Lesson Six

MAKE ME THE EAGLE OF PROGRESS

WHISPERS FROM ETERNITY

by

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Make me an eagle of progress, soaring far above narrow lanes of bigotry. Call me to soar ever higher and higher, far above all clouds of earthly pettiness.

With the sharp talons of my soul I will tear at the little squabbling birds of misery, which prey upon mankind. I will free my mind’s skies from the buzzards of cynicism which prey on carcasses of dead hopes.

I will soar on balanced wings of wholesome living, high up into the finest regions of divine perception. High above the hurricanes of earthly preoccupation, I will soar higher and higher to those unimagined heights where Thou alone dost dwell.

Make me Thy eagle of ever-upward progress.
The Three Basic Qualities

Spirit, in order to create the universe, had to project an outward-moving force to manifest it. This force was balanced by another, opposite force, drawing everything back to Itself.

Just as duality has to exist for Spirit even to manifest Itself, so there must also be these two outward and inward forces to balance each other. The three qualities mentioned in the title of this lesson describe part of this outward-moving process. In oneness with the Supreme Spirit, these qualities, or gunas, cease. As the Sanskrit states it, one who reaches this state becomes triguna rahitam—beyond all the three gunas.

Thus, people who are farthest in consciousness from their own center in Spirit tend to be lazy, sluggish, and stupid. They are wholly engrossed in the senses, and in the quality known as tamas; they themselves are tamasic.

Those who have roused themselves to activity are under the sway of rajas. Such people are restless, involved in outwardness, and constantly active.

And those whose energy is directed upward, toward spirituality, manifest sattwa guna; they themselves are sattwic.

The restless activity of rajasic people can be directed either downward or upward. When it moves downward, it becomes a mixture of rajas and tamas. Thus, it displays rajo-tamas. When rajasic energy moves upward, it displays rajo-sattwa. Activity directed toward nothing in particular is, simply, rajo guna.

People who use their urge toward activity to seek revenge on others; to harm others; to become rich at others’ expense; to ride roughshod over others, indifferent to their interests or wellbeing: such people manifest rajo-tamas.

People who are active simply for activity’s sake express pure rajas.

And those who are active in the service of others, or of God; who use their money to help others; who try to heal the hurts of others; who give others the credit for things that have been done well; who laugh with others rather than at them: all such people manifest rajo-sattwa.

Those who see God everywhere; who emanate God’s love and joy to others; who are naturally kind; whose nature is self-effacing and who, in all they do, see God as the Doer; who identify with the sorrows of others, and do what they can to help them see God as the solution to all their troubles: such people manifest sattwa guna.

The process of spiritual growth is like peeling an onion. The peels represent various levels of commitment to ego-consciousness, the outer being the thickest and the heaviest. When the last inner layer has been removed, there is nothing left, for the onion is composed only of peels!

Because true happiness depends on how close we are to our own centers, it is in our own highest interest to strip away every peel. Every guna, however, has its own logic. Even tama guna is justifiable in the eyes of those who are tamasic. “Why should I exert myself?” the tamasic asks. “My body gives me all I want. Good food; good sex; good sleep; not troubling myself to help anyone else, or even to relate meaningfully to him; jokes that relate to sex and to the simple physical pleasures; a vocabulary that relates mostly to the lower bodily functions; inactivity (why push myself needlessly?)—I view all this as the good life.”
The lower rajasic person (rajo-tamas) justifies himself also: “Why should I let anybody get in my way?” he asks. “It’s stupid to waste time worrying about other people. They aren’t me! Give me the company of jolly fellows who can laugh with me. Give me people and things to laugh at. Let me grab what I can, and get away with whatever I can. My moral value in all situations is, ‘Let me get mine.’ My first question, always, is, ‘What’s in it for me?’ I’d walk a mile for a Camel (cigarette), but I wouldn’t even stretch out a hand to help others unless I got something out of it myself. Live, but why let live?”

The ordinary rajasic person will say, “What does it matter what I do, as long as I keep busy? I wonder who won the lottery last week? I wonder when Suzy will make up with her boyfriend on my favorite TV soap. I just love the new design on corn flakes boxes! I don’t care what work I do, so long as I get good pay. Did you hear which horse won the derby yesterday? The first page I turn to when I get my newspaper every morning is the sports page.”

The rajo-sattwa person asks, “What’s your favorite charity? I care very much what I do: I want to be useful! I’m worried about the situation in Zambezi! How can I best serve our neighborhood? I’m glad Rob Clancy will be our next president! He’ll want to help the poor. I like to do good, even if it means having a little less, myself.”

And the sattwic person says, “I want to make others happy. I like to be kind to others; it makes me happier. I wonder how anyone can actually want to hurt anyone else; I simply don’t know what it means to hate anyone, or to get angry; usually it’s all about trifles! My greatest happiness comes from helping other people to feel God’s joy. I don’t know why anyone wants to be important: I find happiness in being nobody! I like to own things for the pleasure of giving them away. I love others because I see that everyone really wants only one thing, which they see as happiness, but which, if they only knew it, is God’s bliss.”

Many people in our times, in their increasing awareness that different cultures have different values, conclude that all morality is relative. They forget that the theory of relativity is related to the constant speed of light. Moral values, too, are relative, but they relate to something fixed and eternal: man’s need to rise above his ego and to realize himself one with his own true nature as a manifestation of God. The three gunas help us to understand the true nature of relativity.

But the gunas are also present everywhere; all things are a mixture of all three. Without that reality, Creation would not be able to exist.

Yogananda compared the gunas to waves on the ocean. Duality is explained by their rising and falling. But the wave itself, pushing itself up as it does from the ocean bosom, has three parts: the part closest to the ocean (sattwa); the energy that pushes the wave upward and constitutes the middle part (rajas); and the crest of the wave, farthest away from the ocean bosom, and the most likely to obscure the ocean’s vastness (tamas).

Even sattwa guna is still egoic. For it requires ego-consciousness even to be humble! Strange as it may seem, one can fall from sattwic consciousness. For example, there is a similarity between the complete peacefulness of sattwa and the indolence of tamas! Thus, the ego may go many times up and down the ladder of delusion before he breaks out of ego-consciousness altogether, into the free skies of Spirit. It behooves one, therefore, to strive constantly until he breaks out of his ego-cage altogether. For instance, he may become self-
satisfied, and then even proud of his humility or his devotion! Delusion is a subtle power, and it behooves one to hold it always at arm’s-length—never to forget that delusion is ever there, lurking in the underbrush. He should check himself regularly, to be sure he hasn’t slipped even a little bit from his ideals, for it is possible to do so without even noticing. He should keep his sights ever fixed on God alone.

To pass beyond delusion’s hold altogether, the ego must be completely slain. There are even two states of samadhi (the state of oneness with God). In the first state, sabikalpa samadhi (or, as it is also called, sampragyata samadhi) the ego is left temporarily behind as one experiences oneness with God. The ego is still retained in his memory, however, as a lingering reality. If, when he returns—as he must—to ego-consciousness, he continues to dwell gratefully on the vastness of the true Self he has experienced, he will continue toward perfect freedom in the highest state of nirbikalpa samadhi (asampragyata samadhi). But if he allows himself to think, “That vastness is what I, in my human self, really am!” he can fall back into enormous and overwhelming pride, falling from that high state—collapsing might be a better word—into renewed delusion and egotism again.

Thus, sabikalpa may be seen as the last and greatest test the devotee faces, before he can attain perfect freedom in Spirit. A fall from sabikalpa can mean an indefinite delay in attaining his goal: a sidetrack, perhaps, of thousands of years.

People think in terms of one life at a time. The gurus think in terms of a long string of reincarnations. We should train our minds, also, to think in terms of thousands of years, for such, indeed, is the spiritual path.

Sattwa is also evident in the flowers, in nature’s beauty, in friendly animals. Rajas is evident in insects that pester our peace of mind by buzzing in our eyes and ears. Tamas is evident in slugs, scorpions, and low, foul-looking creatures. The mixture of the three gunas is everywhere. Without them, Creation could not exist.

One day when I was with Master at the SRF Lake Shrine, enjoying its beauty, we were pestered by countless little gnats. They kept getting into our eyes and ears. I said to Master, “Look, Sir! Here we are surrounded by all this loveliness, and it has to be ruined by these little creatures!”

He smiled wryly as he answered, “That is God’s way of keeping us always moving toward Him!” (I noticed later, however, that we ceased being bothered by those gnats!)

Yogananda stated that whole galaxies manifest primarily one guna or another. On planets that are in tasmatic galaxies, the people themselves are primarily tasmatic. Cannibalism abounds, and the darker emotions of hatred, anger, bitterness, and envy. Feuding is rife, and there is no peace among the inhabitants. People’s lifespan is brief.

In rajasic galaxies like ours, most of the inhabitants are busily “getting theirs.” To them, it seems naive to act in any other way. Ego-consciousness here is strong, and wars are more or less frequent. People’s lifespan is somewhat longer.

In the sattwic galaxies, people live together in peace. They quickly forgive one another for any slight. The planets are beautiful, and people live close to Nature, rather than crowded together in cities. Warfare is absent. Men have no difficulty in contacting the astral world, for the veil between this universe and the next is finer. People there live longer, and in much better health than here.
For the most part, they live happily.

Time and space are illusory. The people on tamasic planets, if they sin too deeply, come in clouds to our earth and elsewhere, as disease epidemics.

The gunas, though evident in Nature, are primarily evident (as I said earlier) in human beings themselves. The Indian teachings are, in this sense, relativistic, and therefore more realistic than the traditional, absolutist philosophy of the West. For example, India evolved the caste system in recognition of the gradations of human awareness. Indeed, I'm not sure whether it even deserves to be called a system. It was simply a recognition of the way things were.

It became hardened more recently into a hereditary system, thereby systemizing the way things weren't. The caste system as it is practiced today is without justification, and may be listed among the misery-making features with which every society is cursed.

As the castes were originally conceived, they were a recognition of the three gunas as they appear in human nature. People of the lowest caste were called shudras. These were typified by the peasants, though of course in every society there are workers in other fields also who work more with their hands than with their brains. Moreover, there are educated peasants as well as highly intelligent ones. Peasants, then, is simply a convenient caricature, so to speak, of the tamasic type of human being.

The next step upward were the vaishyas, who were characterized as merchants—though there are, and were, plenty of people in other walks of life whose interests lie in personal gain.

The third step upward were the kshatriyas—typically, soldiers and social leaders whose main interest lay in giving. This sort of human being is epitomized by the soldier, because a good soldier is willing to sacrifice his very life for the wellbeing of others. Needless to say, many actual soldiers are far from being so noble, and are, in fact, rather tamasic or rajo-tamasic. But the best kshatriya expresses the quality of rajo-sattwa. He also rules over others as a service to them, and not with the desire to be served by them.

The fourth stage is that of the brahmin: priests by designation, but the true brahmin caste embraces all those who understand in their hearts that no man has anything to give; there is nothing to give: one can only share God’s love and bliss.

Everyone, wherever he is on the long upward incline toward perfection, should gaze above him, not below.

The real shudra has no will to uplift himself; he is completely passive by nature. The best he can do is try to serve people who are nobler than he. For as Yogananda said, “Environment”—and that means, above all, the company one keeps—“is stronger than will power.” Thus, if a shudra serves in a home where the people are at least rajo-tamasic—vaishyas, certainly—he will have at least some opportunity of progressing somewhat higher on that long upward incline. It would not help him to serve in the homes of higher types—rajo-sattwic and sattwic—for the chances are he would consider them foolish, and would only steal from them when he could.

The vaishya can grow spiritually if he doesn’t cultivate, and indeed if he shuns, the company of selfish people, and learns to appreciate and to mix with those who are by nature nobler than he. It is not unusual for a vaishya type to admire someone for his noble characteristics. He would do well to try also to cultivate the friendship of such persons. The people on his own level may
criticize this effort as “social climbing,” but if he can do so with sincerity he will grow, spiritually.

Kshatriya types can develop further if they try to tune in to, as well as mix with, those of still higher consciousness, those who aim to share higher awareness with others and not only to uplift them emotionally or materially. Kshatriyas of refined temperament will be naturally drawn to people who are selfless, who have high ideals, and therefore who think more about God.

Brahmin types, finally (and I speak of brahmin types, rather than brahmans by heredity, who often lack the very basic qualities of a brahmin; who, indeed, resemble far more the vaishya), should devote all their time to practicing the presence of God inwardly. That is to say, they should carry the peace of daily meditation into their outward activity; practice seeing everyone, even the lowliest shudra, as a manifestation of God; refer all their actions to God; indeed, see themselves as belonging only to God, and all their acts—even their mistakes—as offerings to God.

Among other things, they should never let themselves become like what used in America to be called a Boston Brahmin, where it was said that the Lodges spoke only to the Cabots, and the Cabots spoke only to God! He should be humble, and see God alone as the Doer.

How did the present false understanding of the caste system get so entrenched? My Guru said it was because brahmans wanted their children to be brahmans, too. And of course, those children weren’t, always. A person is born into a family that is compatible with his nature, but he is born also when he needs to be born, and a perfect match is not always possible. It may, out of necessity, suffice for a soul ready for earthly birth and the family to which it comes to have only one strong trait in common.

Thus, it sometimes happens (my Guru said) that a saintly soul with a deep love for peace is born into the home of a criminal father who happens to love peace also, at least in the sense of liking to be left alone!

The brahmin caste, and sattwa guna, carry with them some of the same obstacle as is encountered by those who attain sabikalpa samadhi: the danger of smugness—or, in the case of sabikalpa samadhi, the danger of one’s ego becoming megalomaniac. Therefore bear in mind what my Guru once said to me: “Remember, you won’t be safe until you attain nirbikalpa samadhi.”

The castes are the true races of man. The colors of his skin are superficial and of no importance. Every nation has its shudras, vaishyas, kshatriyas, and brahmans. A vaishya or a brahmin in Nairobi will be closer to a member of his own natural caste in Norway than to many of his own neighbors.
Story

How a Saint Converted a Thief

A pious saint, Tulsidas, used to worship before an image of Rama, the saintly ruler of India, and the hero of the epic, The Ramayana. Certain princely devotees of Tulsidas, inspired by his intense devotion, gave him a number of gold utensils to be used ceremonially in his temple. Tulsidas, while meditating on Lord Rama, often felt a mild concern for the safety of his gold utensils. His fear was not baseless, for a thief had learned of them, and was secretly looking for an opportunity to steal them. Whenever he went to do so, however, he saw a living image of the prophet Rama guarding the temple entrance.

Tulsidas always left the temple open and unlocked. At night he would go to meditate in a bower nearby. What puzzled the thief was that, during the daylight hours, there was no sentry at the temple entrance. Yet for seven nights in a row he beheld the prophet Rama standing there, armed with bow and arrows, guarding the entrance. The thief reasoned that it could not be Tulsidas dressed as Rama, for, each night before the thief tried to enter the temple, he always made sure that Tulsidas was in deep meditation beneath his favorite bower.

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The eighth day, the bewildered thief came dressed as a gentleman and addressed Tulsidas: “Honored Sir,” he said, “for seven nights I have tried to enter your temple at night to meditate and benefit from its holy vibrations, but I didn’t dare enter for fear of your hired sentry who stood there, dressed up as Prophet Rama. I’ve been told you keep your temple open even at night, for you wish to give true devotees the opportunity to meditate there. Could you please speak to your sentry? Otherwise, I’m afraid of entering.”

“Did you really see him guarding the temple?” Tulsidas, with tears in his eyes, asked the pretended gentleman. “Well, Sir, I’m very sorry. I will ask him not to guard the door any longer.”

Tulsidas understood that his fear of losing the temple’s gold was the reason for Lord Rama’s manifestation at the door as a sentry. Obviously, this gentleman before him was really a thief.

He retired to the temple and prayed deeply to Lord Rama: “Lord, take away my gold. Please, don’t any longer assume the role of sentry. I am ashamed for having bothered you with my materialistic fears.” Rama appeared to him in vision and promised to grant his devotee’s prayer.

That night, the thief again approached the temple. Finding it without any sentry, the thief quietly entered, tiptoed to the altar, and hurriedly gathered together as many of the golden utensils as he could. These, he placed into a sack, and carefully left the temple.

As he emerged, he encountered a stray dog. It began at first to bark, and then to chase him. The thief, accompanied by the sound of gold tinkling on his back, ran as quickly as he could. At this moment, Tulsidas was just emerging from his meditation. He heard the dog barking, then heard racing feet. He hurried into the temple and discovered his loss. At once, he gathered together the few remaining gold utensils, tied them up in a napkin, and raced in the direction of the commotion. The thief, loaded down by the sack, could not run quickly; Tulsidas had no difficulty in overtaking him. The thief, almost beside himself with fear, fell at the saint’s feet and cried: “O holy one, please take back your gold utensils. I don’t want them. I beg you not to turn me over to the authorities! I
have a family to support.”

Did he really? One wonders. But Tulsidas laughed pleasantly, patted the thief on the back, and handed him the rest of the utensils, saying: “Friend, I didn’t catch you to arrest you, but to give you the utensils you missed in your hurry. I am glad to be relieved of them, for they distracted me in my meditations on Rama. Your need is greater than mine. Take this remainder also, with my blessings. If you want anything more from the temple, please don’t steal it and thereby poison your inner life. Just ask me, and I will give it to you willingly.”

The thief was dumbfounded by such generosity. Tightly he held the saint’s feet, and, sobbing, cried: “Oh holy Saint, I am a thief by profession, but I have never seen a greater thief than you! Today you have stolen everything from me—body, mind, desires, attachments—my very Soul. What now, to me, are these gold utensils. No longer will I be a thief of things that can again be stolen, or, if sold for money, lost to other worthless possessions. I want to be like you, a thief of Souls, and to steal them for God as you have done mine.”

**Affirmation**

I am free from all the qualities of Nature. I am Thine alone.