

The Three *Gunas*

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Shanti: I'm so happy you are having the webinar. So often lately I become aware that I have forgotten who I truly am.

Sundari: If you become aware that you have forgotten who you truly are, how could you have forgotten? Who is that knows that you have forgotten? Shanti forgets. It's okay. Until the self-knowledge has permanently removed ignorance of your true nature, this is bound to happen. Just observe Shanti going through the motions, getting upset about this or that. It has nothing to do with you.

Shanti: Sometimes I can I know who I am and I feel great, but then later I fall back into ignorance again, into old patterns of thinking and behaviour. Life always seems to be a roller coaster ride. When I think that I'm finally getting somewhere, seeing everything clearly, knowing that I am awareness and the world is just happening, on the turn of a dime it can change and I become unconscious again. It's like I'm vacillating between two worlds, being completely at peace with everything, happy and content one moment, and the next moment I get caught up in *maya* again, becoming sad at what I am experiencing and desperately wanting to find a way back to truth and peace.

Sundari: From which perspective is Shanti asking this question? Who is falling into ignorance and goes unconscious? Shanti, who is the self under the spell of ignorance, apparently forgets her true nature and gets caught up in the apparent reality. Continually bring your attention to this every time you find yourself talking from the perspective of the reflected reality (Shanti) and make this your practice. Or apply the opposite thought (*pratipaksabavana*). In the apparent reality (*samsara*) nothing stays the same, everything is unstable and constantly changing. It is its nature to be so, that is the *dharma* field and it is not under your control. This field, the causal body, or macrocosmic ignorance (*Isvara*), is made up of the three *gunas*: *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*.

The *guna* teaching – *triguna vibhava yoga* – is my favourite because I have been interested in psychology and how the mind functions for as long as I can remember. I never found the answers I was looking for in any of the traditional schools of psychology, nor with anything else the world has to offer, spiritual or otherwise. In Vedanta I found home, as do all who are ready for it. James is the only teacher of Vedanta who has expounded extensively on the *guna* teaching. It is so very important. I am very keen for him to write a whole text on this, as it has not been done before.

Here is a brief overview:

Isvara, before the projection of *maya*, refers to pure consciousness/awareness, or *brahman*. *Maya* is a power (*shakti*) that exists in awareness or it would not be unlimited. *Maya* operating ignorance is also referred to as *Isvara*, or God, the Creator, the *dharma* field, the macrocosmic mind, or the causal body. It is made up of the three energies or *gunas*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, although

it's nature is pure *sattva*. The creation comes to be with the emergence of the three *gunas*. *Sattva* is intelligence, knowledge; *tamas* is the heavy, dense energy of matter; *rajas* is the mode of action or desire.

The *gunas* exist whether you like it or not, whether you are aware of them or not. As you are the self, they have nothing to do with you. They are not a problem unless you (as Shanti) identify with them or if you are unaware of their existence. They condition the subtle body 24/7. Liberation, or self-knowledge, means that you have assimilated the knowledge that you are whole and complete, that the person you seem to be walking around as is no more than a notion in you, awareness. When you know who you are, in other words, when ignorance of yourself as awareness (*avidya*) has been removed by self-knowledge, *maya* (macrocosmic ignorance and its effects) still obtains and the *gunas* continue to condition the subtle body (the person) – but they are rendered nonbinding and the doer is negated by the knowledge. They do not bother you, awareness, because you know that you are not the subtle body, the person/doer.

The *gunas* are called macrocosmic *vasanas*, i.e. they belong to *Isvara*, or the Total, the creation, not to Shanti. Until Shanti understands the *gunas*, they are in the driver's seat, so to speak. Shanti thinks she is a doer, so they drive her relentlessly until she gains the direct knowledge of her true nature as awareness. Even when the knowledge is indirect they are in control. In other words, they condition you even if you have not fully realised you ARE the self but still think of yourself AS the self. This is why Vedanta is so big on direct knowledge – only it will set you free.

So start observing them. It won't take long, because they are always operating. Each of your thoughts and feelings are *guna*-driven. See which ones are *sattvic*, which are *tamasic* and which are *rajasic*. Understand the implications of identifying with each kind of energy and the thoughts they cause.

Start looking at the world around you from this perspective and you will be amazed how clear it all becomes. It is like having 20/20 vision. When you are projecting, passionate, angry, frantic, over-stimulated/active/driven, extroverted, afraid, dissatisfied, insatiable, blaming, possessive, jealous, controlling, can't sleep, wired and tired – (to name a few, but you get the drift) – that is *rajas*.

When you are in denial, holding onto the past or using it as a reason to justify action or inaction, a big one – making excuses for why you can't be honest or make decisions (like you don't want to hurt someone), dithering, living in potentia, waiting for the right moment as a justifiable avoidance strategy to deny your own fears – another big one – can't wake up or get out of bed in the morning, exhausted, complaining, dull, lazy, depressed, feeling a victim, feeling the wrongs of the world on your shoulders, unloved or that the world is unloving or a bad place, etc. – that is *tamas*.

When you are peaceful, calm, clear-thinking, balanced, compassionately honest, loving, secure, taking appropriate action, owning all projections, cleaning up your *karma* dispassionate (especially about your own thoughts and feelings), unconcerned, untouched by the opinion of others or the results of your actions, enjoying objects for what they are, i.e. fully aware of all their inherent defects, satisfied, whole and complete, etc. – that is *sattva*.

The *gunas* are programmed ways of thinking and acting. They are totally predictable. When you are too *rajasic* it will trigger Shanti's fear-based thoughts and actions, she will project her stuff onto others or the world and she will go unconscious, as you put it. She will be totally driven by passion and desire to gain whatever object she is fixated on. When Shanti is too *tamasic*, she

will be in denial and avoidance, justifying her actions and thoughts to herself and others. At times she will be cruel, uncaring, self-absorbed, bored. When Shanti is *sattvic*, she will be peaceful and calm. They all work together and at any given time one of them will predominate. *Rajas* and *tamas* are inseparable. I call them “the terrible twins.” James calls them “incestuous bedfellows.” For instance, when you are *rajasic*, projecting outwards and extroverted, *tamas* will be right there to deny it. They are just the programmes that run Shanti (and everything else) as long as she is identified with herself as a person. They are a problem if you do not have the knowledge of how reality functions and if you identify with them. For instance, if you find yourself saying, “I am *rajasic*,” or, “I am *tamasic* today,” you are identified with them. Shanti may be *rajasic/tamasic* today, but you are not. Remember, you are the knower of Shanti, therefore you are the knower of the *gunas*. Again, whenever you find yourself saying, “I am this or that,” press “pause” and ask yourself: “Who is talking here? Which perspective am I identified with, the reflected self (Shanti) or the Self?” If you can consistently do this, it will change your life forever.

All three *gunas* have an upside as well as a downside, as does everything in this apparent reality. Without *rajas*, you would never get out of bed in the morning or accomplish anything. *Rajas* is the active, creative force. It is the mode of passion. Not all desire or passion is bad; you need a passion for self-inquiry and a strong desire for *moksa*. It is one of the qualifications. *Tamas* is the very substance of matter, a heavy and steady energy. Without it you not be capable of endurance. You would not have the staying power to complete anything and would more or less float off the planet. You would not be earthed – AND you would never be able to sleep. With too much *sattva* you can get stuck in a golden cage of experiential bliss, thinking happiness is the Holy Grail and that you are quite special. *Sattva* is not the be-all and end-all, even though *sat*, awareness (of which *sattva* is the most subtle manifestation), is actually your true nature. *Sattva* is a state of mind that is experienced by the doer, the subtle body. It is purely experiential, and therefore does not last. It certainly will not free you from dependence on objects or end the subtle existential suffering that comes with it. Yet it is a valuable energy for inquiry and should be cultivated. It is the *guna* springboard for self-knowledge.

The majority of people who go to Tiruvannamalai are looking for a way to cope with their unresolved psychological issues or a balm to salve their emotional wounds. They have the vanity to think they are pure and holy because they have had some kind of transcendental spiritual experiences or because they have walked away from a *samsaric* life when their renunciation is actually escapism. They build a spiritual identity that makes them feel less small and afraid. This is one of the negative effects of *sattva*.

Other than gaining the knowledge of what the *gunas* are and how they operate, which is half the battle, you can do a great deal to manage them. If you are feeling so brain-dead you make road kill look alive or are feeling depressed or lazy, force Shanti to do something physical. If you are bouncing off the walls with extroversion or stress, fear or anxiety, driven by desire or action – slow down. Find some alone time somewhere where you can sit quietly and just breathe in light. Once you have calmed down, meditate or just light a candle, do a *puja* or pray.

Take a look at your lifestyle and change what you can. Diet is very important for *guna* management. Learn which foods cause which *guna*. Exercise, stop hoarding unwanted stuff (psychological and otherwise). Examine your relationships with people. Don't keep company with negative people who bring you down. Or if you can't avoid them, see how the *gunas* run them. See where you want things to be different and the pain that causes. People can't help being true to their predominant *guna* when they are unaware that there is choice concerning

which *guna* they want to operate out of. If they could be different, they would be.

It is a big eye-opener seeing how the *gunas* operate in yourself and others. Of course there really are no others, as there is only one self with three *guna*-manufactured bodies, but I mean that they work the same way in everyone. They run the show for everyone who is identified with the body/mind and the story of personhood. If your predominant *guna* is *tamas*, clean out your cupboards, give away everything you don't really need, stop staying up or getting up late, stop eating *tamasic* foods. Be constantly alert for denial of any kind. If your dominant *guna* is *rajas*, be on constant alert for aggression, projection, extroversion of any kind. Too much *sattva*? Stop pretending that you are special because you have out-of-this-world epiphanies, spiritual knowledge and lots of bliss. Or that you are very holy because you meditate, chant for hours or have an enlightened *guru* (or worse, that you think you are an enlightened *guru*). Get real, keep it humble and keep up the practice of self-knowledge. The point here is that everyone has a predominant *guna* which will not only create their most entrenched tendencies (i.e. *vasanas*), but it will also be what has conditioned them to have a particular kind of nature. There is no right or wrong here, no better or worse. No one makes themselves the way they are, *Isvara* or the *gunas* do that. The "work" involved in self-inquiry is identifying the *gunas* through self-knowledge and allowing the knowledge to help "you" manage the *gunas* by dis-identifying with them as awareness.

Once you find yourself acting a particular *guna* out, just observe what is going on. Don't judge or beat yourself up, be dispassionate about whatever is going on – it's a movie after all. Trace back the train of events, thoughts and feelings to their source and identify what triggered them. This is the practice of knowledge, the work of keeping an eye on Shanti and her likes and dislikes. Make a note of the *guna* and adjust to it in light of what kind of mind you are trying to create. Each time you do this, it will get easier to manage them and it will be easier to recognize them quicker when they appear as your likes and dislikes. This is how you identify the *vasana* – because the *gunas* and the *vasanas* are hidden in the unconscious mind that keeps a particular *guna* programme running. Before long, you will have deactivated the like or dislike. It will no longer condition the subtle body, although it may still appear.

Conduct a fearless inventory of your likes and dislikes to see which *guna* values they represent. Be totally honest, without shame, blame or fear as you investigate what you are invested in. Be really alert, like a sharp bird with an acute monocular vision, witness Shanti and what goes on in her head and her life. *Triguna vibhava yoga* (managing the *gunas*) is the best way to purify your mind and prepare it for enlightenment. All the *vasanas* and *samskaras* are nothing but the results of the *gunas* and their conditioning. They become binding obstacles (*pratibandikas*) when they are not understood and controlled.

The knowledge of how the *gunas* function alleviates existential pain and guilt, and gives you x-ray vision into yourself and everyone. It shows that no one is doing anything – or ever has. You can stop blaming yourself or anyone else for anything you did or anything that happened to you, because the *gunas* cause everything. If people could be different, they would be. They have no choice but to follow their nature and think they are doers (*tamas*). When you know you are not the doer, you can choose to drop your story. This is not to say you do not take appropriate action or that you would do harm to any part of the creation. You would naturally make a choice that gives peace of mind (*sattva*) and causes no injury, not because you feel guilt or duty-bound, but because you want to enjoy a peaceful mind.

Shanti: I've noticed that in the midst of the downturns I can sometimes see the *vasanas* controlling me. When this happens, is it better to just allow Shanti to play this behaviour out to see it more clearly or is it better that Shanti change her behaviour to acknowledge *dharma*? Sometimes I can't seem even to control Shanti, but that's really *Isvara's* job, right? So I can just blame it on *Isvara* instead of trying to take responsibility to change Shanti? I need to know the answer to this so I can know what to do and have more confidence in my behaviour, in my choices. But I am grateful that at least I am becoming more and more aware of what is happening and can watch more objectively as the *vasanas* pop up. Sometimes I even get a chuckle at watching myself, but it doesn't always work that way, sometimes I cannot see clearly and then life can be very painful and frustrating.

Sundari: Again, from which perspective is Shanti asking this question? Who is it that wants to control Shanti? If you notice that the *vasanas* are controlling you (Shanti), are they controlling YOU? As long as you still confuse yourself with the person Shanti, you will see a doer and those *vasanas* (likes and dislikes), along with the *gunas*, will be binding. Shanti will behave in ways that are true to her nature and the *gunas*, which colour everything and govern the *vasanas*, of course will be controlling her. If you know she is not real, then what Shanti gets up to will be of no great concern to you. When Shanti has realised her true nature as awareness, she will automatically value peace of mind and hold *ahimsa* (non-injury) as her highest value. She will not break *dharma*, because she will know that there is nothing outside of her; she will see no difference anywhere, so why would she harm any part of herself?

Blame is never good, but recognition is. So try to understand the *gunas* and take a dispassionate attitude toward the *guna* or the combination of *gunas* that is manifesting at any moment.

When Shanti's ignorance has been removed by self-knowledge, *maya* still obtains, meaning that *Isvara* will keep running the *guna*-coloured *dharma* field as usual. Shanti will no longer be projecting her interpretation of reality onto *Isvara*. She will know that there is absolutely nothing wrong with her (as Shanti) or the world. She will stop wanting things to be different, so frustration and existential suffering will be a thing of the past. Shanti may still encounter frustrating and painful situations, but they will not frustrate her, because she is actually awareness. As such she will understand that the creation is perfectly managed by *Isvara*, who has knowledge of the Total, which the *jiva* does not. She will observe everything with dispassion and help (but never hinder or interfere) where she can, without wanting to change or fix things. What happens is not up to Shanti OR awareness, except indirectly, when *Isvara/maya* is operating. And you are right – the sanest response to it all is the fourth *guna* – HUMOUR! Have a good laugh as often as possible! Life really is funny. ☺

Shanti: It seems there is a good amount of focus and discipline required in this work, as in all spiritual practice. When I deviate from my practice and make immediate choices to please myself to escape pain of separation, I can sometimes notice the *vasanas* come up, but even during practice sometimes they come up; it seems there's no escaping them. Sometimes I see these *vasanas* as defects in my character, and feel like I'm moving backwards instead of forwards. On a day-to-day basis I could make tens or hundreds of mistakes a day! I know all this is very human but it can really frustrate me because I want so much to know truth and be happy and peaceful in my life, and that's not always happening – well, at least not yet.

Sundari: Yes, indeed self-inquiry requires total dedication (*sattva*) and a burning desire for freedom (*rajas*). Ramji's *guru* Chinmaya always said that eternal vigilance (*sattva*) is the price of freedom (*nirguna*). If you re-identify with the reflected reality, Shanti, the doer is back, the *vasanas* bind (*tamas*) again and suffering (*rajas*) is there. Shanti's character is just her *vasana* load and it is not personal, nor is it defective. This definitely takes work; it's a big job to change (*rajas*) deeply entrenched thinking (*tamas*). Ignorance is hardwired. Ramji says that the ego is obsessively resistant to change – and it IS! By work I mean that it is by exposing the mind with total commitment to self-inquiry as well as practising all the *yogas*. Freedom cannot be attained without the practice of *jnana yoga*, *triguna vibhava yoga* and *karma yoga*. This is where Vedanta differs from other paths. Vedanta is both a means of knowledge – a pathless path – and a path of action, meaning that it provides tools and the instructions how to use them, which when applied rigorously and with dedication will remove ignorance and its effects. It will set you free. As I stated above, the *gunas*, when you understand how they operate, you will see that neither you nor anyone has anything wrong with them. There are no defective objects, because all objects are the self and the self is a perfect wholeness, a perfect completeness. There is nothing wrong with Shanti, the object that is dearest to you. There is only defective thinking. Vedanta offers you the means to change that. Shanti has her perfect stuff and her perfect peculiarities like everyone else.

Love her (*sattva*) the way she is (*sattva*), she's beautiful (*sattva*). *Moksa*, freedom – is not freedom FOR Shanti, but FROM Shanti. Keep up (*tamas*) the *yogas*, trust (*sattva*) in the knowledge, give thanks (*sattva*) and keep pouring your devotion on *Isvara*. It's all okay, so take it easy. Don't be so hard on yourself (*rajas/tamas*) or on life around you. You can relax (*sattva*) and hand it all over to *Bhagavan*, he will take care of business for you. ☺ Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "With a heart that knows now otherness, keep your mind on me alone and I will take care of your getting and your keeping."

Shanti: My deepest wish is that I can permanently establish myself in truth and be confident and strong in every moment of life, happy and at peace, with a pure *sattvic* mind. So when that isn't happening I end up practising more or going here and there to this *guru* or that *satsang* for relief (or perhaps a reminder). I want to surrender to life instead of fight it or feel like I'm forcing myself to go through all the steps of practice. I wish that life was easier, like floating on the ocean or happily swimming with the flow instead of swimming against it and sometimes drowning in it. But I know that all of it is completely out of my control. And this is the frustrating part.

Sundari: You have strong *mumuksutva*, which is very good! Keep observing those *gunas*, see how they operate and control Shanti. If you can catch them before they bite, most of the battle is won. When you find yourself running around like a chicken without a head, stop and have a good laugh! Where can you go? What can give you what you need? How can you get what you already have? You are always present; you are all of it. Of course the *dharma* field is out of your control, so why would you want to control it? It is all perfect for you, awareness. For Shanti, the self under the spell of ignorance, it is all perfect as well. Every moment *Isvara* is giving her what she needs to be free. When she stands firmly in awareness as awareness, she will find everything flows without obstruction. Until then, keep up the self-inquiry, *karma yoga* and *triguna yoga*. They are very important!

Shanti: On the other hand, having said all that, much of my *sadhana* and daily practice is truly delightful, really. ☺ But when it becomes a chore or seems to be in conflict with time, then I get frustrated again because I am aware that I am caught in the world and not “there.” I wish I could wake up every day more relaxed, trust life and take everything more lightly, trusting *Isvara* and completely surrendering to His will. Fortunately, I am not as deluded about life as I used to be and seem to be accepting what comes more and more. I love *Isvara* deeply and truly trust Him. I know that this is *Isvara*’s world and I have no say in it, but sometimes I forget this and want to do things my way, and then I suffer. I am always grateful when I am more aware, when the mind can remember and sees things clearly because then I am more peaceful. But it’s always changing, it’s never consistent. Day to day, moment to moment, I try in earnest to put knowledge into practice, but so often this can be difficult, because each moment changes and the mind is not always clear and focused. Sometimes I forget who I am and what to do in those hard moments, and suffer again.

Sundari: Once again, this is the work, Shanti. You have to keep up the *yogas* and not be so hard on yourself. You are really doing great and your *bhakti yoga* is a great advantage. Go through the paragraph you just wrote, in fact go through your whole email and rewrite it from the SELF’s perspective, not Shanti’s. The nature of *Isvara*’s creation (*maya*) is change. It will never be any other way; all structures in the apparent reality are unstable. There is no security and no reality there. Security there is a myth. It is the reflected reality; it is like the moon which borrows its light from the sun. It exists the same way a mirage exists: you see it but know it is not real. The only security you will ever have is in realising your true nature as the self. Then you will know yourself as the unchanging knower of that which is always changing. That which is *purna*, always full. Vedanta defines that which is real as that which does not change, which is you, awareness.

Shanti: I do understand that all this is *karma* playing out because no matter what living situation or any situation I choose to be in, it always comes back, I cannot escape it. In fact (like a masochist) I sincerely welcome it because I know I must work through it and “smoke it out.” But is all this suffering necessary? I just wish that it wasn’t so painful and I could more naturally get into the flow of things, remember instead of forget, and not force or resist life.

Sundari: *Maya* is *karma*. *Karma* is just action, and as long as you are identified with Shanti, she is a doer and will have *karma*. And Shanti will not escape it. But fortunately you are not Shanti. There is no *karma* for the self. The suffering comes from not knowing this fact. Until such time as Shanti realises her true nature as the self, she will suffer. The purpose of suffering is to cause Shanti (the self under the spell of ignorance) to seek an end to it, to seek freedom from dependence on objects. That said, even when the self is realised, *prarabdha karma* will still play out, but it will be known to be what it is and will be of no great concern to you. Thus when you realise your true nature you no longer need to work things out/smoke them out or whatever else. With the understanding of the *gunas* and how they create the *vasanas* which condition Shanti, you can just drop it all. It’s over, just a story. It is no more real than a movie. Shanti will know she is not the doer and her story will be of no great concern.

Shanti: I am practising *karma yoga* (when I remember to) as well as the two main points of inquiry: discrimination and focusing on awareness as my true self. I am also deeply devoted to

God, and on a daily basis I make time to drop everything, surrender everything at His feet and pray that He empty me, that he empty all of it. And then I thank Him once again for all His grace and for the opportunity to worship Him and be at peace again.

Sundari: Your self-inquiry is getting stronger and your *bhakti yoga* is great. You really need to take *karma yoga* more seriously, as well as *triguna vibhava yoga*. You will not get far without them and will keep suffering. Remember that the purest love there is – *parama prema svarupa* – is your true nature. And only knowledge will reveal that to you.

In *samsara* things are always changing. Just keep going and stay positive, do what you have to do to face the challenge of whatever is front of you. Your beautiful self is always fine no matter what is happening or not happening. Stay positive and watch the *gunas* as they give rise to your likes and dislikes, your fears and all those pesky thoughts that come with them. Just see them for what they are and they will lose their power over you. This is how to manage the *gunas*, your likes and dislikes. It is the most powerful way to purify the mind and prepare it for freedom. If you see reality this way, how can you not embrace whatever happens as a gift?

Vedanta only comes to those that are ready for it. It just works that way. There is nothing wrong with suffering; it really does deepen the person. But why not realise that you are not a person but the self?

Shanti: Thanks for allowing me to vent. ☺

~ With great gratitude, Shanti

Sundari: Vent away! ☺

~ *Om* and *prem*, Sundari