

The Eternal Questions - A Yogic Perspective

A World-view Without Contradictions

In order to achieve mental peace it is helpful if we are able to experience harmony between our physical, mental and spiritual understandings of life. Today, the religious world view, the scientific world view, the economic world view and the ecological world view seem to have little in common. Such contradictions do little to comfort the unit mind. What follows is an explanation of the Yogic concept of the origin of things and their general direction, i.e. Who am I, Where do I come from and Where am I going? It helps to find a link between the scientific and the spiritual and provides us with a scheme for viewing the world that is free of uneasy contradictions.

The Cosmic Dance

Ancient Indian sculptures often represent a male and female figure in a passionate embrace. This symbolically represents two fundamental principles, Consciousness (Shiva) and force or Power (Shakti). Everything in the universe even before and after the universe came into being is considered to be a result of the changing relationship between these two principles. When Consciousness (Shiva) is dominant, force (Shakti) is quiescent (latent). When Shakti is waxing Shiva is waning and vice versa. The two are inseparable and together they are the absolute and all that is, is merely a manifestation of their changing relationships - a cosmic dance of Consciousness and Power.

The Grand Cycle

In Yoga the universe is seen as a grand flowing cycle continuously being born and destroyed. Consciousness gives birth to Cosmic Mind. This Mind is reduced to matter. From the clash within matter, mind again emerges and ultimately returns to Consciousness. Each stage of the transformative cycle is governed by the changing relationship between Shiva and Shakti, Consciousness and Power. Outside the Universe and giving rise to it, is what is called the Absolute or "Nirguna Brahma" (Nirguna means "without bondage"). Shiva (Consciousness) and Shakti (Power) are present but Shakti is completely quiescent - unmanifest. Thus there is only pure Consciousness - there is no manifestation, no expression, no universe.

The universe comes into existence when Shakti stirs and begins to exert her force on Shiva. To create something three things are required: conception, substance and energy. Here Shiva (or Consciousness) provides conception and substance and Shakti (Power) provides energy. This indicates that the leadership (conception) in this relationship comes from Shiva and that Shakti, though powerful, is a blind power, dictated ultimately by Consciousness. As Shakti applies force upon Consciousness it becomes condensed. Thus pure Consciousness (which can be likened to a straight line) is condensed into Mind (Cosmic Mind), the first subtle wavelength, under the pressure of Shakti.

The Universe Begins With Mind

So, according to the Yogic view, the first aspect of the Universe to come into existence is one step down from pure Consciousness, i.e. Mind or Cosmic Thought. This is known as the Cosmic Mind or "Saguna Brahma" (Brahma "with bondage") which is now about to create the rest of the universe as its own internal thought projection.

Matter is Bottled Up Mind

As Shakti exerts her power Consciousness diminishes. Thought is further condensed and now manifests as matter. Thus matter (also bottled up energy) is nothing but bottled up Mind and Mind is bottled up Consciousness. The substance is the same but the degree of density varies. Matter appears in stages beginning with the most subtle - sound (in the beginning was the Word), perceivable only by the sense of hearing this is known as ether or ethereal factor. Space (ether), though apparently a vacuum, is a conductor for sound.

The process of condensation continues, under the growing influence of Shakti. Ether is condensed into the gaseous factor, perceivable by hearing and touch. Gaseous factor is further condensed into the luminous factor, perceivable by hearing, touch and sight, and then into the liquid factor which can also be perceived by taste, and finally the solid factor which can also be perceived by smell as well. Thus as matter is condensed the qualities by which it can be perceived increase in number.

With the emergence of the solid factor the state of ultimate density has been reached. Here Shakti is fully manifest and Shiva is quiescent. In solid matter, Mind and Consciousness are dormant but they remain as a latent possibility.

Life Emerges

Consciousness has been squashed up into solid - which can be squashed no further, yet Shakti continues to exert her tremendous pressure. Something has to happen. At this stage, either there is a tremendous explosion, or, if all

factors are present in a balanced state, Shakti penetrates the solid factor and establishes a nucleus of energy within the object and life ultimately comes into being.

This is the turning point in the cycle which, up to now has been the process of Shakti gradually binding up Shiva. Now, the internal force within the living object is able to resist the external force of Shakti and in this protected environment mind (this time unit mind) can once again emerge from matter. From this point onward Yoga is largely in agreement with Western science, which states that mind emerged from matter. Science has little to say about from where and how matter got there. All they can say, as they study its behaviour, is that matter seems to be embedded within a larger energy and some scientists now say Consciousness.

Evolution - A Mind-led Process

The main difference between the Yogic concept of evolution and the Darwinian concept of evolution is that according to Yoga evolution is a mind-led process whereas according to Darwin it is a process of chance and natural selection. In the Yogic view the clash of interaction with the environment causes the mind to become more subtle. As the mind becomes more subtle it requires a more sophisticated brain, nervous system, glandular system etc. in order to express its expanding potentialities and is able to take advantage of genetic possibilities to gradually evolve the capacities it desires. So, first there is the simple protozoic expression (unicellular mind) and this evolves to a metazoic status (a structure which has a central controlling mind).

Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, the founder of Ananda Marga, went so far as to indicate that a strong collective desire within a particular species over a long period (for example, the desire to be able to survive on land) can actually attract new genetic material carried by viruses which move through space. (He also said that negative and positive states of mind attract negative and positive viruses - one explanation for the source of some dangerous new diseases.)

Spiritual Longing - The Human Distinguishing Factor

As mind evolves and species become more complex we see Shiva (Consciousness) slowly but steadily loosening the bonds of Shakti. With each stage of development subtlety of expression and perception develop. Reptiles have instincts, mammals have instinct plus emotions, human beings have instinct, emotions and reason. More than reason however, Yoga views the uniquely human factor as the emergence of spiritual longing, which means the development of intuition. Human beings are the first species to intuit the possibility of pure absolute Consciousness or Nirvana, and to possess the nervous and glandular structure necessary to achieve it (i.e. spiritual liberation). At this point, the evolutionary process, which has proceeded slowly over millions of years, suddenly makes an increase in speed.

Nirvana - Completing The Cycle

Human beings, having sensed their ultimate potentiality, evolve techniques that enable them to consciously speed up their progress. By learning to detach their minds from their material origins and focus them on their spiritual destination they can take rapid steps to shake off the remaining bondage of Shakti and return to the Absolute state where Consciousness (Shiva) is fully expressed and Shakti is quiescent. Thus the completion of the grand cycle is seen as being accomplished when the human being achieves Nirvana (spiritual liberation) and passes beyond the cycle of birth and death.

Universalistic Implications

All world-views carry social implications. The mechanistic world-view blinds us to the importance of environmental action and reaction, the Darwinian world-view justifies one human exploiting another, certain religious world-views separate human beings from God, others separate human beings from the world. The Yogic view sees the entire universe moving in a common flow (rasa or cosmic flow) according to each entity's dharma – that which is most natural. For human beings the most natural thing (dharma) is to seek infinite happiness which can only be attained through spiritual realisation. Accordingly, the highest dharma of human beings is to do spiritual practices and attain spiritual realisation.

All of us (humans, animals, plants, even matter) share the same origins, the same substance and the same destination. We all ultimately get there. This provides the basis for an inclusive family relationship amongst all created beings and a motive for mutual care and assistance. Spirituality is entirely consistent with ecology.

This grand flow from Consciousness to matter and back to Consciousness is seen as powerful and unstoppable. Those people, institutions or philosophies which attempt to block others (be it other humans or other species) as they attempt to advance will sooner or later be discarded as narrow-minded, and will be forced to expand their consciousness. While those people, institutions and philosophies which support and encourage all in their evolutionary journey will ultimately endure and flourish.