

Article

On Sense Perception

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Abstract

Karma is the natural basis of all existence [Karma, Sadhguru]. But how do we acquire this karma that holds us together? We acquire karma when we interact with the Universe. This interaction takes place through our senses. The senses are the medium through which our soul interacts with the Universe. Thus, it is our senses which influence the karma that makes us. The five Senses, being part of Prakriti, or the manifestation of consciousness, are made up of the five elements (ether, earth, fire, water and air) and can be categorized under three characteristic qualitative categories: sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic [Bhagavad Gita Chapter 14]. Sattvic indicates goodness, rajasic indicates passion and tamasic indicates darkness. The kind of sense perception we have will determine the kind of karma we will acquire. The healing of the element which dominates sense perception, and the progression from a lower guna to a higher guna (tamasic to sattvic) will lead to spiritual growth of a soul. When a soul interacts with the Universe through senses of sattvic guna, it will accumulate karma accordingly. The rising of the senses above all qualities, makes the senses akin to Brahman – it nullifies the elements, entirely finishing the interaction of the soul and the Universe, finishing karma, liberating the soul [Bhagavad Gita 14.20].

Keywords: Karma, senses, perception, elements, gunas, Universe, Brahman, Prakriti, Sattvic.

1. Introduction

Jiva, Karma and Senses

The world we see around us is manifested from *cosmic consciousness* or *brahman*. A single identifiable unit of manifestation (*jiva*) bearing distinct characteristics is manifested from *atman*. While the atman arises from and corresponds to the brahman, the *jiva* is the combination of *atman* as well as its manifestation i.e. mind and matter.

For the purpose of this paper, the word soul is used for *jiva*¹, since it has both the atman (*brahman or pure consciousness*) as well as characteristics of that atman (*the mind and matter, manifested out of accumulated karma*).

Atman is the inner Higher Self, while the soul (*jiva*) is the bearer of life and is subject to the laws of karma [Maria Ryzhik (*Hindu Religious and Philosophical Concept in Context of Globalization and Multiculturalism: "Jivatman"*)]. This mind and matter, is manifested based on the *karma* that the *jiva* bears.

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Karma, is action on three levels: body, mind and energy. Whatever you do on these three levels leaves a certain residue on imprint upon you. What does this mean? It is quite simple. Your five senses are collecting data from the outside world every moment of your life. You are literally bombarded with stimuli at every instant. Over time, this enormous volume of sense impressions begins to assume a certain distinctive pattern within you. This pattern slowly shapes itself into behavioural tendencies. A cluster of tendencies hardens over time into what you call your personality, or what you claim to be your true nature [Karma, Sadhguru].

The stimuli acquired by the senses upon interaction with the universe, and processed by the brain, creates karma, which gives the *jiva* its characteristics. The quality of the senses influences the perception, thereby influencing karma and the characteristics of the *jiva*. The transformation and upliftment of our senses will lead to the transformation of our karma. If we wish to grow ourselves spiritually, it is imperative to understand how our senses are perceiving the world.

As observed below, Prakriti, is made up of the five elements and bear three qualities. Senses, being part of Prakriti, is also made up of these five elements and bear the three qualities of Prakriti.

2. Observation

In the context of Chapter IV.34, in which Krishna tells Arjuna that by respect and humble submission, by enquiry and service, the ones who Know will teach you. Abhinavagupta interprets these 'knowing ones' as your own sense organs, meaning the mechanics of consciousness, your discriminating intellect (buddhi) and the senses within you that receive and collect the enlightening data that will lead to your Liberation (moksha). [The Shiva Sutras In my Understanding V. Susan Ferguson]

To understand how to influence sense perception, it is essential to understand what our senses are made up of, and what is the quality of the sense we can work upon.

3. Senses and Elements

Lord Krishna had said to Arjun, “All that exists in the universe has manifested from My material energy.” Just one material energy has extended itself into myriad shapes, forms, and entities of this world. The Taittirīya Upaniṣhad has elaborated on this:

*tasmadvā etasmādātmana ākāśhaḥ sambhūtaḥ
ākāśhādvāyuh vāyoragniḥ agnerāpaḥ adbhyaḥ pṛithivī
pṛithivyā ośhadhayaḥ ośhadhībhyo 'nnam annātpuruṣhaḥ
sa vā eṣha puruṣho 'nnarasamayaḥ (2.1.2)*

*From My material energy the ākāśhaḥ (ether) was created, from ether the air; from air, fire; from fire, water; from water, earth; from earth, plants; from plants, food and from food, man. This man is made of food-essence.*³

The Samkhya Philosophy, states that there are 25 Tattvas* – with Purusha (*spirit*) being one, thus 24 Tattvas in Prakriti (*manifestation*)⁴ – from the unmanifested Prakriti to the gross body. Kashmir Shaivism divides the manifested into 36 tattvas. Tattvas essentially mean building blocks. The entire manifestation is divided into these building blocks.

These tattvas include the sense organs (skin, tongue, eyes, nose, ears) as well as the senses (smell, taste, sight/ form, touch, sound).

While pure consciousness has no form, the manifestation around it is created from five elements (water, earth, fire, air and ether). Thus, like all of Prakriti, the senses and their respective organs, are all made up of the elements. The five senses, bear the quality of ether, fire, water, earth and air.

Kashmir Shaivism, further talks about how each sense are correlated to the different elements. *Gandha tanmatra (the block in which smell resides) arises from the element of earth (Prithvi tattva), rasa tanmatra (the residence of the impression of taste), arises out of the element of water (jala mahabhuta), rupa tanmatra (the residence of form) arises out of the element of fire (tejas mahabhuta), from the element of air (vayu mahabhuta) rises sparsa tanmatra, the sensation of touch, and from the element of ether (akasa mahabhuta) rises sabda tanmatra, (the tanmatra of sound) [Kashmir Shaivism, The Secret Supreme: Swami Lakshmanjoo].*

Healing of the elements

If a soul already has too much of one element in them due to their accumulated karma, their senses would be swayed by that particular element.

For example, if accumulated karma gives them a water characteristic, their senses would be swayed by taste, their interaction with the manifested universe would depend a lot on taste gratification. Another example, if one accumulates too much information by perceiving body language of others, through an overactive sense of sight, they could better incorporate more of the fire element or heal their inner fire element to balance out the sense of sight and form.

One would find perfumes very overwhelming if their Earth is affected. Simply by walking on grass, the Earth element within a person would begin to heal. Karma with regard to the Earth element in the soul, would be influenced when the sense of smell is healed and conversely, the sense of smell would heal with the healing of the Earth element in a soul.

In order to enjoy the maximum benefits of Vasthu Sastra, a dweller must ensure that his or her five senses are in harmony with the five elements.⁵

Thus healing of the senses would include incorporating or healing that particular element in the person. By interacting and influencing the elemental balance, the senses can be elevated to achieve desired karma.

4. Senses and Gunas

Samkhya philosophers say that life exists for the purpose of acquiring experience and knowing the Self. The *gunas* are meant to facilitate this spiritual endeavour. They reveal, conceal, and stir us up—all for the purpose of drawing us closer to *purusha*, the knower.⁶

All of Prakriti exists in three modes: *sattvic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic*. These *gunas* are the manner in which our senses perceive the manifested universe, the atman within others and the atman within the self.

Bhagavad Gita 14.5

*sattvam rajas tama iti gunah prakriti-sambhava
nibadhnanti maha-baho dehe dehinam avyayam*

[O mighty-armed Arjun, the material energy consists of three gunas (modes) – sattva (goodness), rajas (passion) and tamas (ignorance). These modes bind the eternal soul to the perishable body.]

The Gita (14.05) states that everyone is bound by the three modes. In this conception, the modes are subtle forces that shape the interaction between consciousness and matter. They shape all the three ways in which we interact with material objects: perceiving, processing and pursuing.⁷ When the living entity comes in contact with nature, he becomes conditioned by these modes.⁸

Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18, verses 23–25

Action that is virtuous, thought through, free from attachment, and without craving for results is considered Sattvic; Action that is driven purely by craving for pleasure, selfishness and much effort is Rajasic; Action that is undertaken because of delusion, disregarding consequences, without considering loss or injury to others or self, is called Tamasic.

The word *guna* literally means “strand” or “fiber” and implies that, like strands of a rope, the *gunas* are woven together to form the objective universe. Philosophically, the theory of the *gunas* explains what this universe is made of and how it came to manifest itself as mind and matter. But

more important for yoga practitioners, awareness of the *gunas* tells us whether we are genuinely moving forward in life (*sattva*), running in place (*rajas*), or losing our way (*tamas*).⁹

All the *tattvas* of Prakriti, bear these three qualities. Our senses also bear these qualities. To understand how our senses operate and interact, the understanding of these three *gunas* are imperative.

The three gunas:

Tamas [Bhagavad Gita 14.8]:

And know Tamas to be born of ignorance, deluding all embodied beings, it binds fast, O Bharata, by mis-comprehension, indolence and sleep.

The *guna* of darkness. When a person's senses are influenced by the *Tamas* quality, the person perceives the world around them with darkness. They are unwilling to recognise their life as a spiritual experience, they reside in duality. Their association with duality increases their material greed, and their disregard for the *atman* that resides in others. This gives their accumulated karma also *tamasic* qualities. *Darkness, inertness, mis-comprehension and delusion - these arise when Tamas is predominant, O Descendent of Kuru.*³

Rajas [Bhagavad Gita 14.7]:

Know Rajas to be of the nature of passion, giving rise to thirst and attachment; it binds fast, O Kaunteya, the embodied one by attachment to action.

The *guna* of passion. In this state, the sense perception that a soul bears is that of action, change and movement. There is a recognition of the spiritual path yet there is a lot of dynamic energy, aggression and movement to achieve and grow. Thus, if the senses are *rajasic*, one would acquire karma that would be filled with desire, passion, courage, stress, determination, chaos. *Greed, activity, the undertaking of actions, restlessness, longing – these arise when Rajas is predominant, O Best of the Bharatas.*³

Sattva [Bhagavad Gita 14.6]: The *guna* of goodness.

Of these, Sattva, the luminous, free from evil and because of its unblemishness, binds, O Sinless One, by attachment to happiness and by attachment to knowledge.

When the senses operate from a *sattvic* state, the soul sees the others around them as also a part of the spiritual journey, the soul recognises oneness. It acquires its karma through compassion, empathy, friendliness, trust, calmness. *When through every gate (sense organs) in this body, the light of intelligence shines, then it may be known that Sattva is predominant.*³

When *Sattva* predominates over *Rajas* and *Tamas* it produces on the mind its own nature of happiness and knowledge; when *Rajas* predominates over the other two it produces passions, desires, attachments and actions. When *Tamas* is prominent over *Sattva* and *Rajas* it shrouds discrimination and makes the mind unaware of its nobler duties.³

The best version of our consciousness would manifest itself in us if the right karma is accumulated. The right karma would be accumulated if the senses are worked upon. Incorporating *sattvic* qualities in one's life will influence *sattva* level in the senses, once the senses have *sattvic* qualities, automatically karma would also become of *sattvic* nature.

One of the important aspects of *Sattva* enhancement process is a gradual shift in perspective on life. Samkhya system of thought proposes that the creation is an outcome of an interaction between basic materiality and Consciousness. This material nature in itself is a combination of three primary principles (Triguna), i.e., *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. While suffering is associated with increased *rajas* and *tamas*, and absolute inner freedom is associated with the experience of Pure Consciousness within, *sattva* seems to be an in-between stage of well-being, especially of eudaimonic kind. [*Sattva* Enhancement Therapy: An illustrative report by Jyotsna Agrawal]

A few empirical studies have been carried out to increase *sattva*, mostly utilising either only, or predominantly, *hatha yoga* practice [Khemka et al., 2011]. While, Patil and Nagendra (2014), used an Integral Yoga module which consisted of a mix of *asanas*, *pranayama*, *chanting*, *nadanusandhana*, and *games*, to increase *sattva*. They found the practice of such Integral yoga leads to a significant increase in *sattva guna*, and decrease in *rajas* and *tamas guna*. However, most of these studies have given less attention to the psychological components of yoga. In one study, Puta (2016) successfully utilised a combination of yoga based psychological aspects, such as life style change, ideas of happiness, motivation for action etc., to enhance *sattva*.

By perceiving with harmony, balancing, wisdom, perspective, spirituality, humility, kindness, sincerity, determination, serenity, satisfaction, our senses would adapt to *sattva guna*.

Sri Aurobindo (1997), has suggested that although *satvika* happiness is not the highest state, given that the influence of ego and desire is still present, but with increasing inner freedom from these, it may culminate into highest bliss (Bhagavadgita: Sri Aurobindo, 1997). [Jyotsna Agrawal / *Sattva* Enhancement Therapy: An illustrative report]

5. Conclusion

The qualities of the *Purusha* remains constant – pure, and it is only the *Prakriti* that changes based on its karma (the energy field). So, the qualities are discussed are temporary in comparison to the permanency and the eternal truth of the *atman* by itself. This study is only useful to

analyze our existence in the temporal hologram – the 3D within which we interact and accumulate our karma. The quality with which we exchange information with the universe around us, the quality of sense perception.

The ever-changing Prakriti is what we can change transform and the beginning of the transformation of our Prakriti, is the transformation of our senses.

During the manifestation of this universe, the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) are in a state of ‘imbalance’ – and they are constantly shifting, replacing each other as they compete to dominate our consciousness. If you apply your own awareness – that intelligence (*buddhi*) that allows you to discriminate – and begin to watch how the *gunas* generate your compulsions, over time you will be able to observe their repetitive patterns and begin to detach your own consciousness from their deluding powers.

The ultimate goal of liberation will take place when gunas cease to exist within the senses. When that happens, karma will not be formed any longer. All gunas create attachment and thus bind one’s self to the ego. “When one rises above the three gunas that originate in the body; one is freed from birth, old age, disease, and death; and attains enlightenment” [Bhagavad Gita 14.20].

And he who serves Me with unswerving devotion, he, going beyond the Gunas, is fit for becoming Brahman. [Bhagavad Gita 14.26]

However, since that requires the will of the consciousness: consciousness creates, maintains and destroys by will [Shiva Drishti as explained by Chaitanya Darshan], one can heal their sense perception by healing the elements within their soul and one can aim to cultivate *sattvic gunas* in their senses.

A healed sense perception, would lead to healed karma, healed manifested mind and matter.

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