

Introductory Study Paper 7; THE DOCTRINE OF REBIRTH

Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season.

Katha Upanishad

As a man, casting off worn-out garments, taketh new ones, so the dweller in the body, casting off worn-out bodies, entereth into others that are new.

Bhagavad Gita

The pains which I endured in one body were powers which I wielded in the next.

Edward Carpenter: The Secret of Time and Satan. *Towards Democracy*



It is Plato's doctrine, and none more defensible, that the soul before it entered the realm of Becoming existed in the universe of Being. Released [at death] from the region of time and space, it returns to its former abode ... into communion with itself. After a season of quiet "alone with the Alone," of assimilation of its earthly experiences and memories, refreshed and invigorated, it is seized again by the desire for further trials of its strength, further knowledge of the universe, the companionship of former friends, by the desire to keep in step and on the march with the moving world. There it seeks out and once more animates a body, the medium of communication with its fellow travellers, and sails forth in that vessel upon a new venture in the ocean of Becoming...

W. Macneile Dixon: *The Human Situation*

The teaching that human beings live many times on earth is one of the oldest doctrines known to man; it has been universally accepted and taught by great thinkers, religious leaders, writers and poets in all cultures. What it means, precisely, is set out in this explanatory statement:

The theory of reincarnation, in the esoteric philosophy, asserts the existence of a living and individualised Principle, which dwells in and informs the body of man, and which, on the death of the body, passes into another body, after a longer or shorter interval. Thus successive bodily lives are linked together like pearls strung upon a thread, the thread being the living Principle, the pearls upon it the separate human lives.

Dr Annie Besant, *Reincarnation*

REINCARNATION

An analysis of the word into its Latin elements shows the scope of the doctrine and its several aspects: **re** - (again, more than once); **in** - (into, suggesting entry); **cam** - (from caro, flesh); **ation** - (indicative of becoming or process). To complete the meaning of reincarnation, there must be added a term to denote the entity that is the subject of the process, as well as some indication of the purpose it is designed to accomplish.

The *individualised Principle* mentioned above is the Reincarnating Ego, the Higher Self in man, immortal in its essence and untouched by death. This Self is the Actor who plays his many parts on the stage of life. Each life on earth is an opportunity to play a different role, the personality being the temporary character assumed. Through the experience of each performance, the Actor learns to express some of his inexhaustible talents, described by one of the Adept Teachers in words of tremendous significance, 'the *deific* powers in man and the possibilities contained in nature'.

The purpose to be accomplished by reincarnation is expressed in the injunction, *Unfold, and become what you are*. That purpose may also be described as Self-realisation, salvation, the attainment of perfection, (a word which carries the meaning of completion, of a work finished).

Reincarnation is a doctrine of infinite opportunity, the means whereby mankind is assured of continuing progress towards its goal, 'the assimilation of the human soul with the Universal Soul' - a purpose not to be achieved in a single life. Says the *Katha Upanishad*:

If a man fails to attain Brahman before he casts off his body, he must again put on a body in the world of created things.

In modern language, it might be said that the man returns to another day work in order to deal with

unfinished business, an idea that brings out the intimate relationship between reincarnation and karma.

Another analogy is suggested by the educational system which offers a goal to be achieved over a period of time through a varied syllabus, with repeated opportunities for the development of the talents that lie hidden in the infant. Just as a day, or even a year, of schooling would be inadequate for this purpose, so a single life-time with its limited range of opportunities is inadequate to release the truly deific powers of the individual.

INSEPERABLE DOCTRINES

As every act, thought and desire is the effect of an antecedent cause, so in its turn it becomes the cause of a subsequent effect: 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' (*Gal. vi 7*). These verses from *The Light of Asia* summarise the twin doctrines:

The Books say well, my Brothers! each man's life

The outcome of his former living is;

The bygone wrongs bring forth sorrows and woes,

The bygone right breeds bliss,

That which ye sow ye reap. See yonder fields!

The sesamum was sesamum, the corn

Was corn. The Silence and the Darkness knew!

So is a man's fate born.

EVIDENCE

A considerable body of evidence has been assembled "both in recent Anthologies and in the published accounts of scientific investigation. The Anthologies show the antiquity and the universality of the doctrine of the plurality of lives and the intellectual stature of its exponents. The accumulation of case studies in which reincarnation offers the best explanation, especially the researches of Ian Stevenson, although not constituting proof, lend substantial support to the ancient teaching.

According to the esoteric philosophy, the vehicles of consciousness are normally newly formed for the new incarnation. The absence of memory is explained thus:

Since those principles which we call physical ... are disintegrated after death with their constituent elements, *memory* along with its brain, this vanished memory of a vanished personality can neither remember nor record anything in the subsequent reincarnation of the EGO. Reincarnation means that this Ego will be furnished with a *new* body, a *new* brain, and a *new* memory.

The Key to Theosophy

The Ego alone is permanent throughout the cycle of lives; it follows that knowledge of past incarnations is attainable by putting oneself en rapport with that Ego. So it is that, among the powers of the Self (the *siddhis*), whether developed naturally or by special discipline, is the ability to recall past lives. This is mentioned in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali (Book III verse 18). Similarly in the story of the Buddha we are told how, as Enlightenment came to him, he saw 'the line of all his lives in all the worlds.' For the Adept, therefore, in whom this power is awakened, reincarnation is not a matter of belief but of knowledge.

If it is asked: can anyone follow in detail the chain of causation by which past, present and future lives are linked together? the answer is clearly: yes, **when the conditions are fulfilled**. Those who, after many incarnations dedicated to the practical pursuit of the higher knowledge, have developed the requisite faculties, have been able thereby to study directly "the mysteries of being, of life, death and rebirth, and all have taught in their turn some of the facts so learned."

ANALOGY

The sequence of births and deaths is frequently, and appropriately, compared with the succession of days of activity and nights of rest, as also with the recurring cycle of the seasons. Indeed, whatever support may be contributed by other kinds of evidence, the truth of reincarnation rests rather on its conformity to the law of analogy, 'the surest guide to the comprehension of the occult teaching'. All things, all beings, pass through the sequence of birth, growth, decay and death, then entering again on a new phase of the spiral pilgrimage.

From Gods to men, from worlds to atoms, from a star to a rush-light ... the world of Form and

Existence is an immense chain whose links are all connected. The law of Analogy is the first key to the world-problem...

The Secret Doctrine

The cyclic nature of the evolutionary process on the vast scale of the Kosmos as on the scale of human life, its inherent purpose as the unfolding of potentialities, the 'indivisible divine order, which embraces man and nature alike', and of which reincarnation is but one instance within the context of human life - all this is comprehensively expressed in this passage by a modern writer:

According to esoteric philosophy, just as universes are outbreathed and inbreathed, we too undergo a cycle of forthgoing and return in the form of a long series of rebirths and reincarnations interspersed with periods of gestation. Our being pulses with the ongoing process of the Great Breath. H.P.B. refers to this as the 'cycle of necessity ... the obligatory pilgrimage for every soul ... through the cycles of incarnation in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic law'. In the theosophical view, death is not an end but only a necessary phase in the greater cycle of life. Death is seen as merely a quiescent interval in which the subjective pole predominates for a time between physical embodiments. After each of these periods, the outgoing active pole of objectivity overwhelms the subjective phase once again as the pilgrim soul embarks on a new physical adventure. Even as a tree takes on new life each spring, we undergo an endless series of new beginnings.

We follow nature's spiral pattern as we continue to unfold and grow. through the ups and downs of many lifetimes. We are one with that far-reaching pattern of cyclicity, which provides us with the means for never-ending growth and unfoldment. The metaphysical principles that inhere in the Transcendent One are reflected in us, as throughout cosmos at every level.

Shirley Nicholson, Ancient Wisdom-Modern Insight

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The literature of Reincarnation is very extensive - and still growing! The Key to Theosophy, which was published in 1889, quotes a passage from E. D. Walker's *Reincarnation: A Study of Forgotten Truth*, an early anthology which includes a substantial bibliography on Reincarnation. General text books of Theosophy will include chapters on Reincarnation and Karma.

Anthologies

The Ring of Return (1927), compiled by Eva Martin.

Reincarnation in World Thought (1967), compiled by Joseph Head and Sylvia Cranston

Reincarnation: the Phoenix Fire Mystery (1977), compiled by Joseph Head and Sylvia Cranston

Research Studies

Ian Stevenson: *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1974),

Cases of the Reincarnation Type (3 vols, 1975-80), Xenoglossy (1974);

Francis Story: *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience*

Recent titles

Prof. John Algeo: *Reincarnation Explored* (1987)

Geddes MacGregor: *Reincarnation in Christianity* (1978)

Edward Ryall: *Second Time Round* (1974)