

The Yogic Journey - To Sattva and Beyond

ऊर्ध्वं गच्छन्ति सत्त्वस्था मध्ये तिष्ठन्ति राजसाः ।
जघन्यगुणवृत्तिस्था अधो गच्छन्ति तामसाः ॥

ūrdhvaṁ gacchanti sattvasthā madhye tiṣṭhanti rājasāḥ
jaghanyaguṇavṛttisthā adho gacchanti tāmasāḥ

“Those who are seated in Sattva go upwards; the Rajasic dwell in the middle; and the Tamasic, abiding in the function of the lowest Guna, go downwards.”

- Bhagavad Gītā 14:18

According to traditional Yoga philosophy, there is but one ultimate purpose of life. We are all on a journey, a process of evolution - moving from darkness to light.

That light is *who you are*, in essence. Just as the Sun is always shining even if it is covered by clouds, the Truth of your being is beautiful and effulgent, even though most of us cannot yet perceive this.

That which is covering up our perception is called *avidyā* in Sanskrit. This can be translated as simply “not-knowing”. The purpose of all traditional yoga practices is to help us clear away the clouds, to experience and know the eternal light within directly.

Yoga philosophy says that all of nature - which includes ones’ body and mind - is an expression of three basic qualities, or *guṇas*. The Sanskrit names for these three *guṇas* are *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*. There is no perfect english translation for these terms, but we can consider generally that:

Tamas is the quality of inertia and darkness,
Rajas is the quality of activity, passion and movement, and
Sattva is the quality of balance, light and harmony.

Let us examine in greater detail the attributes of these three qualities, in relation to the state of the body and mind:

Tamas (inertia and darkness) can be associated with lethargy, apathy, lack of motivation, and depression. Physical energy and productivity in work may be low. Psychologically one may feel 'stuck in the past', finding it difficult to open up to the present moment which is ever-new.

Rajas (passion and movement) can be associated with restlessness, perfectionism, ambition, competition, egoism and selfishness. Physical energy may be high, yet the mind will be restless - and without peace of mind lasting happiness is not possible. Productivity may be high in work, yet there could be overachiever tendencies and unhealthy attachment to that work. Psychologically one may tend towards 'anticipating the future'.

Sattva (balance, light and harmony) is associated with goodness, sincerity, peace, and calm. One feels energized, yet the mind remains poised. There is an ability to stay centered through all of the inevitable ups and downs of life. If a person is genuinely established in Sattva, they will naturally embody virtuous qualities. They will be productive, yet not attached to their work. They will seek to contribute to the welfare of others and/or the world at large. Psychologically they are able to abide happily in the present. They will maintain a positive attitude, with a tendency to accept "what is".

In order to remove the barriers to the perception of ones' true nature, one must first cultivate and nurture the quality of Sattva in life. The practices of yoga are meant to help with this. In addition, with the magic of awareness practically any of the basic activities of life can be undertaken in such a way that further supports the blossoming of a Sattvic state. Much depends simply on adopting the right attitude. Lets explore some ways in which we can understand the workings of the three guṇas in daily life.

The Breath

Observation of the breath can be a simple, yet invaluable method to understand which guṇa is predominant in the body and mind at any moment. When one is in a Sattvic state the breath will be balanced, even and deep. Conversely, if one cultivates healthy breathing habits, it will promote Sattva.

Meditation

Having a regular meditation practice is a great way to promote Sattva. Through meditation, we seek to move more and more towards a state of inner peace and stillness. It is best to learn the art of meditation from a qualified and experienced teacher. Progress takes time, patience and regular practice.

Food

Simple, fresh and natural foods tend to be more Sattvic. Fruits & vegetables, milk, almonds, whole grains, and mung beans are foods traditionally considered especially Sattvic. Foods and beverages which are stimulating such as those containing caffeine or a lot of salt or strong spices are considered Rajasic. Old, stale foods, or foods which have lost their freshness are considered Tamasic.

In Ayurveda circles, many consider microwaving food to be Tamasic. Research has shown that microwaving foods destroys many of their nutrients. Heating up food in other ways, such as on the stove or in a toaster oven may be a better choice when possible.

Simply put, “eating right” promotes Sattva.

Entertainment

What we take in via movies, books, music, magazines and the like leaves an impression on the mind which can influence our thinking and behavior. That which inspires and uplifts, while promoting a calm and centered state may be considered Sattvic. Entertainment which promotes sensuality, stimulates and tends to create restlessness or excitement is Rajasic. That which exposes the mind to fear, violence and negativity is Tamasic.

Aiming to strike the right balance between work, rest and entertainment or recreation is also an important point. Too much entertainment and not enough work or productivity can be tamasic. On the other hand, too much work and not enough rest, recreation or entertainment can be considered rajasic. Balance and moderation is Sattvic.

Work and Actions

Work or actions done with a pure, unselfish motive are Sattvic. The actions should be of benefit to others, without causing harm to anyone or the environment as far as possible. The notion that it is ones' duty to contribute to the welfare of the world is a Sattvic attitude. Working in this way promotes peace of mind and a sense of lasting fulfillment. When established in Sattva, one is content with meeting their needs simply and seeks to earn their living through noble means.

Actions which stem from a selfish motive are Rajasic. They are generally driven by desires for money, pleasure, worldly power, name and fame, etc. Examples of Tamasic actions include refraining from work when it ought to be done, as well as performing actions which are destructive or harmful.

Habitual Ways of Thinking

Positive thinking is Sattvic. This can be cultivated by reading inspirational or spiritually uplifting books, as well as hearing talks on these matters. Other methods of cultivating positive thinking include the use of affirmations, as well as prayer.

Rajasic thinking is characterized by restlessness and self-seeking. One may “build castles in the sky”, which lead to “chasing after a mirage”. Tamasic thinking tends to be negative and pessimistic. A very important tool in the yogic tool-box is a practice called “pratipakṣa bhāvana” - breaking patterns of negative thinking by substituting opposite, positive thoughts. When Sattva is cultivated by other means - via any of the other categories mentioned, for example - ones’ thoughts naturally will tend to become more positive.

Relationships & Associations

A person can be greatly influenced by the company they keep. Like increases like. Therefore, being in the company of wise, positive people who are striving to live harmoniously is of great value. It helps bring Sattva into ones’ life, promoting peace and happiness. The Sanskrit word for good company is “satsanga”. In satsang, people are intent on uplifting each-other.

Exercise

Exercise in moderation such as yoga, tai chi, walking and swimming are examples of Sattvic exercise. Exercise in beautiful, natural places is especially nourishing. Competitive sports, or exercise driven by ego and ambition is Rajasic. Being inactive, and not getting enough exercise is Tamasic. Ayurveda advises us that it is best to exercise up to half of ones’ capacity. It is considered best to avoid exercising up to the point of exhaustion.

Living-Space and Environment

Keeping the spaces one lives and works in clean, neat and organized is Sattvic. The 'Kon-Mari Method' is one interesting approach to creating a Sattvic, joyful space. Vastu or Feng Shui may also be helpful in creating a harmonious space wherever you are. Different methods of space-clearing such as smudging, or lighting incense may be useful. It is very good if fresh air flows into the space, as well as plenty of natural light. Even during colder times of the year, opening the windows for at least ten minutes or so daily to let in fresh air can be very beneficial. Spending time in nature is Sattvic.

Sattva is Flexible, Not Rigid

It is important to understand that listed above are general guidelines, not meant to be taken as strict rules or dogma. Perfectionism or adopting a rigid attitude towards these principles is not Sattvic, not natural. True harmony is a natural, organic experience - it is not born from ambition. Observing nature has much to teach us in this regard. If you are able to experience the peace and harmony of Sattva within yourself, you will not need anyone to tell you that you are on the right track.

Where Do You Look for Happiness?

So often it is our tendency to look for happiness, or to look for love 'outside'. There is a story about the musk deer, who has a sweet scent emanating from its forehead. It searches and wanders endlessly, trying to discover where that lovely smell is coming from. We get fleeting hints of the happiness that is our true nature when we experience pleasure because, for just a moment, the mind is at peace. This is an experience associated with Rajas - it is sweet for just a little while, and then bitter once the transitory pleasure slips through our fingers.

When we stop searching for happiness and love outside, and turn within we find that what we have been restlessly seeking has been with us all the while in our very own heart. This happens when we become established in Sattva. It is described as bitter in the beginning, because it requires a certain amount of discipline. Yet it yields the sweet fruit of abiding joy in the long run.

Self-Acceptance

My teacher Swami Niranjan once said “If you are a banana, you are not going to become an orange, but to become the sweetest banana...” On the path of spiritual growth, it is important for us to understand and accept our own unique nature. Then, we must start from where we are at. It is often best to take one small step in a positive direction. We can tread gently, so to speak. It is not about being perfect, but rather about encouraging positive habits and tendencies.

Trying to rush anything in life often ends up being counterproductive in some way. Growth is a natural process which takes time, we simply need to create supportive conditions. An analogy often used to explain this is that of a plant - we cannot rush its growth - rather, our task is to provide it with what it needs: water, air, sunshine, patience, and last but not least, love.

I would suggest beginning with a simple goal that you know you can accomplish - set yourself up for success. You may wish to choose just one of the above categories to work on at first. It can be of immense value to keep a daily journal or log to track your progress, and to shed light on any obstacles which may arise. Growth and lasting positive change takes time. It is best to be realistic and to understand that any real success in moving towards greater harmony takes a certain amount of commitment and dedication.

Believe in yourself.

Uplift and inspire yourself - because you can.