

Guna

A word about the term *guna*, or the three qualities of the universe, accepted by both the *samkhya* and the *yoga* systems, is also in order here. As mentioned above, *gunas* are of three types: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. In this translation, I have tried to use these terms exactly, including their adjectival forms,

‘sattvic’, ‘rajasic’ and ‘tamasic’. *Sattva* is more than just its literal meaning of truth, but rather the quality of truth to which one should aspire – filled with light, a form of honest and pure moral conduct. Some have translated *sattva* as ‘lucidity’. *Sattva* tends to be associated with the moral ideal for brahmins as teachers and priests. *Rajas*, on the other hand, is the quality of passion, being connected to the fruits of actions and being overjoyed or disappointed at the results of those actions. Just as *sattva* is light (both in terms of the spectrum and in terms of weight), *rajas* tends to be heavy, and associated with struggle. *Rajas* tends to be the quality that warriors are most associated with. Finally, *tamas* is the quality of darkness, and that quality is associated with negative behaviour, greed, laziness and dishonesty. According to the *Gita*, this quality weighs all beings down, and is an impediment on the path of the *yoga* of action, with Krishna at its centre. *Tamas* tends to be associated with the dark and the demonic rather than the divine. Krishna advises all people to strive toward *sattva*, no matter what their station in life.

The *gunas* are part of the material universe and an inevitable part of acting in the world. Since action is an inevitable part of who we are and what we do, part of the task of following the path of *yoga* is to be free of clinging to that material universe, and the *gunas* that constitute it. Krishna explains this idea in verse 2.45. Here it is important to add that while *sattva* is a *guna*, and therefore part of *prakriti*, it is still a positive *guna* which can help one along the path to fulfilment and accomplishment. Frequently such positive traits are described in early Indian texts as ‘rafts’ or ‘temporary goals’ which help one along the way. Even though one wants to be free of destructive attachment, one can cling to *sattva* as a positive quality because one can use it in order eventually to attain the larger state of non-clinging.