

As we Pray so we will Evolve in our Life

B Mahadevan¹

One of the good things that can happen to anyone is the fact that when we engage in any pursuit there is some progress in how we do that activity as we go along. In simple terms, this is called evolution. Depending on the context, evolution makes what we do better, more efficient and at times more meaningful also. It appears that this is a common instinct to all living beings. Even animals exhibit this as evident from how they grow and mature over time. Not surprisingly the living beings are “internally wired” with this capability to evolve and it is an inherent behavior as they grow.

Evolution – A common phenomenon for human beings

Therefore, it is fair to say that life of a human being is one of continuous evolution. The journey of every human being from the mother’s womb to the tomb is an amazing story of this evolution. Everything that we do ever since we are born in this world is a series of efforts that fructifies into some form of self-evolution. This evolution happens in all spheres of our life. Let us look at the physical plane first. A new born child is totally immobile and dependent on the mother. However, such a child evolves from this state to a fine individual over time, going as far as exhibiting physical excellence in games and winning international accolades (grand slam victories, Olympic gold medals etc.) in some cases.

We go through a similar journey when it comes to the intellectual plane as well. We begin the journey from an apparent state of knowing nothing about ourselves and that of the outside world. It takes nearly 6 months for the child to take charge of its own body and limbs as it has no sense of the ownership until it is constantly coached by the parents. That is why when the child (named as Ram let us say) will wave its hand when it is repeatedly asked, “Where are Ram’s hands?”. This journey culminates for many into a fully grown individual with intellectual prowess and worldly knowledge and competencies in science, engineering, technology or management. This intellectual evolution leads a few selected to make great innovations and new knowledge even honouring them with recognitions such as Nobel Prize.

If this is the case, then it is natural that every individual must evolve in other planes such as spirituality and religion as well. This clearly points to the fact that even in matters of devotion towards the Lord we may go through a certain stage of evolution. How does one take cognizance of the evolution in his/her path of devotion? What is the purpose of each stage of evolution and how does this transition happen?

In order to clarify these ideas Lord Krishna has devoted some *ślokas* in chapter 9 of the *Gītā*. We shall see one *śloka* in this writing.

The path of evolutionary devotion

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Shri Krishna clarifies what happens to people who resort to different practices of devotion. Those who observe steadfast devotion towards the Devas (*devavratāḥ*) will attain the Devas (*devān yānti*) and be blessed by them. On the other hand, those who observe strict practices and devotion towards the departed souls (*pitṛ-vratāḥ*) will attain them (*pitṛn yānti*) and be blessed. In the same manner, those who worship the spirits and other such entities (*bhūtejyāḥ*) will reach unto them (*bhūtāni yānti*). Finally (*api*), those who show steadfast devotion to Me, the Lord (*madyājinaḥ*) will indeed reach Me (*yānti*) only.

यान्ति देवव्रता देवान्पितृन्यान्ति पितृव्रताः ।

भूतानि यान्ति भूतेज्या यान्ति मद्याजिनोऽपि माम् ॥ 9.25

yānti devavratā devān-pitṛn-yānti pitṛ-vratāḥ
bhūtāni yānti bhūtejyā yānti madyājino'pi mām

Through this *śloka* Lord Krishna suggests that there are four possible paths to our devotion. One is to pray to spirits (evil or otherwise) through an elaborate set of *tantric* practices. Quite often such devotional practices and prayers are intended to ward off “evil effects” in one’s own life, to cast evil influences on others who are creating troubles and disturbances or to get some “quick” gains of higher magnitude not necessarily commensurate to the efforts deployed. Engaging in such practices is more a display of ignorance in matters of devotion and lack of conviction that for a true devotee the Lord indeed takes care of material (*yoga*) and spiritual (*kṣema*) well being².

It takes a while for a person to learn from own experiences and the natural instincts of evolution take that person to other forms of devotion suggested by Lord Krishna. Devotion towards departed souls and celestial entities (Devas) are far superior to the first variety. This is simply because inflicting damage on others goes out of the radar screen and instead the focus is mostly on material well-being for oneself. Such devotional practices are aimed at getting more riches, fame, health, power and position. In other words, the first journey of a devotee is to get out of “fear” of many things in life. In order to reach this stage, the faith in the Lord must grow.

The evolution in this journey of devotion leads to two important aspects for a true devotee. First, over time the devotee experiences the ephemeral nature of the benefits that he/she is seeking through devotion. The search for a deeper meaning of life and the true purpose of life takes such a devotee closer to the Lord and the faith on the Lord grows firmly in the devotee. As the faith in the Lord grows, the responsibility to address one’s own material well being is gradually transferred to the Lord. By transferring what is meant is not in the physical sense but the thought in the mind. When this happens the devotee truly evolves and will be able to “surrender unconditionally” to the Lord. This is the stage when he prays to the Lord Supreme as the need for praying to other entities vanish.

Śaraṇāgati – A state of clarity & courage

² There is a separate writing on this aspect titled, “Managing the two dials in our dashboard called life”.

The state of unconditional surrender is referred to as “*Śaraṇāgati*” in *Sanātana Dharma* parlance. Contrary to popular misconception, surrendering oneself is not at all easy. We implicitly assume that we alone need to sort out all the issues that we face in life by ourselves and end up putting up everything on to our head. Our daily struggle in our lives and the root cause of mental stress and burnout that we go through are simply because we find it difficult to surrender to the Lord. Unfortunately, we do not have control on most of the things around us and for a vast majority of us we cannot even control ourselves in the first place. Surrendering to the Lord through devotion is not simply giving up everything in life, resign the job, give up everything and sit in long prayers in the pooja room, temples and *satsanga*. It is developing a state of mind and constant thought that the Lord takes care of all that happens to oneself even when the individual is in the thick of activities and various life pursuits.

If we are able to surrender to the Lord in this manner, the chances of us putting the best foot forward in whatever we do in life dramatically increases. Every outcome of our life pursuits will be viewed as *prasāda* the Lord has given to us. This changed perspective will make us lead a courageous life as the propensity to fail and fear bad outcomes will come down.

This indeed is the evolution of an individual in the spiritual plane. Since this is a basic instinct in us we cannot stop this process. However, with true devotion we can accelerate our journey in this process.