

What Is *Prakriti*?

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Don: As I read and reread the books of James and listen to his tapes and reflect on them I hope to “more clearly” understand the teaching and meaning of *prakriti* and the three *gunas*. At this point the various terms applied to the word *prakriti* is confusing to me. *Prakriti* is defined as “that which can be molded into manifold objects,” “the substance from which objects evolve” and “a subtle inert form of awareness that is capable of reflecting awareness.”

The text says that it is composed of the three *gunas* (powers/qualities): *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It also says that *prakriti* (nature) is *Maya* when it is pure *sattva*, that predominant *tamas* is called *prakriti*, that it is matter in seed form, that *Maya* creates *prakriti* (page 21) and *prakriti* is the subtle cause of matter and energy. On this latter point, I thought that energy was just a subtler form of matter? *Prakriti* has also been described as a proxy for ignorance and that it helps explain ignorance.

Sundari: *Prakriti* is the subtle cause of matter and energy. Therefore *prakriti* is matter in seed form. It seems conscious because it borrows its light from awareness. The world and all external objects, whether gross matter or subtle matter, are comprised of *prakriti*. *Prakriti* has three qualities, the three *gunas* which reflect the self and seem to conceal it, but do not really conceal the self, because nothing can conceal it.

Pure macrocosmic *sattvic prakriti* is like a bright, clear mirror, capable of reflecting awareness (*pratibimba chaitanya*). Macrocosmic *sattva* is the blueprint for all forms, the entire creation – the eternal truths, forces, laws, *jivas*, *karma*, three *gunas* and five elements. It knows everything. It is not yet mixed with *rajas* and *tamas*, it is pure knowledge. It is awareness appearing as the knower. It is an object known to awareness and contains all objects, including energy and space. When *rajas* and *tamas* arise, and pure *sattva* is contaminated, the mirror shatters into innumerable shards. *Maya* becomes *avidya*, multi-faceted, diverse, pluralistic, creating all objects sentient and insentient, containing the essence of awareness, consciousness, conditioned by *rajas* and *tamas*.

Maya “manufactures” all substance out of *tamas* – the existence “aspect” of consciousness. If *Maya* created all substance out of *sattva*, all rocks could think and talk. *Rajas* acts on the objects according to their blueprint, creating apparent movement and change, individuality and separation.

The five elements, which in various combinations make up *prakriti* (nature) are considered inert. Yet we say they are constantly changing, which proves they are not truly real but only appearances. However, anything that is inert cannot change. According to the laws of physics, inert objects will continue at rest or in motion in the same direction until acted upon by an external force. So Vedanta should teach that the world and all its objects, including *jivas*, can BE changed. But the self alone is real because the self cannot BE changed.

The key idea is *prakriti* which, in terms of the dream of *Maya*, does actively evolve. Vedanta provisionally accepts this view but also negates it as the teachings

progress. Actually, *Maya* is consciousness, so it doesn't evolve, but it looks like it does. If we accept the fact that matter cannot in and of itself change, because it is inert, and therefore it must BE changed, the question then becomes, what changes it? There seems to be only two choices: the self, whose light is reflected through the intellect (*buddhi*) or the three *gunas*.

However, the *gunas* are another name for *Maya*. So the other possibility is that *Isvara* operating through *Maya* uses *Maya's* projecting power (*rajas*) to cause apparent movement and change at the level of *pratibasika satyam (jiva sristi)*. Thus all apparent matter can be changed either externally or internally at this level. However, neither *Isvara* nor *Maya* exist at the *pratibasika satyam* level of "absolute" reality. Therefore the self neither changes nor can be changed.

The issue, which you seem to understand, is *satya* and *mithya*. Neither matter nor awareness actually change but they seem to when we view them through our senses, which are in *Maya* and apparently changing. We don't know that it is identification with the changing senses that makes the world seem to be changing. And insofar as the dream of *Maya* is real, it is possible to effect change because *prakriti* evolves. That's what the discussion on free will in Chapters II to VI of the *Gita* is all about. You should read James' new book on the *gunas*, *The Yoga of the Three Energies*, which explains this in detail.

Don: When and where do the three *gunas*, qualities or powers, come from in the "sequence" of creation? Currently I understand them to be *sattva* (knowledge of what is possible), *tamas* (concealing, non-reflecting, density; earlier I said a black hole?), and *rajas* (projection, action); together they are the attributes or powers of *Isvara 2* (awareness and *Maya*) that create and sustain the world of *mithya*.

Sundari: I explained this above. There is no time for awareness, so it is very difficult to explain the creation teaching, but let's assume time existed.

First and always, there is pure consciousness. Secondly, *Maya* (pure macrocosmic *sattva*) appears, and awareness plus *Maya* "becomes" *Isvara* in the role of Creator. Lastly, matter appears, but macrocosmic *sattvic prakriti* is present before matter appears. *Prakriti* is the clear mirror of consciousness, prior to the emergence of *rajas* and *tamas*.

As explained, *prakriti* is the subtle nature or substance of all matter, subtle and gross matter, the blueprint for all forms, existing eternally within *Maya*. *Prakriti* does not exist without *Maya*. There is no point in talking about the difference between them, because *prakriti* does not mean anything without *Maya*. They are the same, but they are not.

Isvara associated with *Maya* is independent of *prakriti* because *Isvara* is *triguna-atita*, beyond the *gunas*. *Prakriti* depends on *Isvara*, not the other way around. And *Isvara* as pure consciousness gives rise to creation, but is always free of the creation.