

# The Wisdom of the Middle Way

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**Arjuna:** Dear Sundari, I hope you are well. It's been a few months since I exchanged messages with you. During this time, I have worked diligently on what we have discussed as well as followed the various lessons at ShiningWorld.

**Sundari:** I am so happy to hear this, Arjuna.

**Arjuna:** Just looking at the kind of questions I had asked you earlier gives me a sense of how far I've come in the past few months. While circumstances haven't changed much, my personal volatility sure has. This has led to a much steadier state of mind, which has its own benefits.

**Sundari:** Our personal circumstances may or may not change much with the application of self-knowledge to our lives; it is not that important, either way. What is important is how we relate to the *jiva* and its environment. A steady state of mind is the result of a mind applying *karma yoga*, and as a result, less conditioned by the *gunas*, definitely a sign that self-inquiry bears fruit and the knowledge is working.

**Arjuna:** I've been keenly observing my actions/reactions and the events around me, and there is one issue that I'm having difficulty with – finding that balance.

**Sundari:** Indeed, balance is always the key when it comes to the *gunas*. The fact that you are observing the *jiva's* reactions is a sure sign of discrimination at work. The next step of course is to be clear who is observing the change in behaviour and the one trying to find balance.

All three *gunas* are always present, as you probably know, to a greater or lesser degree. They have to be because that is the nature of the field – *Isvara*, the Creator. Given that we all have a built-in predisposition to one of the *gunas*, bringing *rajas* and *tamas* into balance with *sattva* is the key as both are only a problem when they are out of balance with *sattva*. *Sattva* is the true nature of the mind, and one cannot gain more of it; one can only remove the obstruction to it created by excess *rajas* and *tamas*. However, *rajas* and *tamas* are both necessary for the *jiva* in order to cope with the reality it finds itself in – and they are holy terrors when out of balance with *sattva* and in control of the mind. *Rajas* and *tamas* always work together too; we call them the terrible twins.

**Arjuna:** When I started off, my default state was *rajasic*, aggressive and action-oriented. In this state, I confronted difficult issues head-on, which was good, but when setbacks invariably happened or things didn't happen the way I wanted; it took its toll on me, as expected. I then over-corrected and started cultivating "acceptance." However, this led to a situation of becoming too passive and, looking back, I didn't act or confront issues when I should have, leading to a

feeling of helplessness. I guess this is a *tamasic* mode.

**Sundari:** Again, the important question to keep in mind concerning self-inquiry and discrimination between *satya* and *mithya* is: To whom does the “I” refer? As the self, you are *trigunaatita*, beyond the *gunas*. They, along with the *jiva*, are objects known to you. They are *mithya*, and you are *satya*.

When the *jiva*'s dominant *guna* tends to be *rajas*, it is no easy matter to bring it into balance with *sattva*. It's a bit like taming a wild horse: one does so patiently and with great determination. To move too fast and break the horse would be to break its spirit – not a desirable outcome – just as being too passive or moving too slowly would mean making virtually no progress at all, also not a positive outcome. Both approaches are counter-productive, and depression sets in either way. That said, *rajas*, being such a dangerous and potentially destructive energy, one needs to be aware of it and work doggedly to tame it. *Tamas* is just as destructive in the end, but usually it takes longer to be so.

**Arjuna:** I'm guessing being *sattvic* is finding the middle path: engaging and living in the world but accepting the consequences/results as they happen, learning from them and then returning to action?

**Sundari:** The middle way is always the best way, as we have no choice but to work with the nature we are born with, our *svadharma*. If you are a predominantly *rajasic* type, bringing *rajas* into balance with *sattva* means that you honour your nature but temper it with self-knowledge (wisdom), and therefore objectivity born of discrimination. There are times when called upon to confront, and if it is your nature to do so, you answer that call. Arjuna had to face his lot and be true to his *svadharma* by answering the call to arms, as loath as he was to do so. But confrontation without the understanding of your nature or the nature of the field in which you are operating will inevitably backfire.

This is why *karma yoga* is so very important because when employed as the overarching *dharma* in every situation on a moment-to-moment basis, not only do you act in accordance with your nature while aiming for peace of mind (*sattva*) at all times, you act knowing you are not the doer and whatever result ensues is fine. You may take all the right actions and still not get a positive result, and sometimes, vice versa. However, *karma yoga* means that you take whatever result you do get as *prasad*. The objective is never about winning or losing, because this world is zero sum game – it is not real. It is *mithya*. The objective for an inquirer (or a *jnani*) is to live free of the *jiva* and its nature, following *dharma* (the laws that operate the field) at all times – only achieved with the understanding of our nature and the nature of the field, i.e. the *gunas*.

Another point to understand is that we cannot avoid action and the application of self-knowledge/*karma yoga* is not about not acting or stopping action. It is about appropriate action taken in the light of self-knowledge – understanding at all times how the *gunas* are playing out and acting in accordance with one's *svadharma* as well as the universal laws that run the field, as stated above.

I have just finished writing a book on the *gunas* as they relate to lifestyle; James is editing it, and we should have it available in a few months.

**Arjuna:** Our last exchange had a big impact on me, and had it not been for your intervention, I would have had a period of intense frustration. I'm seeking your advice again on how I should work on striking this elusive balance.

**Sundari:** I am very happy for you to hear this. It is the knowledge that works when applied, so well done to you for your dedication.

Here is a small excerpt from my book, on *rajas*:

*Rajas (vikshepa shakti)* is a power in awareness that projects the creation. Without *rajas*, the creation would not exist in physical form. On the psychological level *rajas* is the energy of projection, extroversion and desire. *Rajas* out of balance with *sattva* turns the mind outwards towards objects. It creates a painful drive in the mind, pushing it to seek completion through action or through objects, at all costs. In the extreme, the mind is totally extroverted, driven by passion, greed and desire (likes and dislikes) to gain or avoid whatever object it is fixated on, certain that the joy is in the object and it must have what it wants when it wants it the way it wants it. *Brahman*, or *Brahma*, the self in the form of the Creator, represents *rajas*.

## The Flow

The feeling that life is flowing is obviously desirable for everyone, but it is particularly desirable for predominately *rajasic* individuals. *Rajas* is the "mode of passion." It is also the mode of action, as it inclines one to activity. A *rajasic* person is goal-oriented and wants results badly because his or her happiness rides on results. The doer in control of *rajas* is not a problem, providing the doing is done with *karma yoga*. However, because *Isvara* is in control of results and does not necessarily give you what you want when you want it the way you want it, *rajasic* people are by definition highly emotional and not prone to *karma yoga*. Typically, they are high and happy when they get what they want and angry and depressed when they do not.

## Doership

*Rajas* is an interesting energy, and if you operate out of this *guna* for a while, activity itself becomes a goal. It makes us attached to the idea that we "should" be doing something all the time and we feel guilty if we are not busy. Our identity becomes entangled with what we are doing and achieving the results we want. *Rajas* is the energy behind a driven, obsessive work ethic – working for work's sake. Sometimes the compelling desire to act is so strong we perform unnecessary, even self-insulting, silly and trivial actions simply because deliberate action or inaction is impossible. We just cannot sit still for more than a few minutes and start agitating the moment action is constrained, for whatever reason. The rabbit in the children's story *Winnie-the-Pooh* is a good example of this – he is so rushed and busy all the time that he doesn't know if he is coming or going. The sign on his burrow is "GON OUT BACKSON BISOY BACKSON"! Animation films make a large profit on characters who typify this stereotype, from the rather aged *Road Runner* to *Ice Age* – to mention a few. It seems that Disney sees the value in exploiting this powerful energy.

The most common justification for the state of mindless activity is either as an identity or for

“survival.” You believe that your activities are responsible for your identity and survival. The emptiness of a work-related identity is lost on you and so is the fact that if you were not surviving you would be unable to perform activities. This is not to say that action is “bad” as far as liberation is concerned, only that excess *rajas* mitigates against success as far as success depends on the quality, appropriateness and timeliness of your actions – not to mention a clear, *sattvic* mind. When our mind is agitated, we do not act deliberately and skillfully. Action becomes unconscious. We forget things, drop things, have silly accidents like cutting our finger or burning ourselves cooking, because we do everything too quickly. *Rajas* is a dangerous energy behind most serious accidents of every kind; driving too fast or recklessly is a good example. It is also behind much violence, domestic and otherwise, as well as crime and corruption.

We have often heard the saying “an idle mind is the Devil’s workshop.” Actually, a busy mind is the Devil’s workshop unless the “busyness” is balanced by *sattva* or the mind is busy inquiring – assuming your ultimate goal is liberation. When controlled by this *guna*, boredom often plagues us and we suffer because we cannot relax, often having trouble sleeping. Insomnia is an epidemic in the US because of *rajas*. The sixties, being wound up, or “uptight,” meant stressed and unhappy. It is a good term, as it epitomizes victims of “doership.” Doership is not about doing. From womb to tomb we are active. It is not up to us, because we cannot not “do” – even not doing is a doing. Doership is an identity issue, not an action issue. You think you are a doer because you have never examined the constituents of doing anything. Even without self-inquiry, if we make a simple inquiry into how doing anything actually takes place, we would soon realise that it is impossible to do anything without untold factors out of our control being part of the equation, even something simple, like making a cup of tea.

Doing happens, no doubt, but you are not doing it, either as the *jiva* or as the self. The *gunas* are the doer. If you are *rajasic*, you evaluate yourself in terms of what you have accomplished or failed to accomplish or want to accomplish. This leads to a psychological problem: an inflated or deflated identity. You have an exaggerated sense of your self-importance when you are getting what you want and loss of self-esteem, of failure and depression, when you are not.

## **Deluded Doers**

Usually *rajasic* people think they are very clever because they accomplish so much. What they do not see is how much energy they waste spinning their wheels, and the cost that frenetic activity has on them and everyone around them. Stress levels go sky high, our relationships and health suffer, we wear ourselves out – yet we are like hamsters on a treadmill or a horse with blinkers on. We blindly and stubbornly do the same things over and over, expecting different results, which never materialize. From a spiritual point of view, highly *rajasic* people are often not “the sharpest knives in the drawer,” to use a common (and not very kind) phrase. They are so busy acting out their desires and the mind so extroverted that they fail to evaluate the results of their actions dispassionately – if at all. Which means that they make the same mistakes, repeatedly. They tend to be stubborn and defensive. They vigorously cling to their doings and defend their wants, no matter what. Highly *rajasic* types find themselves in constant conflict with the world because they think their wants are more important than the wants of *Isvara* – in the form of the wants of others. *Rajas* blinds us to the needs of those around us and to what life requires of us, and we pay the price because we do not pay attention. The feeling of “flow” is a situation where you are getting what you want. When *Isvara* does not deliver the desired result, stuckness, *tamas*, ensues.

You can identify doership by observing the way you talk, as well as your language. If you hear yourself saying you are “supposed to,” “have to” or “must do” something, doership is alive and well. The truth is, we are never compelled (or obligated) to do anything. We are free to see that we are not the doer – and we are free to say NO. Furthermore, we can consider life from the point of view of who we really are. If we do, it will be clear that life is a dream that comes and goes, but you do not come and go, because you are the ground of being on which the coming and going (actions) take place.

If you know you are awareness, you are not concerned with being “in” or “out” of the flow of life, because there is no sense of doership – and you know that you are the flow. If, however, you don’t know you are awareness and are identified with the doer/experiencer/enjoyer entity, then you would obviously want your life to flow. If you want it to flow, you will benefit by the knowledge of what the *gunas* are and how they play out in your life and in the world.

### ***Rajas* and the Assimilation of Experience**

How does *rajas* affect the assimilation of experience? Whether my goals are worldly or spiritual, and whether or not I realise them, a *rajasic* intellect is not concerned with the truth of experience, only with how a particular experience relates to the fulfilment of the ego’s desires. *Rajas* is always a source of frustration because everything gained is inevitably lost. An object gained causes attachment and an object lost produces grief, neither of which is conducive to happiness. *Rajas* cannot accept the impermanence of life as a fact and be satisfied with what is. It propels the ego to seek fulfilment continually in new experiences – new objects, places, people, etc. Even though the individual knows better, *rajas* can cause such a lack of discrimination that we will consistently repeat actions that produce suffering. It often generates so many actions in such a short time that the intellect can never determine which action was responsible for a given result, thus preventing it from learning from its experiences.

When a pleasurable experience ends, *rajas* produces disappointment because it wants the pleasure to continue, even though the intellect knows that pleasure is fleeting. If an experience is mediocre, it wants it to be better. If it is bad, it should end instantly and not happen again. If experience repeats itself repeatedly, as it does owing to conditioning, *rajas* causes boredom and produces a strong desire for variety. More, better, different, is its holy *mantra*. It produces an endlessly active, time-constrained life of loose ends – and dissatisfaction. No matter how much is accomplished, the “to-do” list never shrinks. It is a closet, garage, basement and attic overflowing with a confusing assortment of neglected and unused objects. It is a late tax return, a forgotten appointment, an unreturned call, a frantic search for one’s keys. Our *rajasic*, aggressive and extroverted forays into *samsara* inevitably result in tiredness and insomnia.

James says, “When I was young, my father, who was wise in many ways, used to say, ‘You can’t win.’ At the time, I did not understand what he meant, but a life well spent and the teachings of Vedanta made it clear. Life is a zero-sum game, an eternal war within one’s self in which neither side prevails for long. For example, when *tamas* appears in a person whose predominant *guna* is *rajas*, a painful experience is inevitable. You have many things on your ‘to-do’ list, but your mind is so dull that every action becomes painful. You are wired but tired. It is not fun. Conversely, when you need to indulge your *tamas* and sleep, your mind is too busy, so you suffer.”

Assimilation of experience only takes place when the mind is alert and present. Therefore when *rajas* dominates the subtle body, the innate wisdom of the self, much less common than sense-

knowledge, is not available to help the intellect accurately determine what is happening and resolve doubts. Resolved experience leaves our attention present and alert, so that the mind is able to meet the next experience without prejudice. Because life is an unending procession of experiences in this pressurized age, it is important to lay each experience to rest as quickly as possible, preferably as it happens. When we are so *rajasic* and our mind totally wrapped up in dealing with an endless succession of trivial daily desires, we are too busy to look at our “issues,” so they remain in the background, causing suffering.

Unresolved experience subliminally drains attention. When I have difficulty focusing on what I need to do, avoiding what I should or should not be doing, it is a sign that the mind is excessively *rajasic*. As unresolved experience accumulates, we suffer existential constipation, feeling overwhelmed, stressed and unable to keep up with life’s demands. Growth rarely comes through the easy attainment of desires. What is also lost to us when our mind is extroverted is the growth enhancing benefits of assimilating unwanted experiences

**Arjuna:** PS: I’ve also changed my meditation practice. Earlier I was trying to blank my mind, etc. Now I’ve been following Swami Dayananda’s guided meditations (I got my mom to release the meditations in an app form) which encourages active inquiry.

Thanks in advance.

~ Best regards

**Sundari:** Excellent. Meditation is a great tool to purify the mind; however, always remember that it is an aid to self-inquiry but does not equal self-inquiry. We can talk more about this topic if you wish, but rest assured we encourage the practice of meditation (*yoga*), as it is very helpful, especially for *rajasic* types.

You are always welcome, Arjuna, and many blessings to you.

~ Love, Sundari