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आ नौ भद्राः कर्तव्यो यन्तु विश्वतोऽर्ब्घासो अपर्रीतास उद्भिदः । (RgVeda) *Let noble thoughts come to us from every side*

Science-Spirituality Dialogue The Long-standing Question — What is Life?



A Discussion with
Prof. Arthur L. Caplan (left),
Drs. William F. and Virginia
Connolly Mitty Prof. of Bioethics at
NYU Langone Medical Center
and Dr. T. D. Singh (right);
Physical Organic Chemist,
Founding-Director of BI

Dr. T. D. Singh (henceforth TDS): In our tradition, in our epistemology, we consider there are two types of knowledge. One is called material or empirical knowledge; in sanskrit it is named aparā vidyā. The other one, parā vidyā, deals with spiritual knowledge, which includes awareness of what life is. I've always had the intuitive feeling that science and spirituality are complementary; if both are studied seriously with an open mind, I am convinced that the result of this dialogue can bring tremendous benefit, including to our ethics.

Arthur L. Caplan (Henceforth ALC): Yes, ... I see them that way: complementary, just like you do. I am sympathetic to that point of view because they are just addressing the different ways of knowing different dimensions. ...

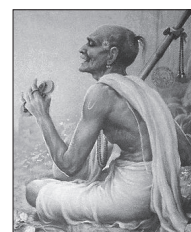
TDS: Yes, in India even at the present time the questions, like, "when does the human life begin" are also studied. Is it at the time of conception? These considerations are very interesting.

ALC: Here is an example of what you are talking about. If I go to my science friends and say, "do you think that science has anything to say about when human life began", many of them would say, "no, that is a spiritual question, or a legal question." ... Western science gets very nervous in this area because these are spiritual questions that its method cannot answer. One way things can be complementary is that there are certain facts that would still lead you to support or think about certain spiritual views, and that's my point. ...

INSIDE

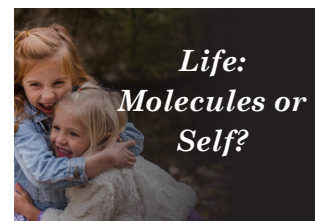


► *On the*
SHOULDERS of
— GIANTS —



Sri Bilvamangala Thakura

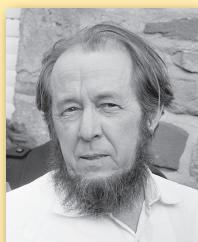
► **VEDANTA and**
— SCIENCE —



► **NEWS BIRDS**



Announcement
Crash Course on
Holistic Education



"Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest for worthy spiritual growth. Our entire earthly existence is but a transitional stage in the movement toward something higher, and we must not stumble and fall, nor must we linger fruitlessly on one rung of the ladder."

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn
Nobel Laureate in Literature

To Know about Life, Matter, and their Interactions, is called Knowledge

TDS: Everybody is eager to know what is life, but the perfect definition is not easy to find, and the question is still pending.

ALC: Oh, yes! (laugh) ...We think it is important to ask physicists questions of this type, "What is life for you? How would you know there is life on some other planet, if you get to Mars for example?" That's the real question, right? How to recognize life? Does it have to say hello, or to be already tabularized, or to replicate – like a crystal would you say? Wow, it could be a life there! It may even be possible to say that there are several definitions; it might be contextual, depending on what purposes you want to use the term life for. So, I don't know, I am not even going to say there is a single answer.

[Excerpt from the book, *Savijnanam* vol-9— *Scientific Exploration for a Spiritual Paradigm*, Bhaktivedanta Institute, Kolkata]

On the Shoulder of Giants

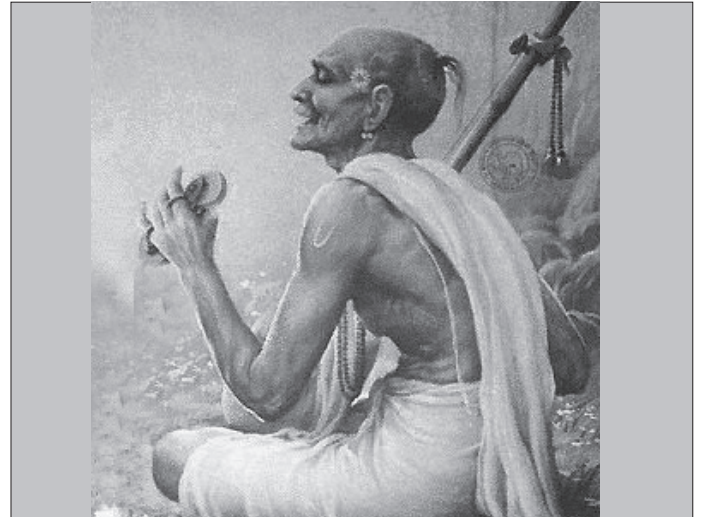
Sri Bilvamangala Thakura

(A *Vaiṣṇava* Saint-Poet)

Sri Bilvamangala Thakura is a renowned Vaishnava poet of the eleventh century. He is also known as Lilāśuka, a name given by his spiritual master – Sri Somagiri, in recognition of his flair for mellifluous renditions of the Supreme Lord's pastimes. Bilvamangala Thakura is best known for the poetic work called *Kṛṣṇa- Karnāmṛta* (an anthology of about 300 devotional poems). These writings are held in very high esteem by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, beginning with Sri Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. Bilvamangala Thakura is also recognized as the founder of the Dvarakadhisha temple in Gujarat.

Bilvamangala Thakura was born in a pious Brahmin family in South India, on the eastern bank of the holy river Krishnaveni. He grew up in a sacred atmosphere of hearing and learning Vedic hymns. He soon became conversant with the teachings of Vedānta and became proficient in Sanskrit. Since the family was well placed, Bilvamangala lived a comfortable life, adhering strictly to the Vedic principles and observing celibacy. However, soon after his parents' demise, Bilvamangala gradually became neglectful of his religious duties and fell into bad company. Thus, he happened to meet a courtesan named Chintamani, living on the other side of the river bank. Bilvamangala yearned to live with the courtesan and exhausted all the parental wealth and assets in such dealings giving up his brahminical culture.

One year had elapsed since his father passed away. Bilvamangala performed the *shraddha* ceremony commemorating the death anniversary day of his deceased father. While it was recommended that he spend the night at a holy shrine, Bilvamangala could not refrain from his thoughts about meeting the courtesan. Despite adverse weather conditions of heavy rains and stormy winds, Bilvamangala managed to cross the river floating on a corpse and hurried to meet the courtesan. Chintamani was very shocked at Bilvamangala's madness and chided him for these delusions. Annoyed with his insanity, she remarked harshly, "Oh, you are so much attached with this flesh and bone of an insignificant woman like me. If only you had developed the same attachment for the transcendental beauty



Bilvamangala Thakura

of the Supreme, your life would have become glorious." By the will of providence, this attraction towards the courtesan, Chintamani turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Realizing the truth of her words, Bilvamangala immediately left the place. Renouncing everything, he set off to the holy land of Vrindavan, seeking spiritual enlightenment. On his way, Bilvamangala was again drawn towards a beautiful woman. Deeply repenting for such conduct, Bilvamangala pierced his eyes with sharp needle and blinded himself from the worldly sight forever. Upon reaching Vrindavan, he made a humble dwelling at Brahma-kunda. Living in seclusion, he was completely absorbed in chanting and singing the holy names of Lord Krishna.

Reciprocating to his devotion, Lord Krishna appeared before the blind renunciant, introducing Himself as a cowherd boy from the nearby village and offered him the help of supplying milk daily. In this manner, the Lord would personally come every day to hear the sweet singing of Bilvamangala Thakura. One day he was blessed with the divine vision to see the Supreme Personality of Godhead Sri Krishna standing before him. The Lord urged Bilvamangala to ask for a boon. With all humility, Bilvamangala prayed that his blindness to the external world should continue, while his vision and devotion of the Supreme Lord continue unceasingly. His divine love and devotion manifested in the form of exquisite poetic compositions such as *Sri Govinda Damodara stotram*, *Sri Kṛṣṇa Karnāmṛta*, *Balagopastuti*, and *Sri Choraṣṭakam*. Herein, he also composed verses of prayers expressing his heartfelt gratitude and respect to the courtesan Chintamani. Bilvamangala Thakura addressed her as his instructing spiritual guide (*śikṣā-guru*) whose words paved for spiritual enlightenment, which further enabled his meeting with the initiating spiritual master (*dikṣā-guru*), Sri Somagiri. These works are held in high esteem by all the spiritual preceptors of *bhakti-yoga*.

By dint of yogic power, Bilvamangala Thakura remained at Brahma-kunda for 700 years performing his devotional service of singing the glories and pastimes of Lord Krishna. His samadhi is situated at Gopinatha Bazaar in Vrindavan. Devotees often visit here to seek the blessings of this great personality.

The life of this great saint sets an example to humanity that irrespective of any situation or any background, one can perfect his life by engaging in the service of Supreme Absolute truth with all sincerity and determination.

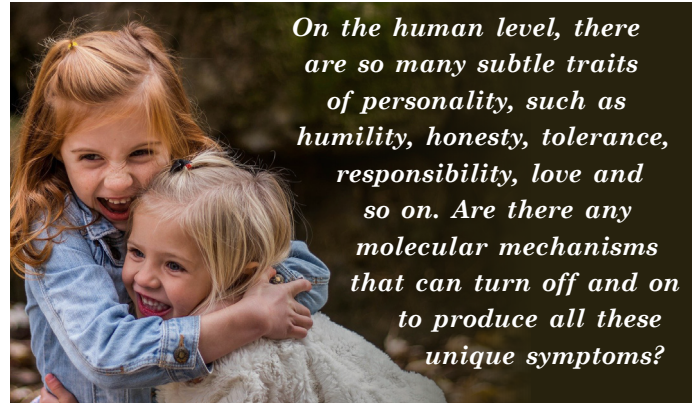
Life: Molecules or Self?

Scientists of many disciplines, such as chemistry, biology, biochemistry, biophysics, geology, geochemistry, and space science, have devoted considerable attention to the study of the origin of life. Virtually all these studies are based on the assumption that life is an emergent product of matter. Scientists in these areas proclaim that life originated from a random combination of molecules interacting under the influence of blind natural laws over a long span of time.

Molecules lack inherent purpose and meaning. Yet we give value to life. A reciprocal feeling of love and care exists among people and among other living entities. Parents think about their children; a nation thinks about the welfare of its subjects. Great sages think about the welfare of all living entities—starting from an ant up to man. There can be no value without purpose and meaning. However, the doctrine of the chemical nature of life reduces life to complete meaninglessness. Since this is contrary to the truth, it generates a sense of emptiness and unhappiness in one's subliminal mind. This is vividly illustrated in the case of Darwin, the father of the doctrine of evolution. He developed, in his own words, a "curious and lamentable loss of the higher aesthetic tastes." He expressed this loss in his autobiography: "I have said in one respect my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds ... gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare.... I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years ... I have almost lost my taste for pictures or music.... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive.... The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect ..."

It is ironic that Darwin should have expressed these thoughts. Why should man, if he is a product of molecular pushes and pulls, worry about happiness or unhappiness? Why should people busy their minds about moral and ethical values? Why should it be necessary to establish educational institutions? Why do problems like those of disease, drugs, alcoholism, violence, terrorism, crime, abortion, and euthanasia bother our minds?

Educated people have shown a renewed concern for professional ethics and human values. This is a direct challenge to the doctrine of the molecular character of life. A growing concern has developed over bioethical problems such as in vitro



On the human level, there are so many subtle traits of personality, such as humility, honesty, tolerance, responsibility, love and so on. Are there any molecular mechanisms that can turn off and on to produce all these unique symptoms?

fertilization of human eggs and their implantation, cloning, and so on. If humanity is a product of molecular pushes and pulls, there is no reason why people should be concerned about the moral and ethical values of life. But every sensible person knows that there is value in life. Life per se is full of meaning and full of purpose.

Roger Penrose, the world renowned mathematician from the University of Oxford, has profoundly expressed, "The issue of 'responsibility' raises deep philosophical questions concerning the ultimate causes of our behavior. ... Is the matter of 'responsibility' merely one of the convenience of terminology, or is there actually something else – a 'self' lying beyond all such influences – which exerts a control over our actions? The legal issue of 'responsibility' seems to imply that there is indeed, within each of us, some kind of an independent 'self' with its own responsibilities – and, by implications, rights – whose actions are not attributable to inheritance, environment, or chance. If it is other than a mere convenience of language that we speak as though there were such an independent 'self', then there must be an ingredient missing from our present-day physical understandings. The discovery of such an ingredient would surely profoundly alter our scientific outlook."

Thus it is clear that all these reductionistic approaches to understand and explain life are unable to convince serious thinkers. They seem to always lead to different deadends. Life is, therefore, beyond matter.

What makes a living cell perform all these seemingly purposeful chemical reactions? What are the chemical theories or principles that can explain such apparently conscious acts even at the molecular levels? What is the wave function that can explain such phenomena? One can cite innumerable examples. We encounter marvels of life at so many levels, and the theorists of evolution cannot even think of touching these points.

[Excerpt from the book, *Life, Matter And Their Interactions*, Bhaktivedanta Institute, Kolkata]

BOOK

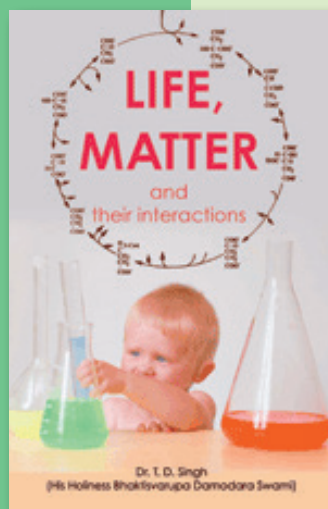
Online Store:

<https://store.binstitute.org/product/life-matter-and-their-interactions/>

Life, Matter And Their Interactions

Softbound: Rs. 125

Bhaktivedanta Institute, Kolkata



In this unique volume, the author closely re-examines the finer characteristics of the life and matter, and their interactions. He explains that the present-day physical laws seen quite insufficient to account for the many features of life. Drawing insights from the ancient Vedantic texts, he presents an alternative view of life beyond molecules. This volume may serve as a useful resource for all those interested in delving deeper into the understanding of life.

Announcement

Crash Course on Holistic Education

(with Spiritual Retreat to Puri, Orissa)



Eligibility:
10+2 Equivalent
Anyone Interest in Philosophy

Mode: Offline/Online
(Zoom/Youtube/FB)

Objectives:

- ~To know easy ways to achieve success
- ~To identify your skillset & innate abilities
- ~To enhance research abilities
- ~To balance personal and professional life
- ~To achieve all-round competence

Schedule & Duration:
02 Days (10hrs per day)

1st and 3rd Weekends of Every Month

Day 01: Saturday | Day 02: Sunday

9:00 am - 12:00 noon

2:00 pm - 9:00 pm

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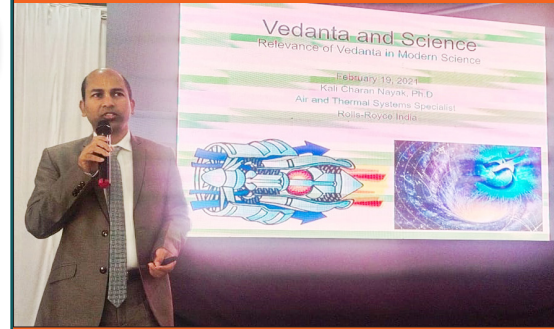
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Bhaktivedanta Institute
Kolkata

Seminar on

Relevance of Vedanta in the
Light of Modern Science

19th February 2021

at Sri Adichunchanagiri Kshetra,
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