jiva*, I have a fair amount of *rajas* but I dedicate the work to *Isvara*, so there is no stress and the experience of the self – the *sattvic* peace – remains undisturbed as I act. Building *Isvara's* house is as valuable as practicing self-inquiry. In this way when you saw a board or pound a nail you are *Isvara* sawing and pounding *Isvara*. I did manual labor to support myself as recently as seven years ago (I'm 75) and I enjoyed it. In fact it *sattva*-ized my mind.

Piro: I hope this makes sense and that I'm not making it overly complicated. In any case, I trust the continued study of Vedanta and the application of inquiry will answer all questions but I look forward to your response.

James: Yes, indeed. Don't change a thing. Renew your commitment to the teaching every day by studying scripture and soldier on. *Moksa* is freedom in spite of *samsara*.

If you commit yourself to *karma yoga* and *jnana yoga* you already have the basis for a high sense of self-esteem, Piro. Be proud of yourself for your commitment to self-inquiry. Understand that *Isvara* would not have revealed Vedanta if you were not qualified, and thank yourself for following your *svadharma*.

Piro: James, thank you very much for your response. It is extremely helpful and has clarified several questions. I especially appreciate your experience with *Isvara's* house! ☺ "*Moksa* is freedom in spite of *samsara*" says it all. These are the teachings I've been waiting for my whole life. The self-esteem issue is falling away like autumn leaves off the tree. God bless you!