

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 54

Rebirth

John Andrew Storey



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

Rebirth

by

John Andrew Storey

**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

Bodhi Leaves No. 54

BPS Online Edition © (2010)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

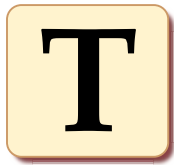
For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are made to the journals *The Middle Way* and *Psychical Studies*, in which extracts from this work have appeared, and to Mrs. Mary Peto who has also printed part of this work for private distribution.

Rebirth

Introduction



here has been a prevailing tendency in science to take a wholly materialistic view of life and the universe. This has perhaps been a natural reaction against the superstitions of past ages which have often masqueraded as religious truth. Happily this extreme reaction is now less apparent than it was, and there now seems to be among scientists a more open-minded approach to life and its phenomena. Parapsychological phenomena, which only a decade ago were not considered to be worthy of serious attention, are now being studied with considerable interest. We hear that Russia has a programme to develop telepathy as a tool in its space work. Similar research is said to be taking place in America, as are also investigations into such phenomena as ESP (extra-sensory-perception), pre-cognition and clairvoyance. One of the greatest scientists of our age, Nobel Laureate Erwin Schrodinger, has said that the problem of "mind" is "the most important problem with which science has yet to deal." Sir John Eccles—perhaps the

world's most eminent neurophysiologist—has shown how much recent trends in science have changed, for he now sees the brain as a detector and amplifier of mental influences. He assures us the brain is “just such a machine as a ghost or mind could operate.”

In this new climate it is not surprising that there is a growing interest in rebirth—though in the West the phenomenon is usually called reincarnation. The Canadian-born psychiatrist, Dr. Ian Stevenson—now living and working in America—has been one of the foremost workers in this field, and the evidence he has made available is very impressive.

The aim of this essay is to review the evidence and examine the arguments for rebirth in an attempt to make a modest contribution to our understanding of the doctrine. We shall see first that the doctrine is very ancient and very widespread. We shall see that it reflects the natural order which from our observations we know to be cyclical. We shall have a brief look at the evidence from the claimed memories of former lives. We shall try to determine the nature of that which is reborn. And finally we shall examine one of the ways by which the process of rebirth may take place. In this way I hope to make our survey comprehensive so that our evaluation can be truly scientific.

John Andrew Storey

Ancient And Universal

The doctrine of rebirth is very ancient, and also very widespread. It appears in various writings in the sixth century B.C. though the doctrine itself probably goes back well beyond that. It is a belief accepted by millions of people, and contrary to popular opinion is not confined to Buddhism and Hinduism. Nor is it confined to the East, for it has many champions in the Western world. A recently published book entitled "Reincarnation in World Thought" (edited by Head and Cranston 1967) lists over four hundred great thinkers of the Western world who have been quoted in favour of the doctrine. In ancient times it had the support of such thinkers as Plato, Plotinus and Pythagoras. In more recent times philosophers like Schopenhauer, Goethe, Hume, Voltaire, T. H. Huxley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson have approved it, and to their names we may add the names of great writers like Tolstoy, Thoreau, Browning, Longfellow, Rossetti, Kipling, Tennyson, Mansfield and Whitman, musicians like Bruno Walier, Leopold Stokowsky, Sir Henry Wood and Yehudi Menuhin, statesmen like Benjamin Franklin and Lloyd George, and

industrialists like Henry Ford. The list is endless and it would be impossible to quote from them all. We will let John Mansfield, the late Poet Laureate of England, be their spokesman. In a poem appropriately called "My Creed" he writes:

I hold that when a person dies
His soul returns again to earth;
Arrayed in some new flesh-disguise,
Another mother gives him birth.
With sturdier limbs and brighter brain
The old soul takes the road again.

The language which Masefield has used to express his ideals may not be that which a well informed Buddhist would chose, as we shall see later, but his sentiments are the same and his words express the beliefs of many Westerners. It goes without saying that almost all the great thinkers of the East have believed in rebirth, a fact which even the adversaries of the doctrine find impossible to dispute.

The Natural Law

The fact that almost all the greatest thinkers of the world have accepted rebirth does not of course in itself

prove the doctrine to be true. Though it is well to listen to what the wise ones have said, we must not let our respect for them completely colour our judgment. Notwithstanding the support the doctrine has received from the great ones we must, for our own satisfaction, yet ask if it is reasonable and if it does appear to fit into the facts of life as we see them. The answer to both of these questions should I believe be "yes."

In the world of nature everything is a ceaseless round of birth, growth, decay and death, and birth again. We have the cycle of the seasons and the cycle of day and night, work and sleep. It would be strange indeed if in the whole of nature man alone was the exception to the cyclic rule. As Nietzsche has said: "Everything goeth, everything returneth. Everything dieth, everything blossometh forth again. Ho, how could I not be ardent for ... the ring of return?" Voltaire expressed the same sentiments when he wrote: "It is no more surprising to be born twice than once: everything in nature is resurrection."

The theory of evolution which has so gripped the imagination in the last hundred years also seems to me to corroborate the doctrine of rebirth. The two in fact would seem to be complimentary and rebirth may even throw some light into the way in which evolution works. It is difficult to see how there can be

any progress, at any rate as far as spiritual things are concerned, if each person coming into the world is a completely “new soul” starting from scratch. The old battle cry of the evolutionists and optimists “Onward and upward forever and ever” will have little hope of fruition if each person coming into the world has to learn the lessons of love and brotherhood from the beginning. Could it not be that the difference between the ignorant and selfish and the wise and holy is that the latter have lived their earlier lives more wisely—than the former? Is it not also possible that some day all will follow where the wise and holy have trod? Certainly we cannot dismiss the possibility. As Thomas H. Huxley has said: “Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of rebirth has its roots in the world of reality. None but very hasty thinkers will reject it on the ground of inherent absurdity.”

Another important lesson we learn from nature is that that which we reap must always be of like character to the seed that was sown. This is true not only of the physical order but of the moral order as well. It is by accepting that “Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap” that we are able to understand the apparent inequalities and injustices of life. Science, no less than religion, teaches us that every effect has its cause. The whole universe, our own lives included, is governed by this law of action-

reaction, or cause and effect. What we sow, we must in due course reap, and we are the creators of our own heaven or hell.

The great geniuses of the world should also be seen in this light, particularly those infant prodigies who display extraordinary abilities at an unusually early age. There have been many such cases. The most famous perhaps—at any rate in the Western world—is that of Mozart who composed a sonata when he was four and an opera when he was seven. In 1951 the London Evening Standard gave an interesting account of a little girl called Danielle Salamon who could play the piano before she could talk, and who by the time she was four had already composed several pieces of music and written the scores in a book. These cases are by no means unique, there are many others like them. During the Summer of 1967 a B.B.C. television News Bulletin gave an account of a three year old boy in Korea who is already attending a University where he is doing a course in advanced mathematics, and he is already the author of several books. It certainly looks as though Plato was right when he asserted in his famous “Theory of Reminiscence” that “knowledge easily acquired is that which the enduring self had in an earlier life, so that it flows back easily.”

Memories From Former Lives

As we have just seen in the previous section those things which come easily to us are in all probability the very things that we worked at diligently in earlier lives. It is at this point though that many people raise an objection which may be summarised thus: “If we have lived before, why have we no recollections of our previous lives?” As we shall see later there is no such things as an “immortal self” to be reborn, but if for the moment we may take the question at its face value we may perhaps best answer it by saying that as we begin each life with a new physical brain the memories of former lives do not therefore normally register in the conscious mind. As we shall see shortly though, there have been many exceptions. Generally though the physical brain seems to have an important part to play in the retention of memory—in a way which we do not as yet understand—and memories of actual events and places would ordinarily perish with the brain. Mahātma Gandhi was probably right when he said: “It is nature’s kindness that we do not remember past births. Life would be a burden if we carried such a tremendous load of memories.” We should perhaps be grateful that we don’t have to recall the sins and follies of previous existences. But are we not in fact being too

narrow in our definition of memory? Character is a form of memory, as are innate abilities and likes and dislikes. And as to the ability to recall actual events we must admit that we can only remember a small fraction of all that happens to us in this present life, and little, if anything, of what happened to us in the early years. Yet no one would deny that he was once a three year old simply because he has no recollection of being three. And if the psychologists are to be believed these forgotten years of early infancy were the most decisive in determining our personality. In such a way is it not possible that the whole of our present character has been determined by the experiences of earlier lives, though those experiences have been blotted from the memory or buried deep in the subconscious?

But as I have already indicated, it is not all that common for people to claim recollections of former lives. Many hundreds of such cases have been investigated and proved beyond any reasonable doubt. Sometimes such recollections take the form of remembering places not previously visited in the present life. A well known incident of this kind is recorded in the life of the English poet Shelley. Walking in a part of the country which he had never before visited, he suddenly said to a companion "Over that hill, there is a windmill." As they breasted the hill

and saw the windmill, Shelley fainted with emotion. Even more striking is the account of an American couple on a world cruise who stopped at Bombay. Walking around the city, they both found themselves extraordinarily familiar with parts of it so that they had no need of a guide and could tell each other in advance to coming to a place, say around a corner, what they would see. They tested this knowledge by going to a particular quarter they thought they remembered and looking for a house and a banyan tree they remembered standing in the garden of the house. When they reached the place where they expected to find the house and tree, they did not see them. But a policeman happened to be nearby, and they asked him if the house and tree had formerly stood there. He confirmed that there had at one time been a house and a tree as the couple described them. He added an additional piece of information. The house had belonged to a family named Bhan. This couple had, for some reason unknown to them, liked the name Bhan and had given this name as first name to their son.

More important as evidence for rebirth are the many recorded cases of people who have actually recalled previous lives. Dr. Ian Stevenson the eminent Canadian psychiatrist—now living and working in America—has investigated many such claims, and his

published findings in "The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations" and "Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation" make impressive reading. Also of great value has been the research of Francis Story and some of his findings are published in his "The Case for Rebirth," Wheel Publication No. 12/13. From the many cases around the world that have been investigated I will give just two examples, one from Asia and the other from Europe. Shanty Devi, a girl living in Delhi (born 1926) began from the age of three to recall and state details of a former life in the town of Muttra, about eighty miles away. She stated that her name had been Lugdi, that she had been born in 1902, was a Choban by caste and had married a cloth merchant named Kedar Nath Chaubey. She said that she had given birth to a son and had died ten days later. As Shanti Devi continued to make such statements, her family finally made inquiries when she was nine years old to see if such a person as her claimed husband actually existed in Muttra. There was such a person, and he sent a relative to the girl's house and afterwards came unannounced himself. She Immediately identified both of these persons. The following year, after it had been established by an investigating committee that she had never left Delhi, she visited Muttra where she instantly recognised places and people and found her

way around with perfect ease. Many statements which she made about her previous life were verified.

Our second case concerns an English woman, Annie Baker, who under hypnosis spoke perfect French, although she had never studied the language or been to France. She spoke of the death of Marie Antoinette as if it had just happened. She gave her own name as Marielle Pacasse and that of her husband as Jules. She stated that her home was in the Rue de St. Pierre near the Notre Dame. Subsequent investigation revealed that though there is now no Rue de St. Pierre, there was one a hundred and seventy years ago. The name Marielle, now very rare, was much in vogue in 1794. Rebirth would seem to offer the best explanation of the link which exists between a Frenchwoman of the seventeen hundreds and the present-day Annie Baker.

These few cases I have outlined provide just a small sample of the hundreds of similar cases which have been thoroughly investigated and verified. Scholarly research along scientific lines is continuing on this subject—conducted by men of the calibre of Dr. Ian Stevenson and Francis Story—which may one day prove beyond any reasonable doubt that rebirth is a fact, just as much a law of science as is the law of gravity.

What Survives?

On the evidence we have seen so far it seems reasonable to suppose that rebirth does in fact take place. We now have to ask ourselves what it is that is reborn and what are the processes by which rebirth takes place. We shall look at the process of rebirth later on, but it is to the nature of that which is reborn that we must now turn.

Let it be said at once that the traditional concept of the soul as held by most European Christians is not one that we need to espouse in order to believe in rebirth. The idea that there is in man a spiritual or “ethereal double” which is able to survive the death of the body and to maintain itself as a changeless, separate entity, does not seem to me to be feasible. What we have to look for is not a “soul” which stays recognisably the same for an eternity, but a principle or entity which is forever evolving—a constantly changing “stream of consciousness,” to borrow a phrase from William James. The Buddhist scholar Ven. Walpola Rāhula perfectly expresses the idea I have in mind. He writes: “If there is no permanent, unchanging entity or substance like self or soul, what is it that can re-exist or be reborn after death? Before we go on to life after death, let us consider what this

life is, and how it continues now. What we call life is ... a combination of physical and mental energies. These are constantly changing; they do not remain the same for two consecutive moments. Every moment they are born and they die. Thus, even now during this lifetime, every moment we are born and die, but we continue. If we can understand that in this life we can continue without a permanent, unchanging substance like self or soul, why can't we understand that those forces themselves can continue without a self or soul behind them after the non-functioning of the body? When this physical body is no more capable of functioning, energies do not die with it, but continue to take some other shape or form, which we call another life. ... As there is no permanent unchanging substance, nothing passes from one moment to the next. So quite obviously, nothing permanent or unchanging can pass or transmigrate from one life to the next. It is a series that continues unbroken but changes every moment. The series is, really speaking, nothing but movement. ... A child grows up to be a man of sixty. Certainly the man of sixty is not the same as the child of sixty years ago, nor is he another person. Similarly, a person who dies here and is reborn elsewhere is neither the same person, nor another. It is the continuity of the same series."

As science penetrates more and more to the heart of

things, as matter is reduced to smaller and smaller particles, so does it become obvious that what we are left with is not “material” at all, but a system of electronic waves, vibrations, or patterns of energy-concentration. As Arthur Koestler has said in his “The Ghost in the Machine”: “Matter is no longer a unitary concept; the hierarchy of macroscopic, molecular, atomic subatomic levels trails away without hitting rock-bottom, until matter dissolves into patterns of energy-concentration, and then perhaps into tensions in space.” If one accepts—as I think one must—the truth of Koestler’s statement, then there is surely no rational grounds for rejecting the idea that there is in man an organised energy-concentration which in a computer-like fashion stores the “personality-data”—the attributes, talents and characteristics—of the “individual.” And if one further accepts the proof of science that energy is indestructible, then one cannot logically deny the possibility that this “energy-concentration” can survive the destruction of the physical brain to continue on his ever evolving pilgrimage in the process of which it may operate through many bodies.

The Process Explained

There only now remains the question as to the processes by which rebirth takes place. It seems to me that radio provides a useful analogy of what in fact may happen. It is not beyond the realms of reason to suppose that the energy-concentration—that which the West traditionally calls the “mind” or “soul”—is given out at the moment of death. In much the same way as a radio signal is given out by a transmitter, and that this signal carries with it the “personality-data” of the “individual” which is eventually picked up and “de-coded” by a suitable “receiver,” i.e. the newly formed or developing brain of an unborn child. And it may also be that just as a radio signal can only be picked up by the right kind of receiver adjusted to the right wavelength, so a deceased individual’s “radio signal” can only be picked up by a brain which is uniquely suited to receive it. At first acquaintance this idea may sound rather fanciful, but it has received support from Sir Julian Huxley, internationally esteemed scientist, philosopher, and self-confessed agnostic. In his contribution to a book of essays called “Where are the Dead?” he makes the following comments. “... there is nothing against a permanently surviving spirit individuality being in some way given off at death, as a definite wireless message is given off by a sending apparatus working in a particular way. But it must be remembered that the wireless message

only becomes a message again when it comes in contact with a new, material structure—the receiver. So with our possible spirit-emanation. It would never think or feel unless again ‘embodied’ in some way. Our personalities are so based on body that it is really impossible to think of survival without a body of sorts. I can think of something being given off which would bear the same relation to men and women as a wireless message to the transmitting apparatus; but in that case ‘the dead’ would, so far as one can see, be nothing but disturbances of different patterns wandering through the universe until they came back to actuality of consciousness by making contact with something which could work as a receiving apparatus for mind.” Francis Story comments in much the same way when he says: “It is only necessary to conceive ... an energy-potential flowing out of the mind of a being at the moment of death, and carrying with it the karmic characteristics of that being, just as the seed of a plant carries with it the botanical characteristic of its type, and a mental picture is formed that corresponds roughly to what actually takes place.”

Conclusion

In our brief survey we have looked at the doctrine of

rebirth from several different points of view. We have seen that it is a very ancient doctrine which has been accepted by most of the greatest thinkers the world has known—including many from Europe and America. We have observed that in nature, birth, death and rebirth is the law, as also is the fact that that which we sow, we must in due course reap. We have seen no reason why man should be an exception to the universal rule, and such phenomena as infant prodigies seem to confirm that what is true for the rest of nature is true of man. More striking still is the evidence from the claimed memories of former lives, examples of which we examined. We have studied the nature of that which is reborn, and by analogy have tried to understand how the process works.

Table of Contents

Title page	2
Acknowledgements	3
Rebirth	4
Introduction	4
Ancient And Universal	6
The Natural Law	7
Memories From Former Lives	11
What Survives?	16
The Process Explained	18
Conclusion	20