

There is No Psychological Evolution

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The scientific idea of evolution as we understand it today was quite new when the modern Theosophical movement started. To put it in context, H. P. Blavatsky met her Master for the first time about eight years before Darwin published his theory in 1859. This idea of evolution—applied not only to the physical world but also to the intellectual and spiritual realms, would eventually become one of the main doctrines that the Theosophical Society introduced to modern spirituality.

It is natural then, that when some years later J. Krishnamurti stated repeatedly that ‘There is no psychological evolution’ some students of Theosophy felt he was denying a central tenet of the Esoteric Philosophy. But was he? In this article we will explore the esoteric teachings in regards to evolution and how they relate to the psyche, which in Theosophical literature is technically called *kāma-manas*.

Constitution of Human Beings

Esoteric Philosophy states that the cosmos is far more complex than the model presented by modern science. It is not a mere physical machine, but has different dimensions that transcend the reach of current scientific technology. Man, in its turn, is a ‘sample’ of the universe, reflecting in him every element that exists in the cosmos—both at the physical and non-physical levels.

Mme Blavatsky generally described human beings as composed of seven Principles or fundamental elements, namely: *ātman*, the universal Self in us; *buddhi*, the source of spiritual wisdom; *manas*, the origin of mind and self-consciousness; *kāma*, the passional elements; *prāṇa*, the individualized universal life; *liṅga-śarīra*, the ethereal model of the last and densest Principle—the physical body or *sthūla-śarīra*.

Since these Principles usually work in association with each other, there are many ways of arranging them depending on the aspect of the Esoteric Philosophy under study. For our present purpose, we will organize them in four categories according to their functions, as follows:

<i>Ātma-buddhi</i> (the Monad)	Spirit
<i>Manas</i> (the higher ego)	Soul
<i>Kāma-manas</i> (the personal ego)	Psyche
<i>Prāṇa, liṅga</i> and <i>sthūla śarīra-s</i>	Body

The Monad (especially in its atmic aspect) is one and universal. It does not belong to any particular human being but pervades all, giving existence to everything. Its reflection in a human being through *buddhi* is what we could loosely call *his* Spirit.

The higher ego or soul is our true Individuality, the reincarnating ‘entity’ that is beyond life and death.

The psyche is a reflection of the soul expressing through the body. It is heavily conditioned by the limitations imposed by the physical organism and mixed with the passions and biological instincts represented by *kāma*. This is the psychological nature of man, that is, his mental and emotional aspects. It constitutes the lower or personal ego.

Finally, we have a living body that during life is the vehicle of all these Principles on the physical plane.

Keeping this classification in mind, we can now pass on to examine the Theosophical teachings about the evolution of this complex entity that is a human being.

Schemes of Evolution

The Theosophical teachings present a cosmos immersed in a vast movement of evolution. According to *The Secret Doctrine* there exist in Nature three separate streams or ‘schemes’ of evolution going on at three different levels that could be described as the spiritual sphere, the archetypal plane,* and the physical world. Man, being a reflection of the *whole*, is the only entity actively evolving on these three levels. In other words, these three separate schemes are in him ‘inextricably interwoven and interblended at every point’. Mme Blavatsky described these schemes as follows:

1. **The Monadic** is, as the name implies, concerned with the growth and development into still higher phases of activity of the Monad in conjunction with:
2. **The Intellectual**, represented by the Manasa-Dhyanis (the Solar Devas, or the Agnishwatta Pitris) the ‘givers of intelligence and consciousness’ to man and:
3. **The Physical**, represented by the Chhayas of the lunar Pitris, round which Nature has concreted the present physical body. . . .¹

Before moving on it is important to note that Blavatsky frequently uses the word ‘intellectual’ in a particular way. She follows the fashion of ancient Greek philosophy, where the word ‘intellect’ is a translation of the term *nous*—the Pure Reason. Therefore, she does not refer to the brain intellectualism but to the source of spiritual intelligence in man, the *mānasa-dhyāni* in us or human soul.

Now, if we arrange these schemes of evolution in connection to the Principles they affect, we have the following:

Monadic Evolution	<i>Ātma-buddhi</i>	Spirit
Intellectual Evolution	<i>Manas</i>	Soul
----	<i>Kāma-manas</i>	Psyche
Physical Evolution	<i>Prāṇa, liṅga and sthūla śarīra-s</i>	Body

As we can see, here we have represented all seven Principles but one: *kāma*, in its association with lower *manas*. In other words, what is absent in this threefold scheme is the evolution of the psyche. One might think that the latter is represented in the Intellectual scheme but, as we said, that scheme is related to higher *manas* as an entity (the reincarnating Soul) and not to its perishable reflection in the body during the period of incarnation. Thus, according to *The Secret Doctrine*, our personal ‘I’ (that is, the psychological identity in which the vast majority of humanity has centred its consciousness) is not in a process of evolution.

What is the meaning of this? What are the implications? To understand this we have first to examine the main features of these evolutionary schemes.

* The term ‘archetypal’ is used here to refer to the higher mental plane of Theosophical literature.

Spiritual evolution. The *universal* Monad is a purely undifferentiated spiritual essence which, being homogeneous, is unconscious on the planes of differentiated matter. The first step in awakening its latent consciousness is to pass through several stages of experience animating the lower kingdoms of nature (elemental, mineral, vegetable and animal). This evolution is not self-conscious—it is guided ‘from the outside’ by the forces of nature.

Once this part of the journey is accomplished, the next step for the Monad is to gather experience *personally* and *individually*. In other words, the universal Monad has to experience the cosmos as a self-conscious entity—a human being. For this purpose, in its previous journey through the lower kingdoms the One Monad shows ‘a gradual tendency towards segregation into individual Monads’, a process that comes almost to completion in the animal kingdom.² But it is only when arriving at the human stage that the universal Monad is individualized into many ‘human monads’ that act as distinct entities in this world of illusion.

The aim of the human monad or Spirit is to develop spiritual self-consciousness, that is, a clear awareness of itself as a centre of consciousness which, nevertheless, is an *inseparable* part of the whole. In order to accomplish this aim the human Spirit needs a suitable tabernacle through which it can experience the cosmos in a self-conscious way.

Physical evolution. While the universal Monad gathers experience in the lower kingdoms Nature is busy at work striving to develop more and more complex organisms. As the forms evolve from minerals to vegetables and then on to animals, they become increasingly able to be aware of, and respond to, the environment. Animal forms with an ever-perfecting nervous system are gradually developed until the process reaches its goal—the creation of an organism with a brain complex enough not only to be highly aware of the environment, but also to be aware of itself as a particular entity. This is the birth of the primitive human being.

Thus, at the beginning of human evolution we have a physical form that is animated by an individual Monad or Spirit and has the ability to host self-consciousness. However, primitive human beings still remained as ‘senseless forms’. Why? This is because *i)* the Spirit, being too pure and undifferentiated, does not have the quality of self-consciousness in itself, and *ii)* the physical evolutionary power is unable to develop the non-physical quality of self-consciousness. An additional stream of evolution is therefore needed to join the efforts to produce a complete human being.

Intellectual evolution. The universal mind is the source of *ahamkara*, that is, the feeling of ‘I am’ or self-consciousness. Once the primitive human forms are ready to develop mental consciousness, the Spirit is helped by the Solar Devas or *mānasaputra-s* (the sons of the universal mind) to create a dwelling place on the archetypal plane—the *causal body*. This marks the birth of the human soul, which is itself a Solar Deva in the making.

At the beginning of its human evolution the soul is in a state of slumber, much as in the case of a newly-born baby. The aim of the first part of its journey is to gradually awaken its dormant self-consciousness, which takes place by going through the cycles of reincarnation.

The soul, being too spiritual of an entity, never fully enters the body. When the time for incarnation comes it sends ‘a ray’ of itself endowing the baby with the potentiality for reason and self-consciousness. As the baby grows, the stimulation that comes from the outside awakens these latent faculties and the soul’s ray develops into the psyche or personal ego. It is by this means that the soul passes ‘through every experience and feeling that exists in the manifold or differentiated Universe’³ and gradually realizes itself as an individual entity.

Now, once this aim of awakening is reached, a new movement becomes necessary. The soul, which so far had been focusing on the psyche and body, must be united with the Spirit. In other words, the soul has to strive to transcend its identification with the personality (through which it awakened to self-conscious life) and endeavour to realize its true identity—a human Spirit dwelling on the archetypal plane and expressing itself on the physical plane. With the attainment of this goal the Spirit becomes self-conscious on all levels of the cosmos and the aim of human evolution is accomplished.

The fate of the psyche. As we just said, the psyche is a ‘fragment’ of the soul expressing itself through the body; a tool to interact with the physical world during life. But what happens when the body dies? At first consciousness centres in the psyche, which survives physical death. Then follows a process known as ‘death struggle’, where the selfish elements in the psyche are separated from the spiritual ones. Anything that was egoistic or of a material interest is discarded, forming a kind of psychic corpse or ‘shell’ that will eventually dissolve. But the impersonal and spiritual essence of the psyche follows the soul to *devachan*—a state where this essence is assimilated and becomes a permanent part of the soul. It is by means of this assimilation that the latter gradually unfolds its self-consciousness and other potentialities. When *devachan* is over and a fresh incarnation begins, the soul sends a new ray to the forming body that will develop into a new psyche.

This psyche will be completely different from the previous one. It will have different capacities, depending on what particular aspects of the soul are chosen to be expressed more prominently in the present incarnation. The new psyche, being developed in a new body, family, country, time, etc., will have different personal experiences, memories and qualities, even though there may be a general continuity of habits and inclinations from the former life due to the *skandha-s*.

But one could ask—will the new psyche be an improvement of the previous one? The answer depends on several factors. If the experiences of the previous incarnation were mainly directed towards selfish and materialistic aims, the new psyche will tend to show an even more marked materialistic or selfish tendency. From a spiritual point of view, we could say that the psyche gets worse. This, however, does not mean that the soul is not evolving. The latter is gathering experience about the lower planes, which will eventually lead it to realize that this road fails to bring about anything productive. If, on the contrary, the experiences of the past incarnation contributed to the awakening of the soul’s potentialities, the general tone of the next psyche may be more spiritual, because the new ray sent to the body will reflect the soul’s growth in wisdom from one life to the next.[†]

As we can see, the psyche is not an enduring Principle but rather a shadow of the real—a transitory tool to be discarded after each day of labour. Thus, although the psyche plays an important role in the soul’s journey, there can be no evolution at the psychological level.

Now, what about the psychological ‘improvement’ that we may observe within one life-time in a person that is leading a spiritual life? Couldn’t we say that this is a kind of psychological evolution? In order to understand this we need to examine another important aspect of the psyche.

The Sense of Separateness

As we said, the soul is the source of self-consciousness; the feeling of ‘I am’. This self-consciousness can exist in different forms, from the spiritual and impersonal to the material and selfish.

[†] However, we need to keep in mind that karma, which regulates all this, may produce ‘unexpected’ effects at the personal level in any given incarnation.

The original self-consciousness of the soul is a pure and unqualified sense of '*I-am-ness*', an impersonal consciousness of just being. When the ray is sent to animate the body in a new incarnation and self-consciousness begins to awaken in the baby, it gradually identifies with the body, with its name, with its personal experiences, etc. In consequence, the originally pure feeling of 'I am' turns into the sense of 'I am—*John Smith*'. This is the psyche. A natural result of the identification of the impersonal consciousness with the personal *vehicles* of consciousness is the sense of separateness, because when one says 'I am John Smith' one is also saying 'I am not Mary Brown', or anybody else.

This sense of personal identity has a fundamental flaw—it is false. Although the soul is a particular Individuality, it does not feel separate from the rest. On its own plane, the soul has an inherent omniscience, and stands beyond life and death. The psyche, on the contrary, is mortal. It feels isolated and alone, and its perception and understanding are very narrow, limited by the bodily senses. But as the soul becomes more and more engaged with the personal experience it gets confused and regards itself to be the corporal, emotional and mental aspects, thus forgetting its divine origin. This identification with body and mind is the source of suffering.

In the first part of the evolutionary cycle the sense of separateness and selfishness associated with the psyche is necessary to awaken the soul to a consciousness of itself as an individual entity. But once this is accomplished the psyche becomes a limitation; just as the walker that helped the baby get strong eventually becomes a hindrance for his walking. What the soul needs now is to reassert its true nature and strive to be united with its source—the Spirit. For this, it has to overcome the fascination for the material world and break its identification with the temporary psyche. In Mme Blavatsky's words:

Eastern Philosophy—occult or exoteric—does not admit of an 'I' separate from the Universe, objective or subjective, material or spiritual—otherwise than as a temporary illusion during the cycle of our incarnations. It is this regrettable *illusion*, the 'heresy of separateness' or personality, the idea that our 'I' is distinct in eternity from the Universal EGO, that has to be conquered and destroyed as the root of selfishness and all evil, before we can get rid of rebirths and reach Nirvana.⁴

This is an important point to be grasped by the student. All mystic teachings point out that spiritual awakening depends on the progressive 'death' of the personal 'I' as a centre of consciousness: 'the man must die before the saint can be born' says a Dervish proverb. For this to happen a purification of the self-consciousness is necessary. Let us examine this in more detail.

In most of us the seat of self-consciousness is not higher than the psyche. We know we have thoughts, emotions and a body, but we are not aware of our higher nature, even though we may know about it through study and reflection, or even dimly perceive it through flashes of inspiration. If, through spiritual practice, we can raise our self-consciousness to the level of the soul, we will begin to be aware of that aspect of our nature that is immortal and impersonal. A natural consequence of this will be a progressive weakening of the attachment to body and psyche, which are not regarded as our real self anymore.

But what happens to the psyche in this process? We could say that it gets united to the soul. In other words, the psyche, now devoid of its sense of 'I am this particular body and mind', becomes a passive instrument for the expression of the active soul. As a result of this the person begins to gradually express in his life the powers of the soul—wisdom, love, compassion, peace, joy, etc. This is the key to explain the 'psychological improvement' that one can observe in a person who is successfully treading the spiritual path. It is not that the psyche with its separate ego is improving; on the contrary, the psyche

gradually stops being an independent centre of consciousness and becomes a vehicle for the expression of the self-aware soul.

Once this is accomplished, the next step in the evolutionary journey is to raise the seat of self-consciousness even higher, from the soul to the Spirit, in what can be regarded as the union of both Principles.

Since the Spirit is beyond any limitation, even the impersonal sense of being an Individuality is transcended. Now there is the sense 'I am—the one All', and the person has the ability to become, in consciousness, anything that is around, whether animate or inanimate. This is the experience of union of any real mystic and occultist, one in which soul, psyche, and body have become the vehicle of expression of the fully conscious Spirit.

References

- ¹ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* vol. 1, (Adyar, TPH, 1978), p. 181.
- ² H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* vol. 5, (Adyar, TPH, 1997), p. 173.
- ³ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, (London, TPH, [1987]), 183.
- ⁴ H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* vol. 12, (Adyar, TPH, 1980), 407.