The Elan Vital and Self-Evolution

An essay on the life-force, consciousness and spirituality.

by Steve Taylor {mosgoogle}The increase in consciousness and life force is seen as the purpose of evolution What is it that makes one form of life more advanced than another? From one point of view, we can say that some beings are literally more alive than others. This 'aliveness', that the French philosopher Henri Bergson called the 'elan vital,' has manifested itself more powerfully within them. We can see the whole evolutionary process which has taken life forward from amoebi to human beings as a process of 'vitalisation', by which living things become progressively more animated. As living beings become more 'vitalised' the intensity of their consciousness increases; so another parallel way of looking at evolution is to see it as a process by which living beings become more and more conscious. Thus, we can say that because the 'elan vital' is relatively weak inside them, plants only have a small degree of consciousness, which manifests itself in the way they react to changes in their environment; while animals like sheep and cows are more conscious than, say, insects, because they have a much fuller awareness of their surroundings. And we human beings, as the latest products of the evolutionary process, are more 'vital' and also more conscious than any other animal: we're the only animals who have self-awareness, for example, the only animals who are conscious of death to any degree, and also the only animals who are conscious of the past.

The 'elan vital', or 'life force', is inside us all. It's the vital energy which we give out as we go about our daily lives, which we expend when we think, when we work, when we use our senses to perceive what's happening around us, and which we also need to mantain the healthy functioning of our bodies. It's this energy which is recharged inside us when we sleep, which drains out of us when we've been doing too many things and our senses have been overloaded with external stimuli, and which also passes out of us when we die. The Chinese word for this 'life energy' is Chi, and acupuncture and the exercises of Chi Gung and T'ai Chi are based on it, while in Sanskrit the word for it is Prana, and it's the principle underlying the exercises of hatha yoga. Strangely, even though everybody accepts its existence on an everyday level (for example, when we say that we feel 'run down', that our 'energy levels are low' or that we need to 'recharge our batteries'), the concept of a 'life energy' is alien to our materialistic Western culture, and our scientists and doctors refuse to believe that there's any such thing. But we too have a word for 'life energy', even if it's not used much nowadays: vitality.

It's very important to look at the 'elan vital' in both these areas, in connection with evolution and in connection with ourselves, because there's a very close relationship between the evolutionary process as a whole and the personal evolution which can take place in our own lives. In exactly the same way that evolution as a whole can be seen as a process by which living beings become more and more 'vitalised', we can also see personal spiritual development as a process of making ourselves more and more 'vitalised' as individuals.

Conserving Vitality

In ordinary life there's always an outward flow of vitality. Our senses are always busy taking in sights and noises, doing our jobs or performing other tasks and chores, and our minds are always busy processing information or chattering away to themselves. These three things - sensory activity, thought processes, and mental or physical activity - are like three channels through which our vitality is continually drained away. But when this outward flow is halted for some reason, and as a result we're able to build up a higher than usual concentration of vitality inside us, something strange happens; in fact it's in these moments that we're liable to experience higher states of consciousness.

This can happen when we meditate. It's possible to see meditation as a technique specifically designed to halt the usual outward flow of vitality so we can feel more 'vital' or spiritual within ourselves. We stop 'doing' and sit still, we close our senses off to external stimuli by closing our eyes, and we try to stop our minds chattering away by focusing our attention on a mantra or on our breathing. Through doing this we close the channels through which our vitality leaks away and create a high concentration of vitality inside us. As a result, when we open our eyes again we may feel we're looking at a different world then we saw before. Everything around us looks more real and more beautiful, there may seem to be a harmony or a unity amongst the whole of our surroundings, and we may feel a strong sense of connection with our surroundings.

Something like this can also happen when we're alone in the countryside. There's silence and stillness around us, and the beauty of the countryside can have an effect similar to a mantra: because it's so beautiful we concentrate on it, which means that the chattering of our minds slows down and may even fade away. As a result we may experience the higher states of consciousness which poets like Wordsworth and Shelley experienced when they were alone in nature: a sense of the amazing aliveness and beauty of everything we see, and also perhaps an awareness of what Hindu philosophy calls Brahma, the pure consciousness which is the essence of all things, including ourselves. Then we feel an overpowering sense of oneness with nature and a profound sense of joy.

For the same reason as this, it's quite common for people to experience a higher state of consciousness at the moment of waking up, even though this might only last a few seconds. Our vital energies are completely recharged after sleep, our minds haven't started chattering away yet, and as a result we may feel a powerful sense that 'all is well', or feel, as Alan Watts wrote, that, "Every morning, when I first awaken, I have a feeling of total clarity as to the sense of life, a feeling of myself and the universe as a matter of the utmost simplcity. 'I' and 'That which is' are one and the same."

Detachment

Another, more subtle, way in which we give away our vitality is by 'attaching' ourselves to external things. Most people depend on external things for their sense of well-being: their possessions and comforts, their hopes and ambitions for the future, other people, their status in society, security, and so on. By depending on these things we give part of our selves away to them. We become aware of this when something we depended on is taken away from us - when we give up an addiction like smoking, for example, or when a person we've depended on leaves us. At first we experience a terrible sense of loss and emptiness, but after a while, if we stop ourselves giving in to the addiction again, we feel ourselves become stronger and more whole, as if the part of ourselves which we gave away to the thing (or the person) we were dependent on has been given back to us. It's as if the 'powers of our soul' have become stronger, because we've made ourselves a little more 'detached' and self-sufficient.

The biologist Alister Hardy conducted a survey of spiritual experiences for his book The Spiritual Nature of Man, and found that the most common 'trigger' for them was depression or despair. This is probably a result of 'detachment' too. Often we are depressed because things we depended on for our well-being have been taken from us - maybe our hopes and plans have been destroyed, or our success or wealth, or our status has been taken away from us. But this also means that we're forced to detach ourselves from these things - which can lead to spiritual experiences.

Ordinary Consciousness

There is a simple reason why building up a higher concentration of inner vitality - either by blocking the channels through which it normally drains out of us, or by detaching ourselves from external things - can lead to spiritual experiences. In the 1960's, American psychiatrist Arthur J. Deikman investigated the changes in consciousness which meditation brings and decided this happens because meditators often experience a 'de-automization' of perception. Under our ordinary consciousness the things we see around us don't look particularly beautiful or interesting, and the world seems to consist of 'things' which are just inanimate and exist in separation from each other and from us. We take it for granted that this view of the world is true, that we're seeing things exactly as they are; but it may be that the only reason we have this view of the world is because, as Deikman noted, our normal perception is automatic. This automatic perception was probably developed by our ancestors in response to the demands of survival, as a way of saving energy and attention so they could concentrate completely on the practical business of keeping themselves alive. It means that normally we don't put any energy into our perceptions - it's almost as if a kind of 'autopilot' is doing it on our behalf. But what happens when we meditate or when we're in a state of 'detachment' is that there's what we could call 'surplus energy' inside us, which means that our perceptions don't have to be automatic anymore. The 'surplus energy' which we've gathered goes into the act of perception - and as a result the dreary inanimate world we lived in before is suddenly full of amazing is-ness and beauty and harmony. And we can look at the way mystics usually went about this in terms of vitality as well. One of the great writers on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, wrote, 'No genius can afford to dissipate his energies, the mystic genius most of all,' and in order to prevent this the mystics made sure that they were far away from the energy draining activity and external stimuli of everyday life, living in monasteries or as hermits. There they spent hours at a time in meditation, and used penitential and ascetic practices to tame their sensual desires, so they could conserve their vitality. They also tried to live without possessions, which are dangerous because, in the words of German mystic Meister Eckhart, they cause 'a chronic discharge of energy.' What the mystics were trying to do was to permanently close down the channels through which our vitality usually leaks away, so that they could build up a greater intensity of 'elan vital' inside themselves, and as a result experience a permanent state of what they called 'deification', or union with the divine.

Our Spiritual Development

If we think of our spiritual development as a question of building up a greater intensity of the 'elan vital' inside ourselves, it's not so difficult to see how we can develop spiritually. Perhaps most importantly, we need to meditate regularly. As well as helping us 'wake up' temporarily, the more we meditate the quieter the chattering of our minds will become, and in the end we might manage to stop it altogether, which 'closes' one of the main channels through which vitality leaks away. Practices like Chi Gung and Yoga, which can generate new vitality inside us, can help us too. And we can also try to live 'vitality conserving' lifestyles: make sure our lives aren't too full of activity and that we're not exposed to too much external stimuli. If we know that the 'powers of our soul' are drained from us by our attachments, and also by our sensual desires, we should try to control this as well - try not to live too hedonistically, and learn to look for contentment inside ourselves instead

of from external things like money, possessions, status, hopes for the future, etc. Meditation can help us here too, because the longer we practise it the more we get used to living inside ourselves, and the more we get into contact with the natural contentment at the source of our beings.

The important thing about spiritual development, or self-evolution, is that it aims at the same thing as the process of evolution itself. For five billion years evolution has been making living beings more and more 'vital', and as a result living beings have developed a more intense consciousness of reality. And this is exactly what we do in our self-evolution - we take evolution into our own hands, and try to make ourselves more 'vital' and more conscious. We can see the mystics as more advanced in evolutionary terms than ordinary people, because they were more 'vital' and more conscious than others, in the same way that ordinary people are more 'vital' and more conscious than animals. And by developing spiritually we're attempting to transform ourselves into a 'higher' form of life as well.

But it's not really 'we' who are doing this at all, it's the force of evolution itself which is doing it, working through us, and trying to push life forward to a higher level of development. Those who try to develop themselves spiritually are sometimes criticised for being selfish, for just concerning themselves with their own well-being instead of other people's. But this isn't true; they aren't doing it for their own sake, but on behalf of evolution itself, and by extension, on behalf of the whole of life itself. Steven Taylor is a teacher and a free-lance writer residing in Manchester, England. This article was published in New Renaissance, Volume 8, Number 4, Issue 27.

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