

Reincarnation: Q & A

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Question: The reincarnation theory claims that we are given multiple lives for cumulative learning. However, as we don't remember our past lives, how do we learn anything from them?

Answer: The cumulative learning over multiple lives is the assimilation of essential life-lessons about how to act and how to live, not the recollection of specific life-experiences about what we did and when.

This focus on principles applies to all cumulative learning, as seen in the following examples of this-life learning:

- Handling boiling water: All of us are cautious when handling boiling water. Do we remember the specific time, place and circumstance when we learn this caution, possibly the first time when we put our hand in boiling water and burnt it? Unlikely, but that learning did happen due to some experience in a remote forgotten past. Though we have forgotten the details of that experience, we have assimilated its essential lesson: caution in handling boiling water.
- Reading: Every time we read, we utilize hundreds of grammatical rules and thousands of word meanings that we have learnt over many years. Most of us have forgotten the details of when and how we learnt those rules and meanings, but our assimilation of the essence of those learning-experiences is evident in our present ability to read. This focus on principles during cumulative learning is a blessing of nature that ensures our smooth and swift daily functioning. Just imagine how our brain would be cluttered and overloaded if, whenever we started reading, we were swamped by the innumerable specific memories related to each rule and meaning that we were using while reading!

This same mechanism of cumulative learning – assimilation of principles, obliviousness to details – applies to the life-lessons that we have learnt from our past lives. Nature spares us the neural overload that would paralyze us if, whenever we had to do a thing, we had to process all the innumerable specifics of its related past-life experiences. Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-gita (15.8) states that, just as what the wind carries from one flower to the next is subtle: the fragrance, what the soul carries from one life to another is subtle: the conceptions of life. These conceptions of life are the innate tendencies and natural inclinations that we were born with and that shape our habits of thought, perception and behavior. Thus, the cumulative learning of our past lives has made us the persons that we see in the mirror.

To summarize, just as the training in this life over many years leads to the subconscious learning of habits and abilities, the training over multiple lifetimes through numerous experiences leads to the subconscious learning of inclinations and tendencies.

In earlier sessions, we concluded that every living entity is a spirit soul, distinct from his body. The relationship between soul and body is similar to the relationship between a driver and his car. The car is a tool to accomplish a mission determined by the driver. The driver exists independent of the car, but the car without the driver is just an inert piece of metal.

This conclusion is the first understanding of spiritual life. And building from this we can examine reincarnation. Here we'll address some frequently asked questions about reincarnation.

Q: Can I be born again as another person?

A: That depends on what you mean by "I." The real "I" is the soul. He's the real person, and he never changes. The soul does change bodies, however, and because the soul identifies with these bodies, he becomes, in the material sense, a new person.

Q: How is it determined what my next life will be?

A: You determine it yourself by your own actions. This is clearly explained in Bhagavad-gītā (8.6):

Whatever state of being one remembers when he quits his body, O son of Kuntī, that state he will attain without fail.

What you remember at death results from the actions, thoughts, and desires of your entire lifetime. According to the Vedic literature there are 8,400,000 species of life, and you, the spirit soul, have to accept the body of a particular species according to the activities and desires of your present life.

Q: But I couldn't take an animal body!

A: Why not? Reincarnation is not limited to the human species. The difference between an animal and a human being is only the body. There is no difference between a soul in a human body and a soul in a dog's body.

According to Darwin, physical bodies evolved until they reached the human form. The Vedic literature, however, states that all forms of life have always existed, and that the soul is evolving, or migrating, from the lower forms of life up to the higher forms until it reaches the human form.

So the same soul. or the same person, who hundreds of thousands of years ago was living in the body of a reptile, fish, or bird, is now living in the body of a human being—you or me.

On the bodily platform there is very little difference between animals and human beings: The animal eats; we eat They sleep: we sleep. They mate; we mate. They defend: we defend.

If someone behaves like a dog or a pig, he can certainly take the body of such an animal in his next life.

Q: How exactly does the soul transmigrate from one body to another?

A: There are three levels of existence: the soul. the subtle body. and the gross body. The subtle body is inside the physical body like a hand within a glove. At the time of death, the soul and the subtle body (composed of mind. intelligence, and false ego) leave the gross body (composed of earth, water, fire. air. and ether, or space). The physical elements that had been temporarily assembled into a gross body then disassemble.

After leaving the body, the soul, carried by the subtle body, enters a particle of male semen by which he is placed within the womb of his next mother.

Q: So when does this new life actually begin? I specifically refer to the abortion controversy.

A: Since the soul didn't die in the first place, there is no question of "beginning." But in this case the Vedas explain clearly that the "new" life. or the development of the new physical covering of the soul. begins at the time of conception. It is impossible to kill the soul. but in the material world killing refers to the slaying of the material body. So abortion at any stage is certainly murder.

Q: Would I take my next birth in the same environment as the one I leave at death?

A: You can take a body on any planet.

Q: But there's no life on other planets!

A: That may be what you've been taught, but consider this: You can't live in the water, but a fish certainly can. You can't live in the earth, but a worm can. And you can't live in the air, but a bird can. To say that there is no life on other planets because we cannot live there is like saying there is no life in the water or in the earth because we cannot live there.

The Vedas explain that life exists everywhere. on all planets, in all universes. Whoever lives on a particular planet is obviously suited for the conditions there. Nature provides the appropriate body.

Q: So, how many times do I have to reincarnate?

A: That's up to you. You can reincarnate in an endless cycle—up and down in this material world—if you want to. But human life gives you a chance to stop that troublesome business.

Q: What happens when someone becomes an animal again?

A: The soul evolves gradually through higher and higher species until he reaches the human form. An animal is not responsible for its activities. It cannot degrade itself to a lower birth. In other words, if a tiger kills you, he does not get a reaction for this killing, because it is his nature.

But as soon as the soul reaches the human form of life, he becomes responsible for all his activities. In other words, if you kill that tiger needlessly, you will get the reaction for killing. So the human being can degrade himself through his actions, whereas the animal progresses automatically.

Q: But it seems unfair that the human being is held responsible for all his actions. Most people don't even know these universal laws that determine the reactions to their activities.

A: For this reason an enlightened or educated society has to know the laws of God. Complete knowledge is given to human society in the form of scripture. The Vedas are meant to guide the human being so that he does not violate the universal laws that govern us all.

Unfortunately, today human society is rejecting all spiritual knowledge and is priding itself on so-called advancement in science and technology. What kind of advancement is it that degrades people to animal existence in their next life?

In Vedic society the leaders had the responsibility to make sure that people were educated in spiritual science. But modern leaders don't even know that there is such a science. Therefore, the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement through the publication of Vedic literature, is stressing the spiritual education.

Q: But if people don't know the laws that determine their next life, isn't it wrong that they are affected anyway?

A: Ignorance is no excuse, just as, for example, when a child touches fire. The fire won't think, "Oh, this child doesn't know that I'm hot. I won't burn him." No, fire burns—regardless of whether or not you are aware of its burning power. Therefore the only way to avoid suffering is by spiritual education.

Q: Still, this whole system seems cruel to me. Besides, I don't see any sense in this endless cycle of reincarnation.

A: No, it is not cruel. Suffering is an impetus for the living entity to find a solution to his problems. The material world is a place of misery.

From the highest planet in the material world down to the lowest all are places of misery wherein repeated birth and death take place. But one who attains to My abode, O son of Kuntī, never takes birth again. (Bhagavad-gītā 8.16)

This verse explains that the material world is by nature not a pleasant place. Even if there is happiness, it is temporary: it will not last. And we cause our own suffering. Many people like to blame God for their suffering. But God wants us to return to the spiritual world, where there is no suffering.

This material world is not our home. Our situation is like that of a fish on the land. You can give the fish a TV, a Cadillac, a fancy house, but all the fish needs is the water. He doesn't care for all facilities on the land. So in the same way, temporary happiness in the material world will never satisfy us. Suffering provides the motivation to attain the goal of life—to go back to Godhead.

If someone is enjoying material happiness, generally he won't see any reason to turn to God. Unfortunately, he doesn't know that his enjoyment can't last. When the results of his pious activities are exhausted, suffering will come again, although he doesn't want it. Real enjoyment cannot be achieved through material senses. It can only be achieved in a spiritual way.

Q: How did we get into this cycle of reincarnation in the first place?

A: Originally all living entities are residents of the spiritual world. But they have a certain independence, and if they decide to try to enjoy without God, they are given the material world as a place to try this.

Q: But if God is all-powerful, couldn't He prevent them from doing this? Why does He let them go and suffer?

A: The natural relationship between Kṛṣṇa and the living entities is love. And love cannot be forced: it must be given voluntarily. So if Kṛṣṇa could force the living entities to love Him, the word love would have no meaning.

Or take another example: The parents love their child. But sometimes the child wants to touch the fire out of ignorance. If he persists despite good advice, the parents may let him touch the fire once. After that experience, the child will be convinced. The parents don't do this because they want to see their child suffer, but because sometimes it is the only way to learn.

Similarly, Kṛṣṇa is infallible, and the living entities are fallible. Therefore some souls choose this way of learning. For us it appears a long time to spend millions of births in the material world, but from the spiritual viewpoint, our stay here is just like a passing cloud.

Kṛṣṇa does not cast us down here to suffer eternally. There is no such thing as eternal damnation. On the contrary, there are always great devotees, prophets, and sons of God to guide us, and Kṛṣṇa Himself appears regularly to try to bring us back to Him.

Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice. O son of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion—at that time I manifest Myself. In order to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish the principles of religion. I advent Myself millennium after millennium. (Bhagavad-gītā 4.7-8)

Although Kṛṣṇa Himself is not always here. He leaves us the Vedic scriptures and other genuine scriptures to guide us. The Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (1.3.43) states:

This Bhāgavata Purāṇa is as brilliant as the sun, and it has arisen just after the departure of Lord Kṛṣṇa to His own abode, accompanied by religion, knowledge, etc. Persons who have lost their vision due to the dense darkness of ignorance in the age of Kali shall get light from this Purāṇa.

Q: Can you explain the end of this cycle of reincarnation in more detail?

A: The human body is the only form of life that enables us to end this cycle. Only in this form is the consciousness developed enough to understand the difference between matter and spirit. Animals cannot understand this. Their only business is eating, sleeping, mating, and defending. They cannot understand what the goal of life is.

But if the human being does not take advantage of this opportunity and simply engages himself in sophisticated ways of eating, sleeping, mating, and defending. then he is nothing more than a sophisticated animal. The only purpose of human life is to develop one's original God consciousness. break free from the cycle of birth and death, and go back home, back to Godhead.

The process to accomplish this is called bhakti-yoga, or devotional service, which entails acting in a spiritual way according to the injunctions of the Vedic scriptures and the bona fide spiritual master. By doing so, one is no longer bound by the laws of material nature, which force one to transmigrate in the material world.