Chapter X

The Three Modes of Nature

To transcend the natural action of the lower Prakriti is indispensable to the soul, if it is to be free in its self and free in its works. Harmonious subjection to this actual universal Nature, a condition of good and perfect work for the natural instruments, is not an ideal for the soul, which should rather be subject to God and his Shakti, but master of its own nature. As agent or as channel of the Supreme Will it must determine by its vision and sanction or refusal the use that shall be made of the storage of energy, the conditions of environment, the rhythm of combined movement which are provided by Prakriti for the labour of the natural instruments, mind, life and body. But this inferior Nature can only be mastered if she is surmounted and used from above. And this can only be done by a transcendence of her forces, qualities and modes of action; otherwise we are subject to her conditions and helplessly dominated by her, not free in the spirit.

The idea of the three essential modes of Nature is a creation of the ancient Indian thinkers and its truth is not at once obvious, because it was the result of long psychological experiment and profound internal experience. Therefore without a long inner experience, without intimate self-observation and intuitive perception of the Nature-forces it is difficult to grasp accurately or firmly utilise. Still certain broad indications may help the seeker on the Way of Works to understand, analyse and control by his assent or refusal the combinations of his own nature. These modes are termed in the Indian books qualities, gunas, and are given the names sattva, rajas, tamas. Sattwa is the force of equilibrium and translates in quality as good and harmony and happiness and light; rajas is the force of kinesis and translates in quality as struggle and effort, passion and action; tamas is the force of inconscience and inertia and translates in quality
as obscurity and incapacity and inaction. Ordinarily used for psychological self-analysis, these distinctions are valid also in physical Nature. Each thing and every existence in the lower Prakriti contains them and its process and dynamic form are the result of the interaction of these qualitative powers.

Every form of things, whether animate or inanimate, is a constantly maintained poise of natural forces in motion and is subject to an unending stream of helpful, disturbing or dis-integrating contacts from other combinations of forces that surround it. Our own nature of mind, life and body is nothing else than such a formative combination and poise. In the reception of the environing contacts and the reaction to them the three modes determine the temper of the recipient and the character of the response. Inert and inapt, he may suffer them without any responsive reaction, any motion of self-defence or any capacity of assimilation and adjustment; this is the mode of tamas, the way of inertia. The stigmata of tamas are blindness and unconsciousness and incapacity and unintelligence, sloth and indolence and inactivity and mechanical routine and the mind’s torpor and the life’s sleep and the soul’s slumber. Its effect, if uncorrected by other elements, can be nothing but dis-integration of the form or the poise of the nature without any new creation or new equilibrium or force of kinetic progress. At the heart of this inert impotence is the principle of ignorance and an inability or slothful unwillingness to comprehend, seize and manage the stimulating or assailing contact, the suggestion of environing forces and their urge towards fresh experience.

On the other hand, the recipient of Nature’s contacts, touched and stimulated, solicited or assailed by her forces, may react to the pressure or against it. She allows, encourages, impels him to strive, to resist, to attempt, to dominate or engross his environment, to assert his will, to fight and create and conquer. This is the mode of rajas, the way of passion and action and the thirst of desire. Struggle and change and new creation, victory and defeat and joy and suffering and hope and disappointment are its children and build the many-coloured house of life in which it takes its pleasure. But its knowledge is an imperfect
or a false knowledge and brings with it ignorant effort, error, a constant misadjustment, pain of attachment, disappointed desire, grief of loss and failure. The gift of rajas is kinetic force, energy, activity, the power that creates and acts and can overcome; but it moves in the wrong lights or the half-lights of the Ignorance and it is perverted by the touch of the Asura, Rakshasa and Pishacha. The arrogant ignorance of the human mind and its self-satisfied perversions and presumptuous errors, the pride and vanity and ambition, the cruelty and tyranny and beast wrath and violence, the selfishness and baseness and hypocrisy and treachery and vile meanness, the lust and greed and rapacity, the jealousy, envy and bottomless ingratitude that disfigure the earth-nature are the natural children of this indispensable but strong and dangerous turn of Nature.

But the embodied being is not limited to these two modes of Prakriti; there is a better and more enlightened way in which he can deal with surrounding impacts and the stream of the world-forces. There is possible a reception and reaction with clear comprehension, poise and balance. This way of natural being has the power that, because it understands, sympathises; it fathoms and controls and develops Nature’s urge and her ways: it has an intelligence that penetrates her processes and her significances and can assimilate and utilise; there is a lucid response that is not overpowered but adjusts, corrects, adapts, harmonises, elicits the best in all things. This is the mode of sattwa, the turn of Nature that is full of light and poise, directed to good, to knowledge, to delight and beauty, to happiness, right understanding, right equilibrium, right order; its temperament is the opulence of a bright clearness of knowledge and a lucent warmth of sympathy and closeness. A fineness and enlightenment, a governed energy, an accomplished harmony and poise of the whole being is the consummate achievement of the sattwic nature.

No existence is cast entirely in the single mould of any of these three modes of the cosmic Force; all three are present in everyone and everywhere. There is a constant combining and separation of their shifting relations and interpenetrating
influences, often a conflict, a wrestling of forces, a struggle to dominate each other. All have in great or in small extent or degree, even if sometimes in a hardly appreciable minimum, their sattvic states and clear tracts or inchoate tendencies of light, clarity and happiness, fine adaptation and sympathy with the environment, intelligence, poise, right mind, right will and feeling, right impulse, virtue, order. All have their rajasic moods and impulses and turbid parts of desire and passion and struggle, perversion and falsehood and error, unbalanced joy and sorrow, aggressive push to work and eager creation and strong or bold or fiery or fierce reactions to the pressure of the environment and to life’s assaults and offers. All have their tamasic states and constant obscure parts, their moments or points of unconsciousness, their long habit or their temporary velleities of weak resignation or dull acceptance, their constitutional feeblenesses or movements of fatigue, negligence and indolence and their lapses into ignorance and incapacity, depression and fear and cowardly recoil or submission to the environment and to the pressure of men and events and forces. Each one of us is sattvic in some directions of his energy of Nature or in some parts of his mind or character, in others rajasic, tamasic in others. According as one or other of the modes usually dominates his general temperament and type of mind and turn of action, it is said of him that he is the sattvic, the rajasic or the tamasic man; but few are always of one kind and none is entire in his kind. The wise are not always or wholly wise, the intelligent are intelligent only in patches; the saint suppresses in himself many unsaintly movements and the evil are not entirely evil: the dullest has his unexpressed or unused and undeveloped capacities, the most timorous his moments or his way of courage, the helpless and the weakling a latent part of strength in his nature. The dominant gunas are not the essential soul-type of the embodied being but only the index of the formation he has made for this life or during his present existence and at a given moment of his evolution in Time.
When the sadhaka has once stood back from the action of Prakriti within him or upon him and, not interfering, not amending or inhibiting, not choosing or deciding, allowed its play and analysed and watched the process, he soon discovers that her modes are self-dependent and work as a machine once put in action works by its own structure and propelling forces. The force and the propulsion come from Prakriti and not from the creature. Then he realises how mistaken was his impression that his mind was the doer of his works; his mind was only a small part of him and a creation and engine of Nature. Nature was acting all the while in her own modes moving the three general qualities about as a girl might play with her puppets. His ego was all along a tool and plaything; his character and intelligence, his moral qualities and mental powers, his creations and works and exploits, his anger and forbearance, his cruelty and mercy, his love and his hatred, his sin and his virtue, his light and his darkness, his passion of joy and his anguish of sorrow were the play of Nature to which the soul, attracted, won and subjected, lent its passive concurrence. And yet the determinism of Nature or Force is not all; the soul has a word to say in the matter,—but the secret soul, the Purusha, not the mind or the ego, since these are not independent entities, they are parts of Nature. For the soul’s sanction is needed for the play and by an inner silent will as the lord and giver of the sanction it can determine the principle of the play and intervene in its combinations, although the execution in thought and will and act and impulse must still be Nature’s part and privilege. The Purusha can dictate a harmony for Nature to execute, not by interfering in her functions but by a conscious regard on her which she transmutes at once or after much difficulty into translating idea and dynamic impetus and significant figure.

An escape from the action of the two inferior gunas is very evidently indispensable if we are to transmute our present nature into a power and form of the divine consciousness and an instrument of its forces. Tamas obscures and prevents the light of the divine knowledge from penetrating into the dark and dull corners of our nature. Tamas incapacitates and takes
away the power to respond to divine impulse and the energy to change and the will to progress and make ourselves plastic to a greater Shakti. Rajas perverts knowledge, makes our reason the accomplice of falsehood and the abettor of every wrong movement, disturbs and twists our life-force and its impulses, oversets the balance and health of the body. Rajas captures all high-born ideas and high-seated movements and turns them to a false and egoistic use; even divine Truth and divine influences, when they descend into the earthly plane, cannot escape this misuse and seizure. Tamas unenlightened and rajas unconverted, no divine change or divine life is possible.

An exclusive resort to sattwa would seem to be the way of escape: but there is this difficulty that no one of the qualities can prevail by itself against its two companions and rivals. If, envisaging the quality of desire and passion as the cause of disturbance, suffering, sin and sorrow, we strain and labour to quell and subdue it, rajas sinks but tamas rises. For, the principle of activity dulled, inertia takes its place. A quiet peace, happiness, knowledge, love, right sentiment can be founded by the principle of light, but, if rajas is absent or completely suppressed, the quiet in the soul tends to become a tranquillity of inaction, not the firm ground of a dynamic change. Ineffectively right-thinking, right-doing, good, mild and even, the nature may become in its dynamic parts sattwa-tamasic, neutral, pale-tinted, uncreative or emptied of power. Mental and moral obscurity may be absent, but so are the intense springs of action, and this is a hampering limitation and another kind of incompetence. For tamas is a double principle; it contradicts rajas by inertia, it contradicts sattwa by narrowness, obscurity and ignorance and, if either is depressed, it pours in to occupy its place.

If we call in rajas again to correct this error and bid it ally itself to sattwa and by their united agency endeavour to get rid of the dark principle, we find that we have elevated our action, but that there is again subjection to rajasic eagerness, passion, disappointment, suffering, anger. These movements may be more exalted in their scope and spirit and action than before, but they are not the peace, the freedom, the power, the self-mastery
at which we long to arrive. Wherever desire and ego harbour, passion and disturbance harbour with them and share their life. And if we seek a compromise between the three modes, sattwa leading, the others subordinate, still we have only arrived at a more temperate action of the play of Nature. A new poise has been reached, but a spiritual freedom and mastery are not in sight or else are still only a far-off prospect.

A radically different movement has to draw us back from the gunas and lift us above them. The error that accepts the action of the modes of Nature must cease; for as long as it is accepted, the soul is involved in their operations and subjected to their law. Sattwa must be transcended as well as rajas and tamas; the golden chain must be broken no less than the leaden fetters and the bond-ornaments of a mixed alloy. The Gita prescribes to this end a new method of self-discipline. It is to stand back in oneself from the action of the modes and observe this unsteady flux as the Witness seated above the surge of the forces of Nature. He is one who watches but is impartial and indifferent, aloof from them on their own level and in his native posture high above them. As they rise and fall in their waves, the Witness looks, observes, but neither accepts nor for the moment interferes with their course. First there must be the freedom of the impersonal Witness; afterwards there can be the control of the Master, the Ishwara.

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The initial advantage of this process of detachment is that one begins to understand one’s own nature and all Nature. The detached Witness is able to see entirely without the least blinding by egoism the play of her modes of the Ignorance and to pursue it into all its ramifications, coverings and subtleties — for it is full of camouflage and disguise and snare and treachery and ruse. Instructed by long experience, conscious of all act and condition as their interaction, made wise of their processes, he cannot any longer be overcome by their assaults, surprised in their nets or deceived by their disguises. At the same time he perceives the ego
to be nothing better than a device and the sustaining knot of their interaction and, perceiving it, he is delivered from the illusion of the lower egoistic Nature. He escapes from the sattwic egoism of the altruist and the saint and the thinker; he shakes off from its control on his life-impulses the rajasic egoism of the self-seeker and ceases to be the laborious caterer of self-interest and the pampered prisoner or toiling galley-slave of passion and desire; he slays with the light of knowledge the tamasic egoism of the ignorant or passive being, dull, unintelligent, attached to the common round of human life. Thus convinced and conscious of the essential vice of the ego-sense in all our personal action, he seeks no longer to find a means of self-correction and self-liberation in the rajasic or sattwic ego but looks above, beyond the instruments and the working of Nature, to the Master of works alone and his supreme Shakti, the supreme Prakriti. There alone all the being is pure and free and the rule of a divine Truth possible.

In this progression the first step is a certain detached superiority to the three modes of Nature. The soul is inwardly separated and free from the lower Prakriti, not involved in its coils, indifferent and glad above it. Nature continues to act in the triple round of her ancient habits,—desire, grief and joy attack the heart, the instruments fall into inaction and obscurity and weariness, light and peace come back into the heart and mind and body; but the soul stands unchanged and untouched by these changes. Observing and unmoved by the grief and desire of the lower members, smiling at their joys and their straining, regarding and unoverpowered by the failing and the darkness of the thought and the wildness or the weaknesses of the heart and nerves, uncompelled and unattached to the mind’s illuminations and its relief and sense of ease or of power in the return of light and gladness, it throws itself into none of these things, but waits unmoved for the intimations of a higher Will and the intuitions of a greater luminous knowledge. Thus doing always, it becomes eventually free even in its nature parts from the strife of the three modes and their insufficient values and imprisoning limits. For now this lower Prakriti feels progressively a compulsion from a higher Shakti. The old habits to which it
clung receive no further sanction and begin steadily to lose their frequency and force of recurrence. At last it understands that it is called to a higher action and a better state and, however slowly, however reluctantly, with whatever initial or prolonged ill-will and stumbling ignorance, it submits, turns and prepares itself for the change.

The static freedom of the soul, no longer witness only and knower, is crowned by a dynamic transformation of the nature. The constant mixture, the uneven operation of the three modes acting upon each other in our three instruments ceases from its normal confused, troubled and improper action and movement. Another action becomes possible, commences, grows, culminates, a working more truly right, more luminous, natural and normal to the deepest divine interplay of Purusha and Prakriti although supernatural and supernormal to our present imperfect nature. The body conditioning the physical mind insists no longer on its tamasic inertia that repeats always the same ignorant movement: it becomes a passive field and instrument of a greater force and light, it responds to every demand of the spirit’s force, holds and supports every variety and intensity of new divine experience. Our kinetic and dynamic vital parts, our nervous and emotional and sensational and volitional being, expand in power and admit a tireless action and a blissful enjoyment of experience, but learn at the same time to stand on a foundation of wide self-possessed and self-poised calm, sublime in force, divine in rest, neither exulting and excited nor tortured by sorrow and pain, neither harried by desire and importunate impulses nor dulled by incapacity and indolence. The intelligence, the thinking, understanding and reflective mind, renounces its sattvic limitations and opens to an essential light and peace. An infinite knowledge offers to us its splendid ranges, a knowledge not made up of mental constructions, not bound by opinion and idea or dependent on a stumbling uncertain logic and the petty support of the senses, but self-sure, authentic, all-penetrating, all-comprehending; a boundless bliss and peace, not dependent on deliverance from the hampered strenuousness of creative energy and dynamic action, not constituted by a
few limited felicities but self-existent and all-including, pour into ever-enlarging fields and through ever-widening and always more numerous channels to possess the nature. A higher force, bliss and knowledge from a source beyond mind and life and body seize on them to remould in a diviner image.

Here the disharmonies of the triple mode of our inferior existence are overpassed and there begins a greater triple mode of a divine Nature. There is no obscurity of tamas or inertia. Tamas is replaced by a divine peace and tranquil eternal repose out of which is released from a supreme matrix of calm concentration the play of action and knowledge. There is no rajasique kinesis, no desire, no joyful and sorrowful striving of action, creation and possession, no fruitful chaos of troubled impulse. Rajas is replaced by a self-possessed power and illimitable act of force, that even in its most violent intensities does not shake the immovable poise of the soul or stain the vast and profound heavens and luminous abysses of its peace. There is no constructing light of mind casting about to seize and imprison the Truth, no insecure or inactive ease. Sattwa is replaced by an illumination and a spiritual bliss identical with the depth and infinite existence of the soul and instinct with a direct and authentic knowledge that springs straight from the veiled glories of the secret Omniscience.

This is the greater consciousness into which our inferior consciousness has to be transformed, this nature of the Ignorance with its unquiet unbalanced activity of the three modes changed into this greater luminous supernature. At first we become free from the three gunas, detached, untroubled, nistraigunya; but this is the recovery of the native state of the soul, the self, the spirit free and watching in its motionless calm the motion of Prakriti in her force of the Ignorance. If on this basis the nature, the motion of Prakriti, is also to become free, it must be by a quiescence of action in a luminous peace and silence in which all necessary movements are done without any conscious reaction or participation or initiation of action by the mind or by the life-being, without any ripple of thought or eddy of the vital parts: it must be done under the impulsion, by the initiation, by the
working of an impersonal cosmic or a transcendent Force. A cosmic Mind, Life, Substance must act, or a pure transcendent Self-Power and Bliss other than our own personal being or its building of Nature. This is a state of freedom which can come in the Yoga of works through renunciation of ego and desire and personal initiation and the surrender of the being to the cosmic Self or to the universal Shakti; it can come in the Yoga of knowledge by the cessation of thought, the silence of the mind, the opening of the whole being to the cosmic Consciousness, to the cosmic Self, the cosmic Dynamis or to the supreme Reality; it can come in the Yoga of devotion by the surrender of the heart and the whole nature into the hands of the All-Blissful as the adored Master of our existence. But the culminating change intervenes by a more positive and dynamic transcendence: there is a transference or transmutation into a superior spiritual status, *triguṇātita*, in which we participate in a greater spiritual dynamisation; for the three lower unequal modes pass into an equal triune mode of eternal calm, light and force, the repose, kinesis, illumination of the divine Nature.

This supreme harmony cannot come except by the cessation of egoistic will and choice and act and the quiescence of our limited intelligence. The individual ego must cease to strive, the mind fall silent, the desire-will learn not to initiate. Our personality must join its source and all thought and initiation come from above. The secret Master of our activities will be slowly unveiled to us and from the security of the supreme Will and Knowledge give the sanction to the Divine Shakti who will do all works in us with a purified and exalted nature for her instrument; the individual centre of personality will be only the upholder of her works here, their recipient and channel, the reflector of her power and luminous participator in her light, joy and force. Acting it will not act and no reaction of the lower Prakriti will touch it. The transcendence of the three modes of Nature is the first condition, their transformation the decisive step of this change by which the Way of Works climbs out of the pit of narrowness of our darkened human nature into the unwalled wideness of the Truth and Light above us.