



The Ancient Wisdom of Emotional Balance: Understanding Personality and Emotion Regulation Through Indian Psychology

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Abstract: This chapter explores the profound relevance of ancient Indian psychology, specifically the theory of the three *gunas*—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—for understanding personality and emotional regulation in contemporary contexts. Drawing from a 5,000-year-old philosophical framework, the *gunas* offer a unique lens through which to examine individual differences in responding to emotional challenges, from calm reflection to overwhelm and avoidance. Integrating theoretical insights with original empirical research involving 100 adults, this chapter demonstrates how these ancient concepts illuminate modern emotional functioning. Findings indicate that Sattvic qualities, associated with harmony and clarity, significantly correlate with better emotional regulation and effective cognitive reappraisal ($r = 0.218$, $p < 0.05$). Conversely, excessive Tamasic tendencies, linked to inertia and resistance, are a significant predictor of poorer emotional regulation, often manifesting as suppression and avoidance patterns ($r = -0.291$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = -0.274$, $p < 0.05$). Rajasic traits, embodying passion and activity, showed no direct significant relationship with overall emotional regulation in this study, suggesting their contextual influence. Beyond empirical validation, the chapter discusses neurobiological correlates, integrating Guna theory with

modern neuroscience to suggest potential biological underpinnings for these ancient observations. Practical applications and therapeutic implications are explored, providing culturally informed pathways for fostering emotional well-being by cultivating Sattvic qualities, skilfully channelling Rajasic energy, and addressing problematic Tamasic patterns. This integration of ancient wisdom with modern psychological science offers a comprehensive and promising approach to enhance emotional resilience and promote more harmonious human interactions.

Keywords: *Indian Psychology, Gunas (Sattva, Rajas, Tamas), Emotion Regulation, Personality, Ancient Wisdom*

Introduction: When Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science

In the bustling corridors of modern psychology clinics, therapists observe clients with remarkably different approaches to emotional challenges. One client responds to stress with calm reflection, seeking to understand emotions before acting. Another becomes overwhelmed by intense feelings, often shutting down completely when faced with difficult situations. While contemporary psychology explains these differences through various personality models, ancient Indian philosophy offers a profound and surprisingly relevant framework: the theory of three fundamental qualities or *gunas* that shape human nature.

This chapter explores how the 5,000-year-old concept of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* (Chapple, 2009), the three *gunas* from Indian philosophical traditions illuminates understanding of emotional regulation in ways that complement and enrich modern psychological science. Through original empirical research and theoretical integration, researchers demonstrate that these ancient insights remain remarkably relevant for understanding how people manage their emotional experiences in today's world.

The significance of this exploration extends beyond academic curiosity. As mental health challenges increase globally and traditional therapeutic approaches seek enhancement through culturally informed perspectives, the integration of ancient wisdom traditions with contemporary psychology offers promising pathways for more comprehensive understanding of human emotional functioning.

The Three Forces Within: Understanding the Gunas

Sattva: The Quality of Harmony and Clarity

Individuals who embody *Sattva* maintain centeredness during crises, respond to conflict with wisdom rather than reactivity, and preserve emotional balance even in turbulent times. In

Indian philosophy, such persons exemplify the quality of purity, harmony, and illumination. Sattvic individuals demonstrate clarity of thought, emotional stability, and natural inclination toward growth and understanding.

Contemporary psychology recognizes Sattvic qualities in people who practice mindfulness naturally, approach problems with creative solutions, and maintain their values even under pressure. These individuals often serve as emotional anchors in their families and communities, providing stability and wisdom during challenging times. Research suggests that Sattvic characteristics correlate with higher emotional intelligence, greater life satisfaction, and more effective coping mechanisms.

The neurobiological foundations of Sattvic functioning appear to involve enhanced prefrontal cortex activity, the brain region responsible for executive functioning and emotional regulation. This neurological pattern supports the capacity for reflective rather than reactive responses to emotional stimuli, allowing individuals to maintain perspective and make decisions based on deeper values rather than immediate impulses.

Rajas: The Quality of Passion and Activity

Individuals characterized by *Rajas* embody the quality of passion, activity, and dynamic energy. They demonstrate drive for achievement, emotional intensity, and tendency toward both great accomplishments and significant stress. Rajasic energy fuels innovation, leadership, and change, making these individuals natural catalysts for progress and transformation.

However, when excessive, Rajasic energy can lead to burnout, emotional volatility, and difficulty finding inner peace. In achievement-oriented societies, many individuals display predominantly Rajasic characteristics, experiencing both the benefits and challenges this brings. They may excel in competitive environments but struggle with rest, contemplation, and sustained contentment.

Recent research indicates that Rajasic individuals often show heightened activity in brain regions associated with motivation and reward-seeking, including the dopaminergic pathways. This neurobiological pattern supports their natural drive and ambition but may also contribute to restlessness when goals are not immediately achievable or when external stimulation is lacking.

Tamas: The Quality of Inertia and Resistance

Tamas represents the quality of inertia, stability, and resistance to change. While this might seem purely negative, Tamasic energy serves important functions, providing grounding, rest, and the stability necessary for preservation and protection. In balanced measure, Tamas offers the capacity for stillness, deep rest, and resistance to harmful influences.

However, when Tamas becomes excessive, it manifests as lethargy, confusion, depression, and avoidance of necessary growth. Understanding Tamas helps researchers and practitioners recognize when rest is needed versus when stagnation has become harmful. The challenge lies in discerning between healthy withdrawal and problematic avoidance patterns.

Neurologically, excessive Tamasic patterns often correlate with reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex and heightened activity in limbic structures associated with stress and emotional reactivity. This pattern may contribute to difficulties with motivation, decision-making, and emotional processing that characterize problematic Tamasic states.

The Dance of Emotions: How the Gunas Shape Emotional Lives

The Sattvic Approach to Emotional Challenges

When faced with emotional difficulties, Sattvic individuals naturally gravitate toward what modern psychology terms "adaptive emotion regulation strategies." They demonstrate tendencies to reframe situations constructively rather than catastrophizing, maintain perspective by viewing emotional situations from multiple angles, practice acceptance by acknowledging difficult emotions without being overwhelmed, and seek harmony by looking for solutions that benefit all parties involved.

Research conducted by the authors involved 100 adults ranging from 18 to 65 years of age, though most participants (89%) were young adults between 18 and 24. This predominantly youthful sample included undergraduate students, working professionals, and individuals from various occupations, providing a diverse snapshot of contemporary emotional experiences. The study was particularly interested in how these ancient personality categories might manifest in people navigating modern life challenges—from academic stress to workplace pressures to relationship difficulties.

The research employed two primary assessment instruments: The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, which helped researchers understand how participants typically manage their emotional experiences by measuring cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression; and The Sattvic-Rajasic-Tamasic Personality Scale, which assessed the relative presence of each Guna in participants' personalities rather than categorizing people into rigid types.

The Rajasic Emotional Landscape

Rajasic individuals experience emotions intensely and often react quickly to emotional stimuli. Their emotional regulation tends to be action-oriented, preferring to "do something" about emotional problems rather than sit with uncomfortable feelings. They focus externally, seeking to change external circumstances rather than internal responses. Their effectiveness

varies—sometimes quick action leads to positive outcomes, other times it creates additional complications. Their emotional intensity can be both inspiring and exhausting.

The research findings revealed a complex relationship between Rajasic traits and emotional regulation. While traditional texts suggest that Rajas can be both helpful and harmful depending on the situation, the empirical study found no significant direct relationship between Rajasic traits and overall emotional regulation. This suggests that Rajas may indeed be the most contextual of the three Gunas, with its effects depending heavily on specific circumstances and how the energy is channelled.

The Tamasic Pattern of Emotional Avoidance

Tamasic individuals often struggle with emotional regulation because they tend to avoid or suppress difficult emotions rather than processing them constructively. Common patterns include emotional numbness, disconnecting from feelings rather than experiencing them fully; avoidance behaviors, using distraction, substances, or withdrawal to escape emotional discomfort; rumination, getting stuck in repetitive negative thought patterns without resolution; and learned helplessness, believing that emotional situations cannot be improved or changed.

The research provided compelling empirical support for theoretical connections between ancient personality concepts and modern emotional functioning. Tamas proved to be a significant obstacle to emotional health, with participants showing strong Tamasic tendencies demonstrating notably poorer emotional regulation. They were more likely to struggle with emotional suppression and avoidance patterns, confirming the traditional understanding of Tamas as a quality that, when excessive, impedes psychological growth.

Introducing the Empirical Study: Revisiting the Gunas in Modern Emotional Contexts

While the Guna framework has long been revered within Indian philosophical traditions, its application in empirical psychological research remains relatively underdeveloped. This study was conceived to bridge that gap—by exploring whether the timeless insights of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas still hold predictive value in the context of emotional regulation within contemporary populations.

Modern emotional landscapes are increasingly complex, shaped by fast-paced lifestyles, digital interactions, and evolving social norms. Amidst this, there is growing recognition of the importance of emotion regulation—our ability to understand, manage, and respond to emotional experiences effectively—as a critical skill for mental well-being. Though much of the empirical research has focused on models like the Big Five personality traits or

emotional intelligence frameworks, few have turned toward traditional Indian typologies to investigate how personality constitution influences emotional regulation styles.

The present research aimed to examine whether individuals who exhibit dominant Sattvic, Rajasic, or Tamasic traits differ meaningfully in their capacity to regulate emotions, particularly in terms of cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression. By applying validated psychometric instruments and modern statistical analyses to a sample of adults, this study sought to generate data-driven insights that could validate—or refine—the theoretical claims of ancient Indian psychology.

Moreover, the research was motivated by a dual goal: to test the predictive validity of the Guna framework in modern emotional functioning, and to propose culturally grounded psychological tools that could enrich global mental health discourse. What follows are the design, findings, and implications of that empirical inquiry.

Statistical Discoveries and Their Implications

The study's findings provided compelling empirical support for the theoretical connections between ancient personality concepts and modern emotional functioning. Sattva emerged as significantly beneficial for emotional well-being, with individuals demonstrating higher Sattvic traits showing significantly better emotional regulation abilities ($r = 0.218$, $p < 0.05$). They were more likely to use cognitive reappraisal effectively, approaching emotional challenges with the clarity and wisdom that ancient texts associate with this quality.

Tamas demonstrated a strong negative relationship with emotional regulation ($r = -0.291$, $p < 0.05$), with participants showing strong Tamasic tendencies displaying notably poorer emotional regulation. When researchers examined the numbers more closely, they found that Sattvic and Tamasic traits together explained about 10.2% of the differences in people's emotional regulation abilities. While this might seem modest, it represents quite meaningful variance in psychological research, especially given the complex nature of emotional functioning.

The regression analysis revealed that among the three Gunas, Tamas emerged as the most significant predictor of emotional regulation difficulties ($\beta = -0.274$, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that reducing Tamasic tendencies might represent one important pathway to improved emotional well-being, while the positive association with Sattva indicates that cultivating these qualities could enhance emotional resilience and adaptability.

Neurobiological Correlates and Contemporary Validation

Recent advances in neuroscience have begun to reveal the biological basis for the personality patterns described by ancient Indian philosophers. Brain imaging studies suggest that individuals with predominantly Sattvic characteristics show greater activity in the prefrontal cortex the brain region responsible for executive functioning, emotional regulation, and wise decision-making (Reddy, 2024). This neurological evidence provides a fascinating bridge between ancient wisdom and modern scientific understanding.

Conversely, those with strong Tamasic tendencies often display heightened activity in the amygdala and other limbic structures associated with emotional reactivity and stress responses. Emerging research suggests that Guna-based personality differences may be reflected in biochemistry as well (Reddy, 2024). Preliminary studies indicate that Sattvic individuals may have more balanced neurotransmitter profiles, particularly in serotonin and dopamine systems that regulate mood and motivation, while Tamasic patterns may be associated with inflammatory markers linked to depression and emotional dysregulation (Sharma et al., 2025).

These findings don't suggest that personality is fixed by biology, but rather that constitutional tendencies may predispose individuals toward certain emotional patterns while still allowing for growth and change through conscious effort and practice. This perspective aligns with both ancient wisdom traditions, which emphasized the possibility of transformation, and contemporary neuroscience research on neuroplasticity.

Bridging Traditions: Contemporary Research Context

Integration with Modern Psychological Frameworks

Several interdisciplinary studies have attempted to bridge Triguna theory with contemporary psychological frameworks. Ravindra and Babu (2021) found that Sattva positively correlated with positive emotional styles, while Rajas and Tamas showed negative associations. Interestingly, resilience demonstrated a unique negative correlation with Sattva, suggesting complexity in these relationships that warrants further exploration.

Gautam Shiv's theoretical work highlights how ancient Indian texts conceptualized mental health through the predominance of Sattva, with therapeutic aims focused on enhancing Sattva while reducing the influence of Rajas and Tamas. This goal resonates with modern psychotherapeutic models of emotional regulation and personality restructuring, suggesting cross-cultural validity in these observations about human psychological functioning.

Rastogi and Kewalramani's theoretical comparison of Triguna theory and Emotional Intelligence proposed a continuum from Tamas (low EI) to Sattva (high EI), with Rajas occupying a transitional space. They argue that personal growth and emotional regulation may be facilitated by movement across this spectrum, aided by practices like meditation, self-reflection, and disciplined living.

Cross-Generational and Cultural Considerations

Sharma et al. (2024) conducted a cross-generational study on emotional expression and regulation within families, finding that Sattvic traits promoted adaptive emotional expression while Tamasic traits predicted repressed emotional behavior. Rajasic traits were associated with impulsive expression, particularly among younger participants. These findings suggest that Guna patterns may manifest differently across developmental stages and cultural contexts.

The predominantly young sample in the current research means that findings may not generalize to all populations. The cultural context of emotion regulation varies significantly across societies, with some emphasizing individual emotional expression while others prioritize collective harmony. Understanding these cultural variations helps prevent inappropriate universalization of specific behavioral expressions while maintaining underlying psychological principles.

Practical Applications and Therapeutic Implications

Recognizing Guna Patterns in Clinical Practice

Understanding Guna constitution can provide valuable insights into emotional patterns and growth opportunities for both practitioners and clients. Individuals with predominant Sattvic responses typically seek to understand different perspectives in conflicts, maintain emotional balance during stressful periods, find meaning and learning opportunities in difficult experiences, and feel drawn to practices that promote inner peace and clarity.

Those with strong Rajasic patterns often feel compelled to take immediate action when emotionally triggered, demonstrate high motivation by goals and achievements, experience emotions intensely both positively and negatively, and sometimes feel restless or struggle with stillness. Individuals with pronounced Tamasic tendencies frequently feel overwhelmed by emotional situations, tend to avoid conflict or difficult conversations, experience emotional numbness or disconnection, and sometimes feel stuck or resistant to necessary changes.

Therapeutic Interventions Based on Guna Theory

Based on both ancient wisdom and modern research, developing Sattvic qualities appears particularly beneficial for emotional well-being. Practical approaches include

mindfulness and meditation practices that develop capacity for clear observation of emotional states without immediate reactivity. Even brief daily practices can gradually shift emotional patterns toward greater stability and wisdom.

Reflective practices that encourage deeper understanding of emotional experiences rather than just expressing or suppressing them can cultivate Sattvic responses. Questions that explore the learning potential of difficult emotions or how situations might contribute to growth can facilitate this development. Compassionate reframing that seeks to understand all perspectives in emotional conflicts while looking for solutions that honor everyone's legitimate needs represents another Sattvic approach.

Rather than eliminating Rajasic energy, therapeutic goals focus on channeling it wisely through physical exercise and creative expression that provide healthy outlets for intensity while preventing emotional buildup. Goal-setting and achievement practices can satisfy Rajasic drives while incorporating Sattvic wisdom about sustainable success and meaningful accomplishment. Structured decision-making processes allow for Rajasic enthusiasm while including time for reflection and consideration of consequences.

When Tamas becomes problematic, gentle but persistent approaches prove most effective, including gradual exposure to avoided emotions and situations, building tolerance and confidence incrementally rather than forcing dramatic changes. Social support and accountability can provide external motivation and encouragement when internal drive is lacking. Professional therapeutic support may be necessary when Tamasic patterns involve significant depression, trauma, or other clinical concerns requiring specialized intervention.

Limitations and Future Directions

Acknowledging Research Boundaries

The current research, while encouraging, represents just one step in the ongoing dialogue between ancient wisdom and modern science. Several important limitations must be noted. The predominantly young, educated sample means that findings may not generalize to all populations. Future research should include more diverse age groups, educational backgrounds, and cultural contexts to establish broader validity.

The cross-sectional nature of the study prevents causal statements about relationships between Guna traits and emotional regulation. Longitudinal research could help clarify whether certain personality patterns lead to specific emotional outcomes or whether the relationship is more complex and bidirectional. The reliance on self-report measures, while practical, introduces potential biases in how people perceive and report their own emotional patterns.

Future studies might incorporate behavioral observations, physiological measures, or reports from multiple sources.

Promising Research Avenues

Several exciting research directions could further illuminate connections between ancient wisdom and contemporary psychological science. Neuroscientific investigations using advanced brain imaging techniques could map the neural correlates of Guna-based personality patterns, potentially revealing biological mechanisms underlying these ancient observations.

Intervention studies could test whether practices designed to cultivate Sattvic qualities actually improve emotional regulation and overall well-being, providing practical validation for theoretical concepts. Cross-cultural research could explore how Guna patterns manifest differently across various cultural contexts while maintaining underlying psychological validity. Developmental studies could investigate how Guna patterns change across the lifespan and what factors influence these changes.

Conclusion: Integrating Ancient Wisdom with Contemporary Understanding

The journey from ancient Indian philosophy to contemporary psychological research reveals remarkable consistency in human observations about personality and emotional functioning. The Guna framework, developed thousands of years ago through careful observation of human nature, continues to offer valuable insights for understanding and improving emotional well-being in the modern world.

The research demonstrates that these ancient categories are not merely philosophical abstractions but correspond to measurable differences in how people regulate their emotions. Individuals with predominantly Sattvic characteristics show greater emotional resilience and adaptive coping strategies, while those with excessive Tamasic tendencies struggle more with emotional regulation challenges.

Perhaps most importantly, this framework offers hope for personal growth and transformation. Unlike rigid personality typologies that suggest fixed characteristics, the Guna model recognizes that these qualities exist in dynamic balance within each person. Through conscious effort, appropriate practices, and supportive environments, individuals can cultivate greater Sattvic qualities while learning to work skilfully with their Rajasic energy and address problematic Tamasic patterns.

The integration of ancient wisdom with modern psychological science represents more than academic curiosity—it offers practical pathways for enhanced emotional well-being, more effective therapeutic interventions, and deeper understanding of human nature that honors both contemporary knowledge and timeless wisdom traditions. As researchers continue to navigate

the emotional challenges of modern life, the ancient insights of Indian psychology provide valuable guidance for developing the emotional regulation capacities needed for both personal well-being and creating more harmonious communities.

Author Note

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