

The Three Gunas



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Vedic Deities

The Vedas present a vast pantheon of deities (devata) on many different levels, often said to be innumerable or infinite in number. For a specific number, the Gods are said to be 3339 in total. This number is clearly a play on the number three. One of the main early efforts to classify the Vedic Gods (as in the Brihad Devata of Shaunaka) was to reduce them to the three prime deities for the three worlds.

Agni or Fire on Earth (Prithivi)

Vayu or Wind in the Atmosphere (Antariksha)

Surya or the Sun in Heaven (Dyaus)

The Rigveda is organized in this way with the hymns to Agni generally coming first in most of its ten books, then the hymns to Vayu and Indra, and finally the hymns to the Sun.

These three deities meanwhile are three aspects of the One, God or the Purusha, the supreme consciousness principles and higher Self that is pure light. The term Deva for deity itself means 'a shining one' or form of light. It is related to the term Dyaus, meaning heaven and so refers to the heavenly or celestial lights. Vedic deities represent the main forms of light (Jyoti) in the universe.

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Relative to this principle of light, we can equate the three main Vedic deities of Agni with heat, Vayu with electrical force, and Surya with pure light. These forms of light, however, do not only represent the corresponding forces of nature. They also represent the inner light or the forms of consciousness. They are the three aspects of the Purusha or Cosmic Person. Each has its psychological significance, with Agni or fire as speech (Vak), Vayu or wind as breath (Prana) and Surya or the Sun as the perceptive aspect of the mind (Buddhi).

Vedic deities and the Vedic Yoga follow the threefold law of manifestation in the universe. Naturally the question arises as to what extent this correlates with the three guna theory of classical Samkhya and Yoga.

The Three Gunas

Any student of classical Yoga is well aware of the importance of the three gunas in yogic thought and practice. Few, however, are aware of their Vedic background and the deeper understanding that a Vedic perspective brings to them.

In the philosophy of Yoga, derived from the Samkhya system, all matter in the universe is reducible to one primary substance called Prakriti. Prakriti literally means the original power of action. It does not refer to substance in the physical sense but to the potential from which all forms of matter, energy and mind can arise. Prakriti is the original state of pure potential out of which all things become possible. Prakriti is the latent state of substance, like the seed that holds the potential for a great tree. It is the prima materia of the world of which matter, energy and mind are manifestations. Prakriti, we could say, is the causal or original form of all substances, from which their subtle and gross forms arise. It is extremely subtle, ethereal and transcendent, forming the basis for space that is its first material form.

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Prakriti itself is said to be a composite of three prime qualities as sattva, rajas, and tamas.

Sattva is the power of harmony, balance, light and intelligence- the higher or spiritual potential.

Rajas is the power of energy, action, change and movement- the intermediate or life potential.

Tamas is the power of darkness, inertia form and materiality- the lower or material potential.

Perhaps the simplest way to understand the gunas for the modern mind is as matter (tamas), energy (rajas) and light (sattva), the main factors of our physical universe.

The three gunas reflect the three worlds of Vedic thought.

Earth is the realm of tamas or darkness, physical matter.

The Atmosphere, also called rajas in Vedic thought, is the realm of action and change symbolized by the storm with its process of lightning, thunder and rain, but it indicates energy or subtle matter on all levels.

Heaven is the realm of harmony and light, sattva. It indicates light as a universal principle which is the causal or original form behind the gross and subtle elements or forms of matter and energy.

The entire universe consists of light that moves in the form of energy and gets densified in the form of matter. The three great lights of Agni, Vayu and Surya energize these three worlds as the spirit within them.

The first is Agni or Fire on the Earth. Fire is hidden in our bodies, in plants, in the rocks, and in the very core of the Earth itself.

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The second is Vayu or Lightning in the Atmosphere. The power of the wind, which creates lightning, circulates through the atmosphere.

The third is Surya or the Sun in Heaven. The Sun represents the cosmic light of the stars that pervades the great space beyond this world.

These three lights are interrelated. We could say that lightning is the fire in the Atmosphere and the Sun in the fire in Heaven. Or fire is the Sun on Earth and lightning represents the solar force in the atmosphere. Or lightning on Earth creates fire and in Heaven it energizes the Sun.

These three lights also reflect the three gunas.

Agni is the tamasic form of light, the fire that is hidden in darkness.

Vayu is the rajasic form of light, light in its active and energetic mode as lightning or electrical force.

Surya is the sattvic form of light, light as pure illumination (prakasha).

The movement from tamas to sattva is a movement from Earth to Heaven. It occurs through bringing the light out of the Earth (Agni) and raising it to Heaven (Surya). This requires crossing the Atmosphere through using its forces (Vayu).

The Threefold Purusha

In the Vedic view these forms of light (Jyoti) are the three forms of the Purusha or higher Self that is also defined in terms of light. In the Vedic view, light is consciousness, not simply a material force. These three lights are also the three aspects of our being. These visible lights are manifestations of the invisible divine light of consciousness that illumines all things, including visible light and darkness. The three gunas and three worlds exist within us, as do their light forms as our powers of our own awareness.

The Three Gunas

Agni- Earth- tamas- body- speech (vak)

Vayu- Atmosphere- rajas- breath (prana)

Surya- Heaven- sattva- mind (manas)

In this sense, sattva as light is also mind, rajas as energy is also the vital force and tamas as matter is also our bodily expression, the foremost of which is speech.

Sattva- light- mind

Rajas- energy- prana

Tamas- matter- body

These three aspects of the Purusha or consciousness principle reflect the three aspects of Prakriti or the material principle. In the Vedic view, therefore, the science of the three gunas connects not only with Prakriti but also with the Purusha. The gunas are not simply the powers of Prakriti; they reflect the nature and presence of the Purusha, as well. The Purusha is threefold in its human manifestations as speech (body), breath and mind, just as Prakriti or the world is threefold as earth, atmosphere and heaven or as matter, energy and light.

Agni is light or the Purusha in the realm of matter or the earth.

Vayu is light or the Purusha in the realm of energy of the atmosphere.

Surya is light or Purusha in the realm of light or heaven. In the Vedic view, the Purusha or consciousness principle is not limited to embodied creatures but pervades these great forces of nature, as well.

Understanding these light forms of the gunas helps us to use the science of the gunas not only to understand Prakriti, but also to understand the Purusha. The Vedic Yoga works with these three light forms or three forms of the Purusha in order to master and transform the three forms or aspects of Prakriti.

The Three Gunas

Agni- physical body and internal organs- speech- mantra yoga- tamas- matter- five gross elements

Vayu- vital body and motor organs- breath- prana yoga- rajas- energy- five pranas

Surya- mental body and sense organs- mind- Dhyana yoga- sattva- light- five subtle elements

Agni as the power of speech is the means of purifying and controlling both the physical body and physical matter and mastering the guna or quality of tamas. Through it we can control our internal organs and the gross elements. The Yoga of speech involves chanting, singing, internal repetition of mantras and meditation on mantras. Through it we gain control of the subconscious mind.

Vayu as the power of the breath is the means of purifying and controlling the vital body and the realm of energy and mastering the guna or rajas. Through it we can control our motor organs and the five pranas (five major actions). The Yoga of the breath involves pranayama. Through it we gain control of our emotions.

Surya as the power of thought is the means of purifying and controlling the mental body and the realm of light and mastering the guna of sattva. Through it we can control our sense organs and the subtle elements. The Yoga of the mind is meditation. Through it we can control the rational mind and direct it towards knowledge of the higher Self.



