

The Gunas

Ouspensky was always interested in the origin of the System. He thought that some of it came from Samkhya, one of the 6 schools of Indian Vedic philosophy. This school – founded around 500 BC – does not exist now as an active tradition, but some of its elements have been incorporated in other schools, notably Yoga and Advaita.

The teaching on the Gunas came originally from Samkhya. The Gunas (strict translation, strings) correspond to the three forces of the System:

Rajas = active force
Tamas = passive force
Sattva = neutralising force.

Ouspensky used to start the teaching of triads in this way:

This is the first idea that was explained in the System and at the time when we first spoke of it in St Petersburg when we first learned it, I realized that this idea is the same as the idea of triads in Indian philosophy. In Sankhya philosophy you find the idea of three Gunas and it is explained there that there are three forces and their combination produces all the phenomena in the world. In Sankhya philosophy it is put like that: three Gunas have seven combinations, one combination incomprehensible for our mind and six combinations comprehensible for our mind. [*A Record of Meetings*, 17.1.38]

Exactly where Ouspensky found this account of the Samkhya triads is unclear, because in the main corpus of Hindu literature there is little about the order of action of the Gunas, just a single mention of six triads in the *Mahabharata*. A more likely source is a statement of this sort in a little known book by a fellow theosophist, Bhagavan Das, whom Ouspensky met in India in 1914. Ouspensky thought that the Samkhya teaching had degenerated compared to the System teaching and it is certainly less precise, but it has certain advantages.

The Gunas are often regarded as *qualities*, which give a particular flavour to actions, events, psychological states. There is nearly always a mixture of the three, but one can dominate. For example our psychological state: dominated by Tamas, our state is sluggish; dominated by Rajas, excited; dominated by Sattva, equable.

The great exposition of Gunas is in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the translation with a commentary by Shankara is particularly interesting. Shankara, the founder of the Advaita tradition, rejected Samkhya on the ground that it was dualistic, but he accepted the Samkhya mastery of the teaching on the Gunas.

In Chapter 14 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Gunas are introduced in the context of what binds the self:

Sattva is lucid and healthy; it binds by attachment to happiness and knowledge. Rajas is of the nature of passion, the source of thirst and attachment; it binds fast by attachment to action; Tamas is born of unwisdom and creates delusion; it binds fast by heedlessness, indolence and sloth.

From Sattva arises wisdom, from Rajas greed, from Tamas, heedlessness, error and ignorance. Those who follow Sattva go upwards, the Rajasic remain in the middle, and the Tamasic go downwards.

The *Bhagavad Gita* goes on to list a number of things in the spiritual life affected by the different Gunas: worship, food, abstinence, offerings, knowledge, action, intellect, firmness, pleasure.

For example, action:

An action which is ordained, which is free from attachment, which is done without love or hatred by one not desirous of the fruit, that action is declared to be Sattvic. But the action which is done by one longing for pleasures, or done by the egotistic, costing much trouble, that is declared to be Rajasic. The action which is undertaken from delusion, without regarding the consequence, loss, injury, and ability, that is declared to be Tamasic.

There are interesting instances of parallels with the six System triads:

That which is like poison at first, at the end like nectar, that pleasure is declared to be Sattvic.

What's the practical application of this teaching? There is a clue in the following statement:

Now the feeling of 'I' comes under the threefold division: if a man has Sattva in abundance he will have a Sattvic feeling of 'I' which is very close to the Real Self. If it is full of Rajas it will imagine the ego to be composed of self or mind or sense organs... If the psyche is weighted down by Tamas, then the ego feeling will be equated with the body. So for him 'I' the Self, will become only that; he looks only after that, and does not bother about anything beyond. [Shankaracharya, 21.01.70; Sanskrit names translated].

So can one conclude the following?

1. Everything we experience is subject to the Gunas, one has to realise this: life is the play of the Gunas¹.
2. Only through Sattva comes clarity, peace of mind.
3. Nevertheless even Sattva binds the self. The aim must be to 'cross beyond the Gunas'.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is very much geared towards worldly renunciation, so the practical steps advised for 'crossing beyond the Gunas' may not apply. But the following description (which like nearly everything in the *Gita* comes from Krishna, a god-like incarnation) is universal:

When the seer beholds not an agent other than the Gunas and knows Him who is higher than the Gunas, he attains to My being.

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¹ Note that Tamas and Rajas are not always 'bad': for example, activity during the day is necessarily dominated by Rajas, rest at night by Tamas.