

# THE THREE GUṆAS OF PRAKṚTI

by

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*“It is said that there is an imperishable banyan tree, nourished by the guṇas.*

*The real form of this tree cannot be perceived in this world.*

*No one can understand where it ends, where it begins, or where its foundation is.*

*Having cut this strongly rooted tree with the axe of detachment,*

*that goal is to be sought from which, having gone, no one returns.*

*I surrender to that primal Being from whom everything has extended since time immemorial.”*

*- From Bhagavad-gītā 15.1-4*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Subject of study

To try to talk about something basically unknown to another person presents a rather difficult challenge. As such, one needs to first initiate the unfamiliar person into the new field of study. In this endeavor it's always helpful to begin from the direct experience of the audience and then try to apply the new information to their experience. As such, in introducing my subject of study, let me begin by posing the following question:

What are the underlying causes behind the great variety of physical and psychological conditions and attributes we daily experience in life?

We see so many species on earth, in the sky and in the water. We meet people of different personality types, some are similar to us, some are not. Sometimes we feel alert, peaceful and happy, and everything in life runs smoothly. Other times we feel restless and impulsive and our life is in turmoil. Again, at other occasions we don't feel like doing anything. We are lazy and everything seems to be so difficult to do. We might feel unhappy and prefer to just go to sleep. What causes all this conditions and changes?

In studying Indian philosophy we encounter a concept referred to as "the three *guṇas*<sup>1</sup>". These are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. We read that the *guṇas* are associated in a very fundamental way with material nature (*prakṛti*), and that they exert their influence in both the physical and the psychological realm. The theme of the three *guṇas* thus occupies a central position, especially in the system of *Sāṅkhya*. Nevertheless, the topic is rather obscure, and it is my intention to get a better hold of it through this assignment.

The system of *Yoga* is seen to be closely related to that of *Sāṅkhya* as the metaphysical knowledge put forth by the *Sāṅkhya* system constitute to a large degree its intellectual content. As such, I will also look into how the three-*guṇa* scheme is adopted within the system of *Yoga*.

In the following, when reference is made to *Bhagavad-gītā* (abbreviated as "Bg."), Sargeant's translation is used, but the commentary ("purport") on the text is taken from A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda's edition. *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (also known as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) is abbreviated as "ŚB."

### Prakṛti & Purusa

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<sup>1</sup> In Sanskrit the word *guṇa* has three meanings, namely 1) a thread, strand or rope, 2) a subdivision, something secondary, and 3) a quality or attribute.

As these two categories have a central position in the topic at hand, let us start by first defining them.

The word *prakṛti* (fr. pra, “before” + kṛ-, “to make, produce”) denotes a primary substance or original source. *Prakṛti* is Nature, the insentient, passive power<sup>2</sup> for creating the material world. All physical bodies are derived from it.

Distinguished from *prakṛti* is the principle of consciousness or the *puruṣa*. It accounts for the *experience* of matter, as opposed to the *structures* of matter. *Puruṣa* is the knowing self and *prakṛti* is the object which is known. *Puruṣas* are innumerable.

For the upcoming discussion on the three *guṇas* of material nature, it’s important to keep in mind the distinction between matter and spirit.

### Approach

*Sāṅkhya* is one of the six schools of Indian philosophy and is regarded as the oldest amongst them. The *Sāṅkhya* system is atheistic (*nirīśvara*).<sup>3</sup> It does not admit an intelligent creator of the world. Furthermore, the objective and the ultimate ideal of *Sāṅkhya* philosophy is the eradication of the three kinds of pain<sup>4</sup> and the attainment of spiritual aloofness (*kaivalya*), or separation from *prakṛti*, by the *puruṣa*.<sup>5</sup>

I will not study the three-*guṇa* scheme in the context of the classical *Sāṅkhya* philosophy, but according to the philosophy of *Vedānta*, as it is expounded by the *Bhāgavata* creed<sup>6</sup>. The latter recognizes a super-soul (*uttama-puruṣa*)<sup>7</sup>, who is recognized as the source of both matter and consciousness<sup>8</sup>. According to the *Vedānta* philosophy, *prakṛti* is always under the control of the *uttama-puruṣa*. It cannot do anything by itself. The *uttama-puruṣa* gazes at *prakṛti*, and only then it is put in motion, and it begins to create.<sup>9</sup> *Prakṛti* is only a helper (*sahakārin*) in the process of creation. Furthermore, separation from *prakṛti* is not

<sup>2</sup> The expression “passive power” might at first struck one as contradictory. For clarification, compare to an inanimate object such as a dynamite, which even though containing great force, cannot act by itself. It is dependent on the manipulation of a sentient being. The constitution of Nature should be understood in a similar way.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, Benjamin, *Hindu world. An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, Volume II (London 1968), p. 344.

<sup>4</sup> *adhidaivika-kleśa* (sufferings caused by the demigods, such as droughts, earthquakes and storms), *adhibhautika-kleśa* (sufferings caused by other living entities like insects or enemies), and *adhyātmika-kleśa* (sufferings caused by one's own body and mind, such as mental and physical infirmities). Cp. Simonsson, Nils, *Indisk filosofi. Sāṅkhya* (Stockholm 1955), p. 33-34 (kārikā 1).

<sup>5</sup> Hiriyanna, M., *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (Bombay [1932] 1976), p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> The word *bhāgavata* denotes one devoted to *bhagavat* [Lord]. The *bhāgavata* creed thus refers to the monotheistic, devotional tradition of Hinduism, centred on the worship of Viṣṇu. Encyclopædia Britannica 2002 (Standard Edition CD).

<sup>7</sup> Hiriyanna, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 131-132.

<sup>8</sup> Bhagavad-gītā 7.6, 10.8, 15.7.

<sup>9</sup> Bg. 9.10, “With me as overseer, material nature produces all things animate and inanimate. From this cause, Arjuna, the universe revolves.” (mayādhyakṣeṇa prakṛtiḥ sūyate sa-carācaram | hetunānena kaunteya jagad viparivartate | ).

conceived here as the ultimate ideal, but only as a means to an end.<sup>10</sup> The goal of life, as represented by the *Bhāgavata* creed, is the attainment of unswerving devotion to a personal God, celebrated as Vāsudeva or Kṛṣṇa.

### Questions

The following are the questions which I will pursue in this assignment.

A. 1. What exactly are the three *guṇas*?

- Are they a part of a larger group or do they form an independent entity by themselves?
- Are they an effect<sup>11</sup>?
  - Are they ordinary, gross objects, such as a tree or a table?
  - Are they a subtle phenomenon such as the mind?
  - Are they properties or conditions of something?
  - Are they an action or ability, such as hearing and speaking?
- Are they a cause? Are they a group of fundamental, irreducible elements?
  - Are they substances that all gross and subtle things are made of?
  - Are they the causes of a property or a state of being?
  - Are they what make activity possible?
- Are they localized or pervasive?
- Are they perceptible by the senses and/or the mind (through introspection)?
- What is their relationship with *prakṛt*?
- Are they inert and passive or sentient?

2. Do the three *guṇas* have any relationship with each other? Do they interact and combine with one another, or do they work independent of each other?

3. What functions do the three *guṇas* fulfill?

4. What are the symptoms of the three *guṇas*?

B. What role does the three-*guṇa* scheme play in the system of *Yoga*?

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<sup>10</sup> Bg. 18.54.

<sup>11</sup> Here I'm not concerned with the technical definition of cause and effect and the relation between the two according to the different philosophical schools, but want to merely denote the two categories, product and producing agent.

## THE ONTOLOGY OF THE GUṆAS

### Constituents of material nature

The *guṇas* are the ultimate constituents of *prakṛti* or material nature.<sup>12</sup> They are its very substance. *Prakṛti* is the undifferentiated and unmanifested stage of material nature. *Prakṛti* is the state of equilibrium amongst the *guṇas*.<sup>13</sup> *Prakṛti* is thus pure potentiality. When the state of equilibrium is disturbed, creation takes place. The three *guṇas* then produce all the building blocks of the manifested universe.<sup>14</sup> The three-*guṇa* scheme is thus very fundamental.

The three *guṇas* encompass everything within our experience, the totality of our environment, with the exception of consciousness, which is something distinctly different from matter. In *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* we find the following statement,

All states of material being, whether seen, heard of or conceived by the intelligence, are constituted of the *guṇas*.<sup>15</sup>

The *guṇas* are thus all-pervading within the universe. This can be illustrated by the analogy of the threads in a piece of cloth. To create a piece of cloth, threads are woven lengthwise and crosswise. The cloth is made of hundreds of strands of such threads going in both directions. Thus the threads pervade the entire cloth. One could imagine a soul so minute that it lived in the universe of that piece of cloth. Everywhere it would experience the threads.

To continue the analogy, the threads composing the piece of cloth can be of different colors and qualities. In a similar way the three constituents of material nature, which make up this whole material creation, also possess their individual attributes. This will be dealt with later on.

The three primary colors – blue, red, and yellow – can serve as another helpful analogy. All other colors are permutations of these three colors.<sup>16</sup> Expert artists know how to combine these colors in varying combinations and proportions to produce any other color in the spectrum. Three times three gives nine. Then nine times nine gives eighty-one. Then eighty-one times eighty-one ...and so on. In this way, we have an almost endless variety of colors. Similarly, the three *guṇas* combine, and recombine, and again recombine to

<sup>12</sup> Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, Volume II (Delhi [1923] 1993), p. 263.

<sup>13</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 261; Dasgupta, Surendranath, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Volume I (Cambridge [1922] 1957), p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> 23 elements are enumerated. Larson & Bhattacharya, *Encyclopedia of Indian philosophy*, vol 4 - Sāṃkhya (Delhi 1987), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> ŚB. 11.25.31 (sarve guṇa-mayā bhāvāḥ ... dṛṣṭam śrutam anudhyātam buddhyā vā).

<sup>16</sup> That is to say, with the exception of the color white.

produce the seemingly endless variety of sense objects that we find in the material world.<sup>17</sup> All variety can eventually be traced to these three *guṇas*. The manifested world is composed of them.<sup>18</sup> Thus the three *guṇas* encompass the entire range of material existence, whether manifest or unmanifest. They become the “threads” that run through all of ordinary experience and throughout the natural world.<sup>19</sup> They constitute the material sphere.

### *The interaction of the guṇas*

The three *guṇas* never occur individually, they are always combined.<sup>20</sup> They are never separated from one another. Between them there is a perpetual competition for supremacy.<sup>21</sup> Later when we will speak of a person or thing as being in a particular *guṇa*, we mean that the particular *guṇa* is dominant in that person or object, but it is never alone. In reality in this world there is no pure *tamas*, or pure *rajas* or pure *sattva*.

## THE FUNCTIONS OF THE GUṆAS

The interaction of the three *guṇas* conducts all the affairs of the material nature. First of all, they produce the building blocks of the manifested universe. Further, through their influence they are the cause of all properties and conditions in nature. Finally, they bind the living entity and condition him to the world of matter.

### Originating the condition and qualities of all objects

Nothing within the compass of material nature is free from the influence of the *guṇas*. There is nothing within the material world that cannot be analyzed on the basis of the three *guṇas* by checking the symptoms.

Material nature as we observe it commonly has different ways of being. Sometimes things are being created, sometimes things are being maintained, and sometimes things are being destroyed. A useful word in this connection (as employed by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda<sup>22</sup>), is the term “mode”, which means a way of being.<sup>23</sup> I will henceforward use this term for denoting the states of being characterized by the different *guṇas*.

<sup>17</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 77 (kārikā 16).

<sup>18</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 63 (kārikā 11).

<sup>19</sup> Larson, *Encyclopedia of Indian philosophy*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 263.

<sup>21</sup> Bg. 14.10, “When prevailing over rajas and tamas, sattva arises, Arjuna; rajas prevailing over sattva and tamas also comes to be; likewise tamas prevailing over sattva and rajas.” (rajas tamaś cābhibhūya sattvaṁ bhavati bhārata | rajah sattvaṁ tamaś caiva tamaḥ sattvaṁ rajas tathā | |).

<sup>22</sup> *Bhagavad-gīta - As It Is*, Translated and commented by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (Los Angeles 2003), See title to Ch. 14 (“The Three Modes of Material Nature”).

<sup>23</sup> The word is commonly used in the field of computers (cp. stand-by mode).

When things are being created material nature is said to be acting in the mode of *rajas*. When things are being maintained it's in the mode of *sattva*, and when things are being destroyed, it is acting in the mode of *tamas*. In nature the things that are left over after *tamo-guṇa* finishes it's action become the raw materials for more *rajas*, they get assembled, are maintained for a period (*sattva*) and are finally again destroyed (*tamas*). This is the cycle. Things come into being, they remain for a while and are then destroyed. Creation, maintenance, destruction, followed by creation etc.<sup>24</sup>

### Binding the living entity

The word *guṇa*, as was said earlier, also means rope. Just as a rope is made by braiding three strands of hemp into one, so the three *guṇas* combine to make a powerful binding agent which entraps the soul within the material body<sup>25</sup>, thus conditioning him to repeated birth and death. This state is due to the attachment of the soul to this world, or in other words, to the three *guṇas*.<sup>26</sup>

## THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE GUṆAS

A sign can be explained as a discernible indication of what is not itself directly perceptible<sup>27</sup>. As the *guṇas* indeed are very subtle and elusive, one needs to be acquainted with their characteristic signs in order to discern their prevalence in the different areas of life. Recognition necessitates prior knowledge of the distinguishing signs of the object to be known. Hence the principal signs of the three *guṇas* will next be enumerated. As the *guṇas* are entities which affect both the physical and the psychological realm, their signs should, as far as feasible, be understood in terms of both. In the following, a description of the *guṇas* in terms of personal character has also been included.<sup>28</sup>

### Sattva

Etymologically, the word *sattva* is derived from “*sat*”, which conveys the meaning of being or existing. It also has the sense of real or true. In a secondary sense, *sat* means good or

<sup>24</sup> Ravindra-svarūpa dāsa (Deadwyler, William H.), *Divinity & Divine Service* [An audio seminar on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 1.2.17-21, 5 Classes] (Ravindra-svarūpa dāsa Tape Ministry, 41 West Allens Lane, Philadelphia, PA), Session 3.

<sup>25</sup> Bg. 14.5, “Sattva, rajas, tamas – the guṇas born of material nature, bind fast in the body, O Arjuna, the imperishable embodied one.” (sattvaṁ rajas tama iti guṇāḥ prakṛti-sambhavāḥ | nibadhnanti mahā-bāho dehe dehinam avyayam | |).

<sup>26</sup> Bg. 13.21, “The spirit, abiding in material nature, experiences the guṇas born of material nature. Attachment to the guṇas is the cause of its birth in good and evil wombs.” (puruṣaḥ prakṛti-stho hi bhunkte prakṛti-jān guṇān | kāraṇaṁ guṇa-saṅgo 'sya sad-asad-yoni-janmasu | |).

<sup>27</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, *Encyclopædia Britannica 2002* (Standard Edition CD).

<sup>28</sup> Besides personal qualities a number of other categories can also be found, viz. **food** (āhāra, Bg. 17.8-10, ŚB. 11.25.28), **sacrifice** (yajña, Bg. 17.11-13), **austerity** (tapas, Bg. 17.14-19), **charity** (dāna, Bg. 17.20-22), **action** or work (karma, Bg. 18.23-25, ŚB. 11.25.23), **intelligence** or understanding (buddhi, Bg. 18.30-32), **determination** or steadfastness (dhṛti, Bg. 18.33-35), **residence** (vāsa, ŚB. 11.25.25), etc.



virtuous.<sup>29</sup> The suffix “*tvā*”, corresponding to the English suffix “-ness”, by addition gives a word the sense of a state or a quality. Thus *sattva* literally means “existing-ness” or goodness.

*Sattva-guṇa* stands closest to the principle of consciousness. It is that constituent of *prakṛti* which is of the nature of pleasure and contentment.<sup>30</sup> It is pure<sup>31</sup> (*nirmalatva*), externally, in the sense of freedom from dust, dirt or taint, and internally, as a state free from moral fault.<sup>32</sup> *Sattva-guṇa* is healthy<sup>33</sup> (*anāmaya*), free from disease, weakness and malfunction. It embodies soundness and balance. When *sattva-guṇa* is predominant its distinctive feature is illumined awareness (*prakāśa*), or knowledge (*jñāna*).<sup>34</sup> One experiences clearness of thought, a broad yet focused attention. One becomes free from ignorance and experiences spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. *Sattva* also includes the attribute of lightness (*laghutva*).<sup>35</sup> When the influence of *sattva-guṇa* increases in a person he feels a sense of lightness in his limbs and that his senses become clear and capable of easily grasping their objects.

Concerning the character (*vr̥tti*) of one in the mode of *sattva*, the following qualities can be enumerated<sup>36</sup>:

Such a person is calm and peaceful (*śama*) as he does not strive to satisfy the incessant flow of desires within the mind.<sup>37</sup> He is self-controlled (*dama*) and does not use his senses for exaggerated enjoyment, beyond his basic needs.<sup>38</sup> He is tolerant of the offenses of others (*titikṣā*)<sup>39</sup> and discriminates between good and bad<sup>40</sup> (*ikṣā*). He remains true to his responsibilities<sup>41</sup> (*tapa*). He strictly follows his duty with great determination and enthusiasm (*dhṛty-utsāha-samanvita*), without bragging or boasting about his achievements (*anaham-vādī*). He remains unperturbed and unwavering in success or failure (*siddhy-asiddhyor nirvikārah*).<sup>42</sup> He maintains truthfulness (*satya*) and in this way does not distort the truth for some personal interest.<sup>43</sup> He is sympathetic (*dayā*) and is intolerant of others' unhappiness.<sup>44</sup> He is mindful of the past and future (*smṛti*), and does not forget his identity as separate from matter.<sup>45</sup> He is satisfied in any condition (*tuṣṭi*) and

<sup>29</sup> Apte, Vaman Shivram, *The Student's Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi [1970] 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12); Bg. 14.6, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Bg. 14.6.

<sup>32</sup> ŚB. 11.3.24 purport.

<sup>33</sup> Bg. 14.6.

<sup>34</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12); Bg. 14.11, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 70 (kārikā 13).

<sup>36</sup> The basic traits have been taken from ŚB. 11.25.2. Other sources have been consulted for clarification and complementation. This applies also to the upcoming delineation of character in the modes of *rajas* and *tamas*.

<sup>37</sup> Bg. 2.70.

<sup>38</sup> Bg. 10.4 purport.

<sup>39</sup> ŚB. 1.16.26.

<sup>40</sup> ŚB. 7.11.7.

<sup>41</sup> ŚB. 1.16.26.

<sup>42</sup> Bg. 18.26.

<sup>43</sup> Bg. 16.2 purport.

<sup>44</sup> ŚB. 1.16.26.

<sup>45</sup> ŚB. 11.13.6.

is not eager to gather increasingly more material possessions.<sup>46</sup> He is instinctively religious (*śraddhā*), generous (*tyāga*) and feels embarrassed at acting improperly (*hrī*). He is gentle, patient, clean and steady. He is sensible, conscientious and able to think in a clear and intelligent way.<sup>47</sup>

### Rajas

The word *rajas* is derived from the verbal root “*rañj-*” whose spectrum of meaning ranges from “being coloured”, to “being affected or attracted”.<sup>48</sup> The word is used to denote things which color or partially darken the sky, such as mist, clouds and dust. In a more abstract sense it refers to emotion and powerful and controlling feelings.

*Rajo-guṇa* is characterized by passion (*rāgātmaka*), or intense and ungovernable emotions compelling one to action. It is mobile (*cala*) and stimulating (*upaśtambhaka*).<sup>49</sup> Hence the predominance of *rajo-guṇa* is inferred from the presence of desire and hankering (*lobha*, *sprhā*), restlessness (*aśama*) and the undertaking of actions (*ārambhaḥ karmaṇām*).<sup>50</sup> A person under the influence of *rajas* becomes driven and has to be on the move all the time. He wants to get bigger and better and increase. The end result of this type of overactivity and feverish enjoyment is misery and thus *rajo-guṇa* is said to be of the nature of pain and dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*).<sup>51</sup> When the influence of *rajo-guṇa* increases in a person he becomes fickle in mind and erratic in action.<sup>52</sup> (“I’ll go to the town, I’ll court a woman, I’ll practice austerity...”) His mind is in a state of constant anxiety.

Regarding the character (*vṛtti*) of one in the mode of *rajas*, the following qualities can be found<sup>53</sup>:

He possesses many mundane aspirations (*kāma*), and with great effort endeavors to fulfill them (*ihā*), yet remains dissatisfied even in gain, always hankering for more (*tr̥ṣṇa*). He is attached to his work and the fruits thereof, is subject to joy and sorrow and lacks purity both in a moral and a physical sense (*aśuci*).<sup>54</sup> He is bold and arrogant (*mada*) and is falsely pride, claiming exaggerated personal importance and stature (*stambha*). He is envious of other’s achievements.<sup>55</sup> Desiring rapid success in his own enterprises he depends on and beseeches (*āśī*) people of influence and power. He considers himself different and better than others (*bhidā*). Being hostile and violent by nature (*himsātmaka*), he has a rash eagerness to quarrel and fight<sup>56</sup>, though his courage is simply based on self-

<sup>46</sup> Bg. 10.5 purport.

<sup>47</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12).

<sup>48</sup> Monier-Williams, Monier, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi [1899] 1993).

<sup>49</sup> Chatterjee, Satishchandra & Datta, Dhirendramohan, *An introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta [1939] 1960), p. 261.

<sup>50</sup> Bg. 14.7,9, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12); Chatterjee, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 261; Bg. 14.16.

<sup>52</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 70 (kārikā 13).

<sup>53</sup> ŚB. 11.25.3.

<sup>54</sup> Bg. 18.27 (+ purport).

<sup>55</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12).

<sup>56</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 70 (kārikā 13); Bg. 18.27.

conceit (*mada-utsāha*). He has a fondness for hearing himself praised (*yaśaḥ-prīti*) and has the tendency to ridicule others (*hāsya*). He has a strong sense of masculine pride with an exaggerated sense of power (*vīrya*), often justifying his actions by his strength (*bala-udyama*).

### Tamas

The etymological meaning of *tamas* is darkness. The nature of this third *guṇa* is opposed to that of both *sattva* and *rajas*. It is opposed to *sattva* in being heavy (*guru*) and in causing ignorance<sup>57</sup> (*ajñāna*), by obscuring knowledge (*jñānam āvṛtya*) and the ability to know.<sup>58</sup> It also resists *rajo-guṇa* as it restrains the motion of things and produces the state of apathy and indifference.<sup>59</sup> The predominance of *tamo-guṇa* thus results in indolence, sleep and confusion.<sup>60</sup> In the extreme case it can even lead to insanity. When the limbs of the body feel heavy and the senses become slow and incapable of grasping their objects properly, one then knows that *tamo-guṇa* has increased in influence.

In reference to the character (*vṛtti*) of one in the mode of *tamas*, the following qualities have been described<sup>61</sup>:

Such a person is wrathful (*krodha*) and lacks in generosity (*lobha*), being unwilling to share what he has with others. He is untruthful (*anṛta*), violent-natured (*hiṃsā*) and apt to quarrel (*kaḷi*). He depends upon others for survival and lives as a parasite (*yācñā*). He is hypocritical, pretending to be what he is not (*dambha*). He is chronically fatigued (*klama*), always feeling tired and weak. He constantly laments and is under delusion (*śoka-mohau*). He is depressed (*viśāda*) and habitually sleeps too much (*nidrā*). He has a self-destructive or entropic state of mind.<sup>62</sup> He indulges in false and groundless hopes and expectations (*āśā*) and is fearful and paranoid (*bhī*). He is lazy (*anudyama*) and procrastinating (*dīrgha-sūtr*<sup>63</sup>). Though he has the capacity to work, he makes no endeavor. He drags on forever that which can be done in a short amount of time.

## THE ROLE OF THE THREE-GUṆA SCHEME IN THE SYSTEM OF YOGA

When one learns any discipline, science or philosophy what one receives is a categorical scheme, a paradigm<sup>64</sup>, by which one looks at the world and understands things. There are many ways of looking at the world, and the way one chooses depends on one's purposes.

<sup>57</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12); Bg. 14.8.

<sup>58</sup> Bg. 14.9.

<sup>59</sup> Chatterjee, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 262.

<sup>60</sup> Bg. 14.8.

<sup>61</sup> ŚB. 11.25.4.

<sup>62</sup> Simonsson, *Indisk filosofi*, p. 67-68 (kārikā 12).

<sup>63</sup> Bg. 18.28.

<sup>64</sup> A paradigm can be defined as a theory, an explanation, or model of something else, like a map over a territory.

The concept of the three *guṇas* is a categorical scheme given for the business of understanding the universe so that one can transcend it (the ultimate objective of *Yoga*). That is the assigned task for a spiritual practitioner. For the purposes of modern scientists the three-*guṇa* scheme may not be useful categories, but to a practitioner of *Yoga* they constitute the theoretical basis of his entire enterprise.<sup>65</sup>

### Means of freedom

Earlier it was said that the three *guṇas* condition the soul to this world of matter. This state continues as long as the *puruṣa* remains attached to material nature. This attachment is due to the illusion of oneness between the *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Ignorance thus constitutes the cause of bondage. For emancipation from this state of bondage, what is needed is the knowledge of the distinction between the two, namely the self and the non-self.<sup>66</sup>

One who knows that the three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*—are not constituents of the soul but of material nature, and who knows that the pure soul is simply an observer of the actions and reactions of these *guṇas*, is not bound by them.<sup>67</sup>

Knowledge is defined as proper understanding of *prakṛti*, *puruṣa* and the *uttama-puruṣa*.<sup>68</sup> It was noted earlier that knowledge depends on an existential (psycho-physical) condition in *sattva-guṇa*. As such it is the task of the *yogin* to cultivate *sattva-guṇa* as a means for transcending the *guṇas* altogether.<sup>69</sup> For this he obviously needs to first have a clear understanding of the three-*guṇa* scheme.

### A system of diagnostics

Further, the very practice of *yoga* is said to have the effect of *rajas* and *tamas* decreasing in influence.<sup>70</sup> Thus the *yogin*, through knowledge of the attributes of the three *guṇas*, becomes a diagnostician of his own spiritual advancement. The increase of *sattva* and the decrease of *rajas* and *tamas* become the criteria of his progress on the path.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Smart, Ninian, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (Leiden 1992), p. 64, 77.

<sup>66</sup> Leaman, Oliver, *Eastern philosophy. Key readings* (London 2000), p. 254.

<sup>67</sup> ŚB. 6.12.15 (sattvaṁ rajas tama iti prakṛter nātmano guṇāḥ | tatra sākṣiṇaṁ ātmānaṁ yo veda sa na badhyate | |).

<sup>68</sup> Bg. 13.2, “Know also that I am the knower of the field in all fields, Arjuna; knowledge of the field and of the knower of the field, that is considered by Me to be true knowledge.” (kṣetra-jñāṁ cāpi māṁ viddhi sarva-kṣetreṣu bhārata | kṣetra-kṣetrajñayor jñānaṁ yat taj jñānaṁ mataṁ mama | |)

<sup>69</sup> ŚB. 11.13.6. By contacting things, qualities and conditions of a specific mode of nature, one can increase the influence of that *guṇa* upon oneself.

<sup>70</sup> ŚB. 1.2.19 (tadā rajas-tamo-bhāvāḥ kāma-lobhādayaś ca ye | ceta etair anāviddhaṁ sthitaṁ sattve prasīdati | |).

<sup>71</sup> Ravindra-svarūpa dāsa, *Divinity & Divine Service*, Session 3.

## SUMMARY

The theme of my study for this assignment was the concept of the three *guṇas*. In order to summarize, the following can be stated.

The three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, are the ultimate constituents of the insentient *prakṛti*. They *are* material nature. Thus they form an ultimate entity by themselves, though they remain eternally subordinate to the *uttama-puruṣa* and act under his supervision.

By their nature, the *guṇas* constitute the totality of the material environment, including the attributes and conditions of all objects. At the same time they are the direct causes of all objects and all conditions and qualities.

They can be perceived in the form of their gross products, but in their ultimate ontology, they can only be inferred by their effects and symptoms. The three *guṇas* condition the *puruṣas* to the world of matter.

The three *guṇas* are never separate. They constantly intermingle with one another and compete for supremacy.

*Sattva-guṇa* encompasses a steady state of maintenance, and gives rise to knowledge, happiness and virtue. *Rajo-guṇa* is responsible for creation and action. It corresponds to hankering for that which is not, and ultimately leads to suffering and pain. *Tamo-guṇa* is the agency of decay. It obstructs action and causes apathy and confusion.

As the three *guṇas* comprise the totality of the material realm and constitute the very agency for keeping the *puruṣa* conditioned in this world, and as it is the purpose of *Yoga* to free the soul from this very realm, knowledge of the nature of the three *guṇas* thus becomes a fundamental necessity for the practitioner of *Yoga*. The three-*guṇa* scheme forms an integral part of a *yogins* means of freedom and also the criterion of his spiritual elevation.

### Questions for further study on the topic

- As the *guṇas* are inert, how then do they exert their influence upon the living entity and the objects of the world? What determines their influence? Is the *puruṣa* responsible for invoking them, either by direct contact or on the basis of his karmic reactions, or are the *guṇas* invoked by the *uttama-puruṣa* himself?

- Does action, per definition, depend on *rajo-guṇa* and sleeping on *tamo-guṇa*? This especially in regards to the condition of a liberated person who is still living in this

material world (*jīvanmukta*)? As he is liberated from the *guṇas* but still has a material body and continues to act in this world, what exactly is his relation to the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*?

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