

Evolution and Enlightenment

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Introduction

This is a 'Theosophy-Science' lecture on 'Evolution and Enlightenment', and it would be appropriate to begin, by defining the terms, *science*, *theosophy*, *evolution* and *enlightenment*.

Science (from Latin *scientia*, meaning "knowledge") is a systematic enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of verifiable predictions and explanations, free from internal contradictions, about the universe. It assumes there is an objective reality shared by rational observers, and governed by natural laws, which is discoverable by systematic observation and experimentation. *Hard sciences*, such as physics, chemistry and biology, deal with the exterior, physical, sensorimotor world. Science would be put to considerable difficulty, if it were required to investigate and explain, for example, the moment of enlightenment of Gautama Buddha under the Bodhi tree, because this is a *subjective* experience belonging to the *inner* world – no less real to those who have experienced it, as is the *outer* world. This needs to change, and this can happen only if we expand the scope of science to include both the objective and the subjective realities shared by equally competent observers; i.e., scientists need to experience enlightenment!

Theosophy refers to a state of inner *enlightenment* or "Divine Wisdom" that a person can attain through intellectual and spiritual *evolution*. It is noteworthy that both 'enlightenment' and 'evolution' appear in this definition. Theosophy is also described as the wisdom underlying all religions when they are stripped of accretions and superstitions. In this respect, *theosophy* shares with *science* the pursuit of truth and the rejection of untrue beliefs that have gained ground during the course of human history.

Enlightenment in a secular context often means the "full comprehension of a situation", but in spiritual terms, it alludes to a spiritual revelation or deep insight into the meaning and purpose of all things, a state of supreme knowledge and infinite compassion – a fundamentally changed consciousness whereby everything is perceived as a unified field.

Evolution refers to any gradual directional change. In the hard sciences, evolution is commonly referred to in a biological or a cosmological context. But, in the context of spiritual enlightenment, it refers to the evolution of consciousness itself – which

includes, but also transcends, the physical, biological and mental worlds. According to an old Sufi saying,

*God sleeps in the rock,
Dreams in the plant,
Stirs in the animal,
And awakens in man.*

Mystics worldwide have suggested that when such awakening manifests in the human being, it is as though consciousness becomes aware of itself, wonder-struck by its own creative unfolding.

Form and Emptiness

Our ancient traditions also had their sciences, which were in perfect congruence with their wisdom, sometimes referred to as the *perennial philosophy*. According to these wisdom traditions, both material and non-material worlds are pervaded with Spirit, and made up of the *five elements (panchabhoota)* – *ether, air, fire, water and earth* – which constitute any form. All creation is believed to emerge from ethereal Spirit, driven by a mysterious evolutionary impulse, manifesting progressively from the subtle to the gross, from idea to material reality. Whether physical, biological, mental, or otherwise, all are but different and wonderfully diverse forms of the same consciousness. All emerge from, subsist in and return to the same divine Source, the Ground of all Being, formless Spirit. We live in a world of appearances that are continually changing, although we mostly believe that forms have a solid permanent reality of their own.

In today's science, we have a different understanding of 'elements' and believe that our understanding of the material world has significantly advanced. But scientists tend to agree with the ancient wisdom that the material world in reality is far different from what it appears to be. It is as though our brains are hard wired to see things on the surface. Below this surface appearance, which we apprehend through our five primary senses, there are deeper layers of reality, which we need to penetrate in the quest for truth regarding ultimate reality; this quest is shared by both science and theosophy.

Even scientists need to take a leap in their imagination to enter the sub-atomic world, a world which was initially believed to be made up of tiny discrete particles (quarks and electrons) whirling about at unimaginably high speeds in large empty spaces. With the birth of quantum field theory, the tiny particles that make up matter are now regarded as excitations of an underlying unmanifest 'quantum field', in which anything is possible – where things emerge and things disappear with movements that cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty, and where everything is interconnected with everything else. The Buddha, some 2500 years ago, without the aid of any electron microscope or mathematical calculations, intuited this unmanifest ("unborn") field, which he labelled as *emptiness (sunyata)*, as being the absolute reality underlying all phenomena that are invariably changeable in nature. Our essential nature is a mysterious Void – not an empty one,

but a pregnant Void – full of infinite creative possibilities. Our underlying field of consciousness has an infinite potential to bring into being, sustain and dissolve any form of existence, all forms being inter-connected. As stated in the Heart Sutra, one of the most famous of the Buddha’s teachings, *Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.*

Evolution of Matter, Life and Mind

A similar mystery reveals itself to us when we shift our gaze from the infinitesimal to the infinite – to the far reaches of outer space. Cosmologists have now worked out that, following the Big Bang, which is said to have occurred some 13.7 billion years ago, the universe emerged from practically nothing, giving birth to space and time. Ever since, the universe has been expanding. From nothing, everything emerged in a mighty explosion, and with subsequent cooling and consolidation, matter took form and cosmic evolution came into being. Ever since, there has been a tug-of-war between the outward expansion of the universe and the inward forces of gravity within matter, with galaxies and stars being born or getting dissolved. In fact, the galaxy that scientists observe through modern telescopes is not *as it is now*, but *as it was* some billion years ago!

In the immeasurably vast empty space of the universe, *life*, as we presently understand it, exists only here, on our planet earth, which, calculations indicate as having been born some 4.6 billion years ago. Mysteriously, conditions have appeared just right for the emergence of life in its various forms – from simple cells (3.8 billion years ago) to insects and seeds (400 million years ago) and all kinds of plants and animals, and finally to the anatomically modern humans (200 000 years ago). Scientists tend to believe that this emergence of life – which requires certain parameters to take on critical values, and which would have been impossible if there was a slight deviation in even one of these values – is nothing but a fortuitous coincidence. Scientists seem to have no qualms about living in a meaningless universe, and tend to discard any notion of Spirit, simply because it is not something that their rational objective minds can see or measure through their microscopes and telescopes. But perhaps, for the vast majority of humanity, there is something precious missing in these explanations, something that mystics worldwide have always intuited, and seen as the very basis for a meaningful existence.

Scientists have attempted, rather valiantly, to examine the ‘hard problem’ of how biological evolution led to the emergence of subjective experiences and mental phenomena, and how the development of the human brain, from the reptilian complex and limbic system to the neo-cortex, is correlated to increasing mental potentials and capacities. However, such an approach, which ascribes the emergence of consciousness to physical neuron activity in the brain, has not yet succeeded in bridging the gap between mind and matter. Clearly, to gain a fuller and more complete understanding, science needs to reconcile with ancient wisdom, which perceives consciousness as the primary, albeit mysterious, source of everything – in which both *involution* and *evolution* are on-going processes, linking both matter and mind.

In this context, it is relevant to recall the beautiful story of a dialogue between a wise *guru* (which in Sanskrit, literally means, 'dispeller of darkness') called Uddalaka and his young son called Svetaketu, as described in one of the ancient Upanishads. As was customary during those ancient times, Uddalaka sent away his son at the age of twelve to another *gurukula* for his education. When Svetaketu returned home at the age of twenty-four after completing his studies, the alert father was quick to recognize that the young man, despite all the profound knowledge he had acquired from the *Vedas* on self-realization, had still not awakened fully.

Seated below a banyan tree, Uddalaka questions Svetaketu: *How did this huge tree come into existence?* The young man replies readily: *From the seed.* But, asks the guru, *how did the seed come into being?* The young man does not have an answer. So, the guru asks him to go and collect a fruit from the tree, break it open and take out a seed. Then he asks Svetaketu to break open the seed and to look inside and report his findings. Svetaketu dutifully reports that nothing inside is to be seen. The father then points out to the son the miracle of life: *From this apparent emptiness, this huge tree has emerged. From the same Source, this whole universe, including you and me, have emerged. You are That (tattvamasi), Svetaketu!*

That spiritual essence is realized as being both transcendent and immanent in all forms of consciousness.

The Miracle of Existence

There have been scientists who had some degree of mysticism in their outlook. Albert Einstein was one such remarkably brilliant scientist. He had once remarked: *The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.* On another occasion, he is reported to have said: *There are only two ways to live your life: as though nothing is a miracle, or as though everything is a miracle.*

We may have notions of having progressed spiritually and having read, learnt and practised a lot, but many of us tend to get flat and ritualistic or dogmatic in our practice, and we need to return, again and again, to the freshness and innocence of a *beginner's mind*. One of the most powerful, and yet simple ways, of doing this, is to pause, every now and then, amidst all our activity, to simply wonder at the supreme mystery underlying everything. Notice the mystery! Breathe the mystery! Be the mystery! This is an important challenge especially for many of us, who find ourselves losing a sense of vibrancy and aliveness, as we age.

This is especially true in religion, when we get caught, unconsciously, in our belief systems, and fail to see the omnipresence of Spirit. There is a wonderful story, made popular by Antony de Mello, a Jesuit priest, which illustrates this point, and is of relevance in the context of enlightenment. Once upon a time, there was a devoted priest called Father Benedicto, who had diligently served the Church for many decades and had absolute faith in the divine. He was in charge of a particular church when there an unexpected deluge, and it rained for many days uninterrupted. As the waters rose, there was a struggle for survival, and people tried to escape from

nature's fury by travelling to safer places on boats. The good priest climbed on top of his church and prayed for their welfare. When the waters reached the roof of the structure and came waist-high, one of the boats approached him and the people on board, implored: *Father, join us and save yourself!* Father Benedicto smiled at them and said, *Please don't worry about me; the Lord will save me.* The waters climbed higher, and when they reached chest-high, yet another boat approached and the same scene was repeated. Father Benedicto was steadfast in his faith, and remained unmoved, even when the flood waters reached up to his nose, and he was likely to get drowned. A third boat approached him, but he valiantly refused and maintained: *I have lived a pure life, devoted to the Lord. The Lord will surely save me!*

Unfortunately for him, the Lord had other plans, and he got drowned. When he regains consciousness, he finds himself in the clouds, standing in line to enter the gates of heaven. He recognizes Saint Peter at the entrance. Saint Peter too pays special attention to him, and says: *Father Benedicto, welcome to heaven! But why are you looking so glum? You should be delighted to be here!* The good father responded: *Yes, it is true; I feel betrayed that my prayers have not been answered. The Lord did not heed them.* Hearing this, Saint Peter smiles and says: *What do you mean, dear Father? We sent you three boats!*

Now, that is a truly meaningful story, especially for the elderly, including scientists and theosophists – because many of us tend to believe that we have seen and know all that there is to be known. The truth is that we hardly know anything! We are like the space occupied by the earth in the universe – close to zero! We must have the humility to acknowledge this, and to look for newer ways of regenerating ourselves spiritually, because the truth is that all spiritual practices, no matter how sophisticated and inspiring at the beginning, tend to flatten and deaden with time. It takes a great deal of self-awareness and humility to see this and to awaken the sparkle in us that can see the wonder and mystery and the presence of Spirit everywhere and at all times!

To see the extraordinary in the ordinary, moment to moment, is at the heart of being enlightened! It comes from a steady integral practice that evolves and matures, as one grows older.

Evolution of Perspectives

One of the sure signs of spiritual evolution, according to ancient traditions, is the increasing ability to empathize with multiple perspectives, so that the sense of “otherness” that separates us from our brothers and sisters and all sentient beings gradually vanishes.

In this connection, it is worth recalling the beautiful ancient story of the *six blind men and the elephant*, which originates from India. It is very relevant because it reminds us as to how wedded we tend to be to our own views and beliefs, without realizing that other perspectives, including those that may be diametrically opposite to ours, may well be equally valid. According to this story, once upon a time, six blind men decided to visit an elephant, of which they had heard much about. Each

person felt one part of the elephant and quickly came to a conclusion about the elephant. The blind man who felt the elephant's trunk was quick to exclaim: *I know this elephant! It is a serpent!* This, of course, was contradicted by the others – for the one who felt the tusk was convinced that the elephant was a spear; the one who touched the ear knew that the elephant was a fan; the one who felt the leg thought it to be the trunk of a tree; the one who patted the solid side of the elephant was certain that it was a wall; while the sixth blind man who felt the tail believed that the elephant was a rope! Were they being untruthful? No, they were all right, given their limited perspectives – but only partially right, and in an overall sense, all far removed from the whole truth!

It takes wisdom for us to acknowledge that we too – scientists and theosophists included – are blind and that we do not have the wherewithal to see reality in its entirety! We all come with our different initial conditions and make strong judgements about practically everything we perceive with our limited senses, looking for compatriots who agree with our perceptions and quarrelling endlessly with, or holding in disdain, those who hold completely different perspectives. If we are truly interested in discovering the truth, we must be willing to give up, at least temporarily, the positions to which we tend to cling to so tenaciously, and to explore, with genuine empathy and curiosity, other perspectives. If we were to be the blind men in the story, we should at least ask: *Why is it that my brothers are so convinced about their views regarding the elephant? Let me explore.* Then, giving up our hold on the part of the elephant we have touched, we can then walk around, and feel what our brothers have felt, and then the wisdom will dawn: *Oh, now I understand why they felt this way, and they are right too!* More important, we make the great and humbling discovery: *The elephant (big picture) is much more than all these views put together! It remains a supreme mystery!*

Clearly, it is desirable to have a holistic perspective, and it is important for science and theosophy to recognize this. For indeed, as Einstein pointed out, *Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind.* Perhaps, the reality today is that much of science is lame and much of religion is blind; each seems to have provoked the malady in the other.

For some reason, we all tend to cling to our individual perspectives. It is as though the clinging defines our very identity! According to ancient wisdom, it is that very clinging or grasping that is the biggest obstacle to our enlightenment and spiritual evolution. We need to let go to be free and to allow us to see higher truths.

Scientific Resistance to Religion

History has borne witness to the dangers posed by religion in the absence of science. The so-called *Age of Enlightenment* (or *Age of Reason*) came into existence in the late 17th century in Europe, primarily as an anti-religious movement. The intellectuals wanted to liberate people from the dictates of state religion and the herd mentality. Science flourished because it succeeded in explaining so many things that had been previously attributed to God. To this day, scientists tend to be deeply suspicious of religion, simply because many religious believers do try to

impose their beliefs on others, and invoke all kinds of threat, including damnation. The great divide between science and religion is much in evidence even today. Science has sprinted ahead with mind-boggling successes, while religion, as popularly practised, has remained pretty much where it was, with a great disconnect.

Peter Russell, in his wonderful book called *From Science to God*, gives expression to his predicament regarding religion, in the wake of scientific discoveries, as follows.

Copernicus had shown that we were not the centre of the universe. Astronomers had found no evidence of a heaven up in the sky. Darwin had dispelled the idea that God created the earth and all its living creatures in six days. And biologists had proved virgin birth impossible!

Which story should I believe? A text whose only authority was itself, and whose proclamations had little bearing on my everyday reality? Or contemporary science, with its empirical approach to truth? The choice was obvious. I dropped out of conventional religion. The universe seems to work perfectly well without divine assistance.

We must realize that there is a substantial justification in such a perspective. If today, many in our young generation continue to feel likewise with reference to conventional religion, it is perfectly justifiable. Yet, it is an incomplete and naïve perspective, as Peter Russell himself discovered in his later years, following an awakening. The challenge for us is to speed up such awakening in our young men and women, rather than condemn them or block their questioning. Indeed, a rebellious spirit can be very helpful – provided it is supported by a genuine aspiration to reach for truth through the evolution of consciousness.

We must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Unfortunately, that is exactly what seems to have happened in modern science and education. To this day, religion tends to be identified with belief in the literal truth of “accretions and superstition” in various religious texts, which are treated largely as Santa Claus by scientists; this is the bathwater. But the essence of religion, the core of the wisdom traditions – that is the precious baby that we seem to have thrown out in the world today, and we can see all around us the ill effects of such an approach in life.

In India too, which once boasted of having great world-famous universities like the one at Nalanda, we seem to have completely forgotten our rich traditions of respecting the integration of science and theosophy. We seem to have abandoned this holistic approach in favour of a Western model of education. Lord Macaulay, who had a big say in the creation of modern education in India, had this comment to make of our ancient knowledge: *A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.* We believed it then. We still believe it!

Of course, there are many reasons as to why scientists continue to be highly suspicious of any kind of spirituality – simply because there is so much counterfeit spirituality and quackery in vogue today.

The Beautiful, the Good and the True

The Western world has also contributed its share of wisdom to the world. Noteworthy is the contribution of Plato, the disciple of the philosopher Socrates, who referred to three sectors of human realization: *the beautiful, the good and the true*. The *beautiful* refers to a sublime individual inner experience – the subjective experience. The *good* and the *true* extend to the inter-subjective and third person domains, as the former refers to the well-being of all and the latter refers to truths in the verifiable objective domain (to which science belongs) as well as the subjective and inter-subjective trans-personal domains. The essence of all three – the true, the good and the beautiful – (*satyam, shivam, sundaram* in ancient India) have been perceived by wise men to be fundamentally the same. They have maintained that it is necessary to develop all three, in order to perceive the whole reality.

Unfortunately, in the modern world, we have tended to give far more importance to objective truths than subjective ones. This can seriously impair our evolution – because it is not just science that needs to be developed, it is also morals and aesthetics or art. We need a coherent development in all three sectors.

Indeed, even spirituality is perceivable in all the three sectors. For example, when we stand in wonder at nature – which is a third person perspective – we experience *nature mysticism*. In conventional religion, when we stand in awe and devotion before our concept or image of God – in a second person perspective – we experience *deity mysticism*. Finally, when we are in a state of *witness consciousness*, and the subject dissolves into what is perceived, we see and experience everything as one – in a first person perspective – we experience *formless mysticism*.

We live in times where our scientifically trained graduates have no difficulty in recalling Newton's three laws of motion, but have no clue about the four noble truths of the Buddha. This has resulted in a lop-sided development. Indeed, as Thomas Merton says,

*Of what avail is it if we can travel to the moon,
If we cannot cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves.
This is the most important of all journeys
And without it, all the rest are useless.*

The Paradox of our Time in History

The consequence of such lop-sided development is easy to see everywhere. It is been beautifully captured in these words of the American humourist, George Carlin:

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways but narrower view-points. We spend

more but have less; we buy more but enjoy less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time. We have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgment; more experts, yet more problems; more medicine, but less wellness.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, drive too fast, stay up too late, get up too tired, watch TV too much, love and pray too seldom, and hate too often.

We've learned to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life, not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a neighbour. We've conquered outer space, but not inner space. We've done larger things, but not better things.

We've conquered the atom, but not our prejudices. We plan more, but accomplish less. We've learned to rush, but not to wait.

These are the times of fast foods, and slow digestion; big men and small character; steep profits and shallow relationships; two incomes, but more divorce; fancier houses, but broken homes; more entertainment, but less happiness...

Despite all the material progress we see all around us, thanks to science and technology, during the last century in particular, we also bear witness to an increasing shallowness in our lifestyles and relationships and the conflicts that inevitably arise on account of this. In this connection, the Arbinger Institute has published two wonderful books called *Leadership and Self-deception* and *The Anatomy of Peace*. Their central message is that we all often tend to get trapped "in the box", whereby we lose focus on all our noble intentions and aspirations and shifts to defending our ego-selves at any cost. Our hearts are then "at war", instead of being "at peace", and in this process, we end up conveniently blaming others and the system for the situation we frequently find ourselves in. We tend to treat others as objects, instead of humans like ourselves, having similar cares and concerns, and our views get distorted, in order to justify our positions. Here are some wonderful quotes from these books, which we will do well to reflect upon.

People who came together to help an organization succeed actually end up delighting in each others' failures and resenting each others' successes...We withhold information and resources from one another, try to control one another, and blame one another.

When I'm blaming A or B or department XYZ (and suggesting that all our problems will be solved if only they straighten up), I'm doing it because their shortcomings justify my failure to improve.

Evolution of Consciousness

The vast majority of us are living fragmented, inauthentic and unawakened lives. Clearly, we need to nurture considerable self-awareness to even be aware of this and how we unconsciously get stuck in these unhealthy habit patterns. We need to also have a firmer commitment to the ideals of the true, the good and the beautiful, in the interest of our own personal and collective well-being. In order to do this, and to have our hearts at peace, filled with compassion and wisdom, we need much more than what science can provide us. We need an integral spiritual practice.

In addition to the obvious problems related to our subjective worlds, we are facing an imminent crisis in the external world, threatening our very survival. Indeed, it is paradoxical that the same science that has enabled us to live more comfortable lifestyles, compared to the previous generations, has also unleashed an environmental disaster. This, of course, is no fault of science. It is clearly because our progress in external development has not been matched by a similar progress in our inner development. We have missed out on the deeper spiritual realization of how integrally we are connected with the rest of nature, and the reality that individual well-being is not achievable at the cost of our collective and universal well-being.

In this connection, Albert Einstein had these wise words to remark:

A human being is a part of the whole called the Universe – a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison.

We are rapidly running out of conventional energy resources to sustain our unsustainable lifestyles and we have polluted our planet to such an irretrievable degree that what the future has in store for us is something that even scientists are unable to predict. What we need in these difficult times, in addition to more intelligent science, is a conscious evolution in our consciousness. Indeed, as Einstein himself pointed out, we need solutions from a higher level of consciousness to resolve problems that we have created at our current level.

Although there have been several studies that attempt to map different stages of human consciousness, perhaps the simplest way is in terms of three broad classes: the *pre-conventional*, the *conventional* and the *post-conventional*. We may have, as a society today, by and large, progressed from the pre-conventional or ego-centric level to the conventional level (which is ethno-centric, and for some, even world-centric). What we need to progress to is a post-conventional level, where our concerns and self-identity expand to a universal stage. This points to a transcendental maturity, enabling us to learn, to live, to love, to relate and to play in truly fulfilling and creative ways.

It is not enough if we only a few individuals consciously aspire for such evolution in consciousness; there is a need to make shifts collectively. We are already witnessing the dangers posed by terrorism, for example, in a world where weapons of mass destruction can fall into the hands of a few ethno-centric fundamentalists and so can wreak havoc. In the words of integral philosopher, Ken Wilber,

Nobody at a world-centric level of moral consciousness would unleash the atomic bomb, but somebody at a pre-conventional ego-centric level would quite cheerily bomb the hell of pretty much anybody who got his way. Until the modern era, this problem was limited in its means because the technologies themselves were quite limited. You can inflict only so much damage on the biosphere, and on other human beings, with a bow and arrow. Now, for the first time in history, it has become possible and even likely to have a global man-made catastrophe: an atomic holocaust or ecological suicide.

Simply put, our problem is that while science has zipped into the post-conventional stage of development, the inner world of humanity is still stuck at the conventional (and in some pockets, pre-conventional) level. We can, of course, wait for the slow evolutionary process of nature to take us forward. But we are running out of time, and cannot afford such a luxury. Indeed, there have been some horrible predictions about how life on this planet is likely to come to an end, as we have perhaps already crossed the *tipping point*. We need to face these *inconvenient truths* and come to terms with possible potential dangers of new technologies related to 'advancements' in genetic engineering, robotics and nanotechnology, which are now being unleashed in a global scale.

An evolutionary crisis of this nature can mean one of two things: either a *breakdown* or a *breakthrough*! Which of the two is more likely? We do not know! All that we know is that we have a choice – whether to awaken consciously or not. Each one of us has to lift our consciousness levels individually, and also work to enable this in others. The challenges facing us are so complex that we need to truly and deeply awaken to find creative solutions. This is our collective responsibility. May we live up to it!

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