

*Sadhana as a Tapas*¹
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Indian and Classical Greek philosophical traditions both recommend that we structure our lives around the performance of certain kinds of actions as daily and regular habits. Under some circumstances and for some individuals, this means merely doing what comes naturally. For others, it requires varying degrees of self-control. For yet others, adhering to these practices is impossible or unimportant, beyond the scope of their interests or abilities. I want to take issue with one familiar answer to the question of why this is, and to suggest a different one.

I. Sadhana

The *Yoga Sutras* (II.29) enjoin us to cultivate the values and habits appropriate to the higher practices of yoga through consistent *sadhana*, or spiritual practice – the daily performance of very specific kinds of action:

The *yamas* are restraints on action that govern our relationships with others. They include nonviolence, avoidance of falsehood, abstention from theft, celibacy, and non-possessiveness or detachment.

The *niyamas* are positive observances that govern our relation to our higher self. They include mental and physical purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and devotion to the sacred.

The *asanas* are physical postures that cultivate physical and physiological strength, flexibility and balance.

Pranayama consists in exercises that cultivate control of the breath, the strength and endurance of the central nervous system, and so mental and psychological equilibrium.

Pratyahara, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi* are meditation practices that cultivate perceptual and intellectual discrimination, sustained and focused attention, and in-depth self-scrutiny.

Adhering to all of these practices can seem like a lot of work. For this reason they are considered to be forms of *tapas*, i.e. disciplines or austerities we may choose to impose on our behavior that, at the beginning, generate heat and energy because our ego-selves resist them. The stronger and more expansive the ego, the harder the work of bringing it into line.

However, we do not escape this work by turning to the Western philosophical tradition. Socrates in the *Euthyphro* enjoins us to “give [our] first and greatest care to the improvement of [our] souls,” (30b1-2); “to set our

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thoughts on goodness," (31b5-6); to "not allow to grow in [our]selves the habit of dishonesty," (35c6-7); to "make [ourselves] as good and wise as possible." (36c5-6) He warns us that "[i]t is much more honorable and much easier, not to suppress others, but to make [our]selves as good as [we] can." (39d6-8) And in the *Crito* he advises that "we ought not to repay injustice with injustice or to do harm to any man, no matter what we may have suffered from him." (49c11 - d1).² Socrates' counsel is more general than the detailed instructions for sadhana we find in the *Yoga Sutras*. But the similarities in the kind and content of actions he recommends are clear.

It is tempting to interpret Socrates' recommendations as telling us simply to *be* good and wise, or to act honorably and truthfully – as though we could easily follow these recommendations through simple acts of will; as though we could immediately become the model of human excellence to which we aspire, merely by wanting to. This impression is reinforced by Socrates' own behavior, which embodied this model of excellence with ease and grace.

Aristotle, Plato's student, corrects this impression for the rest of us. He says we are to cultivate virtuous traits of character – courage, temperance, generosity, kindness, patience, truthfulness, friendliness, modesty, and so on – by diligently practicing them until they become second nature. (1103a15-19; 33 - 1103b2)³ Through systematic repetition of the relevant actions, Aristotle tells us, these actions become habitual character traits. We then reflexively and naturally express them in action, as circumstances call them forth. He says,

It is the way that we behave in our dealings with other people that makes us just or unjust, and the way that we behave in the face of danger, accustoming ourselves to be timid or confident, that makes us brave or cowardly. Similarly with situations involving desires and anger: some people become temperate and patient from one kind of conduct in such situations, others licentious and irritable from another. In a word, then, like activities produce like dispositions. (1103b14-22)

² I have relied on the following translations: Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*, trans. F. J. Church (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956); *Euthyphro*, trans. Lane Cooper in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Eds. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); *Crito*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in Hamilton and Cairns.

³ I have relied on the following translations: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985); Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson and Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); and *Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard McKeon, Ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1971).

I believe that Aristotle's inspiration for this insight came from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, in which Yagnavalkya argues,

As a man acts, so does he become. A man of good deeds becomes good, a man of evil deeds becomes evil. A man becomes pure through pure deeds, impure through impure deeds. (paragraph 232)⁴

Both texts argue that we sculpt our characters and inner selves using the tool of our physical behavior. Both challenge the Western psychoanalytic assumption that right outward action stems from successful inner self-scrutiny. Both claim that cultivation of character and self progresses in the opposite direction, from outer to inner. Once we have trained ourselves to be fluent and effortless in right action through practice and repetition, we already will have achieved the moral and spiritual character that such action naturally and effortlessly expresses.

In the meantime, we may choose to exert ourselves in less ambitious acts of will. If we can now, on this occasion, bring ourselves to behave outwardly in the way a morally and spiritually developed person would behave, we begin to carve the pathways of habit and disposition in which we want our inclinations to travel. We in effect gradually mold ourselves to be the kind of person we aspire to be. In time, Aristotle assures us, the inner qualities of mind and temperament will follow.⁵

So we find in both Indian and Greek philosophical traditions the very strong recommendation to undertake certain physical and mental activities on a regular – indeed even a daily basis; to practice them repeatedly and systematically until they become second nature; in short, to train ourselves in human excellence. Both traditions regard the project of self-cultivation as centrally definitive of a worthwhile human life.

⁴ All references to the Upanishads are to the Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester translation (*The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

⁵ Aristotle distinguishes between moral and intellectual virtues in a way the *Yoga Sutra* does not. Whereas moral virtues are learned through practice, through one's upbringing, and through emulating role models, the intellectual virtues of reasoning, analysis and deliberation are learned through instruction. However, this distinction is not as hard and fast as it may seem. After all, we need instruction in which actions to practice, just as we need practice in the intellectual habits in which we are instructed. We are instructed in which actions are worthy of emulation and practice from our parents, our peers, our environment, and from individuals whose actions we admire. Similarly, we practice the intellectual disciplines of reasoning, analysis and deliberation in doing the assigned work in which a teacher instructs us.

II. Tapas

I said earlier that all this seems like a lot of work. But appearances, as we know, can deceive. It may be less work than it seems, when one is ready to undertake it; or more work for some people than for others; or more work at some points in one's life than in others. For Socrates it wasn't work at all, but rather his happiness. These practices may require very great self-governance for one individual, or under one set of circumstances. They may be not only effortless but intensely pleasurable under another.

One explanation is inherent in Aristotle's account of habituation. These practices are perhaps the hardest work of all to the extent that one has had no prior experience with them, and they become easier and more effortless with practice. Just as learning to play the piano is most excruciating at the very beginning, when one's fingers are stiff and unwilling and one's repertoire is confined to Hannon and Czerny fingering exercises, similarly holding one's temper or postponing the satisfaction of desire may be virtually unachievable if one has had no prior practice in doing so. The lesson here is that the work of self-cultivation is hardest at the very beginning of the project; and that one must want overridingly to achieve this end – more than one wants, at that moment, to express one's anger or satisfy one's immediate desire – in order to make any headway at all.

But this explanation leaves many questions unanswered. It does not explain why the hard work of self-cultivation, hard as it is at the beginning for all of us, is so much more challenging for some of us than for others. Nor does it explain why, however hard that work is, some of us but not others have the interest or ability to *want it badly enough* in order to prevail. Why is sadhana of interest to some but not others? Why is it so much harder for some than for others? And among those for whom it is difficult, why do some but not others succeed in continuing to practice it? Just how much of a tapas is sadhana supposed to be?

A different answer to these questions is supplied by familiar versions of certain Hindu doctrines. These claim that lack of interest, difficulties or failures in the project of self-cultivation – like any other personal difficulties or failures – are the result of "bad karma," i.e. that any such present difficulties are the deserved result of one's own prior derelictions, either in this life or an earlier one. This answer thus motivates us to practice the virtues out of fear that any vicious actions we perform will come back to haunt us. It instructs us to accept any difficulties or failures we are presently experiencing as the just retributive consequences of vicious actions we have performed in the past, or in a past life. And it thus implies that those for whom sadhana is easier are in some mysterious sense morally superior to those for whom it is hard.

I take moral issue with the implied use of fear to motivate virtue; with encouraging acceptance of rather than constructive resistance to present personal misfortune; with the reasoning that any such misfortune – particularly to children, animals, and the innocent – is their own fault; and therefore with the illusion of moral hierarchy in a wisdom tradition that implicitly rejects it. But I focus here on the metaethics behind the “bad karma” argument.

This argument presupposes two metaethical doctrines of Hinduism: the doctrine of karma and the doctrine of reincarnation.⁶ In its familiar form, the doctrine of *karma* states that

- (1) all actions are causally determined by earlier ones;
- (2) all actions have morally significant, causally determined consequences, extending into the indefinite future; and
- (3) morally good actions have morally good consequences and morally bad actions have morally bad consequences.

The familiar doctrine of *reincarnation* states that

- (1) an individual is repeatedly reborn in one life after another and one body after another;
- (2) the life circumstances in which one is reborn on a particular occasion are determined by the moral quality of one’s previous life; and
- (3) morally good actions in a previous life determine better life circumstances the next time around and morally bad actions in a previous life determine worse life circumstances the next time around.

The familiar doctrines of karma and reincarnation are thus mutually interdependent: karma supplies the causal and moral continuities of acts and consequences throughout time, while reincarnation supplies the metaphysical and personal continuities of individual identities who are affected by them throughout time. Thus both assume the temporal continuity, through successive lifetime physical embodiments, of a persisting individual ego-self. Both assume that persisting ego-self as the causal origin of a succession of behaviors and consequences of behaviors that further mold and influence it. And both assume that those behaviors and consequences can be morally

⁶ I distinguish the metaethical from the religious version of these doctrines found in Shankara’s commentary to the *Brahma Sutras*, according to which an omniscient and omnipotent Ishvara metes out consequences, incarnations, and spiritual status in accordance with just deserts. I consider here only the former version.

evaluated, consistently and objectively over time, independent of context, community, or culture.

As stated, these familiar doctrines are vulnerable to many objections I cannot explore here. In what follows I suggest a different interpretation of these doctrines that is consistent with the metaphysics of the *Upanishads*, but implies a different explanation for why sadhana requires more self-control for some individuals or under some circumstances than others.

III. The Spiritual Function of Sadhana

These practices fit into the context of a more general moral view, in both Indian and Greek traditions. In both, we undertake these practices, not as ends in themselves, but rather for the express purpose of cultivating the self – of refining our moral, intellectual and spiritual capacities to their fullest expression. This, in turn, serves a further purpose: to achieve knowledge of ultimate reality. The *Katha Upanishad* states,

[W]hen a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses, like the well-broken horses of a charioteer, lightly obey the rein. (paragraph 55) ...The senses of the wise man obey his mind, his mind obeys his intellect, his intellect obeys his ego, and his ego obeys the Self. (par. 61) ...When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not – then, say the wise, is reached the highest state. This calm of the senses and the mind has been defined as yoga. He who attains it is free from delusion. (par. 106-107)

Here we find the probable inspiration for Plato's metaphor in the *Phaedrus* of the immortal soul as a charioteer who governs the passions in the form of two horses, one obedient and one not. The thought is that in order to grasp knowledge of ultimate reality, we must physically, physiologically, psychologically and spiritually prepare ourselves to receive it. Our body and central nervous system must be conditioned and balanced, our senses alert, our intellect sharp and clear, and our vision impartial and unclouded by undisciplined desires, impulses, or personal bias or preoccupations. This conception of sadhana is familiar in Yoga and Vedanta. But it is implicit in Aristotle's remarks in the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the contemplative life as requiring self-sufficiency, leisure, freedom from fatigue, and that we

ought, so far as possible, to make ourselves immortal, ... to do all that we can to live in conformity with the highest that is in us; for ... this is the true self of the individual. (1177b 20 – 1178a4)

Similarly, in both traditions, to achieve this knowledge is intensely pleasurable. In Yoga and Vedanta, the pleasure derives from the lived

experience of union with ultimate reality. This experience is the final outcome of the practices already described, which cultivate the discernment of underlying unity behind the multiplicity of appearances. Because direct, experiential insight into this underlying unity at the same time transcends the apparent boundaries between the knowing subject and the object known, the experience of union is simultaneously an experience of unconditional love, unrestricted freedom, and undifferentiated bliss. Thus the final outcome of sadhana is a release from the rigors of tapas because it is a release from the limiting constraints of ego-individuation:

Having fully ascertained and realized the truth of Vedanta, having established themselves in purity of conduct by following the yoga of renunciation, these great ones attain to immortality in this very life; and when their bodies fall away from them at death, they attain to liberation. (*Mundaka Upanishad* par. 56)

In hindsight, we discover that tapas – the experienced friction of working against the resistance of our delinquent impulses – was also the felt resistance of the physical and spiritual bars that imprisoned us within our limited individual identities. Having achieved knowledge of ultimate reality, we thereby achieve a state in which these temporal and material constraints no longer exist.

Aristotle's account of the happiness that comes with the life of contemplation is less explicit, but nevertheless consistent with this account. He defines happiness as "an activity of the soul in accordance with or implying a rational principle," (1098a8-9), i.e. virtue; and declares that "virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves." (1099a20-21) Contemplative activity, however, is the highest virtue of "the best part of us.

Whether this is the intellect or something else that we regard as naturally ruling and guiding us, and possessing insight into things noble and divine ...it is the activity of this part, in accordance with the virtue proper to it, that will be perfect happiness. (1177a12-18) ...any man who lives it will do so not as a human being but in virtue of something divine within him, and in proportion as this divine element is superior to composite human nature. (1177b26-28)

Here Aristotle describes contemplation as insight into "things noble and divine," lived and experienced "in virtue of something divine within [us]." What we come to know through contemplation has a divine dimension, and we come to know it in virtue of the divine dimension within ourselves. Both Indian and Greek traditions associate the divine with the unconditioned – that is, with omnipotence, omniscience, and unconditional freedom. Hence I would propose that Aristotelian contemplation, like yogic meditation, is a process that advances us from the conditioned world of individuated appearances to experiential insight into the unconditioned, unified ultimate

reality that lies behind it. Next I try to suggest what it is about this ultimate reality that enables us to arrive at it through the yogic practices of sadhana.

IV. *The Metaphysics of Sadhana*

Obviously I set myself here an impossible task. By definition, what is unconditioned and unlimited is beyond the capacity of individuating words and concepts to capture. That is why the *Upanishads* refer to ultimate reality using not a descriptive term but rather a proper name, Brahman. Like the name Susan, the term Brahman designates something without purporting to describe it. Unlike a person named Susan, however, the referent of the term Brahman cannot be described, and to try is immediately to fail. Nevertheless the rishis who authored the *Upanishads* could not resist the temptation to try. They disagreed violently among themselves as to how best to describe Brahman. I like to envision the rishis, each firmly ensconced within the solitude of his or her forest enclave, furiously e-mailing one another back and forth about this topic.

In the *Prasna Upanishad*, Brahman is associated with the sun, light, prana (or breath), and energy (pars. 6, 8-9, 13, 40-41, and especially 60). In the *Mundaka*, Brahman is described as willing the universe into existence and engendering its material cause. This in turn engenders its primal energy, which in turn engenders mind, and so the subtle elements. These in turn engender multiplicity, and thereby the causal determination of the universe (par. 9). The *Mundaka* also describes Brahman as formless and self-luminous (pars. 19, 29, 38-39), reinforcing the characterization of the *Prasna*. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* narrates the way Brahman,

[d]esiring that he should become many, that he should make of himself many forms, ... meditated. Meditating, he created all things. Creating all things, he entered into everything. (pars. 32 - 33)

Later in the *Taittiriya*, Brahman is described as the "source of all thought and life and action" (par. 67). Similarly, the *Aitareya Upanishad* opens by declaring that

Before creation, all that existed was the Self, the Self alone. Nothing else was. Then the Self thought: "Let me send forth the worlds." (par. 1)

Later, the *Aitareya* characterizes Brahman as pure consciousness (pars. 13, 15). The *Chandogya Upanishad* describes the realized form of the Self as light and its thoughts as true (par. 5). It later declares that

In the beginning there was Existence alone - One only, without a second. He, the One, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth. Thus out of himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being. (par. 42)

These descriptions of Brahman have three features in common: First, they provide a first-cause explanation of the creation of the physical universe of name and form. Second, they characterize this first cause as intentional, or object-directed. Third, they further characterize this first cause as self-aware, i.e. as conscious of the nature and consequences of intentional conscious acts.

From these three features we can extrapolate an account of the relation between the ultimate reality we may seek to know, and the concrete practices within our familiar world of multiplicity by which we can come to know it. We need only make one assumption that is implicit but not actually stated in the *Upanishads*. That one extra assumption is that *consciousness is identical to energy*.⁷ If consciousness is energy, then since energy can condense into matter, an intentional consciousness can causally engender a physical state of affairs. And if energy is conscious, then every materially condensed physical object has some degree of consciousness, however slight. This provides one way of understanding the frequently repeated claim in the *Upanishads*, that Brahman, or the true Self, subsists not only in every living thing, but indeed deep within every being of any kind.

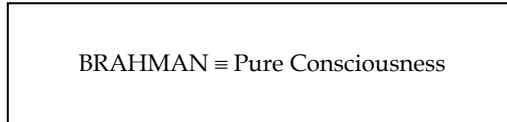
Under this assumption, ultimate reality - or Brahman - is pure consciousness, and ultimate reality generates the world of name and form in exactly the same way consciousness always engenders multiplicity. Consciousness - or Brahman - is inherently intentional: it is always consciousness *of something* [please refer to **Figure 1**]:

⁷ Here I am aware of identifying two concepts associated with two different Hindu traditions - Tantric and Vedantic - often seen as radically divergent. This seeming divergence is rooted in the even more ancient philosophical tradition of Samkhya, which sharply distinguishes between consciousness (*Purusha*) on the one hand, and any kind of matter (*Prakriti*), including but not limited to the physical, on the other. However, all claim Vedic authority to varying extents, and nothing in the *Upanishads* rules out this identity. Since it is a useful identity, I am going to use it.

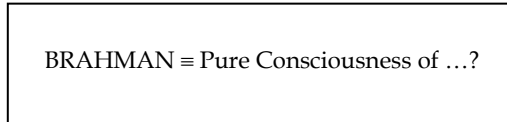
Figure 1: Foundations of the Steady-State Universe in the Upanishads

NOTE: The following levels are structurally co-existing, not temporally sequential.

Level 1: Only Pure Consciousness \equiv Energy exists:

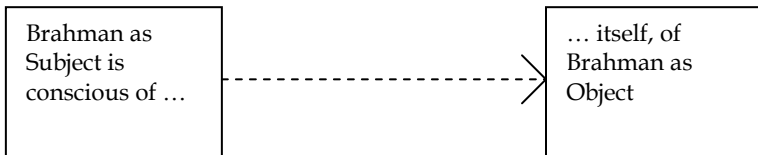


Level 2: What is Pure Consciousness conscious of (it's in the nature of consciousness to be of something)?



Level 3: Answer: Brahman is essentially conscious of *itself*. → Brahman differentiates into Conscious Subject and Object of Consciousness. Here there are *two* things whereas at Level 1 there is only *one*:

BRAHMAN \equiv Pure *Self-Consciousness*:



Level 4: Brahman distinguishes itself as *object* of its own consciousness both from Brahman itself as *subject* and from what it is *not*: Now there are *three-plus* things - Brahman as self-conscious Subject, Brahman as Object of consciousness, and Brahman as all consciousness that is neither Subject nor Object. Generally, $[(\sim\text{Subject}.\sim\text{Object}) \equiv \text{Object}^i]$ and $\{[\sim\text{Subject}.\sim\text{Object}.\sim\text{Object}^i] \equiv \text{Object}^i\}$.

REMEMBER: Consciousness \equiv Energy. SO: Consciousness/energy hereafter proliferate in accordance with the law of non-contradiction, differentiating and condensing into material, concrete particular entities, events and states of affairs (“the world of name and form” of the *Brahma Sutras*) that interact in accordance with the laws of physics:

BRAHMAN							
Subject = Not-Object				Object = Not-Subject			
Both Not-Subject and Not-Object =							
Object ¹		Object ²		Object ³		Object ⁴	
Conjointly Not-Subject and Not-Object and Not-Object ¹ and Not-Object ² and Not-Object ³ and... Not-Object ⁿ =							
Object ⁿ⁺ ₁	Object ⁿ⁺ ₂	Object ⁿ⁺ ₃	Object ⁿ⁺ ₄	Object ⁿ⁺ ₅	Object ⁿ⁺ ₆	Object ⁿ⁺ ₇	Object ⁿ⁺ _m

In the limiting case in which there is only one thing, namely consciousness, consciousness is nevertheless conscious of itself - i.e. it is *self*-conscious. But then there are *two* things that are Brahman, namely Brahman as conscious subject and Brahman as object of that consciousness. However this bipartite relation, too, implies consciousness that is neither subject nor object but conscious of both. Brahman is now *three* things: subject, object, and that consciousness which is neither - with the attendant distinctions of name that identify the distinctions in form which that consciousness has created. Each iteration of the act of self-conscious discrimination creates further multiplicity and diversity in the objects of consciousness, at the same time that it further detaches the ultimate Self from the multiplicity of objects its self-awareness has created.

And because - and here is where our extra assumption becomes useful - consciousness is identical to energy, these acts of self-awareness generate intentional objects of consciousness that have physical reality as well. These individuated forms constitute our familiar, causally determined world of multiplicity, and include human beings. So this world, including humanity, is a product of Brahman, is co-extensive with Brahman, is saturated with Brahman, and also is an illusion that conceals the steady, unitary state of consciousness that Brahman is in fact.

Sadhana comprises spiritual practices within the familiar world of multiplicity that enable us to trace this path back in the opposite direction,

from “the world of name and form” to “the One without a second” that underlies it. In the *Upanishads*, individual human consciousness is an extension of the original, unitary consciousness that engenders it. Like that original consciousness, individual human consciousness in turn creates further objects of awareness⁸ – then enters into them, then gets lost in them. Identifying with and pursuing the objects of individual consciousness we have created, we lose our connection to the true Self whose objects they are.

In different ways, all of the eight limbs of yoga train us in two habits. First, sadhana trains us to observe and control our mental and physical reactions to stimuli. Second, sadhana cultivates the ability to detach our awareness from those reactions: from our perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs; from the emotions and desires we feel in response to them; from the actions our emotions and desires move us to perform; and finally from the fruits of those actions outside us. Thus sadhana trains us in the habit of self-awareness.

Of course we continue to experience the full force of these ego-states, as long as we survive as ego-selves at all. Simultaneously, through sadhana, we learn to regard the ego’s antics reflectively – with detachment, amusement and compassion. From this reflective standpoint, the distinctions of name and form that give our ego-states such personal urgency are not all that important. We learn not to take our ego-selves too seriously. Sadhana teaches us to enjoy and applaud the dance without slipping a disk on the dance floor.

As we learn to view our ego-states from the standpoint of self-awareness, we come to identify with that Self in us that views the ego’s antics as entertainment. From that standpoint we see that our ego-states are not essential parts of our Self at all. They are creations of self-consciousness we can observe, enjoy, and finally release. To release our ego-states from our consciousness is to release our consciousness from their imprisonment, and so to rejoin the original, unitary consciousness that engendered them. In this sense, sadhana really is our direct pipeline to God.

V. “Bad Karma” and the Gunas

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* describes how
[t]he seers, absorbed in contemplation, saw within themselves the
ultimate reality, the self-luminous being, the one God, who dwells as the

⁸ This implies creating the actual states of affairs that these intentional objects denote only in the limiting case of original, unitary consciousness (Brahman), in which consciousness and energy are presumed to be strictly identical.

self-conscious power in all creatures. He is One without a second. Deep within all beings he dwells, hidden from sight by the coverings of the *gunas* – *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. (par. 4)

The *gunas* are the three kinds of qualities or dispositions that differentiate ultimate reality into discriminable forms – as we just did a moment ago in distinguishing between Brahman as subject, Brahman as object, and Brahman as neither subject nor object. The *gunas* thus shape all physical and psychological entities and forces in the universe. So we release our ego-states from consciousness by examining, controlling and releasing their qualities and dispositions [please refer to **Table 1**]:

Table 1: The Three Gunas in The Bhagavad-Gita

Quality:	Sattva	Rajas	Tamas
<i>Desire for:</i>	Happiness, knowledge	Pleasure, possessions	Stupor, unconsciousness
<i>Enslavement of:</i>	The happy	The doers	The deluded
<i>Prevalence of guna:</i>	Feels, perceives	Seized by	Yields to
<i>Character trait:</i>	Understanding	Greed	Sloth, confusion
<i>After death:</i>	Goes to heaven	Reborn rajasic	Reborn tamasic
<i>Action result:</i>	Joy	Pain	Ignorance
<i>Guna result:</i>	Knowledge	Greed	Delusion
<i>Life location:</i>	Higher realms	Mundane world	Underworld
<i>Object of worship:</i>	God	Power, wealth	Chimaeras
<i>Food:</i>	Fresh, soothing	Spicy, salty	Preserved, pickled, rotten
<i>Offers sacrifice out of:</i>	Duty	Reward	Carelessness
<i>Does austerities for:</i>	Devotion	Recognition	Malevolence
<i>Gives gifts:</i>	Appropriately	Reciprocally	Inappropriately
<i>Renunciation out of:</i>	Duty	Aversion	Ignorance
<i>Knowledge of:</i>	Unity	Difference	Distortion
<i>Action from:</i>	Dispassion	Lust	Delusion

Agent:	Unattached	Ambitious	Dim, dishonest
Conscience:	Discriminating	Indiscriminate	Distorted
Determination:	Unwavering	Obsessive	Obstinate
Quality of happiness:	Joy	Finally bitter	Deluded, erroneous
Physical quality:	Lightness	Energy	Sluggishness
Mental quality:	Contentment	Striving	Torpor, dullness

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the analysis of the three gunas has a distinctly moral and hierarchical inflection. However, as natural cosmic forces, they are in themselves morally neutral. *Sattva* is the tendency toward weightlessness, dispersion, and clarity. In human beings it is associated with the character traits of serenity, purity and joyfulness. When we are navigating effortlessly through our lives with ease, grace, and sensitivity, we are sattvic. *Rajas* is the tendency toward forward propulsion, explosive energy or force, and drive. In human beings it is associated with ambition, desire, and competitiveness. When we feel driven to speed up on the highway so as to outstrip the car that is trying to pass us, we are being rajasic. *Tamas* is the tendency toward inertia, resistance, and dullness. In human beings it is associated with ignorance, delusion, and stupefaction. We are tamasic after many hours of watching TV, and even more so if we compound our couch potatohood with Big Macs and beer.

It may be difficult for us to think about these three tendencies in and of themselves, without making moral judgments about them. But they do not necessarily indicate a person's moral character. Try, for example, to identify the preponderant guna in Aristotle's portrait of the magnanimous man:

The magnanimous man is thought to have slow movements, a deep voice, and unhurried speech. For since he takes few things seriously, he is not excitable; and since he counts nothing great, he is not high-strung. (1125a13-16)

Aristotle's magnanimous man sounds rather tamasic to me.

In human beings, the gunas shape our physical, biochemical, psychological, and spiritual constitution. As psychological and spiritual dispositions, the gunas determine the given traits of character we then may attempt to train and mold through sadhana. The particular mix of gunas is

different for each of us, and may be different at different points in our lives. All three of them are present in all of us to varying degrees.

For all of us, the key to progress in cultivation of our higher self – to upward spiritual mobility, as it were – is rajas. No matter how much tamasic inertia we each must resist, our apportionment of rajas is what drives us to formulate goals and ambitions and ideals for ourselves, and what energizes us to achieve them. Rajas can find expression in passion, persistence, and commitment, as well as in the less admirable traits described in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thus rajas is the force that propels us along the path, from where we began to where we want to go. Where we want to go is determined by our individual priorities and our social conditioning. If we want to go to Brahman, rajas charges up our sadhana to gradually peel away the gunas or mental tendencies⁹ of the ego-self, layer by layer, until we reach “the ultimate reality, the self-luminous being, the one God, who dwells as the self-conscious power ... hidden from sight by the coverings of the gunas” within all of us.

Now back to why sadhana is harder for some individuals at some times than for others at other times; and why “bad karma” does not provide an adequate explanation of this. It follows from this account of the gunas that any project of self-improvement – which relies essentially on one’s own initiative rather than external incentives – will be more difficult on the face of it, for those of us who have a large proportion of tamas in our personal constitution. It will be even harder if this inertial resistance is compounded by prior self-destructive or self-indulgent habits – whether learned or chosen – that must be overcome. Furthermore, some individuals may lack sufficient rajas ever to blast through these resistant habits of mind and body. They may be unable to make themselves *want* cultivation of their higher self, or union with ultimate reality *enough* to endure the tapas of self-discipline. They may, quite simply, have other priorities. Others who lack these impediments will find the journey easier, and perhaps even pleasurable, because there is a greater proportion of sattva in their personal constitutions.

Moreover, neither science nor logic gives reason to dispute the thesis that there are individuated, non-physical continuities of energy that persist throughout several individual lifetimes. The gunas are psycho-physical forces that determine the manner, kind and quality of all entities that condense out of original unitary consciousness. So they determine not only a person’s psychological dispositions of character, but also the person’s capacity and inclination to alter or improve that character. What we do or do not do with

⁹ Known technically as *samskaras*.

our lives now may well entrench some of those dispositions so deeply that they survive the dissolution of the body. They may then gravitate to and condense in newborn physical forms in which they find further expression. Other life habits may erase some of those character traits and replace them with others that are, literally, self-canceling: the disposition to openness, generosity, humility, surrender, or self-sacrifice, for example – dispositions that soften and dissolve the boundaries of the ego-self, and make union with ultimate reality much easier.

However, the transpersonal continuity of individual character traits through several lifetimes – call this the “thin” account of reincarnation – *does not imply* the transpersonal continuity of an individual ego-self – call this the “thick” account. As we have seen, character traits are dispositions to react to given circumstances with a certain kind of response. If the circumstances are never given, the response never occurs. In this case the latent disposition remains present, but unrealized and unexpressed. The person who has it is no less an individual ego-self for that. Furthermore, two people can have the same character trait – say, generosity – and express it differently because the circumstances that call it forth and the resources available to each are different. Those differences are what define each person’s ego-self, not the character trait they share in common.

These traits are therefore necessary conditions of individual identity; but they are not sufficient. Rather, my individual identity is determined by the *personal content* of my actual experiences: my particular environment, relationships, encounters, and my thoughts and feelings about all of these. Most of all, my individual identity as an ego-self is determined by the personal content of the memories that I am constantly accumulating and shaping with each passing moment in my life.

I find no texts within the *Upanishads* that might explain how *this particular, personal accumulation of memory-content* might endure transpersonally throughout several lifetimes – nor, therefore, any that actually support and elucidate the thick account of reincarnation that virtually all of them avow. But it is precisely this continuity of personal memory-content that identifies me to myself and to others as the individual I am. If this lifelong personal continuity does not endure transpersonally, then I as an ego-self cannot be said to endure transpersonally.

If I *as an ego-self* do not endure transpersonally, then I cannot be held morally responsible for the past-life moral successes or failures of any impersonal mix of gunas that may have found previous human incarnation. Therefore I cannot be held morally responsible for the impersonal mix of gunas that give shape to my efforts in this one. That mix may make my sadhana easy, but I receive no moral credit for that. Or my mix of gunas may make sadhana hard, or impossible or uninteresting, without my racking up

any moral demerits. I cannot be blamed for *having* these gunas, nor for my actions in a previous life that *bequeathed* me these gunas. For there was no “me” in a previous life to whom such actions could be ascribed.

Of course I am morally responsible for doing the very best I can – or not – with the mix of gunas I happen to have in this life. If I aspire to ultimate knowledge, I can be praised for devoting every resource of character I have to the project of self-cultivation. And I can be blamed for squandering those resources on self-aggrandizement, or destroying them through self-indulgence, selfishness, or vice. In any such case, the proper subject of moral evaluation is *what I do* with the natural endowments I happen to have. It is neither morally reasonable nor metaphysically sound to pass moral judgment on those natural endowments themselves.

Hence no individual morally “deserves” the character traits with which she begins her life; and no individual is being rewarded or punished with those character traits in this life for moral successes or failures in a previous one. A person who finds sadhana difficult or impossible is a victim of misfortune. But this does not make his personal difficulty a punishment for past-life moral dereliction. His burden is not “bad karma,” but rather bad luck.