

Evolution

By Swami Tathagatananda

All evolution is a movement from the undifferentiated state to differentiated states. Vedanta recognizes the process of cosmic evolution from a homogeneous mass into a variety of phenomena. Life forms were initially single cell organisms; gradually, they became multi-cellular and increasingly complex, culminating in the appearance of the human being. Vedanta does not accept any theory of special creation. It accepts the theory of gradual evolution. Life begets life; all living beings are derived from living things. They are not generated from non-living things—the assumption that by following certain mechanical processes Nature brings forth something out of inanimate objects is illogical and untenable.

Hindus conceive a universe without beginning. Sir Monier-Williams, in his lecture in England, probably in 1894, said:

Indeed . . . the Hindus were Spinozaites more than two thousand years before the existence of Spinoza, and Darwinians centuries before Darwin, and evolutionists many centuries before the doctrine of evolution had been accepted by the scientists of our time, and before any word like 'evolution' existed in any language of the world."

The secret of evolution is in the organism itself. The Vedantic concept of evolution is much deeper. Swami Vivekananda observes:

From the lowest protoplasm to the most perfect human being, there is really but one life. Just as in one life we have so many various phases of expression, the protoplasm developing into the baby, the child, the young man, the old man, so, from that protoplasm up to the most perfect man, we get one continuous life, one chain. This is evolution; but each evolution presupposes an involution. The whole of this life—which slowly manifests itself, evolves itself from the protoplasm to the perfected human being, the Incarnation of God on earth—the whole of this series is but one life, and the whole of this manifestation must have been involved in that very protoplasm. This whole life, this very God on earth was involved in it, and slowly came out, manifesting itself slowly, slowly, slowly.

The definition of evolution by Vedanta includes not only the development of structure but also the manifestation of consciousness—Hindu theory teaches continuity of life; non-dualism teaches continuity of consciousness. The lengthy chain of life, from its first

link of protoplasm, through myriad links of subsequent evolutionary stages, to the last link of human life just prior to liberation, ends with the soul of man entering the Life Eternal. According to Hindu tradition "a jiva (from the stage of a protozoan, perhaps) attains competence for a human body after undergoing 8,400,000 births."

It may be interesting to note that some ancient Puranas of the Hindus record in detail this evolutionary journey. For example, the Brihad Vishnu Purana states that there are a total of 8,400,000 species in the following order:

20,000 species of non-mobile plants, etc. (Sthavara); 900,000 species of aquatic creatures; 900,000 species of amphibia and reptiles; 1,000,000 species of birds, etc.; 3,000,000 species of other creatures such as animals, etc.; 400,000 species of anthropoids (vanaras), after which the human species (Manushya) of 200,000 varieties come into being, and Man then engages in purposeful activity to attain perfection.

An English biologist has calculated that there are 5,375,000 generations between the most subtle micro-organism and the fully evolved human being.

This slow evolution through the transformation of life from one species to another in its journey to perfection is addressed by Patanjali:

The change of the body from one species to another is caused by the inflowing of [the jiva's] nature. Good and bad deeds are not the direct causes of its transformation. They act as breakers of obstacles to the inflow of nature, just as a farmer breaks down obstacles in a water course to let water flow of itself.

Expanding on this declaration of Patanjali, Swami Vivekananda explains the function of nature's evolutionary process in man's struggle to free himself:

Perfection is man's nature, only it is barred in and prevented from taking its proper course. If anyone can take the bar off, in rushes nature. Then the man attains the powers which are his already . . . It is nature that is driving us towards perfection, and eventually, she will bring everyone there. . . which is our birthright, our nature.

Today, the evolution theory of the ancient Yogis will be better understood in the light of modern research. And yet the theory of the Yogis is a better explanation. The two causes of evolution advanced by the moderns, viz., sexual selection and survival of the fittest, are inadequate. Suppose human knowledge to have advanced so much as to eliminate competition, both from the function of acquiring physical sustenance and of acquiring a mate. Then, according to the moderns, human progress will stop and the race will die . . . But the great ancient evolutionist, Patanjali, declares that the true secret of evolution is the manifestation of the perfection which is already in every being; that this perfection has been barred and the infinite tide behind is struggling to express itself. These struggles and competitions are but the results of our ignorance, because we do not know the proper way to unlock the gate and let the water in. This infinite tide behind must express itself; it is the cause of all manifestation. Competitions for life or self-

gratification are only momentary, unnecessary, extraneous efforts, caused by ignorance. Even when all competition has ceased, this perfect nature behind will make us go forward until everyone has become perfect. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that competition is necessary to progress.

Darwin's theory of evolution is popularly known as the "struggle for existence" and the "survival of the fittest" through natural selection. These two oft-quoted expressions actually were used by Herbert Spencer and not by Darwin. Darwin gave more importance to Nature herself as the cause of evolution.

In one of his London lectures, Swamiji said:

What is the cause of evolution? Desire. The animal wants to do something, but does not find the environment favourable and therefore develops a new body. Who develops it? The animal itself, its will. You have developed from the lowest amoeba. Continue to exercise your will and it will take you higher still. The will is almighty. If it is almighty, you may say, why cannot I do everything? But you are thinking only of your little self. Look back on yourselves from the state of the amoeba to the human being ; who made all that? Your own will. Can you deny then that it is almighty? That which has made you come up so high can make you go higher still. What you want is character, strengthening of the will."

Elaborating the same idea, he mentions two reasons. Firstly, "A tremendous potential power which is trying to express itself, and circumstances which are holding it down, the environments not allowing it to express itself. So, in order to fight with these environments, the power is taking new bodies again and again" and secondly, "Change is always subjective. All through evolution you find that the conquest of nature comes by change in the subject."

Swamiji also speaks of the unique role of evolution on thinking man:

In the animal kingdom we really see such laws as struggle for existence, survival of the fittest, etc., evidently at work. Therefore Darwin's theory seems true to a certain extent. But in the human kingdom, where there is the manifestation of rationality, we find just the reverse of those laws. . . . The highest evolution of man is effected through sacrifice alone. A man is great among his fellow beings in proportion as he can sacrifice for the sake of others; whereas in the lower strata of the animal kingdom, that animal is the strongest which can kill the greatest number of animals. Hence the struggle theory is not equally applicable to both kingdoms. Man's struggle is in the mental sphere. A man is greater in proportion as he can control his mind. When the mind's activities are perfectly at rest, the Atman manifests itself.

This shows that Vedanta does not accept the view that everything in nature is meaningless or the mere play of chance. Vedanta informs of a definite purpose and design behind the whole of nature's scheme.

The self-effulgent and self-existent Divinity is deeply embedded in every living being. That Divine Being is the sole support behind the individual and the cosmos, and That is responsible for our very existence, growth and development, not only horizontally, but also vertically. Slowly and steadily, that dormant Divinity is being manifested through human endeavor and struggle, culminating in the attainment of illumination. We have repeatedly said that Vedantic evolution means the change of the structure and the greater and higher manifestation of a spiritual consciousness. Science does not know the immense possibility of human excellencies—of human ability to attain perfection and full freedom. Lamenting over the narrow outlook of materialistic science, Richard Colton, Nobel Laureate in physics, said:

Ignorance lies at the bottom of all human knowledge (including that of science), and the deeper we penetrate the nearer we come to it (ignorance). For what do we truly know, or what can we clearly affirm, of any one of these important things upon which all our reasoning must of necessity be built—time and space, life and death, matter and mind? Physicist Eugene Wigner says,

Until not many years ago, the existence of a mind or soul would have been passionately denied by most physical scientists. The brilliant success of mechanistic and, more generally, macroscopic physics, and of chemistry, overshadowed the obvious fact that thoughts, desires and emotions are not made of matter, and it was nearly universally accepted among physical scientists that there is nothing besides matter.

In the same vein, the neuroscientist Roger Sperry, highlighting the limitations of science, says,

Consciousness, free will and values [have been] three long-standing horns in the hide of science. Materialistic science could not cope with any of them, even in principle. It's not just that they're difficult. They're in direct conflict with the basic models. Science has had to renounce them—to deny their existence or to say that they're beyond the domain of science. For most of us, of course, all three are among the most important things in life. When science proceeds to deny their importance, even their existence, or to say that they're beyond its domain, one has to wonder about science.

Fritjof Capra, well-known physicist and author of *The Tao of Physics*, has said that "Science as we know it requires a language based on some unquestioned framework."

Western science, from its very beginning has been investigating the outer thrust of matter. Indian mystics, on the other hand, thousands of years earlier turned their minds inward and developed a keen sensitivity enabling them to penetrate the deepest secrets of human life. They experienced Supreme Reality within themselves and also articulated It: "Humanity may roll up in space like a piece of leather; still there will be no end of sorrow without knowing one's (innate) Divinity."

Vedanta declares the divinity of man. This concept of divinity is indicative of three attributes of man: the feeling of oneness, the infinite power in man, and the perennial

urge to evolve and outgrow the limitations of one species transforming to another. The inherent divinity impels the living organism to attain perfection. Gradual evolution demands the removal of obstacles through the greater manifestation of divinity within.

The extremely refreshing optimism of Indian thought is rational and is being slowly appreciated by Western scholars of different disciplines. The modern theory of evolution is confining itself to studying the physical aspects, touching only the outer fringe of evolution. Darwin was not interested either in tracing the origin of life or the development of mental faculties. The quintessence of Darwinism as summarized in his words, "is the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or for the Preservation of Favourable Races in the Struggle for Life." Preservation of favorable variations and destruction of harmful variations is called "natural selection," or the "survival of the fittest"—one phrase referring to the process and the other to the result. Therefore, this theory does not give us any insight about the ethics, moral principles or the goal of life. We quote only one such critic, Bertrand Russell, who expresses his deep dissatisfaction when he remarks: "From evolution, as far as our present knowledge shows, no ultimately optimistic philosophy can be validly inferred."

Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1891), xii.

C. W., II:228.

Gita-Rahasya, B. G. Tilak, footnote, 252-3.

Yoga-sutras of Patanjali, IV:2,3.

C. W., I:292-93.

Ibid., II:356-57.

Ibid., II: 136, 137.

Ibid., II:154-55.

Svetasvataropnishad, 6:20.