

The Three *Gun*as and the Three Bodies

Ted Schmidt

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Tony: Hi, Ted. I hope all is well with you. I continue to read your *satsangs* and enjoy them quite a bit!

I do have a question for you: How do the three *gun*as connect with the three bodies (causal, subtle and physical)?

I don't think this is directly addressed in any of the texts I've read. However, from what I've pulled together from different readings, I think this answer is that the three *gun*as are present in each of the three bodies. For example, in the physical body we can see *tamas* as matter, *sattva* as the order/intelligence and *rajas* as the motion/power in the physical world. Similarly, in the mind we have each of the *gun*as present in terms of our mental disposition (peaceful/contemplative to dull/irresponsible). And in the causal body we have *sattva* as the *dharma* field and all the laws that govern everything, *rajas* as the projecting power of *maya* and *tamas* as the veiling power.

Do I have this straight?

~ Regards, Tony

Ted: Hi, Tony. In a word, yes, your understanding is sound.

The following is a more detailed explanation of Vedantic cosmology that might further flesh out your understanding.

In the beginning (though technically speaking, of course there is no beginning to what is eternal), there exists an eternal conscious existence that in Sanskrit is referred to as *brahman*. In *brahman* there exists the principle of *maya*, or what we can call causal matter, which is also referred to variously as *mula-ajnanam*, *mula-avidya* and *mula-prakriti*. Causal matter is not a material substance as we ordinarily conceive of matter as being, but simply a subtle agent by means of which *brahman* is seemingly conditioned and the manifest universe is brought into being in its causal, subtle and gross aspects. Moreover, *brahman* is consciousness-as-such, or the conscious principle that makes knowing possible, rather than the relative action of knowing that takes place by means of the functioning of the *antahkarana* (i.e. "inner instrument" consisting of the *manas*, mind, *buddhi*, intellect, *chitta*, memory and *ahamkara*, ego). Similarly, *maya*, as inert matter, is ignorance-as-such, or the principle of ignorance, whose conditioning influence on *brahman* causes *brahman* to apparently forget its true nature and prevents the mind of the apparent individual from understanding its true identity. Thus though they are essentially one and the same being, there exist primordially what seem to be two beginningless principles, namely *brahman* (i.e. pure, limitless awareness) and *maya* (i.e. causal, or original, matter).

The fabric of *maya* is composed of the three *gun*as – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Though commonly conceived of as energies, for each does have an energetic aspect, the *gun*as are actually the subtlest and most fundamental constituents of which every aspect of the manifest universe is made. *Sattva* is of the nature of light, clarity, purity, insight, knowledge, intelligence, inspiration,

peace, contentment, harmony, order and beauty; its essential power is that of revelation. *Rajas* is of the nature of passion, desire, activity, motion, creativity, force and will; its essential power is projection. *Tamas* is of the nature of density, heaviness, groundedness, solidity, practicality, dullness, apathy, laziness and ignorance; its essential power is concealment. As these descriptions suggest, none of the *gunas* is good or bad per se. The character of each can have a positive or negative influence within the context of a given circumstance or endeavor. While the ignorance, apathy and laziness associated with *tamas* is something we would want to avoid, it is equally true that *tamas* is responsible for the material substance out of which the physical universe is formed and also provides the psychological groundedness that is the basis for practicality and rational thought as well as the physiological regularity that affords us the ability to rejuvenate our system through sleep. In the same way, while the unbridled mindless and sometimes even unethical pursuit of gratuitous desires that is fueled by *rajas* is something we definitely want to avoid, by the same token *rajas* provides us with the necessary gumption to get things done and accomplish our goals. Strangely enough, even *sattva* has a drawback. Though a *sattvic* mind is the springboard from self-inquiry to the assimilation of self-knowledge, too much *sattva* can cause one to be too flighty and impractical to take care of one's "worldly" responsibilities and, worse, can instill one with a sense of spiritual conceit that affords one the idea that one is a "highly advanced seeker" or even a "realized being" and thereby allows the ego to co-opt one's "enlightenment" and claim it as a personal accomplishment replete with a higher cosmological status.

Though it can be a little tricky to get a handle on, *maya* is both the original, or causal, matter (i.e. *pradhana*, or *prakriti*) and the conditioning effect of that matter on *brahman*. The initial effect that *maya* exerts on *brahman* is to cause it to black out, so to speak. Consequently *avyakta*, or the unmanifest state, is brought into being. This state is what we commonly refer to as the macrocosmic causal body. Technically speaking, however, it is not "causal," because unlike the causal body associated with the *jiva* (i.e. the apparent individual person), it is not a storehouse of personally accumulated *karma* that requires and thereby "creates" a body through which it can be experienced. For this reason, traditional Vedanta refers to the original unmanifest state from which all manifestation springs as *avyakta*. As mentioned, *avyakta* is comprised of three fundamental constituent *gunas*. Each *guna*, moreover, has two basic powers: *avaruna shakti*, the power of concealment, and *vikshepa shakti*, the power of projection. By means of these two powers, each *guna* produces a different *upadhi* that accounts for one of the three essential aspects of manifestation.

An *upadhi* is a limiting adjunct, or conditioning agent, that seemingly lends its qualities to the object upon which it is having a conditioning influence. For instance, if a red rose were placed directly behind a clear crystal, it would appear to someone perceiving the crystal from the side opposite the rose that the crystal was red. Though the clarity of the crystal itself is not actually affected, the crystal seems to assume a red hue due to its proximity to the rose. Similarly, though *brahman* (i.e. pure, limitless awareness) is not actually affected by the conditioning influence of *maya*, it seems to take on various characteristics due to the *upadhis* that *maya* projects upon it.

In terms of the macrocosmic manifestation, there are three fundamental *upadhis* produced by the conditioning influence of *maya*. From these three come the innumerable *upadhis* (i.e. the vast array of gross bodies and subtle minds) that comprise the manifest universe.

Sattva-pradhana-prakriti (i.e. the *sattvic* aspect of *maya* or original matter) produces *maya-upadhi*. Here *maya-upadhi* refers more specifically to *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator.

Most traditional Vedanta teachers maintain that *Isvara* is untainted by *avaruna shakti* and that *vikshepa shakti* alone accounts for *Isvara's* omniscience and omnipotence. Some teachers in the tradition, however, maintain that though *Isvara* is unquestionably unaffected by ignorance, it could be said that *avaruna shakti* does seemingly delimit *brahman* to the extent of empowering "it" with omniscience. The former account correlates with the account given in *Vedanta-sara*, a highly regarded *prakarana grantha* written by the sage Sadananda. I'm not sure what scripture espouses the latter explanation. Either explanation, however, offers a reasonable explanation for *Isvara's* role as *sristi-sthiti-laya-karta* (i.e. the creator, sustainer and dissolver of the universe).

Rajo-pradhana-prakriti (i.e. the *rajasic* aspect of *maya* or original matter) produces *avidya-upadhi* and thereby brings the *jiva*, the apparent individual, into being. Here *jiva* does not refer to any particular individual person, but rather the archetype of the apparent person. In regard to the *jiva*, *avaruna shakti* renders the apparent individual ignorant of its true limitless nature. Under the spell of *avidya*, or *ajnana* (i.e. ignorance), the *jiva* suffers from *adhyasa*, whereby he or she takes him or herself to be the limited individual person he or she appears to be. *Vikshepa shakti* then causes the *jiva* to superimpose the fundamental notion of individual identity as well as that of a dualistic universe on the "screen" of *brahman's* being. This superimposition is referred to as *adhyaropa*.

Tamo-pradhana-prakriti (i.e. the *tamasic* aspect of *maya* or original matter) produces the *mahabhutani*, the five great elements. At this stage, the elements are not the physical elements as we know them to be, but are the subtle archetypes of the five elements, which undergo a process of "grossification," called *panchikarana*, by means of which they become the physical constituents of the manifest universe. *Avaruna shakti* accounts for the potential density of the elements themselves. *Vikshepa shakti* accounts for their availability as the fundamental substance for manifestation.

In terms of the three bodies, *maya-upadhi* constitutes the macrocosmic causal body, and *avidya-upadhi* constitutes the microcosmic causal body. The subtle and gross bodies are both brought about by a further subdivisional effect of the *gunas* on the five subtle elements that are the product of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti*.

The *sattvic* and *rajasic* aspects of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* together produce the subtle body in both their macrocosmic and microcosmic aspects. The *sattvic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* produces the five *jnanendriyas* (perceptive organs), *manas* (mind), *buddhi* (intellect), *chitta* (memory) and *ahamkara* (ego). The *rajasic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* produces the five *karmendriyas* (active organs) and the five *pranas* (physiological systems). The total *sukshma-sharira*, or subtle body, is referred to as *hiranyagarbha* (which, at the risk of confusing the issue, is in some scriptural texts equated with *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator, when *maya-upadhi* is strictly conceived of as *avyakta*, and thus devoid of all attributes). The individual *sukshma-sharira* is referred to as *tajjasa*, or "the shining one," for it illumines all the thought waves arising in the mind.

The *tamasic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* produces the gross elements, and thus accounts for both the body of the apparent individual and the entire array of physical forms obtaining within the manifest universe. The total *sthula-sharira*, or gross body, is referred to as *virat*. The individual *sthula-sharira* is referred to as *vaishvanara*, or simply *vishva*, "the one who assumes many forms."

The three-bodied division of the total and individual can also be considered as five sheaths. In

this regard, *maya-upadhi* and *avidya-upadhi* equate with the macrocosmic and microcosmic aspects of *anandamaya-kosha* respectively. The *sattvic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* consisting of the perceptive organs, the intellect and the ego equates with *vijnanamaya-kosha*. The *sattvic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* consisting of the perceptive organs, the mind and the memory equates with *manomaya-kosha* (yes, you read that correctly, the perceptive organs are part of both the *vijnanamaya-kosha* and *manomaya-kosha*, for, remember, that fundamentally the mind is a singular unit that is divided into parts only for the purposes of analysis). The *rajasic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* consisting of the active organs and the physiological systems equates with *pranamaya-kosha*. And the *tamasic* aspect of *tamo-pradhana-prakriti* consisting of the five gross elements equates with *anamaya-kosha*.