

# The Three Modes of Material Nature

by Suhotra Swami

The English word "mode" best conveys the sense of the Sanskrit word \*guna\* (material quality). "Mode" comes from the Latin \*modus\*, and it has a special application in European philosophy. \*Modus\* means "measure." It is used to distinguish between two aspects of material nature: that which is immeasurable (called \*natura naturans\*, the creative nature) and that which is measurable (called \*natura naturata\*, the created nature). Creative nature is a single divine substance that manifests, through modes, the created nature, the material world of physical and mental variety. Being immeasurable (without modes), creative nature cannot be humanly perceived. Created nature (with modes) is measurable, hence we do perceive it. \*Modus\* also means "a manner of activity." When creative nature acts, it assumes modes of behavior that are measurable and thus perceivable.

The fourteenth chapter of \*Bhagavad-gita\* (verses 3-5) presents a similar twofold description of material nature as \*mahat yoni\*, the source of birth, and as \*guna prakrti\*, that which acts wonderfully through modes. Material nature as the source of birth is also termed \*mahad brahman\*, the great or immeasurable Brahman. \*Mahad brahman\* is nature as the divine creative substance, which is the material cause of everything. "Material cause" is a term common to both European philosophy (as \*causa materialis\*) and Vedanta philosophy (as \*upadana karana\*). It means the source of ingredients that comprise creation. We get an example of a material cause from the Sanskrit word \*yoni\*, which literally means womb. The mother's womb provides the ingredients for the formation of the embryo. Similarly, the immeasurable creative nature provides the ingredients for the formation of the material world in which we live, the measurable created nature.

The clarity of this example forces a question: what about the father, who must impregnate the womb first before it can act as the material cause? This question is answered by Krsna, the speaker of the \*Bhagavad-gita\*, in verse 4: \*aham bija pradah pita\*, "I am the seed-giving father." In Vedanta philosophy, this factor of causation is termed \*nimitta-matram\* (the remote cause). It is important to note that by presenting creation as the result of the union of two causes (the material and the remote), the \*Bhagavad-gita\* rejects the

philosophy of \*Deus sive natura\*, "the identity of God and nature." In short, though creative nature may be accepted as the direct cause of creation, it is not the self-sufficient cause of creation. The seed with which Krsna impregnates the womb of creative nature is comprised of \*sarva-bhutanam\*, all living entities (verse 3).

\*Bhagavad-gita\* 14.5 explains that when Krsna puts the souls into the womb of material nature, their consciousness is conditioned by three modes, or \*tri-guna\*. The modes are three measures of interaction between conscious spirit and unconscious matter. The modes may be compared to the three primary colors, yellow, red and blue, and consciousness may be compared to clear light. The "conditioning" (\*nibhadhanti\*) of consciousness upon its entry into the womb of material nature is comparable to the coloration of light upon its passing through a prism. The color yellow symbolizes \*sattva-guna\*, the mode of goodness. This mode is pure, illuminating, and sinless. Goodness conditions the soul with the sense of happiness and knowledge. The color red symbolizes the \*rajo-guna\*, the mode of passion, full of longings and desires. By the influence of passion the soul engages in works of material accomplishment. The color blue symbolizes \*tamo-guna\*, the mode of ignorance, which binds the soul to madness, indolence and sleep. As the three primary colors combine to produce a vast spectrum of hues, so the three modes combine to produce the vast spectrum of states of conditioned consciousness that encompasses all living entities within the universe. The term \*tri-loka\* is often found in Vedic scriptures. \*Tri-loka\* means "three worlds." The universe is divided by the three modes into three worlds, or realms of consciousness: \*bhur\*, \*bhuvah\* and \*svar\* (the gross region, the subtle region and the celestial region). In \*svargaloka\* or the celestial heaven, superhuman beings called \*devatas\* exist, enjoying a life that in human terms is almost unimaginable. In the subtle region exist ghosts and elemental beings. And in the gross or earthly realm exist human beings and other creatures with tissue-bodies, including the animals and plants. There is also a subterranean region where powerful demons reside. And there is a region known as \*naraka\*, hell. As explained in \*Bhagavad-gita\* 3.27, the souls within these regions of material consciousness wrongly identify themselves as the doers of physical and mental activities that are actually carried out by three modes of material nature. This wrong identification is called \*ahankara\*, or false ego. False ego is the basis of our entanglement in material existence.

A detailed description of the threefold false ego is given by Krsna to Uddhava. This is recorded in the eleventh canto of the \*Srimad-

Bhagavatam\*. By false ego in goodness (technically called \*vaikaraka\*), the living entity identifies with the mind. What is the mind? The mind is the living entity's subtle medium of reflection, comparable to a mirror. By its own nature of goodness, the mind is a suitable medium for reflecting the eternal absolute truth. But it can also reflect the objects of the senses and thus become absorbed in the temporary appearances of the material world. The \*Amrta-bindu Upanisad\* therefore declares, "For man, mind is the cause of bondage and mind is the cause of liberation. Mind absorbed in sense objects is the cause of bondage, and mind detached from the sense objects is the cause of liberation." By false ego in passion (\*aindriya\* or \*taijasa\*), the soul identifies with the physical senses and the creative intellect by which the senses are skillfully employed in work. By false ego in ignorance (\*tamasa\*), the soul identifies with the objects perceived by the physical senses, i.e. what is heard, what is felt, what is seen, what is tasted and what is smelt. Krsna says that the false ego is \*cid-acin-mayah\*, that which encompasses both spirit and matter, because it binds the \*cid\* (conscious soul) to the \*acid\* (unconscious matter).

The cultivation of the innate goodness of the mind is the essence of the Vedic method of \*yoga\*, summarized by Krsna as follows. "The mind can be controlled when it is fixed on the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Having achieved a stable situation, the mind becomes free from polluted desires to execute material activities; thus as the mode of goodness increases in strength, one can completely give up the modes of passion and ignorance, and gradually one transcends even the material mode of goodness. When the mind is freed from the fuel of the modes of nature, the fire of material existence is extinguished. Then one achieves the transcendental platform of direct relationship with the object of his meditation, the Supreme Lord." (\*Bhag\*. 11.9.12)

The transcendental platform of the soul's direct relationship with the Supreme Soul is the state of absolute being. How the \*yogi\* perceives this state is described in \*Bhag\*. 11.14.45. "He sees the individual souls united with the Supreme Soul, just as one sees the sun's rays completely united with the sun." The sun is \*jyotisi\*, the source of light. Similarly, Krsna, the Supreme Soul, is the source of the light of consciousness of all living entities. Sunlight is composed of photons, which are tiny units of light. Similarly, each individual soul (technically called the \*jiva-atma\*) is a tiny unit of consciousness. The Sanskrit word \*yoga\* means "connection;" through \*bhakti-yoga\* (the \*yoga\* of pure devotion), the consciousness of the individual soul

connects with its source, Krsna. This is called Krsna consciousness. By Krsna consciousness, the soul rids itself of the coloration of the three modes and returns back home, Back to Godhead.