



The Leap: A Spiritual View of Evolution

Steve Taylor



In this piece based on his new book of the same title, Steve looks at the inner side of evolution and signs of more widespread spiritual awakening, which leads him to an optimistic vision of the human future.

On a physical level, evolution can be seen as a process by which living beings become increasingly complex and more intricately organised. But evolution has an *inner* dimension, too. Increasing physical complexity is mirrored internally in the expansion of awareness and the intensification of consciousness. In these terms, we can see evolution as a process by which living beings become increasingly conscious and aware, both of the world and of themselves.

At the same time as being the most physically complex beings on this planet (certainly in terms of our brains), human beings are probably also the most intensely aware and conscious living beings. Although we can't be certain, it seems likely that we have a more intricate and expansive awareness of reality and a more intense degree of *self* consciousness than any other animal.

Types of awareness

Here it's useful to think in terms of four different types of awareness. The first of these is *perceptual* awareness, which means experiencing the phenomenal world around us, through our senses. The second is *conceptual* awareness, which means being aware of concepts such as time, the past and the future, death and — more subtly — morality and justice. It means being able to think in terms of categories and recognize the relationships (including the differences and similarities) between different phenomena. It's related to conceptual and symbolic developments such as alphabets and written languages, numbers and mathematics, and systems of laws.

Thirdly, there is *subjective* awareness, which means awareness of our inner lives, of our selves and our own states

of being. And finally, there is *intersubjective* awareness: the individual's emotional and empathic awareness of and connection to others, not just to other human beings but also to animals, the Earth itself and even the whole universe.

Even the simplest life forms have perceptual awareness. And some non-human animals clearly have more acute perceptual awareness than human beings, at least in certain areas. For example, dogs have a much more acute sense of smell than we do, and they can hear sounds beyond our auditory range. But we human beings seem to possess the other two types of awareness — conceptual and subjective — to a more intense degree than other animals. Some animals show degrees of self-awareness — for example, magpies appear to be able to recognise themselves in mirrors — and some animals, such as apes, can be taught a rudimentary awareness of categories and numbers, showing some conceptual awareness. But the amazing intricacy and complexity of human language, compared to the apparently rudimentary languages of some animals, testifies to the unprecedented richness of our conceptual and subjective awareness. No other animals appear to be able to examine their own inner subjective world as deeply as human beings, or to have as rich and intricate understanding of the world we inhabit.

Intersubjective awareness is a little more problematic. Simple life forms obviously possess awareness of other members of their species, and moreover, there are animal groups whose behaviour is so precisely and intricately coordinated that it might be seen as the manifestation of some subtle intuitive connection, as if individuals can sense and respond to the experience of other members of the group e.g. the "swarm behaviour" or "swarm intelligence" of ant colonies, termites, flocks of birds or shoals of fish. This could certainly be seen as a form of intersubjectivity. However, this intersubjectivity only extends as far as a particular group, rather than to the species as a whole, or to other species. Human intersubjectivity is much more wide-ranging and indiscriminate, even extending to other species (such as when identification and empathy with animals leads to vegetarianism or veganism) and may also be deeper, involving a powerful sense of compassion.

However, we tend to forget that, even if we may generally have more intense awareness than other animals, the human race as it presently is can't be the end point of the evolutionary process. It's completely illogical to assume that evolution is just behind us, rather than in front of us as well. The intensification and expansion of awareness will undoubtedly continue.

And in my view, the phenomenon of spiritual awakening shows that this process *is* continuing among us at the moment.



Spiritual awakening and evolution

Spiritual awakening can be seen as a shift into a more expansive and more intense mode of awareness. In my new book *The Leap* (2017) - based on my psychological research into more than 100 cases of spiritual awakening - I define 'wakefulness' as '*a higher-functioning state in which a person's vision of and relationship to the world are transformed, along with their subjective experience, their sense of identity and their conceptual outlook. This shift brings a sense of well-being, clarity and connection. The person develops a more intense awareness of the phenomenal world, and a broad, global outlook, with an all-embracing sense of empathy with the whole human race, and a much reduced sense of for group identity.*'

My research found that a shift into this state can occur both gradually and suddenly. When it happens gradually, it is usually due to a long term commitment to spiritual practices and paths.

When it occurs suddenly, it is most frequently due to intense psychological turmoil, which has the effect of 'dissolving away' our normal self-system. The turmoil - which may be due to a diagnosis of serious illness, bereavement, addiction, intense stress or depression - breaks down the psychological attachments which form our normal sense of identity. For many people, this just equates with psychological breakdown, but for a minority, it allows a new self to be emerge - a new expansive, higher-functioning state of being which seems to have been latent inside them.

The state of 'wakefulness' can be seen in evolutionary terms - in fact, in terms of the four different types of awareness I've just mentioned. Wakefulness involves an intensified perceptual awareness, a more vivid awareness of our surroundings, with an enhanced sense of beauty. The world around us becomes more real, more alive, and more fascinating. We may become aware the whole world is full of a spiritual force which creates a sense of harmony and meaning and folds all seemingly separate things into unity.

Wakefulness also involves a broader conceptual awareness - a wider sense of perspective, a transcendence of group identity, and an unconditional universal morality. And it involves an intensification of subjective awareness. It means going *deeper* into ourselves, and becoming more aware of the richness and fullness of our inner lives. It means finding stillness and harmony inside ourselves, and discovering that at the core or ground of being, we are one with all things.

And finally, spiritual awakening involves an increased intersubjectivity. As the sense of separateness dissolves away, there is increasing connection between a person and the other human beings, other living beings, the whole of the nature world, and the whole cosmos itself. This means increased empathy and compassion, and increased sense of responsibility and concern for others. And at the most intense level, it means actually becoming *one* with the whole cosmos, and becoming aware that there is no difference between subject and object, so that we literally *are* everything.

It is therefore possible that what we experience as spiritual awakening is a part of the evolutionary process, part of the same movement towards more and more expansive awareness which has been underway of hundreds of millions of years. Through spiritual awakening, evolution may be moving towards a new stage of development that is more expansive than the present normal human state in the same way that this normal state is more expansive than the consciousness of other animals.

Spiritual views of evolution

I'm certainly not the first person to put forward such a spiritual view of evolution. Many philosophers have suggested that evolution is a purposeful process of the unfolding and intensification of consciousness, including the German philosophers Hegel and Fichte, the French philosophers Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin, the American philosopher

Ken Wilber, and the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo. Teilhard de Chardin (1961) saw evolution as a process of the spiritualization of matter, which was progressing toward an 'Omega Point.' This is the culmination of the whole evolutionary process, when all matter is wholly infused with spiritual energy and all phenomena, including human beings, become one.

In his book *Cosmic Consciousness* (first published over a hundred years ago), Richard M. Bucke (2017) describes his conviction that cosmic consciousness is a stage of development that awaits the human species as a whole. Bucke distinguishes two other types of consciousness. First, there is the simple consciousness of animals (and early human beings), which means that they are aware of their surroundings and have the ability to respond to changes in their environment. Second, there is the self-consciousness of human beings, which probably developed, according to Bucke, just a few thousand years ago. This means that, for the first time, in addition to being aware of their surroundings, human beings are aware of themselves. And now we're witnessing the onset of cosmic consciousness. Although, according to Bucke, it is quite rare at the moment, cosmic consciousness is becoming increasingly common and will eventually spread to every member of the human race. In the future, it will become human beings' normal state, which we all naturally develop into in adulthood.

I'm obviously implying here that evolution isn't just a random process generated by genetic mutations and natural selection. In my view, there's an *impetus* behind evolution that encourages a movement toward both greater physical complexity and a more expansive awareness. Living beings have an *innate tendency* to develop in the direction of more intense perceptual, conceptual, subjective and intersubjective awareness. You could compare evolution to the development of a human being from embryo to adulthood. Here development moves naturally and inevitably from the simplest state — when two cells meet and merge — through levels of increasing complexity, as cells split off and organise and start to form different parts of the body. The process unfolds along predetermined lines, following a kind of blueprint or mould specific to our species.

I think evolution is similar to this but on an enormously extended time frame, unfolding over hundreds of millions of years. Perhaps the only difference is that the direction of evolution may not be as fixed as the development of individuals — perhaps there's a simple *tendency* to move toward greater complexity and awareness that is broadly directional without being completely predetermined. Evolution is teleological - in the sense that there is an impetus moving inevitably to greater intensities of awareness - although I think it is highly unlikely that this process is moving towards a specific goal, as Hegel or Teilhard de Chardin suggested. It is more likely that the process is open-ended, leading to ever greater physical complexity and intensify of awareness *ad infinitum*.

There may be a connection with the concept of emergence. Systems theorists suggest that natural systems and organisms have an innate tendency to move toward greater complexity, spontaneously generating structures which are more than the sum of their parts. Applied to evolution, this would suggest that order and complexity are not created by genetic mutations, but by self-organisation and the emergent properties of systems. A number of biologists - beginning with Samuel Alexander (1920) and with the more recent example of Robert Reid (2007) - have argued that natural selection isn't sufficient to explain the arising of genetic variation and new life forms, and that a concept of 'emergent evolution' is required to account for these. The only difference between this view and the spiritual view of evolution I'm putting forward is that the latter implies that emergence doesn't happen spontaneously, but is impelled by the innate tendency of life itself to move towards greater complexity and awareness.

It's also worth noting that this view of evolution can still include genetic mutations as a mechanism of change. The significant point may be that, within this model, genetic mutations aren't necessarily random. Beneficial genetic mutations may be generated by the impetus of evolution, as a means of creating change and greater complexity. This would help to explain the problem of how a negative phenomenon such as beneficial mutations (which occur extremely rarely and have to be cumulative, forming a sequence of development with mutations that have become before them) could be responsible for the incredible creativity of evolution.

So in my view, to believe that evolution is accidental is as illogical as trying to explain human development from an embryo to adulthood in terms of accidental factors. This process of *ontogenetic* (or individual) development closely parallels the course of evolution itself over the past four billion years, moving from simple cellular structures to increasing complexity and specialisation. This parallel includes the probability that both types of development aren't random but directional.

According to this view, there's something *inevitable* about spiritual awakening. It's the natural unfolding of a process of intensifying awareness that has been underway for millions of years. Wakefulness is latent inside us, waiting to emerge. You could say that, in a sense, it was *always* latent in living beings, even in the first single-celled bacteria. Aristotle originally put forward the idea (later taken up by other philosophers) that all higher evolutionary forms are latent in lower ones. He saw evolution as the unfolding of latent potential, leading to higher forms of life, all of which were inherent from the beginning.

And I believe that, at the present time, the latency of wakefulness has become so powerful that the state is ready to emerge. I believe that wakefulness is *already* emerging within us collectively, gradually moving the whole human race to a higher-functioning state of being and a more expansive and intensive state of awareness.

Evidence for an evolutionary leap

What evidence is there that such an 'evolutionary leap' is underway? I would say that there are five signs. The first four relate to individual experiences of wakefulness.

First of all, wakefulness seems to be *natural* for a small minority of people. There are some people who aren't awake due to a sudden transformation, or to decades of regular spiritual practice - wakefulness is simply their normal, natural state. That is, they live in a naturally more expansive and higher-functioning state, with heightened awareness and intense well-being, appreciation and presence, and a strong sense of connection or union to nature, and compassion for other human beings and living beings. Such naturally wakeful people don't usually become known in a spiritual context. They usually don't establish themselves as spiritual teachers, and usually don't follow specific spiritual paths, or affiliate themselves with particular traditions. Instead, they often become creative artists. Famous examples include Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, Richard Jeffries (author of *The Story of my Heart*), Wordsworth and William Blake, and painters such as Turner, Monet, Caspar David Friedrich and the American painters Thomas Cole and George Inness. You can see such natural wakeful people as 'evolutionary throw-forwards' who live in a state of intensified awareness which will not become normal to human beings until a future time. They seem to be the spearhead of collective transformation.

The second sign of an evolutionary leap is that, among the great majority of human beings who don't experience wakefulness as their normal state, temporary awakening experiences are quite common. There are many collections and analyses of such experiences (e.g. Johnson, 1960; Laski, 1961; Hoffman 1992; Wade, 2000; Taylor, 2012b) and research suggests that a significant proportion of the population have had them least once. For example, Heald (2000) found that 29% of a sample of 1000 had had an experience of 'a sacred presence

in nature'. Similarly, Greeley (1975) found that 35% of a larger sample had had the experience of being 'very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself.' Similarly, a 1994 survey by the National Opinion Research Centre at the University of Chicago for *USA Today* magazine found that two thirds of Americans have had at least one mystical experience, and that 5% had them often (in Fenwick, 1995).

Awakening experiences tend to occur when we are inactive and relaxed, and our minds become quiet and calm, and so are often associated with sedate activities such as meditation, contact with nature, reading spiritual literature, or listening to creative or arts performances. (Paradoxically, though, the most frequent trigger of them is psychological turmoil. See Taylor [2011, 2012a] for a discussion on this.) For a few moments, our normal 'sleep' state slips away and the wakeful state emerges, like the sun from behind a wall of clouds. In these moments, we become aware of a heightened reality, a sense of connection, harmony and meaning. This suggests our normal 'sleep' state has only a loose hold over us and can easily dissolve away, even if it usually manages to reestablish itself.

The third sign is that many people feel a strong *impulse* to awaken. More and more people seem to sense instinctively that something is wrong with their normal state of being, that it is limited and delusory. They're aware that they're asleep, and they want to wake up. As a result, they feel impelled to investigate methods of expanding and intensifying their awareness such as following spiritual practices and traditions. Again, this suggests that our sleep state is losing its hold over us. It suggests that an evolutionary change is building up momentum within our collective psyche. The individual impulse to awaken is an expression of the evolutionary impulse itself. It's the same urge toward an expansion and intensification of awareness expressing itself through us.

The fourth sign (and the final one that relates to the individual experience of wakefulness), is the fact that awakening occurs so spontaneously and readily in response to psychological turmoil. In other words, at the same time as being the most important trigger of temporary awakening experiences, intense psychological turmoil can also trigger permanent wakefulness. As I showed in my book *Out of the Darkness* (Taylor, 2011), it is not uncommon for people who go through intense stress and turmoil - perhaps linked to bereavement, a diagnosis or cancer, alcoholism or depression - to undergo a sudden shift into the wakeful state. This often occurs when people have reached 'rock bottom', when they think they have lost everything. Their previous identity seems to dissolve away, and a new 'wakeful' identity suddenly emerges to replace it, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. And from that point on, they live in a higher-functioning state of heightened awareness, with a strong sense of connection, compassion and well-being.

This is probably the clearest sign of the increasing latency of wakefulness. For the 'shifters' - as I called them in *Out of the Darkness* - who undergo awakening in this way, the wakeful state seems to emerge fully formed, as if it had been latent inside them, waiting for the possibility to unfold. Although there are sometimes periods of confusion and disturbance as the old 'sleep' state fades away and the new one establishes itself, the process seems natural and inevitable. And again, this suggests that the wakeful state is ready to emerge within our collective psyche. It is already there, fully formed and integrated, but only able to emerge (at least for some people) when the old sleep state dissolves away.

All of these could be interpreted as signs that the momentum of wakefulness is increasing, that it's beginning to unfold as the next stage in the evolution of life. As a result, it's manifesting itself in a variety of ways, in the same way that a rising water level manifests itself as overflowing rivers and lakes, and new streams, ponds, and tributaries. Wakefulness is also rising, and showing signs of its emergence everywhere.

A cultural shift

Fifth and finally, it's also possible to see signs of wakefulness in *cultural* changes. These have, I believe, been clearly visible for about 250 years. The second half of the eighteenth century was a very interesting time to be alive, particularly in Western Europe. For the previous few thousand years, Europe, like the rest of the world, had known little but brutality, oppression, and suffering. For the vast majority of people, life had been — in the words of the sixteenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes (2006) — 'nasty, brutish and short.' If you or I were able to travel back in time to, say, England in the early eighteenth century, we would be profoundly shocked by the cruelty and injustice we encountered, and the lack of compassion people showed to one another. But in the second half of the eighteenth century, a shift started to occur. A new surge of compassion began to develop, together with a new awareness of the importance of justice and the rights of other human beings and other groups. This led to a whole host of social and cultural changes over the following decades, including the emergence of movements for women's rights, animal rights, and the abolition of slavery, and the development of concepts of democracy and egalitarianism, more lenient forms of punishment, and so on.

This was also the time of the French Revolution and the American constitution, both of which were responses to the gross injustices of the feudal system, and based on the principle that all human beings were born equal and entitled to the same opportunities and rights. And culturally, this was when the Romantic movement flourished, when poets, artists, and musicians developed a new relationship to both their own inner world and to the natural world. The poets, painters, and musicians of the Romantic movement explored their inner beings in a way that artists had never done before and expressed a new ecstatic appreciation of the beauty and grandeur of nature. In evolutionary terms, this suggests an expansion of both subjective and perceptual awareness.

It was almost as if human beings were developing a new ability to transcend the separateness of the sleep state. It was as if their identity was expanding beyond their own mind-space, bringing an ability to enter the mind-space of others and so to empathise with them and feel compassion for their sufferings. There was a new sense of connection — to other human beings, other living beings, and to the natural world in general. That is, there was a marked intensification of intersubjective awareness.

At the same time, these changes suggest a different conceptual outlook, giving rise to new principles of justice and morality. There was a movement beyond egocentrism and self-centered morality toward a more universal perspective, beyond group identity toward a sense of common humanity. That is, there was an intensification of conceptual awareness.

This process continued throughout the nineteenth century, expressing itself through new egalitarian political philosophies such as socialism and the spread of democracy. The women's rights movement gained increasing influence — women became able to own property independently of their husbands, go to university, and enter professions. (New Zealand became the first country to allow women to vote in 1897, with many others following over the next two or three decades.) In literature, novelists such as Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky documented the lives of their society's poorest and most downtrodden people, illustrating the increased sense of empathy and compassion that was developing.

During the twentieth century, the transcendence of ego-separation expressed itself as an increasing sense of connection to the body and an increasing openness to sex. A deepening connection to nature — and a wider conceptual outlook — gave rise to the ecological and environmental movements. Similarly, an increasing sense of empathy toward animals led to the popularity of vegetarianism and veganism (in addition to more awareness of animal rights).

Over the last few decades this psychological change has also — arguably — manifested itself in a decline in conflict and warfare throughout the world as a whole. Most historians agree that the last seventy years (since the end of the Second World War) have been the most peaceful period in recorded history, both in terms of conflicts between different countries and conflicts *within* countries (such as revolutions and civil wars). At the same time, over the past few decades, an increasing movement away from materialism has manifested itself in the downshifting and downsizing movements, based on an awareness that the consumerist lifestyle is an obstacle to well-being, rather than the source of it.

And finally, perhaps the biggest cultural change of the last few decades — and the strongest cultural sign of the occurrence of a collective movement toward wakefulness — is the massive (and still growing) upsurge in interest in spiritual philosophies and the spread of spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga, and other techniques of self-development. This suggests an intensification of subjective awareness — an exploration of our inner being, a journey deeper into ourselves.

Everywhere there are signs of a movement beyond both ego-isolation and egocentrism, a growing sense of connection and empathy. There are signs of an expansion and intensification of awareness in all of the four areas I mentioned — perceptual, conceptual subjective and intersubjective. Particularly when coupled with the direct individual signs of awakening I described above, these signs could suggest that an evolutionary shift is occurring, and the human race is in the midst of a collective shift into a more expansive and higher-functioning state. Even if this process is a gradual and fitful one — and even if it may appear to be still in its nascent stages — we appear to be in the process of waking up.

A possible problem with this argument, I'm aware, is the idea that the intensification and expansion of awareness is linked to increasing physical complexity, in particular of the brain. How could a process of collective spiritual awakening in the human race be linked to increasing physical complexity? Am I saying that present-day human beings are more physically complex than our ancestors of, say, five hundred years ago, before this process of awakening began to occur?

Of course not. But the increasing complexity in this case may not lie in our brains or in us as individuals, but in our species collectively. Over the last three hundred years, since the beginning of the industrial revolution, the human race has become increasingly interconnected in more and more complex ways. Distances have collapsed, borders and boundaries have faded away, populations have increased and merged, and new technologies have constantly increased the communications and interactions between people. Teilhard de Chardin (1961) believed this increasing interconnection was so significant that it was creating a whole new domain of reality — the *noosphere*, as he called it, which would unite the whole human race into a single interthinking group. Peter Russell (1988) put forward a similar argument in his book *The Awakening Earth*, suggesting that our increasing interconnection was leading to the development of a 'global brain.'

Conscious evolution

However, at the same time as living of unprecedented spiritual awareness, unprecedented compassion and connection, we live in a time of unprecedented danger. The positive developments I've described above are opposed by extremely negative trends. Although many people have begun to move beyond materialism, many others cling to materialist ideals more firmly. Although there is greater general concern for the environment than ever before, together with a greater sense of connection to the natural world, the destruction of the earth's life-support systems is continuing apace, with governments and global corporations still seeing the Earth as little more than a supply of resources to be exploited.

Although many people are moving beyond group identity and conventional religion to an all-embracing spirituality, many others are clinging to their religious and national identity more firmly (as witnessed by the rise of nationalism and protectionism, and of Islamist terrorism).

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that some of these opposing traits seem to be getting stronger. When a new phase begins, the characteristics of the previous one often become stronger and more entrenched, in response to the threat of their demise. (The Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser [1970], who believed that human consciousness has evolved through different 'structures' over history, also suggested that the characteristics of each structure become more rigid and entrenched while it is in the process of being superseded.) Essentially, the cultural conflict taking place now is between the old values and traits associated with our sleep state and the new values and traits associated with wakefulness. The old traits are threatened and so seem to be asserting themselves more strongly. It's almost as if, within our collective psyche, the 'self-system' of our sleep state senses that it's being superseded and is trying to tighten its grip.

In relation to this, it's important to remember that our own individual psyche is connected to — and influences — our species as a whole. When we undergo awakening as individuals - or at least move towards awakening through

following spiritual practices and paths - we contribute to the awakening of our whole species. Our own leap is part of the leap of our whole species. We are part of the evolutionary process, and can influence it by practising *conscious evolution*, contributing to and intensifying the shift that is already underway. Our own self-evolution contributes to the process of evolution itself.

So, taking an optimistic vision of the human race's future, as more and more of us move toward wakefulness, this evolutionary change may gain more momentum. It may become easier for others to wake up. Temporary awakening experiences may become more common, and more and more people will feel an impulse to expand their awareness through following spiritual practices. Naturally awakened individuals may become more common too, and more and more people will experience sudden transformation triggered by intense psychological turmoil. At the same time, the cultural changes related to expanding awareness may grow more prevalent. The blueprint of the wakeful state may build up within our collective psyche until eventually it may replace sleep as the normal state that all human beings naturally develop in adulthood.

Then the human race will have made its evolutionary leap, and life will continue to progress towards greater levels of complexity and awareness.

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