

REBIRTH AND ITS CRITICS

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From time immemorial, man has always found it difficult to believe that his life comes to an end with the dissolution of the physical body. 'Do we live on after death?' This question has always been the subject of human speculation, because it links up with every fundamental problem of man's being and purpose on this earth.

Although there are supporters as well as critics of this doctrine of rebirth, there is no doubt that all religions, from the earliest times, have been unanimous in affirming that life continues beyond the grave, but there is a wide range of differences on the question of what form the survival takes.

In the West, studies in spiritualism have found evidences to prove that survival is a fact. In the past, many things were considered figments of the imagination. Today, on account of the work carried out by the Society for Psychical Research in England, the Parapsychology Foundation of America and similar organisations in several European countries, a great mass of evidences have shown that there are forces at work in the cosmos which lie beyond the range of our present knowledge. Such phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance and psychometry have been acknowledged as fact; what is open to conjecture is what causes them.

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Ed.

Buddhists not only believe in survival after death but maintain that all beings are caught in a cycle of births and deaths called Samsara, which beginning is inconceivable. Living beings, apart from humans, include animals as well as those beings in other planes of existence.

The Buddhist concept of rebirth is closely associated with its doctrine of Karma, the law of cause and effect. Each man's life and his life span are

determined by his own past actions, good and bad, in this life and in previous lives.

Three kinds of Evidence

The modern case of the Buddhist concept of rebirth rests primarily on three items of circumstantial evidence. They are spontaneous evidence, clairvoyance and age-regression.

Spontaneous evidence is a historical study of people, mostly children, who claim to recall their alleged previous lives. Details of information regarding their former lives, not known to them through any published account or other ordinary means, are indicated. After careful verification, many of these items of information have been confirmed. Outstanding medical scientists have been involved in these studies and they include Prof. Ian Stevenson, former head of the Department of Neurology and Psychiatry of the University of Virginia in the U.S.A. and Dr. Jamuna Prasad, a former director of the Bureau of Psychology in Allahabad, India.

Certain scientific principles are followed in these studies, such as the exclusion of persons who recall previous lives but have evidence of mediumistic ability; preparation of a written record of information prior to commencement of verification; verification to be undertaken by independent persons; items recalled to be highly specific; the facts remembered should not be written or printed in any one book; and the recollection should not be of the previous lives of leading personalities, whose biographies are well-known.

After verification and study of over 2,400 reincarnation cases, Prof. Stevenson concluded in 1986 that the 'doctrine of rebirth or reincarnation is the most plausible hypothesis by which these verified cases could be explained'. Dr. Prasad pointed out that many explanations are offered for the spontaneous recall of previous lives but there are a few unique cases where no explanation appears to be plausible other than the phenomenon of rebirth.

Clairvoyants, who have the abnormal faculty to perceive things not apparent to normal human beings, also provide evidence of rebirth. The best known is Edgar Cayce, who successfully diagnosed illnesses even without seeing patients by his remarkable clairvoyant powers. Moreover, he provides accounts of the previous lives of some of them. Several of these accounts were found to be historically true after investigation.

What is most significant in these life readings of Cayce for the Buddhist concept of rebirth is that he took back individuals 1,000 to 50,000 years, to the time of the Atlantis continent. This is in accordance with the Buddhist concept of *samsara*, the cycle of births and deaths, over an inconceivable period of time.

Another important feature in his life readings relevant to Buddhism is his reference to *karma*. Not only did he use the word *karma* but attributed the afflictions of some of his patients to bad *karma* of previous lives.

One of the most persuasive arguments in favour of rebirth is based on age-regression, where under hypnosis a subject is able to recall or to re-live past experiences, both in this life as well as in previous lives. Information given in several case studies under age-regression of incidents in previous births was found to be true after investigation.

The following study examines critically several arguments adduced against the Buddhist concept of rebirth by its critics.

Population

A popular criticism against the concept of rebirth is that it cannot account for the continuous increase of population, both human and animal. It is true that the human population in the world has been expanding continuously over the last several centuries and although no surveys can be conducted in respect of animals it appears that there has been a continuous increase in animal populations.

This argument would be valid if the concept of rebirth is confined only to humans and animals. The Buddhist view of rebirth and *samsara* cover three other broad planes of existence, namely heavenly abodes, discarnate spirits and lower realms. Moreover, according to the Buddha, apart from the world that we know there are thousands of world systems. Consequently, the Buddhist theory of rebirth is not invalidated by this argument.

In this connection, it should also be mentioned that although the human population is on the increase, several developed countries are actually experiencing a decline in population. The Governments of these countries are most concerned about this trend and corrective action in the form of incentives to encourage larger families have been offered but this has not

been that successful. In some developed countries, it is only the immigration factor that has enabled the maintenance of population at present levels without causing a decrease. Thus, the present trend in the world towards increasing population could be reversed with economic development and progress.

Unscientific

An important objection to the concept of rebirth is that it is unscientific. The argument is based on the relationship between the brain and the mind. The human brain is a very remarkable organ, which has still been only superficially explored, despite substantial research, due to obviously practical difficulties and its own extra-ordinary complexities.

So in modern science and psychology there are several theories regarding the mind-brain relationship. Broadly, there are two theories, namely, the identity hypothesis and the dualist theory. The former maintains that the mind and the brain are identical. An extreme form of this theory, called central state materialism, maintains that the mind is a function of the brain and the central nervous system.

A less extreme view but still monistic, is that the mind and the brain are two aspects of the same reality and consequently they cease to function with death.

On the other hand, the dualist theory argues that the mind and the brain are different entities. A modern form of this view is the instrumentalist theory where the brain functions as an instrument of the mind but being itself affected by it.

Prof. Sir John Eccles, considered to be one of the most eminent neurologists, who has specialised in the operation of the brain, has stated that it is a kind of machine operated by a 'ghost' where the word 'ghost' defines any kind of agent that defies detection by apparatus used to detect physical agents.

This suggests that the instrumentalist theory cannot be excluded in the light of modern findings. In this connection, it should be noted that many diseases not only have psychological origins, with or without a discernible organic condition but are curable by purely psychological means. Moreover, physical pains with an organic basis can be relieved or removed by drugs or by suggestions under hypnosis.

Furthermore, all mental activities cannot be related to the brain. There are various forms of extra-sensory perception where the physical brain is unable to account for them. So is the existence of telepathy which proves that mental communication can move through space and even time with no physical link.

Thus with a number of theories regarding the mind-brain connection and no firm conclusions and the limited available knowledge regarding the operation of the brain, this argument lacks adequate strength to vitiate the concept of rebirth.

Life from Non-Living Matter

It is also argued that if science, with its substantial progress in recent times, succeeds in generating life from non-living matter, it would damage the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. Such an achievement will make no difference to rebirth and the associated law of Karma.

The Karmic causal current could re-manifest itself through vital elements brought together artificially in the same way as it does through the natural biological process.

The artificial production of living organisms may seriously affect the theory of divine creation but will not in any way vitiate the Buddhist explanation of life, particularly the modern scientific method of producing test tube babies. Whether a being is born in a test tube, or in a mother's womb or in any other way, still it is the result of the karmic force of the being who is born.

Objections to Spontaneous Evidence

A criticism that is often raised against spontaneous evidence is that recollection of previous lives is largely or almost entirely confined to children. It is argued that if there are previous lives why is it that all people or all children cannot recall previous births. One explanation is that all people do not have the same capacity. Thus child prodigies such as Beethoven gave concerts and Mozart composed music when they were only seven years old. Similarly John Stuart Mill wrote *the History of Rome* at the age of six. In fact, the special aptitude of certain children to

acquire particular skills with remarkable *alacrity* strongly suggests remembering rather than learning.

Actually, all people do not have even the normal human faculties, with some beings denied sight or voice even from birth. Thus, it is not necessary that all children or all people should be able to recall previous lives to establish the validity of rebirth.

On the other hand, it is argued by the proponents of rebirth that one good case of spontaneous recollection of a previous life, with substantial accuracy and reasonable acceptability, would be sufficient to establish the theory of rebirth.

A further objection to the concept of rebirth related to this argument is why we should accept its validity when most people cannot remember their experiences in previous lives. This is a poor argument since people accept many experiences which they do not remember. One cannot remember one's birth or early infancy but accepts that one was born and led a life as an infant. Similarly, although most people have not been to the North and South poles they accept their existence based on other acceptable evidence.

The acceptance of spontaneous evidence is further questioned on the ground that the recall of past lives could be deliberate fabrications, where collected information is fed to unsuspecting children, who are made to repeat such information on being asked by any one. The effective coaching of a child with a prepared story of a past life is most unlikely as a practical proposition. Children are easily liable to falter under skillful cross-examination by trained scientific investigators such as Prof. Ian Stevenson and Dr. Jamuna Prasad.

Moreover, V. F. Gunaratana for instance has pointed out in his long essay, on 'Rebirth Explained', that to give a fabrication the appearance of truth, the perpetrator of this fraud must first acquaint himself with numerous details of the life of a person who has actually died elsewhere. This search will have to cover a wide area of events and circumstances connected with the activities of the dead person.

If the place of death of this person is in a far off country the task of collecting these numerous details becomes difficult in the extreme, if not almost impossible. Thereafter, this vast fund of information has to be transferred to the child-mind without confusing it and what is more

difficult, to see to it that these details are retained in the child-mind in their proper sequence.

He adds that if the parents of the child are responsible for fraud of this nature, many others such as relatives, neighbours, associates and servants would have to support the fraud. Moreover, the fabricators of the story cannot possibly anticipate all the questions that would be raised under a wide ranging cross examination.

In this connection, it should be noted that eminent personalities, such as Prof. Ian Stevenson, have been associated in the verification of some of the rebirth stories right from the beginning, adopting principles mentioned earlier in this essay.

It is also argued that these rebirth stories are fabrications of parents for publicity and other gains. On the other hand, Prof. Stevenson states that in many cases children continued to talk of previous births despite threats by parents for reasons of religious beliefs or out of fear that children with ability to recall previous lives are doomed to be short lived.

There is another theory that the child's belief in a previous life is the product of his fantasy. However such an explanation is unacceptable if the story turns out to be historically true and does not appear to have been derived from any source in this life.

Recall of Animal and Spirit Life

A criticism of considerable substance is that no one has been able to recall previous lives in the animal kingdom spontaneously either through clairvoyance or age-regression. All recollections have been mainly confined to previous lives in the human plane. It is claimed that under the Buddhist concept of *Samsara* all people would also have lived as animals but none could recall experiences in that world.

A probable answer to this criticism is that the emotions and feelings of animals may be totally different from those of human beings and consequently it may not be possible to recall such lives.

In 'Rebirth as Experience and Doctrine', published posthumously in 1975, its author Francis Story, reports an interesting case where the wife of a Government Officer in Burma has been able to recall in her childhood several important facts of her previous human life as well as

describe her subsequent life in the world of spirits. She has been saving small amounts of money to ordain her eldest son as a bhikkhu; this money she kept buried to hide it from her husband who was a confirmed gambler. However, she was taken ill and in a short period passed away but was reborn immediately in the world of spirits.

As a spirit she was able to watch her own funeral but could not communicate with her relatives about the hidden money. She found that her relatives could neither see nor hear her. She remembered only a short period as a discarnate spirit. When she was about two years old in her present life and could form connected sentences she told the story of her previous life in the human plane and identified her former husband and other relatives as well as described her life as a spirit. Thus there are spontaneous recollections of previous lives other than in the human plane.

However, it must be said that Francis Story does not appear to have followed the scientific principles adopted by Prof. Ian Stevenson. Story came to know of this case only several decades after the event. Yet, as he was closely associated with Prof. Stevenson in his studies of rebirth it would be presumed that he would have adopted a critical approach to what was said to have been recalled by the good lady in her childhood regarding her previous births as a human and as a discarnate spirit.

It is also observed that many children have a deep interest and affection for a particular animal in their childhood. This attention passes away with time but it may be due to a previous animal life.

Acceptability of Age-Regression

The acceptability of age-regression as evidence of rebirth has been challenged for several reasons. It is said that the recall of previous lives under hypnosis is due to spirit possession and not because of an actual earlier life. This objection is also leveled against spontaneous evidence. In spirit possession, however, the discarnate spirit usually claims to be a separate personality acting through the medium of a living person. On the other hand, hypnotised subjects describe their own previous births. In fact, some subjects under hypnosis have referred to the same previous life in several separate sittings.

It is also argued by most traditional psychologists that the recall of previous births is actually dramatization and role-playing based on information gathered in this life. It is considered an illusion of memory

where what the hypnotized person has heard or read in childhood or thereafter and forgotten is revealed under age-regression but not the manner in which such information has been learnt.

In most cases, however, where previous births are recalled under age-regression, there is clear evidence that the subject has had no knowledge whatsoever of the life that is recalled. There is the famous case of Bridey Murphy, where an American woman Mrs. Virginia Tighe, was hypnotised on six occasions between November, 1952 and August, 1953, and recalled a previous life as Bridey Murphy in Ireland.

Ten facts of her previous life described by Mrs. Tighe under hypnosis were at that time not in accordance with known facts. One was that her husband had taught law at Queen's University in Belfast, Ireland, sometime after 1847. So-called expert opinion at that time maintained that there was no Queen's College until 1949 and no Queen's University until 1908.

However further investigations revealed documentary evidence that a Queen's College in Belfast for studies including law was established by Queen Victoria on 19th December, 1845 and the Queen's University of Ireland was founded by her on 15th August, 1850.

At the time Bridey Murphy's case received world publicity in the early 1950's, opponents of reincarnation attempted through magazine and newspaper articles to characterize it as a hoax or as a figment of the hypnotist's or of the subject's imagination. It was also claimed that many of the details of this case were either erroneous or a contradiction of known historical data.

However a major American newspaper sent an experienced reporter to Ireland to verify the information and background indicated by Mrs. Tighe of her former life in that country. The investigation revealed, that much of the information given by her was basically correct while the claims of the sceptics were not substantiated.

The conclusion of Prof. C. J. Ducasse, former Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Brown University and past President of the American Philosophical Association, after a thorough study of the Bridey Murphy case, was that 'neither the articles in magazines or newspapers.....nor the comments ofpsychiatrists hostile to the reincarnation hypothesis, have succeeded in disproving or even establishing a strong case against the possibility that many of the

statements of the Bridey Murphy personality are genuine memories of an earlier life of the subject over a century ago in Ireland.'

There is also the case of Mrs. Anne Baker quoted by Dr. Jonathan Rodney in 'Explorations of a Hypnotist' published in 1955. A Lancashire housewife, Mrs. Baker, who has never studied French or been to France and whose education was very ordinary, spoke perfect French under hypnosis, referred to the death of Marie Antoniette as if it had just happened, gave her name as Marielle Pacasse and spoke of a street named Rue de St. Pierre near the Notre Dame Cathedral.

Subsequent investigation indicated that the name Marielle is rare now but was common at the time of the French Revolution and although there is no such street at present, there was in fact a street of that name in that vicinity at the time. It is most unlikely that her competence of the French language and the knowledge of the street were acquired in this life.

In more recent times, around 1979, an experienced psychologist, Dr. Helen Wambach, Ph. D., in her book, 'Reliving Past Lives', records the result of her investigations into the past lives of 1000 people. Hypnotising her subjects in groups, she took them back to differing lifetimes from about 200 B.C. right up to the present century and found them living lives in almost all parts of the world, both as men and women at different times.

Most of these lives were very ordinary and the numbers of people reporting previous lives in the lower, middle and upper classes accurately reflected the known historically estimated proportions of each class for the period.

It is significant that what was recalled under hypnosis in the studies conducted by Dr. Helen Wambach were not inconsistent with what the historians and the archaeologists know to be the facts. One woman described a type of money which has not been discovered by the archaeologists until some years later.

Another hypothesis is that the subject hypnotised did not actually live a previous life but acquired information about events in that life by paranormal or extra sensory perception and dramatised such a past life. However, there is little evidence of such wide and penetrative powers of telepathic, clairvoyant or retrocognitive perception except perhaps in a few extraordinary persons. On the other hand are a large number of cases where previous births have been recalled under hypnosis. In fact, some

psychologists have conducted over a thousand case studies and it is difficult to presume that in all these cases the subjects had abnormal powers.

Thus, it is far more reasonable to accept the simple explanation of rebirth for the numerous previous lives recalled with substantial accuracy under age-regression than the explanations offered by the critics of rebirth.

Genetical Memory Derivation

Another explanation is that experiences recalled spontaneously or under age-regression are derived genetically from one's ancestors. However there is no independent scientific evidence of such hereditary derivations of specific memory experiences other than abilities and attitudes.

Moreover, this explanation requires an ancestral link between the two personalities. This is unlikely where the previous birth has been centuries earlier and in a distant country with a totally different culture and social background.

Only Edgar Cayce

A criticism of clairvoyance as a support for the concept of rebirth is that although there are several recognised clairvoyants, only Edgar Cayce has referred to previous births. However, his health and life readings are well documented. Those who were associated with him ensured that from the beginning his readings were stenographically recorded and well maintained. Even today, these readings are available.

The health readings refer to rare medical terms which only professionals in that field could have understood. Some patients who cannot obtain relief from western medicine still turn to Cayce for diagnosis and medication. They go with their symptoms to the Foundation to ascertain whether Cayce had diagnosed and prescribed for similar symptoms in his time. If so, they try his medication and there are several cases where this approach has been completely or partially successful.

Moreover, in his life readings Cayce spoke languages of which he had no knowledge in his normal life. He 'frequently lapsed into languages clearly recognizable-French, Italian, Spanish, German and others that were unrecognizable...Once he read for a man in Italy who had deputised

a friend here to sit in on the readings. The friend of Italian extraction, asked a question and the answer came back in fluent Italian'.

Logical Impossibility

Another argument against the Buddhist concept of rebirth is that it is a logical impossibility. In Buddhism, a living being, consisting of body and mind, is in a constant state of flux. It is continuously changing even from one moment to another, both physically and psychologically. Consequently it is questioned as to who is reborn? Is it the person who died or a different person? Buddhism maintains that the person reborn is neither the same person nor a different person. It is argued that this is a poor explanation.

On the other hand, a little reflection indicates that it is a very satisfactory explanation, especially when one considers the relationship between the child grown to be a man. One cannot say that the man is the same as the child nor that he is a totally different person. When examined in this way, this argument of logical impossibility does not appear to seriously affect the Buddhist theory of rebirth.

Transplanting of Human Organs

The transplanting of human organs which began in the 1960's, is also said to undermine the concept of rebirth. This line of criticism became popular in the late 1960's at the time that the well-known South African surgeon Christian Barnard, began the transplanting of hearts from dead people to those living with incurable diseased hearts. It was asked whether the personality of the patient that received the new heart is the same or whether it has changed to the personality of the person whose heart was transplanted.

According to Buddhism, one's personality rests on the ever-changing five aggregates, of which four are mental factors and only one is physical. So the predominating factor in one's personality is the mind though the physical body would influence personality to some extent. Thus, the mere transplanting of one or two vital organs from one to another cannot affect the personality of the receiver of such organs.

In this connection, it should be mentioned that usually persons with wholesome qualities such as goodwill, kindness, consideration and

compassion are referred to as people with good hearts. Actually, the function of the heart is to ensure the regular circulation of blood in the human system and it is not a key factor in one's personality. Thus when it is said that the heart of a person is good it really means that his heart is performing its function effectively. The wholesome qualities are more concerned with the mind and the purification of the mind.

A more significant development for the doctrine of rebirth would be the transplanting of the brain, which is perhaps the physical organ that is closest to the mind. Still, as pointed out earlier, the modern view appears to be that the brain is not the mind but most probably an instrument of the mind.

Thus, even the possible development of brain transplanting would not affect the Buddhist view of rebirth. Moreover, medical scientists are agreed that the transplanting of the brain cannot even be contemplated today since the brain is so closely connected with the nervous system and other organs of the body.

Thus the transplanting of vital organs does not affect the Buddhist concept of rebirth and further developments in this field are also unlikely to seriously affect the doctrine.

There is no conclusive evidence of proof of rebirth. However, there are several items of circumstantial evidence, which taken collectively, strongly support rebirth. On the other hand, the arguments against this doctrine lack strength and conviction. Thus, the case for the Buddhist concept of rebirth, despite criticism, remains unassailable.

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