

Reincarnation—Fact or Fantasy?

Without Vedic knowledge, apparent evidence

concerning past and future lives leaves us with an unsolvable—

and sometimes frightening—mystery.

Although for those who require ironclad scientific proof none of the accounts confirm reincarnation, the phenomenon of past-life regression is in large measure responsible for the growing popular belief in rebirth. Still, many questions remain: Are past lives, recalled under hypnosis, fact or fantasy? Can reincarnation be scientifically proven? If so, what is it that reincarnates? And if I do reincarnate, what will I be in my next life? Do I have any choice in the matter? Can I come back as an animal? Does reincarnation ever end? What happens then?

The Vedic Version in a Nutshell

The essence of the Vedic teachings on reincarnation is contained in the Bhagavad-gītā, India's unexcelled treatise on metaphysics. In the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, enlightens His friend and devotee Arjuna about the distinction between the material body and the spiritual soul:

For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain. . . . The soul can never be cut into pieces by any weapon, nor burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind. . . . It is said that the soul is invisible, inconceivable, and immutable. Knowing this, you should not grieve for the body. (Bg. 2.20, 23, 25)

Lord Kṛṣṇa also describes how the soul travels from one body to another:

The living entity in the material world carries his different conceptions of life from one body to another, as the air carries aromas. Thus he takes one kind of body and again quits it to take another. The living entity, thus taking another gross body, obtains a certain type of ear, eye, tongue, nose, and sense of touch, which are grouped about the mind. He thus enjoys a particular set of sense objects. (Bg. 15.8-9)

The conditioned soul is sheathed in two bodies. One is the gross body, made of earth, water, fire, air, and ether, and the other is the subtle body, composed of mind, intelligence, and false ego. The soul occupies the same subtle body throughout all the changes of gross bodies. Thus all his memories and conceptions from previous lives travel with him, stored within his mind, from one body to the next.

In strict accordance with nature's law of karma, the soul receives a gross body that exactly conforms to the subtle conceptions and desires stored in his mind. A hog, for example, is a conditioned soul who developed the mentality and desires of a hog and thus received from nature a hog's body, with suitable senses of sight, taste, smell, and so on, with which he could pursue his hoggish desires. The same holds true for a fly, a worm, a whale, and so forth. Thus, through the inexorable law of karma, nature rewards or punishes the conditioned soul, who must accept various gross bodies that, according to his previous activities, allow him to enjoy or force him to suffer.

Since time immemorial, philosophers have been baffled by the apparent injustice of nature's ways. Why is one race, nation, family, or individual singled out for suffering, while another is awarded abundant health, wealth, and good fortune? The law of karma wonderfully explains nature's seeming capriciousness. In this life, we are all reaping the individual or collective just deserts of our previous good or bad deeds. At the same time, we are creating a new stock of reactions to be meted out in the future. W. R. Alger, a Unitarian minister and author of *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life*, considers karma to be "marvelously adapted to explain the seeming chaos of moral inequality, injustice, and manifold evil presented in the world of human life. Once admit the theory to be true, and all difficulties in regard to moral justice vanish; . . . and the total experience of humanity becomes a magnificent picture of perfect poetic justice."

In the Bhagavad-gītā, Kṛṣṇa declares that the soul does not have to undergo repeated birth and death in the material world; he can escape and attain eternal life in the spiritual world, in the company of Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Unfortunately, many persons who believe in karma and reincarnation are unaware of the path of liberation. Some think the goal is to accrue good karma life after life, while others think the goal is to be liberated from the cycle of rebirth by merging into an amorphous ocean of spiritual consciousness, completely devoid of any personal features whatsoever. Both these proposals are denied in the Gītā. The ultimate goal, says Lord Kṛṣṇa, is to return to Him in the spiritual world. This is clearly His intent when He tells Arjuna,

After attaining Me, the great souls, who are yogis in devotion, never return to this temporary world, which is full of miseries, because they have attained the highest perfection. 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. . . . That which the Vedāntists describe as unmanifest and infallible, that which is known as the supreme destination, that place from which one, having attained it, never returns—that is My supreme abode. (Bg. 8.15, 16, 21)

If the conditioned soul uses his present body to purify his consciousness of material contamination, he becomes free of the distresses of birth, old age, disease, and death. He is then reinstated in his original spiritual body and relishes eternal blissful life in the association of Kṛṣṇa and all His devotees.

In the eleventh chapter of the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa explains that this perfection is attained only by those who execute the process of bhakti-yoga, the path of pure devotion to Him. In the ninth chapter He declares that bhakti-yoga leads to "direct perception of the self by realization." By direct perception Kṛṣṇa does not mean perception with our material senses, as He explains in the Gītā:

In the stage of perfection called trance, or samādhi, one's mind is completely restrained from material mental activities by practice of yoga. This perfection is characterized by one's ability to see the Self by the pure mind and to relish and rejoice in the Self. In that joyous state, one is situated in boundless transcendental happiness, realized through transcendental senses. (Bg. 6.20-21)

Such transcendental perception awakens only by the purifying process of bhakti. Our material senses are not the final authority on the transcendental platform. Nevertheless, because bhakti-yoga leads to predictable results every time—namely, liberation from karmic reactions and full self-realization—it is a perfect scientific process.

Dogmatism vs. Science

A discussion of reincarnation would be incomplete if we failed to address the opposing view, that of the empiricists, who hold that whatever cannot be perceived by at least one of the five senses cannot be proved to exist. Being materialists, empiricists look upon Vedic metaphysics as a nonsensical, wishful attempt for immortality. "Can you show us the soul?" they demand. "Can you give us scientific proof that the soul exists?" Since their demand for "scientific proof" has never been met to their satisfaction, empiricists have little sympathy for the lofty views of the Vedic transcendentalists.

We should bear in mind, however, that when empiricists call for scientific proof, they really mean empirical proof. The reason they say "scientific proof" is only because they assume that gross matter is all that exists and that empiricism is the only valid scientific method for investigating reality.

Neither of these assumptions is true. The Vedic literature repeatedly asserts that the soul is a nonmaterial substance. How, then, can materialists expect anyone to prove the existence of the soul by empirical methods? Furthermore, Kṛṣṇa describes the soul as acintya, inconceivable, and avyakta, invisible. Again, how can something inconceivable and invisible be presented for sensory inspection?

Materialists perennially insist that their empirical standards be applied by the transcendentalists. Such a proposal is patently absurd. Suppose we transcendentalists were to demand that the empiricists give us a complete description of the molecular composition of a nerve cell without employing any empirical procedures—just chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, be celibate, give up meat and intoxicants, and study philosophy with us. Such a demand would be taken as outlandish, and rightly so, because studying cell structure is a material science and thus requires an empirical methodology. Similarly, the process of self-realization, which results in direct perception of the soul, is a spiritual science and thus requires a spiritual methodology.

Still, although it is impossible to perceive the soul directly except by practicing bhakti-yoga and acquiring spiritual vision, it is possible to perceive the soul indirectly by inference, even before one perfects the process of bhakti. In fact, understanding the soul's existence by inference may give you the impetus you need to pursue self-realization to the point of full maturity.

In the thirteenth chapter of the Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna how the soul's existence is inferred:

O son of Bharata, as the sun alone illuminates all this universe, so does the living entity, one within the body, illuminate the entire body by consciousness. (Bg. 13.34)

In other words, the mere fact that a person is conscious implies that the soul is present in the body, even if we cannot see the soul directly, just as the presence of the sunlight implies that the sun is present in the sky, even when the sun isn't directly visible.

In the second chapter of the Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa gives another inferential argument for the soul and reincarnation:

As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change. (Bg. 2.13)

Everyone has experienced the subtle and continuous changes of body "from boyhood to youth to old age," but most people are unaware of just how literal the change of body is. In *The Human Brain*, John Pfeiffer states, "Your body does not contain a

single one of the molecules it contained seven years ago." This means that if you are thirty years old, you have completely changed your body roughly four times. But throughout these changes of body, you subjectively perceive that your individual identity is not changing. You wouldn't doubt for a moment, for example, that the "I" who demanded a cookie from Mommy at age five is the same "I" who is now reading this article, regardless of how many bodies you may have changed in the interim. The logical inference is that the "I," or the self, is different from all these changing bodies. That unchanging self is the spirit soul.

At this point the empiricists will shake their heads disapprovingly, or smile tolerantly, charmed to see the lengths to which transcendentalists will go to uphold their fantasies, for empiricists supposedly reject inference as a valid argument. But the inherent flaw in their so-called scientific neutrality has been aptly pointed out by Professor J. Paul Williams of Mt. Holyoke College in his essay "Belief in a Future Life":

The fact that we have no direct experience of souls which do not exist apart from the bodies . . . need not force us to the conclusion that [the soul] does not exist. The typical reaction of the materialists to this kind of reasoning is an appeal to stick to the known facts. But the materialistic scientist certainly does not limit himself to immediately experienced data. The limits of our experience are so narrow that if we did not permit our thinking to go beyond them, human thought would be puny indeed. Whoever experienced an atom or an electron? The whole conception of the atomic structure is an inference; it is believed because it is consistent with the way in which elements combine, because it explains why under certain conditions peculiar markings appear on photographic plates. Yet we do not accuse the physicist of irrationality when he says that solid matter, such as rock, is really composed of tiny solar systems in which electrons revolve at incredible speeds around protons. Let no one think he has reached perfection in his habits of thought if he accepts inferential logic in physics but rejects it in theology.

In other words, transcendentalists are just as entitled to present inferred evidence as empiricists. It is certainly inconceivable that a swirling cloud of atomic particles can appear as a solid rock, or that the electron can act sometimes as a particle and sometimes as a wave. But these are gospel truths to empirical scientists. Therefore, to argue from inference for the existence of the soul and for its inconceivable qualities is not as farfetched as some adamant materialists would have us think.

As we have seen, reality can be viewed from different perspectives. A transcendentalist has to apply the methodology of the physicist to understand subatomic reality. By the same token, the physicist has to apply the methodology of the transcendentalist to understand the soul. As in any other science, those who abide by the hypothesis and conduct the experiment carefully will get the predicted result. As Lord Kṛṣṇa assures us,

The foolish cannot understand how a living entity can quit his body, nor can they understand what sort of body he enjoys under the spell of the modes of nature. But one whose eyes are trained in knowledge can see all this. (Bg. 15.10)

Technological success has awarded the empiricists a great deal of prestige. But science is not synonymous with empiricism. Science means the systematic execution of procedures that yield observable and predictable results. Empirical methods, therefore, are not the only ones that qualify as scientific. Such an assumption is pure dogma.

In truth, empiricism limits us to an understanding of only those features of reality that can be described physically, chemically, or mathematically. Consciousness, the most essential part of reality (and the inseparable quality of the soul), is left out by this approach. If empiricism cannot account for such a basic feature of reality as consciousness, how can we possibly rely on it to prove the existence of the soul, which underlies consciousness? And what to speak of other subtle natural phenomena, such as the principles of karma and reincarnation?

The Bhagavad-gītā, unlike empirical science, presents a model of reality that takes all phenomena into account. It therefore deserves full consideration. For those who reject the teachings of the Gītā out-of-hand, Dr. Michael Sabom of Emory University, in his book *Recollections of Death*, reminds us of the true meaning of "scientific method":

To say that an idea has not been accepted in a scientific sense does not mean that such an idea should not at least be scientifically considered as a possible explanation for unexplained phenomena. For it is the premise of objective neutrality which has made scientific method such as a useful investigative process: all available hypothesis must be carefully examined before a conclusion can be reached.

Thus, whether one wants to prove or disprove reincarnation or the existence of the soul, an in-depth study of the Bhagavad-gītā is indispensable, for the Gītā is "an available hypothesis" with "an explanation for unexplained phenomena" that "must be carefully examined before a conclusion can be reached."

For anyone interested in past or future lives, the Gītā will reveal how we've come to our present situation and, more importantly, how we can act to break free of the cycle of reincarnation forever. Knowledge of our past lives may lead to some vain reminiscences—if we do not unearth some horrifying memories like Jan's—but the Bhagavad-gītā's scientific teachings for attaining the liberated status are far more in our self-interest.