

*Wheel Publication No. 141/142/143*

**Survival and Karma  
In Buddhist Perspective**

*K.N. Jayatilleke*



# Survival and Karma In Buddhist Perspective

by

**K.N. Jayatilleke**

M.A. (Cantab), Ph.D (London)  
Professor of Philosophy  
University of Ceylon

**Buddhist Publication Society**  
**Kandy • Sri Lanka**

**The Wheel Publication No. 141/142/143**

Talks given in 1968–1969 at the Buddhist Information  
Bureau, Colombo

Copyright © 1969 Buddhist Publication Society.

First Impression: 1969

Second Impression: 1980

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

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.

# I. The Buddhist View of Survival



In this talk I will state and examine the Buddhist view of survival. At the same time I wish to stress the fact that apart from briefly examining the intelligibility of the theory I do not propose to consider here its truth (or falsity) in the light of modern evidence, which I shall do in a later talk.

It is necessary to have a clear and authentic formulation of the Buddhist conception of survival as found in the early texts since there seem to be some misconceptions about this. We may briefly state some of these misconceptions.

## Misconceptions

According to one view, the Buddha lived in a society in which the doctrine of rebirth was universally (or widely) taken for granted from time immemorial. The Buddha himself saw no reason to question this belief which he accepted uncritically and dogmatically.

Another such misconception may be stated as follows: The

Buddha's doctrine of *anattā* or no-soul was a denial of the existence of an animistic soul which survived the death of the body and transmigrated. Since nothing survived the death of the body, Buddhism is a form of materialism. The Buddha utilised the doctrines of rebirth and *karma* prevailing in this society (so they say) to impart ethical teachings but did not himself believe in these doctrines.

There is yet another misconception. According to this view, the Buddha was not interested in nor held specific views about the question of human survival or life after death. He roundly condemned speculation about the past or future (i.e. about prior lives or future lives) as unprofitable or mistaken. He was only concerned with man's present state of anxiety, suffering and dissatisfaction and the solution for it.

These misconceptions can be cleared only by making a careful study of the authentic early texts of Buddhism. When we do so we find that the Buddha did assert (i) the continuity without identity of individuality due to the operation of causal factors, (ii) the doctrine of *anattā*, which denied the existence of a physical, mental, psychophysical or independent entity within or related to the psychophysical aspects of personality and (iii) that he rejected mere metaphysical speculation about prior or future lives which did not result in the verification of facts about them.

# Historical Background

In order to understand the Buddhist view of survival it is desirable to have some knowledge of the views presented by pre-Buddhist thinkers, i.e. prior to the rise of Buddhism since the Buddhist conceptions were often presented in contrast to them.

It is a remarkable fact that in no other age in the history of thought was a solution to the problem of survival sought with such intensity as in this period and nowhere else can we find such a variety of views put forward.

Logically there are four possible points of view that we can adopt with regard to the question of survival. We may say (i) that we survive death in the form of discarnate spirits, i.e. a single after-life theory, (ii) that we are annihilated with death, i.e. a materialist theory, (iii) that we are unable to discover a satisfactory answer to this question or there is no satisfactory answer, i.e. a sceptical or positivist theory and (iv) that we come back to subsequent earth-lives or lives on other similar planets, i.e. a rebirth theory.

The Buddhist texts record several variants of each of these four types of theories. Let us take the variants of single after-life theories or one-life-after-death theories.

# Single After-life Theories

There are thirty-two single after-life theories listed in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*. According to what philosophers or religious teachers who put forward these theories assert, they are broadly classified into theories which posit that the soul after death is (A) conscious (*saññī*), (B) unconscious (*asaññī*) and (C) super-conscious (*nevasaññāsaññī*).

There are sixteen variants of (A) and eight each of (B) and (C). The sixteen variants of (A) are due to:

- I. Variations regarding the material form of the soul:
  - i. has a subtle material form
  - ii. has no such form
  - iii. has for some time a subtle material form and then has no such form
- II. has no such form but has the power of manifesting one.
  - i. Variations regarding the duration of the soul:
    - ii. comes to an end
    - iii. is eternal
    - iv. changes its state after some time and becomes eternal
    - v. does not exist in time.
- II. Variations regarding the nature and extent of

consciousness:

- i. is conscious of unity
- ii. is conscious of diversity
- iii. is of limited consciousness
- iv. is of unlimited consciousness.

V. Variations regarding the hedonic tone of the experiences:

- i. is extremely happy
- ii. is extremely unhappy
- iii. is partly happy and partly unhappy
- iv. does not experience happiness or unhappiness, i.e. has a neutral hedonic tone.

Only variations I (i)–(iv) and II (i)–(iv) are considered applicable to those who hold that the soul is (B) unconscious or (C) super-conscious after death.

The above classification appears to be a purely logical one but the fact that many of these theories can be traced to pre-Buddhist literature proves that it is not.

Thus Prajāpati held on the basis of rational and metaphysical speculation that the soul was “conscious and having its own form after death” [1] —i.e. A I (i). Uddālaka held that the soul was “unconscious and without form” after death—i.e. B I (ii). The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* holds that the soul has a subtle material form for some time after death and then ceases to have such a form—i.e. A I (iii).

Yājñavalkya has tried to show that the soul is “neither conscious nor unconscious after death and has no form”—i.e. C I (ii). The *Brāhmaṇas* often speak of a “second death” after personal survival—i.e. A II (i).

The one-life-after-death theories held by people in the West who subscribe to different forms of theism or spiritualism are also classifiable as permutations and combinations of the above alternatives. Thus the views held by those who subscribe to the belief that the soul survives as a discarnate spirit for all eternity or those who say that the soul goes to heaven or hell for eternity after death or those who maintain that the soul sleeps with the body till a day of judgement when its state is changed or those who believe that the soul goes to purgatory till a day of judgement—all these views are classifiable under the above scheme.

## Materialists

In sharp opposition to those who held dualist theories of body-and-soul and claimed that there was only a single life after death were the Materialists who denied a life after death altogether. Seven schools of such materialists are referred to in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* and some of these are independently referred to in the non-Buddhist literature.

The most extreme of them held there is no mind or soul apart from the body which was entirely a hereditary product of one's parents (*mātāpettika-sambhavo*) and the material elements. What we call "mind" are the patterns of movement in our bodies, The modern version of this is called central state materialism, [2] which tries to do away with phenomenal factors such as "experience," "consciousness" etc. According to this theory when we say that a person is happy, it refers not to a mental state but to a physical state which has among its consequences that it causes a person to behave in a characteristically happy way.

Another school held that the mind is an emergent product which has a material basis and its condition is determined by the food we eat. They argued that just as much as when we mix up certain chemicals in certain proportions, there emerges the intoxicating power of liquor, even so the material particles of the body and the food we eat go to form the mind, which is an emergent by-product. There were also schools of mystic materialists who by the use of drugs claimed the possibility of achieving expansions of consciousness (called *micchā jhāna*, wrong *jhāna*, in the texts).

All these schools of materialists were characterised by the fact that they did not hold that mind and body were two different entities but were one and the same entity, either denying the reality of mental phenomena altogether or asserting that they were epiphenomena or accompaniments of the state of body. [3]

# Skeptics

The dialectical opposition between the dualistic soul-theorists who asserted the reality of survival and the monistic materialists, who denied survival, had already resulted prior to Buddhism in the rise of several sceptical schools of thought. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* states “This doubt is there with regard to a man deceased—‘he exists’ say some; ‘he exists not’ say others.” [4]

The four schools of Sceptics (*amarāvikkhepikā*) in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* adopted scepticism on the basis of various intellectual or pragmatic grounds. Some maintained that in holding the view either that “there is survival” or that “there is no survival” there results an involvement or entanglement (*upādāna*) in a theory and this promotes mental unrest. Others argued that in holding or denying the theory of survival one is led by one’s prejudices for (*chanda, rāga*) or against (*dosa, paṭigha*) and that, therefore, truth demands that we do not come to any definite conclusions. Yet others avoided making definite pronouncements for fear of being engaged in debate. Others again like Sañjaya argued that statements about an after-life, about moral responsibility or about transcendent existence were not verifiable and therefore it was not possible to discover their truth or falsity.

Among those who held a dualist hypothesis and asserted

“the eternity view” (*sassatadiṭṭhi*) were not only the single after-life theorists but those who held several variants of rebirth-theories as well. It is important to bear in mind the fact that Buddhism was opposed to all these theories, including the rebirth-theories that had been propounded. The Buddha did not posit the existence of an unverifiable, unchanging entity to account for his theory of re-becoming and rebirth. Nor did he hold that the process of re-becoming was strictly determined by past kamma, by natural causes, or by the will of God. Causal factors were operative no doubt but they were not deterministic. Besides, some rebirth theories held that beings could be reborn even as “rice and barley, herbs, beans, sesame plants and trees.” [5] The Buddha did not subscribe to such a point of view. In fact it is doubtful whether the Buddha held that there was rebirth at the lowest levels of life. The Buddha later recounts as a mistaken view some of the beliefs of Jainism, which he put to the test prior to his enlightenment. In one place he says, “I used to walk up and down conscientiously extending my compassion even to a drop of water, praying that the dangerous bacteria in it may not come to harm.” [6]

## Buddhist Solution

It is in the historical context outlined above, that the Buddha

appeared on the scene and sought a solution to the riddle of life. It is therefore not correct to say (as many scholars have done) that the Buddha took for granted the belief in rebirth current in society at the time. As is evident from the Buddhist and the non-Buddhist literature, there was a variety of views on the question of survival at the time covering almost every possibility that one can think of.

Besides, the belief was not of very great antiquity. It is absent in the *Vedas*, it is merely hinted at in the *Brāhmaṇas*, and the early *Upaniṣads* present a variety of views, some of which clearly reject rebirth. By the time of the Buddha, the materialists had made such an impact on society that the Buddha classifies the prevalent theories of his time as those of the Eternalists and of the Materialists. In addition, scepticism was so rampant that the elite (the *viññū purisā*) did not subscribe to any specific belief. They were no doubt interested in the problem and people like Pāyāsi even performed experiments to test the validity of the belief in survival. One of the experiments carried out was that of weighing the body immediately before and after death. [7] Finally, an unquestioning acceptance of the belief in rebirth is hardly consistent with the spirit of the *Kālāma Sutta* where the Buddha asks people to adopt a critical attitude towards traditional beliefs.

The Buddhist theory of survival has its origin in the Enlightenment of the Buddha and not in any traditional Indian belief. It is said that it was on the night of his Enlightenment that he acquired the capacity to know his

prior lives. It was when his mind was composed, clear, cleansed and without blemish, free from adventitious defilements, pliant and flexible, steadfast and unperturbed, that he acquired this capacity to recall hundreds and thousands of prior lives and the prehistory of the universe, going back through the immensely long periods of the expansions and contractions of the oscillating universe. This is, in fact, called the first important item of knowledge, which broke through the veil of ignorance (*ayaṃ paṭhamā vijjā*).

The second important item of knowledge (*dutiyā vijjā*) was obtained by the exercise of the faculty of clairvoyance (*dibba-cakkhu*), with which the Buddha was able to see among other things the survival of beings in various states of existence, the operations of karma, galactic systems, clusters of galactic systems and the vast cosmos.

## The Five States of Existence

In the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* there is a reference to the five states of existence. They are as follows: (1) the lower worlds (*duggati, vinipāta niraya*), (2) the animal kingdom (*tiracchānayoṇi*), (3) the spirit sphere (*pettivisaya*), (4) human beings (*manussa*) and (5) *devas* or higher spirits.

While the “lower worlds” (*vinipāta*) are also called *niraya* (hells), we must not forget that “hells” (*pātāla*) in the popular sense are denied. It is said that the common man believes that there is a hell or nether world in the bottom of the ocean, but Buddha says that this belief is false and states that “hell” is a term for painful sensations. Yet elsewhere there is a reference to worlds which the Buddha claims to see in which everything one senses is unpleasant and the thoughts that come to one’s mind are disagreeable and foul. In contrast, it is said that there are worlds in which everything one senses or experiences is pleasant. About the existence of devas, the Buddha says when asked the question as to whether they exist that he knows on good grounds that they exist. When further questioned as to why he used the qualification “on good grounds,” he says that it is because it is commonly taken for granted that devas or higher spirits exist. [8]

The five states of existence are graded according to the amount or degree of pain or pleasure experienced in them. According to this description, the human world is one in which one experiences “more pleasant than unpleasant experiences.” [9] In the spirit-sphere it is more unpleasant than pleasant. In the animal sphere it is unpleasant since animals are supposed to live in a state of constant fear with strong unsatisfied instinctive desires such as hunger and thirst. In the “lower worlds” it is said to be very unpleasant. In the deva worlds, on the other hand, it is extremely pleasant. [10]

The person who is pictured as faring on in these states of existence is conceived as one who is oppressed by the heat, exhausted, afraid, and thirsty. The lower worlds are compared to a pit of coals into which he falls, animal existence is a pit full of excrement, existence in the spirit-sphere is like coming under a tree in a desert without much shade, human life is compared to coming under a large and shady tree while the deva world is compared to a well-furnished and beautiful palace. In contrast, Nibbāna is said to be analogous to the above person who is oppressed with heat, exhausted and thirsty reaching a lake where the waters are cool and clear, bathing in it, quenching his thirst and sitting or lying down in an adjoining glade experiencing extreme happiness. [11]

From the descriptions given in the early texts the usual tendency is for a person to survive as a departed spirit or a discarnate spirit in the spirit-sphere and come back to an earth-life since the normal character of human beings is a mixture of good and evil and the stage of evolution of one's consciousness is attuned to existence in these worlds. But it is possible to regress to animal or sub-human forms of existence by neglecting the development of one's personality or character and becoming a slave to one's passions. It is also exceptionally possible to attain to existence in the deva-worlds. In the *Saṅkhāruppatti Sutta*, [12] it is said that a person who is possessed of faith (*saddhā*), virtue (*sīla*), learning (*suta*), selflessness (*cāga*) and wisdom (*paññā*) can aspire to and attain better states of existence

among human beings or devas.

## Intelligibility

The word used to describe the progression from existence to existence is the word “re-becoming” (*punabbhava*). Rebirth is only a special case of re-becoming when a person comes back to an earth-life. Rebirth in this sense takes place until a person attains a spiritual state of “Non-Returner” (*anāgāmi*) or Arahant. If there is any doubt about the interpretation of *punabbhava* as rebirth in these contexts, it may be dispelled by examining similar expressions such as “he does not come back to lie in the womb,” [13] used of an Arahant.

The question has been raised by some philosophers as to whether a conception of survival after death either in the form of rebirth or as a discarnate spirit is at all intelligible. If we preserve someone’s heart or kidney in a living condition after his death, we would not say in respect of such an organ that so and so is now alive. It is therefore necessary that there should be some sense in which the re-born person or discarnate spirit should be able to claim identity with the dead person (when he was alive) even though all that can be established is continuity and not identity even in this life. To say that both have the same soul will not help because the existence of such a soul as an unchanging agent or recipient of actions is unverifiable.

The solution to this problem lies in the criteria that we employ to claim personal identity. In a single human life we

normally employ two criteria. One is the spatio-temporal continuity of the body. On the basis of this we can claim that so and so is a person who as a child went to such and such a school although there may be nothing in common between the two bodies as far as shape and content is concerned. The other criterion is memory on the basis of which someone may claim that he was such and such twenty years ago. When one life is concerned, the two criteria normally support each other.

In the case of the re-born person or discarnate spirit it is the memory criterion alone which can establish the identity. In this case when the body criterion is employed, we have to say that "he is not the same person" but when the memory criterion is employed we would have to say "he is not another person." So according to Buddhism "he is neither the same nor another" (*na ca so na ca añño*) when we give a strictly accurate description although in common parlance we may say that he is the same person.

The logical possibility of such personal identity without a soul is granted by Professor A. J. Ayer of Oxford, a logical analyst who says, "I think that it would be open to us to admit the logical possibility of reincarnation merely by laying down the rule that if a person who is physically identified as living at a later time does have the ostensible memories and character of a person who is physically identified as living at an earlier time, they are to be counted as one person and not two." [14]

As for the concept of a discarnate spirit, Professor H. H. Price, following the ideas of some Hindu and Buddhist texts (as he admits) has given an intelligible account of how a “discarnate spirit” may be conceived of, consistent with findings of modern psychology and psychical research. [15]

Although the majority of modern psychologists attempt to explain the functioning of the brain on mechanistic models, they find it difficult to explain away the fact and role of consciousness. Despite the claim of some philosophers [16] the ghost from the human machine has not been exorcised. Professor Sir John Eccles, who has been described by Sir Cyril Burt as “the most eminent of living neurologists who have specialized in the study of the brain,” has made the following statement about the structure and functions of the brain: “the structure of the brain suggests that it is the sort of machine that a “ghost” might operate” where the word “ghost” is used “to designate any kind of agent that defies detection by such apparatus as is used to detect physical agents.” [17] We can do without the concept of a permanent soul, but it is doubtful whether consciousness can be explained away, where it functions as a causal factor in initiating plans, making decisions etc.

The Buddha did not subscribe to the dualist hypothesis that “the mind and body are different” (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*) nor to the identity hypothesis that “the mind and body are the same” (*taṃ jīvaṃ, taṃ sarīraṃ*) but found that there was partial truth in both. Consciousness is partly formed by the impact of the environment on the living body

but in turn it determines bodily behaviour.

In rebirth and re-becoming there is continuity of the stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) without identity (*anaññam*) making the recall of prior lives potentially possible. It is, however, not a self-identical permanent substance, which is quite independent of the body with regard to its growth and development.

# II. The Buddhist Doctrine of Karma

In this talk I merely propose to give a brief account of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, as it is taught in the texts. I do not intend to examine the case for or against it in the light of evidence. I shall undertake this in a later talk.

I refer to this doctrine specifically as the Buddhist doctrine of karma in order to distinguish it from the other non-Buddhist doctrines of karma, which were taught by non-Buddhist thinkers prior to, during and even after, the time of the Buddha. In this respect it is important to note the significant differences between the Buddhist doctrine of karma and the doctrines of karma taught in Jainism, by certain Ājīvika thinkers as well as the Brahmins.

## Misconceptions

This is particularly necessary since the Buddhist doctrine is often confused with and assumed to be the same as the Brahmanical doctrine of karma. People tend to speak of or criticise the doctrine of karma as though there was only one

such doctrine common to different religions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Ājīvikism despite the fact that they profess different teachings about the nature, operations and attitude to the alleged phenomenon of karma.

Another misconception which is partly connected with the above misunderstanding is that the Buddhist doctrine of karma constitutes or implies a fatalist attitude to life and nature, a view put forward by some (not all) Western scholars and even subscribed to by some South Asian intellectuals both non-Buddhist and even Buddhist.

Yet another source of misunderstanding is the attempt on the part of certain scholars and other individuals to rationalise (quite unnecessarily) the doctrine of karma by interpreting it to mean the social or biological inheritance of man or both, ignoring altogether and distorting the authentic teachings of the texts of the Buddhist Canon.

## Meaning

In the pre-Buddhist literature the word karma was used mainly in the sense of either religious rituals or the social functions and duties of man. In the latter sense the *Īṣa Upaniṣad* says: “Let a man aspire to live a hundred years, performing his social duties” (*kurvanneveḥa karmaṇi*

*jijīviṣecchataṃ samāḥ*) (2). This sense has survived in the Buddhist texts, where the word karma is used in the plural to denote the different professions or occupations of men. Thus, Buddhism recommends people to perform “morally blameless occupations” (*anavajjāni kammāniī*).

As a technical term, the word karma is used in the early Buddhist texts to denote volitional actions. These actions may be morally good (*kusala*), morally evil (*akusala*) or morally neutral (*avyākata*). They may be actions which find expression in bodily behaviour (*kāyakamma*), verbal behaviour (*vacī-kamma*) and psychological behaviour (*mano-kamma*).

The morally good and evil actions are said to be liable to give rise to consequences, individual as well as social, pleasant and unpleasant on the whole as the case may be. The individual consequences may be manifested in this life, the next life or the lives to come unless their potentialities get extinguished or they do not find an opportunity for fruition.

Conscious volition (*cetanā*) is a necessary condition of such a morally good or evil or neutral act, but does not constitute the whole of it except when it happens to be a purely mental act. Thus, we would not be guilty of the crime of murder merely because we had the intention of murdering somebody. As the *Atthasālinī* (p. 98) points out “there are five constituent factors in an act of killing: (i) the existence of a living being, (ii) the awareness of the existence of such a

living being, (iii) the intention of killing, (iv) the effort or the means employed to kill and (v) the consequent death of the living being.”

The intention is necessary but not sufficient to constitute an act of killing. As the *Vinaya* rules point out, where the intention is absent but one’s actions are instrumental in causing the death of a person, one may be guilty of an act of negligence but not of murder.

So the word karma is used to denote volitional acts which find expression in thought, speech or physical deeds, which are good or evil or a mixture of both and are liable to give rise to consequences, which partly determine the goodness or badness of these acts.

## Basis for Doctrine

It is often assumed that the basis for the doctrine of karma in Buddhism is a rational argument implicit in the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*. It is true that in this Sutta the Buddha seems to suggest purely rational grounds for believing in the doctrine of karma, but it would be mistaken to believe that the doctrine is accepted as true or as representing the nature of things as they are on these grounds.

In this Sutta, a Brahmin youth meets the Buddha and asks him for an explanation as to why among human beings some are short-lived while others are long-lived, some are sickly while others are healthy, some are ugly to look at while others are handsome, some have little power or influence while others are influential, some are poor while others are rich, some are of a lower social status while others are of a higher social status.

The question is posed in the form: “What is the reason and the cause for the inequality (*hīnappaṇītata*) among human beings despite their being human?” The Buddha’s reply on this occasion was as follows: “Beings inherit their karma and it is karma which divides beings in terms of their inequalities.”

We may argue that this embodies the following rational ethical argument, consisting of an empirical and ethical premise, viz. people are of unequal status; those of unequal status ought to be such only by virtue of their own actions; therefore, since this is not due to their actions in this life, it should be due to their actions in a prior life. This means that both karma and pre-existence are the case.

It is also true that this kind of rational ethical argument has appealed to many thinkers. Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), poet, dramatist and essayist says: “Let us return to reincarnation ... for there was never a more beautiful, a juster, a purer, a more moral, fruitful and consoling, nor, to a certain point, a more probable creed than theirs. It alone,

with its doctrine of successive expiations and purifications, accounts for all the physical and intellectual inequalities, all the social iniquities, all the hideous injustices of fate.” [18] Professor Allan G. Widgery also speaks appreciatively of such an argument when he says: “For it affirms that men are not born equal ... and this affirmation appears to be more in accordance with the facts ... Men are regarded as different at birth: the differences being due to the manner in which in past lives they have built up their nature through the action of the law of karma.” [19]

But it would be mistaken to consider the passage in the above Sutta as presupposing a rational ethical argument with a concealed ethical premise. It is true as Ānanda has said of the Buddha that “so far as anything can be attained by reasoning (*takka*), you have ascertained it” [20] but the doctrine of karma is not put forward in Buddhism as a product of mere speculative reasoning (*takka*), which is not adequate for the discovery of the facts of nature as the Buddha has elsewhere pointed out. The Buddha’s statements even in this Sutta are based on clairvoyant observation and reasoning and not on mere rational speculation.

It is also mistaken to assume on the ground of the recognition of the fact of the known inequalities among mankind that Buddhism accepted the status quo of a static conception of society or denied the doctrine of what is known as “the equality of mankind.”

For as we shall see when we come to the social and political philosophy of Buddhism, Buddhism upholds the biological, social and spiritual equality of mankind and envisages a time in the future when with the economic, moral and spiritual regeneration of man there would come into being a social order in which people would be healthy and long-lived and the inequalities in power, wealth and social status would be greatly diminished.

In this context, we must not forget that one of the central teachings of Buddhism revolves round the conception of the destruction or elimination of the evil effects of karma (*kammakkhaya*) by effecting a change in the basis of human motivation from that of greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and ignorance (*moha*) to selflessness (*cāga*), compassion (*karuṇā*) and understanding (*paññā*). Even the better social order of the future can be set up only by people who believe in moral and spiritual values and have to some extent cultivated the qualities of selfless service, kindness and wisdom.

## Verifiability

As we have said above, the statements about the operations of karma are made by the Buddha on the basis of inferences based on clairvoyant observation. The awareness of the

nature of the operations of karma is said to be the second item of knowledge (*dutiya vijjā*) obtained by the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment.

It is said: “When his mind is thus composed, clear and cleansed without blemish, free from adventitious defilements, pliant and flexible, steadfast and unperturbed, he turns and directs his mind towards an understanding of the death and rebirth (*upapāta*) of beings. Then with his pure, paranormal, clairvoyant vision he sees beings—the high and the low, the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the wretched—dying and being reborn according to their character (*kamma*).”

The three-fold knowledge (*tisso vijjā*) acquired by the Buddha, which is crucial for the attainment of enlightenment consists of the knowledge of pre-existence, of the operations of karma and of the capacity to eliminate the inflowing impulses (*āsavakkhaya*). It is the same knowledge obtained by the Arahants attaining emancipation of mind (*ceto-vimutti*), and in the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthā*, the verses of the elder monks and nuns, we constantly meet with the refrain: “I have attained the three-fold knowledge, I have done the bidding of the Buddha” (*tisso vijjā anupattā, kataṃ Buddhassa sāsanaṃ*).

The operations of karma are therefore personally verified by the Buddha and his disciples. In the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, the Buddha refers to the way he tested the theory of karma as though he was testing scientific hypothesis.

It is said: “There are these five destinies, Sāriputta. What five? The lower worlds, the animal kingdom, the spirit-sphere (*petti-visaya*), human existence and the higher worlds. I know these lower worlds, the path which leads to them or the kind of conduct which takes you to that state of existence at death ... Herein, Sāriputta, I comprehend the mind of a certain individual with my mind as follows: ‘This individual is set on behaving in such a manner and follows such a mode of conduct that he is likely to be born in one of the lower worlds at death on the destruction of the body.’ I then observe him at a later time by means of clear, clairvoyant, paranormal perception—the same individual born in one of the *lower worlds* at death experiencing *great pain*. Just as if there were a pit of coals and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted, taking a path leading straight to it and a man possessed of sight were to observe him and say to himself ‘This man is surely taking a path which will land him in a pit of coals’ and later sees him fallen in that pit experiencing great pain; even so ... *the animal world* ... experiencing *much unhappiness* ... Just as if there were a cesspit and a man, tired and exhausted, were to come along ...; even so ... *the spirit-sphere* ... experiencing *more unpleasant than pleasant sensations* ... Just as if there were a tree in a rugged place, with sparse foliage affording scanty shade and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted; even so ... *the human world* ... experiencing *more pleasant than unpleasant sensations* ... Just as if there were a tree with dense foliage in a pleasant spot and a man were to

come along, tired and exhausted ...; even so ... in a *higher world* ... experiencing *extremely pleasant sensations*... Just as if there were a palace with all the comforts and luxuries and a man were to come along, tired and exhausted ....”

In the *Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta*, the Buddha points out that certain yogins who have acquired the capacity for clairvoyant observation, nevertheless, came to false conclusions and denied the fact of karma since they made invalid inferences from the observed data. This is what he says: “Herein a certain yogin, as a result of his efforts and application, attains a certain state of trance, in which he sees with his clear, clairvoyant, paranormal vision a man who has misconducted himself born at death on the dissolution of his body in a happier and better world. He concludes as follows: “There are no evil actions (*kamma*) and no consequence of misconduct, for I have observed a man ...” “Everyone, whether one misconducts oneself in this life or not, is born at death in a happier and better world.” I do not agree (says the Buddha) with the claim of this yogin that there are no evil actions and no future consequence of misconduct. I am prepared to grant that this yogin has observed a man who has misconducted himself in this life, born at death in a happier and better world. But I do not agree with his conclusion that, therefore, all people, whether they misconduct themselves in this life or not, are born at death in a happier and better world. The knowledge of the Transcendent One (*Tathāgata*) with regard to operations of karma is different ... If a person who has misconducted

himself in this life, is born at death in a happier and better world, then he has either some time in his past done good deeds, which have resulted in these experiences or at the time of his death, has changed his ways and adopted the right view of life.”

The mistake that these yogins made, according to the Buddha, was to form generalisations on the basis of one or a few observations without observing a generality of cases and seeing that the apparent exceptions were explicable on other terms. The operations of karma, it is said, are so complex that they are not fully comprehensible (*acinteyya*, A II 80) except to the vision and understanding of a Buddha. Even with regard to the universe (*loka-visaya*), we noted that the Buddha could observe clusters of galaxies and the vast cosmos, while Anuruddha, the specialist in clairvoyance, could observe only a single galaxy.

## Relation to Causal Laws

The operation of these laws of karma was only a special instance of the operation of causal laws in nature, in which there were physical laws (*utu-niyāma*), biological laws (*bīja-niyāma*), psychological laws (*citta-niyāma*), karmic laws (*kamma-niyāma*) pertaining to moral acts and their consequences and laws pertaining to spiritual phenomena

(*dhamma-niyāma*). But the patterns of events in nature, according to Buddhism, are neither deterministic nor indeterministic.

Karmic laws, therefore, state tendencies rather than inevitable consequences. Several of these correlations are stated in the *Cūlakammaṅga Sutta*. The general principle is that morally good acts tend to be followed by pleasant consequences and morally evil acts by unpleasant consequences in the long run to the individual. Since it is of the nature of good acts to promote the material and spiritual well-being of mankind, it follows from this general principle that one cannot gain one's own happiness at the expense of others.

Among the specific correlations are the following: Those who harm and hurt living beings tend to be sickly, while those who are compassionate towards them tend to be healthy. Those who are angry and irritable, scowl at and abuse people tend to be ugly, while the others who are not so, tend to be beautiful. Those who are envious and jealous of the gain, honour and respect bestowed on others tend to lose respect while the others would tend to command respect.

## Medieval Analysis

In the medieval period we find karma classified, firstly according to function (*kicca*) as what gives birth (*janaka*), what tends to support a tendency (*upatthambhaka*), what tends to obstruct a tendency (*upapīlaka*) and what destroys (*upaghātaka*). Secondly, according to the manner in which they come into fruition (*pāka-dāna-pariyāya*), they are classified as weighty (*garuka*), proximate (*āsanna*), habitual (*āciñṇa*) and residual (*kaṭattā*). Thirdly, according to the time of taking effect (*pāka-kāla*) there are four sorts—what is “experientable” in this life (*diṭṭhadhamma-vedanīya*), in the next life (*upapajja-vedanīya*), some time in the future (*aparāpara-vedanīya*) or never (*ahosi*). Fourthly, according to the locus in which the effects take place there is evil karma finding fruition in the worlds of sense-gratification; similarly it is with good karma; and there is also good karma which becomes effective in the subtle material worlds (*rūpa-loka*) and the immaterial, ideational worlds (*arūpa-loka*).

## Distinction

It is necessary to distinguish the Buddhist theory of karma from the other non-Buddhist theories. Firstly, it has to be distinguished from the Jain theory according to which man could not develop morally and spiritually without

undergoing all the consequences of one's previous evil karma. The Jains hoped to achieve this by indulging in ascetic practices, which they believed helped to wear away the evil effects of past karma. The value of a moral act likewise depended on its physical expression rather than the intention, unlike in Buddhism.

The Buddhist theory has also to be distinguished from an Ājīvika theory which asserted that all present actions and experiences are strictly determined by previous karma. Karma, according to Buddhism, while being non-deterministic was only one among many factors which conditioned the nature of the individual's experiences of pleasure and pain. Among them were the physiological state of the body, which was partly a product of heredity or the biological laws (*bīja-niyāma*) recognised in Buddhism. The other factors were changes in the physical environment (*utu-pariṇāma*), in social vicissitudes (*visama-parihāra*), the intentional activity of the individual (*opakkamika*) and lastly karma. Karma, it would appear, could operate separately in a psychosomatic manner or in co-operation with the other factors.

Since a number of factors operated in conditioning man's experience, it was wrong to say that pleasure and pain were due entirely to one's own actions (*sayam kataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ*). Nor was it due to the action of an external agent like God (*paraṃkataṃ*), nor to a combination of both (*sayam kataṃ ca paraṃ kataṃ ca*), nor was it accidental (*adhicca-samuppanna*). Pleasure and pain were causally

conditioned (*paṭicca-samuppanna*) and man by his knowledge of himself and nature could understand, control and master them.

## Fatalism, Heredity and Karma

Since karmic correlations were not deterministic, karma was only one of many factors conditioning the nature of experience and past karma was extinguishable and modifiable in the context of one's present actions, it need hardly be pointed out that the Buddhist teaching of karma was not fatalistic. Buddhism, it may be noted, was opposed to all forms of determinism, natural determinism (*sabhāva-vāda*), theistic determinism (*issara-kāraṇa-vāda*), karmic determinism (*pubba-kammavāda*) or any combination of them. According to one Brahmanical text, nature (*prakṛti*) compels man to act as he does, while nature itself is under the control or will of God.

According to Buddhism, man is conditioned by his heredity (*bīja-niyāma*), by his environment, physical, social and ideological (*salāyatana-paccayā phasso* etc.), by his psychological past (*citta-niyāma*) including his karmic heritage (*kamma-niyāma*) but he is not determined by any or all of them. He has an element of free will (*atta-kāra*) or personal endeavour (*purisa-kāra*) by exercising which he can

change his own nature as well as his environment (by understanding it) for the good of himself as well as of others. In this sense man is master of his fate (*attā hi attano nātho*).

The laws of heredity, likewise, are not to be confused with the laws of karma. Buddhism accepts both. As a result there may be situations in which the causal lines of karma and heredity coincide. A person may have a certain trait because he inherits it from one of his parents and also because he has a particular karmic reason or affinity for it.

Sometimes in the case of mental traits, the origin may be karmic rather than hereditary. As Professor C. D. Broad (Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University of Cambridge) has stated in his examination of the philosophy of the late Professor John McTaggart of Cambridge University, who urged a belief in rebirth and karma on philosophical grounds in his books *The Nature of Existence* and *Some Dogmas of Religion*: “McTaggart points out that the assumption of selective affinity between certain kinds of mind and certain kinds of organism would explain likenesses in mental characteristics between parents and children which are often ascribed to the direct influence of heredity. Owing to heredity a man’s organism will resemble those of his direct ancestors more closely than those of other people. Now, similar organisms will be adapted to similar minds and zygotes which will develop into similar organisms are likely to attract similar minds and unite with them at conception.” Professor Broad adds, “I think it must

be admitted that this theory is ingenious and plausible.” [21]  
Besides it can be seen how rebirth and karma can explain the (sometimes marked) temperamental differences in identical twins, who when they happen to be “Siamese twins” have an identical and a common environment.

## Central Teaching

It must, however, not be forgotten that the central teaching of Buddhism is not that of continuing to perform good karma for the sake of rewards in continued saṃsāric existence (which cannot be enjoyed without the subsequent suffering from the evil which finds fruition) but the elimination of any karmic (i.e. rebirth-producing) action.

The immediate ideal of the Buddhist should therefore be that of attaining the first stage of spiritual development (*sotāpanna*) by the elimination of attachment to notions of ego and ego-centred views (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*), by elimination of doubts regarding the Buddhist account of the nature and destiny of man in the universe (*vicikicchā*) through examination, inquiry into and partial verification of the truth of the Dhamma, and the realisation that religion is part and parcel of one’s daily living and experience and not of obsessional attachment to rites and rituals (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*). Such a person is “not liable to fall below

the status of human existence" (*avinipātadhammo*) and is destined to achieve the goal of enlightenment (*niyato sambodhiparāyano*) before long. This is the path leading to the destruction of karmic bondage (*kammakkhaya*) in which the good life is cultivated with the growth of selflessness, love and understanding for its own intrinsic worth and not for egoistic rewards.

# III. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma

As we pointed out in the talk on the Buddhist view of survival, it would be incorrect to represent the Buddhist conception of survival as being a simple doctrine of rebirth. If we use the word “rebirth” to denote the view that immediately or some time after death we return to an earth-life, then such rebirth is only a special case of re-becoming.

According to this Buddhist doctrine of re-becoming, there could be continuity of individuality in various planes of existence. We may survive as a discarnate spirit (Pali *gandhabba* = Sanskrit *gandharva*) in the spirit sphere (*petti-visaya*), as a denizen of a sub-human world or as an angelic spirit in the celestial planes of existence. Such survival, as the *Kathāvatthu* explains, is either in the gross material world (*kāma-loka*), the subtle material world (*rūpa-loka*), or the immaterial world (*arūpa-loka*). There is no intermediate existence (*antarābhava*) apart from existence in one of these three planes of becoming.

Since human existence is a mixture of good and evil, the usual pattern as the texts make out is to survive as a discarnate spirit and come back to a human existence. The practice of Buddhism by the cultivation of faith (*saddhā*),

virtue (*sīla*), learning (*suta*), selflessness (*cāga*) and wisdom (*paññā*) makes it possible for a person to determine his future birth on the human or celestial planes. A person who has become a non-returner (*anāgāmi*) need not come back to a human existence and an *Arahant* will not be born again in the spatio-temporally and causally conditioned cosmos.

## Novel Theory

Besides, the Buddhist theory of survival, as we have already shown, is a novel theory which is not to be found in the pre-Buddhist literature. It was a doctrine of survival without the concept of a self-identical substance or soul. The physical form, perceptions, feeling, will or intellect were not the soul, nor did the soul own them, nor was a soul to be found within them nor again were they to be located in a cosmic soul. There was no self apart from a complex of psychophysical processes and man was defined as a bundle of dispositions (*suddha-saṅkhāra-puñja*). Though there was no self-identical (*anaññaṃ*) substance, there was a continuity (*santati, santāna*) of individuality, sometimes referred to as a stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) or a stream of becoming (*bhava-sota*). Associated with a person's present body were the dispositions with potentialities for re-becoming (*ponobhavika bhavasāṅkhāra*).

These planes of existence and the operations of karma were observed by the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment. His knowledge consisting of “the recall of prior lives” (*pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*) is described as follows:

“When his mind is thus composed, clear and cleansed without blemish, free from adventitious defilements, pliant and flexible, steadfast and unperturbed, he turns and directs his mind to the recollection of his former lives, viz. one life, two lives ... ten lives ... a hundred lives ... through evolving eons, recalling in what place he was born, his name and title, his social status, his environment, experiences and term of life and dying there, in what place he was next born, and so on up to his present existence he remembers the varied states of his former lives in all their aspects and details. Just as a man who has travelled from his village to another and from that to yet another, when he returns to his former village by the same route, remembers how he came from village to village, where he stayed and rested, what he said and what he did; even so, when the mind is composed ...” [22]

Since the Buddhist theory of survival is a composite theory, the case in support of such a theory should include at least the arguments for survival as discarnate spirits as well as the arguments for rebirth.

Before we examine such arguments and the evidence, we

have to meet the objection that the known facts of science concerning brain-mind phenomena suggest the impossibility of survival.

## Two Views

There are two classical views regarding the relationship between the mind and the body. One is the identity hypothesis, which either denies the reality of mental experience or holds that such experiences are inseparable from aspects of neural or brain phenomena. The other is dualism, which holds that mental and neural phenomena interact.

The extreme form of the identity hypothesis, called central state materialism, tries to do away with such factors as “experience” or “consciousness” and explains psychological behaviour as being solely the functioning of the central nervous system. This is a purely mechanistic theory.

A less extreme view, which is still monistic, is the psychosomatic theory according to which psychological experience and brain phenomena are merely the two aspects of one reality. According to this theory the brain-mind combination does not function in a purely mechanical manner, but since brain and mind are two aspects of the

same process, they both cease to function with the death of the person.

A modern form of the dualist theory would be the instrumental or the transmission theory, according to which the brain would function as the instrument of the mind, being itself affected by it.

Buddhism, which discards the monistic and the dualistic hypotheses, would hold that there is some truth in each without subscribing to either. For Buddhism the human being in normal consciousness is a psycho-physical unit, in which the physical and psychical phenomena are in a state of mutual dependence (*aññamañña-paccaya*). Yet at the same time aspects of will can control, govern, and produce mental activity. Also, when the body is brought within control and is in a state of perfect composure with its activities stilled (*kāya-saṅkhāra niruddha*), it can exercise its extra-sensory powers of perception.

Buddhism, therefore, while rejecting the identity hypothesis that “the mind and the body are the same” (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*) and the dualist hypothesis that “the mind and the body are different” (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*) finds partial truth in each and thus puts forward a middle view.

## Neurology

The ideal scientist in the field of neurology is not expected to subscribe to any particular point of view. As Dr. Wilder Penfield said in 1957, “Any scientist who looks up from his work to declare, for example, that the truth is to be found in monism or dualism, or that there is a middle ground, ceases to be a scientist.” [23]

This does not, however, mean that the findings of scientists have no bearing on these theories. The advances made over the last fifty years are due to new electro-physiological techniques which have made it possible to stimulate single nerve fibres and record responses from single nerve cells; the measurement of the electrical activity of the brain (EEGs); brain surgery; and the study of the chemical basis of neural phenomena. They have shown that it is possible to alter somewhat the state of the personality or consciousness by physical or chemical means.

Consciousness, incidentally, cannot be argued or analysed away to the satisfaction of the extreme monists, for it is a brute fact that certain physiological processes such as aspects of brain phenomena are accompanied by consciousness or self-consciousness, though it could have been otherwise.

## Memory

At the same time, this research has also shown that there is no one-to-one correspondence between brain phenomena and mental experience as the psychosomatic theory would like to maintain. Thus, memory is not uniquely located in particular points of the brain. Dr. H. O. Hebb stated in 1953 that “it is very difficult to conceive of memory as a function of a localised region.” [24]

Dr. Penfield records that when a specific point in the brain of a woman patient was touched, she heard a mother calling her little boy. But eleven minutes later when the same point was touched with the electrode, the patient no longer heard the mother calling her little boy but instead heard the voices of people calling from building to building. In another case, the patient heard the same song vividly when each of four different points in the brain was stimulated. Lord Brain F. R. S., the eminent neurologist, states, “Evidently in the brain, memory is not a unitary function nor is there any single part of the nervous system in which all memories are stored.” [25]

The lack of specific localisation is not confined to memory but is to be found in other functions as well. In 1912, Yerkes found that habits registered in one part of the nervous system of an earthworm might shift later onto another part, and a similar versatility was to be found in human brains relative to the effects of brain damage in children by Klebanoff, Singer and Wilensky in 1954.

A senior lecturer in zoology, working mainly on the brains

of rats, reports as follows: "Three of the preceding sections are headed respectively 'cortex,' 'limbic system' and 'reticular system,' but this anatomical arrangement does not correspond to the facts of function: the study of any of these systems soon becomes meaningless without reference to the others. During every few milliseconds, in the waking brain, information passes to and fro in a network of communication of which only the larger details are yet certainly known ... In such a flux, we cannot, with our present knowledge, properly speak of localisation of function but only of the specific effects of injury or stimulation ... A small injury can influence behaviour which certainly depends also on the functioning of the other parts; by contrast, some substantial injuries leave behaviour largely unaltered; and when behaviour is disturbed by lesions, there may be subsequent recovery due, evidently, to some compensatory process elsewhere. These facts at present defy explanation. All they do is to make accounts of neural function in terms of reflex arcs as absurd as interpretations of learning in terms of conditioned reflexes." [26]

In a recent BBC broadcast, Dr Grey Walter speaking on *Mind, Matter, and Machines*, confessed the lack of knowledge about the nature of memory. He said: "No sketch of the contemporary world of brain research would be complete without a hue of mystery because this is what catches the mind's eye. For me there are two great obscurities in our picture: memory and sleep." [27] Recently (April, 1968) Dr.

Penfield confessed to the limitations of present scientific research. He said: “The more we learn about the mechanisms within the brain, the clearer it becomes that science has not thrown any real light on the nature of the mind ... The only way the neurophysiologist works is to study the action of the brain on one side and the changing stream of mental activity on the other. You can see the parallelism of the activity but you cannot understand the interrelationship.” [28]

It is said that a circular stimulus figure that we observe as a circle will be far from circular when it is projected in the occipital lobe of the observer’s cortex. So what we perceive as a circle is not circular in outline in the brain. The case is similar with our vision of three-dimensional figures. [29]

## Instrumental Theory

The brain functions or is made to function as a whole and there is no one-to-one psychosomatic correspondence between brain phenomena and the concomitant experiences. So despite the recent advance in biochemistry and microbiology, mental phenomena cannot be considered to be just one aspect of a single process in the brain.

Professor Sir John Eccles, who has been described by Sir

Cyril Burt as “the most eminent of living neurologists who has specialised in the study of the brain,” has observed that “the structure of the brain suggests that it is the sort of machine that a ‘ghost’ might operate”, where the word “ghost” is used “to designate any kind of agent that defies detection by such apparatus as used to detect physical agents.” [30]

This suggests that an instrumental theory of the brain cannot be excluded in the light of modern findings. We must not forget in this context that many physiological changes are initiated by the operation of aspects of will, and that many diseases not only have a psychological origin (with or without a discoverable organic condition) but are curable by purely psychological means. We may note that physical pain with an organic basis can be relieved or removed by chemical means (i.e. drugs) or by the suggestions of hypnosis.

When in addition to all this, we have to take into account the realities of ESP (extra-sensory perception), the identity hypothesis becomes almost untenable although there was much to be said in its favour. Mr. John Beloff, a lecturer in Psychology in the University of Edinburgh, regards the para-psychological evidence as constituting the most damaging objection to any materialist theory of mind as envisaged in the identity hypothesis.

This is what he says: “This (i.e. para-psychological evidence), it seems to me, is the empirical reef on which the

identity hypothesis is doomed to founder even if it can survive all other hazards. Most of its supporters do indeed recognise the danger, but like Feigl, pin their faith to the ability of science to explain the ESP phenomena eventually along more or less conventional lines (obscure brain functions, unsuspected sources of energy etc.). Such faith, though plausible enough twenty or thirty years ago, is now increasingly unrealistic. The choice that confronts us today, I submit, is a very drastic one: either we must blankly refuse to credit the evidence or we must be prepared to accept a radical revision to the whole contemporary scientific world picture on which materialism has taken its stand." [31]

That the para-psychological phenomena constituting ESP have come to stay and are at present accepted as valid by leading scientists, psychologists and philosophers is evident from a recent publication (1967) of a book called *Science and ESP in the International Library of Philosophy & Scientific Method*.

The brain may be compared to a computer, and electronic machines can be constructed to perform certain operations of abstract thinking (such as logical and mathematical calculations) with a greater speed, precision and accuracy than the human mind is capable of. But however much such computers may simulate human behaviour, they cannot have psychological experiences, express personal behaviour as opposed to mere imitation, and have the degree of creativity and spontaneity that a human mind is capable of exhibiting.

Summing up recent scientific findings on the body-mind problem, Professor Hornell Hart states: “To look at the body-mind problem without bias, it is essential that we recognise two pivotal facts: (1) that damage to brain structure may block or distort what the “I”-thinker wants to transmit and (2) that the chemical condition of the brain has marked effects on the moods and attitudes of the “I”-thinker himself ... Whatever it is that thinks “I” in any one of us is not a constant, unchanging reality. Nor is it something which progresses smoothly and consistently along a regular trend.” [32]

## Buddhist View

All this seems to support the Buddhist theory of the mind, which holds that “conscious mental and cognitive phenomena function in dependence on their physical basis,” [33] that certain aspects of will can direct, govern and produce mental activity as well as verbal and bodily behaviour and that when the body and the brain are stilled with the attainment of the fourth *jhāna* (and sometimes even otherwise), the mind can exercise its powers of extra-sensory perception which are potentially present.

So none of the modern findings with regard to the mind and its relation to the brain, or the assertions of modern brain

physiologists, in any way preclude the empirical possibility of survival after death. This does not mean that survival after death is a fact but that it is an open possibility to be proved or disproved or made probable or improbable in the light of relevant evidence.

## Other Objections

There are other objections that are raised specifically against the concept of rebirth. They fall into three categories: (i) that rebirth is a self-contradictory concept, (ii) that it cannot account for the increase in the human population, which is a fact, and (iii) that bio-genesis or reproduction by fission at the lowest levels of life is inexplicable on the basis of the rebirth theory.

The first objection is that the concept of rebirth involves the identity of two or more persons, one of whom lives. It is held that the identification of two or more persons regarding them as one and the same person is either meaningless or self-contradictory. This is based on the belief that the identity of the person consists in the identity of the body, which is certainly the case in the law courts. But as the philosopher, John Locke, pointed out with specific reference to the case of rebirth, we also apply a mental criterion in our identification of persons.

If someone suffers from an attack of total amnesia, which involves a complete black-out of his past memories, resulting in a complete change of life, we would be inclined to say that he is now a new person, that he is not the same person as before. For example, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde who have the same body are regarded as two different persons. This means that as regards the identity of persons, we normally employ two criteria, that of the continuity of the body and that of the continuity of memory and mental dispositions. In the rebirth case all that is claimed is that, in a significant sense, there is continuity (*santati*) of the mind of the individual from one earth-life to another.

This makes it meaningful to say that two persons, historically removed from each other in time, are one and the same individual because they have a continuous mental history. The modern positivist philosopher, Professor A. J. Ayer of Oxford, granting the meaningfulness and the logical possibility of rebirth, says: "I think that it would be open to us to admit the logical possibility of reincarnation merely by laying down the rule that if a person who is physically identified as living at a later time does have the ostensible memories and character of a person who is physically identified as living at an earlier time, they are to be counted as one person and not two." [34] The logical objection is, therefore, untenable.

The second objection is that it cannot account for the increase in human population. This objection would be valid if the theory required that any human birth at present

presupposes the death of a prior human being on this earth. Such a theory would also make it impossible for human beings to evolve out of anthropoid apes since the first human beings to evolve would not have had human ancestors. [35] But according to the early Buddhist view of the cosmos, there are hundreds and thousands of galaxies spread out in space, containing “thousands of suns, moons, earths and other inhabited spheres.” It is also the case according to the Buddhist theory of rebirth that the prior life of a human being may be animal. It is, therefore, possible according to this theory to account for the increasing number of present human births in terms of the deaths of human beings, animals or non-human beings in this as well as on other planets in the universe.

As regards the third objection from bio-genesis, it can hardly affect the Buddhist theory. Although according to some Brahmanical theories, rebirth is possible even at the level of plants, it appears to be the case according to Buddhism that rebirth takes place at a higher level of evolution when a “re-becoming mind” has been formed with the persistence of memory. After his enlightenment, the Buddha refers to some of his Jain practices, as an aspirant to Buddhahood, in the following words: “I used to walk up and down conscientiously extending my compassion even to a drop of water, praying that the dangerous bacteria in it (*khuddake pāṇe visamagate*) may not come to harm.” [36] The context seems to suggest that this was a waste of time.

# IV. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma

In examining the case for the Buddhist theory of survival and karma, we took up for consideration in the last talk certain objections which may be levelled against the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. The first of these was that modern discoveries about the nature of mental phenomena and the relationship between the brain and the mind ruled out any possibility of a survival hypothesis being true. We pointed out, on the contrary, that in the light of modern findings regarding the brain-mind relationship and the assertions of leading brain physiologists, the empirical possibility of survival after death remained an open possibility.

## Body-Mind Problem

The case against the possibility of survival in the light of what we know about the mind is fully stated in a book by Dr. C. Lamont called *The Illusion of Immortality*.<sup>[37]</sup> A sound

criticism of its contents is to be found in Ch. XIII of a book by Dr. C. J. Ducasse, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Brown University, called *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life after Death*. [38]

The Buddhist theory of the relationship between body and mind can account for the basic facts stated in Lamont's book as well as the criticisms of Ducasse. Lamont's case is based on the following facts:

- a. that "the power and versatility of living things increase concomitantly with the development and complexity of their bodies in general and their nervous systems in particular."
- b. that "the genes or other factors from the germ cells of the parents determine the individual's inherent physical characteristics and inherent mental capacities."
- c. that, during the course of life "the mind and the personality grow and change, always in conjunction with environmental influences, as the body grows and changes."
- d. that "specific alterations in the physical structure and condition of the body, especially in the brain and cerebral cortex, bring about specific alterations in the mental and emotional life of a man."
- e. that "conversely, specific alterations in his mental and emotional life result in specific alterations in his bodily condition." [39]

Ducasse shows that (e) contradicts Lamont's contentions against dualism. He further cites the case of psychosomatic disease to show that, primarily, mental states cause physical changes in the body. Psychosomatic medicine, for example, today recognises the fact that mental states such as anxiety, tension and worry sometimes cause painful stomach ulcers.

Now what is the Buddhist theory? Buddhism clearly holds that conscious mental and cognitive experiences function in dependence on a physical basis. A statement in the *Paṭṭhāna* reads as follows: "That physical basis in dependence on which the category of mental experience (*mano-dhātu*) and the category of cognitive experience (*mano-viññāṇa-dhātu*) function, this physical basis is to the category of mental experience and the category of cognitive experience and to phenomena associated with them, a condition by way of dependence" (*nissaya-paccaya*).

Because of this dependence it is not surprising that (a) is true and (d) occurs, namely the alterations in the physical basis resulting in alterations in the nature of consciousness.

Yet the dependence is not one-sided. As the Buddhist texts elsewhere state, "the mind follows in the wake of the body" (*kāyanvayaṃ cittaṃ*) and "the body follows in the wake of the mind" (*cittanvayo kāyo*). The relation between the psyche (*viññāṇa*) and its hereditary psychophysical basis (*nāmarūpa*) is one of "mutual dependence" (*aññamañña-paccaya*). The will and other psychological factors can initiate some of the mental and physical changes that take place as suggested in

(e).

Again, since according to Buddhism, the psychophysical basis of our bodies is partly due to what is derived from mother and father and “biological laws” (*bīja-niyāma*) operate, it is not surprising that (b) is partly true, namely that genetic factors condition our physical and some of our mental characteristics.

When the Buddha told Sāti that it was wrong to hold that consciousness fares on from life to life without change of identity (*anaññam*), he illustrated this by showing that consciousness was causally conditioned. It is conditioned by the state of our body, which is partly a product of hereditary factors. It is also conditioned by the external environment. On account of the eye and visual phenomena, there arises in us visual consciousness. Similarly in respect of the other senses, there arise forms of consciousness associated with their respective sense objects.

Likewise, it is said, that on account of the impact on the conscious mind (*manoviññāṇa*) of ideas (*dhamma*), there arise various forms of conceptual consciousness. When these ideas do not come to us through language from our social and external ideological environment, they impinge on the conscious mind from our own unconscious. As a result of this our consciousness changes and grows and this in turn affects our subsequent behaviour. This is how the Buddha explains to Sāti that the psyche (*viññāṇa*) is not an unchanging entity but is in a state of dynamic growth and

becoming, in close association with the conditioning of the body.

In the case of visual stimuli etc., they physically affect the senses in giving rise to their respective impressions (*paṭigha-samphassa*), but in the case of ideas that arise in the mind in remembering, imagining, thinking etc., the contact with the conscious mind is said to be only conceptual (*adhivacana-samphassa*).

It is these impressions and ideas and their by-products that accumulate in our memory and form part of our mind. So what is stated in (c), namely that “the mind and personality grow and change always in conjunction with environmental influences as the body grows and changes,” is partly true. As we have seen above, it is stated in the Buddhist texts themselves.

So while Buddhism holds that the person is a psychophysical unit (*nāmarūpa*), it does not subscribe to the identity hypothesis that the mind and the body are one and the same entity, nor to the dualistic hypothesis that the mind and the body are entirely different. Besides, Buddhism holds that if awareness (*sati*) can be retained while the impressions and ideas that impinge on the conscious mind are inhibited, the activity of the body is gradually stilled and the emotions of sensuous desire (*kāmacchanda*) and hate (*vyāpāda*) subside, then the mind being intrinsically resplendent (*pabhassara*) gradually acquires certain extra-sensory powers of perception (*abhiññā*).

What we outlined earlier was the relationship of the conscious mind (*manodhātu, manoviññāṇadhātu*) to its physical basis, but we must not forget that according to the Buddhist theory, the “stream of consciousness,” has two components without a sharp division between them (*ubhayato abhocchinnaṃ*), the conscious mind and the unconscious, in which accumulate the emotionally charged experiences that we have had, going back through childhood and birth into previous lives. Besides, with the expansion and development of consciousness (*vibhūta-saññi*), it attains a paranormal state.

How much of our memories in the unconscious are associated with the brain? Do they include the memories of prior lives as well? What is the nature of the association between the potentially paranormal mind and the brain? Does the paranormal mind function at its best when the activity of the brain and the body is quiescent (*kāyasaṅkhārā niruddhā*) under its control? The total psyche (*viññāṇa*) of a person, comprising the conscious mind, the memories and dispositions in the unconscious and the potentially paranormal mind, is said to be “associated with and linked to the body” (*ettha cittaṃ ettha paṭibaddhaṃ*). But it is not clear how close or how loose the association of its several aspects is.

The Buddhist texts speak of two forms of telepathy, direct and indirect. Indirect telepathy, it is said, is had “by attuning oneself with the thought-vibrations of a person as he thinks” (*vitakkayato vitakka-vipphāra-saddaṃ sutvā*). Direct

telepathy does not require this mediating process. Is the activity of the brain required for indirect telepathy while it is unnecessary for direct telepathy?

In the previous talk we tried to show that the modern findings in regard to the mind and its relation to the brain do not preclude the possibility of survival after death. While reiterating this point we tried to give a more detailed account of the Buddhist solution to the body-mind problem.

The arguments of the critics from the nature of the mind and its relation to the brain, if valid, would hold against any theory of survival after death including the Buddhist. The other objections which we dealt with in the previous talk could only be levelled against a rebirth theory. They were, that rebirth was a self-contradictory concept in that it claimed that many persons were one and the same person, that it could not account for the increase in the human population and that bio-genesis or asexual reproduction at the lowest levels of life was inexplicable on the basis of a rebirth theory.

## Another Objection

If any of the above arguments were valid, they would have shown that a rebirth theory was not merely improbable but impossible. But we saw that the arguments were based on false premises and did not affect the Buddhist theory of rebirth. Where there was continuity of mind in the form of actual or potential memory and mental dispositions, then in

popular parlance, we can speak of the many lives of one person. The increase of population would not present a difficulty where pre-existence could be in the form of animal lives or those of non-human beings in this as well as other planets in the universe. Bio-genesis ceases to be a problem if rebirth takes place only at a higher level of biological evolution.

One of the commonest objections against a theory of rebirth, which implies pre-existence, is that we do not remember our past lives. The objection may take three different forms. First, that we do not have any memory of prior lives and that, therefore, there is no evidence of our having lived in the past prior to our present birth. Secondly, that memory is indispensable to the identity of a person. Thirdly, that unless we have memory, rebirth is to no purpose, since no moral or other lesson is learnt in the process.

We may first dispose of the third form of this argument. We are concerned only with the question as to whether re-becoming or rebirth is a fact and not whether it is a good thing to be reborn. We cannot argue from what ought to be or what is best, to what actually is the case. It is generally admitted that such an argument has no basis in fact, since if it is true, the world would be very much different from what in fact it is. Besides, there is a variety of rebirth theories and the question as to which one is true cannot be made on the basis of the ethical consideration as to which one is the best to believe in. For, quite apart from differences of opinion as to what is best (whether, for example, it would

be better to remember or not to remember), there is no justification, as we have shown, in arguing that what is best is in fact the case.

The second form of the objection is that memory is indispensable to the identity of a person. If by this is meant that unless a person has authentic memories of a past life, we cannot be certain at all that he is the same as one who lived before, there is some substance to this objection. But it would not be necessary to prove that this was so in the case of all people.

If a sufficient number and variety of people can be shown to have such authentic memories, then although we may not be able to identify the prior lives of other human beings, it would be a reasonable presumption that they too had had prior lives and are potentially capable of remembering this at some time or another.

To come back to the first form of the objection that we have no memory of having lived before, then, if rebirth is a fact, it is certainly not true of all human beings that they do not recollect their prior lives. For, there are at least a few who do, while many others could be assisted to recall their previous lives.

It is possible, of course, to argue that the lack of memory regarding prior lives is no proof that we have not lived before, just as the lack of memory regarding the first year of our lives on the part of all or most human beings is no proof that we did not live in the first year of our life. It is true that

mere absence of memory of a certain event or phase of life is no proof that such an event did not take place or that we did not live through such a phase of life.

Yet this is an argument from silence. In the case of our present life, we have another criterion to go on, namely, the criterion of bodily continuity and other people can testify to the fact that we existed in the first year of our lives and lived through certain experiences. But in the case of rebirth we have no evidence at all if we do not have actual or potential memories. Memory is, therefore, very relevant to the problem of rebirth.

However, it is necessary to point out that the word “memory” is used in two senses. In a secondary sense, “having a memory” is a matter of retaining a skill or capacity that we acquired. If someone learnt how to swim when he was a child and can now swim very well without having to re-learn it and without even being able to recall that he learnt to swim as a child, we still say that he remembers how to swim though he has forgotten that he had learnt it as a child.

If rebirth be the case, is it not likely that some of the capacities or skills we have or acquire without much difficulty in this life may be due to our having learnt them in a prior life, especially where they cannot be fully accounted for in terms of heredity or learning in this life?

The explanation, not only of capacities and skills but of differences of temperament or “weaknesses,” which also fall

into this category, would have to be the same. Now identical twins (as opposed to fraternal twins) are said to have the same heredity, and when they happen to grow up as “Siamese twins” joined to each other, they have more or less a common environment. Now if individual differences and variations are due entirely to the factors of heredity and environment alone, there should be identity of temperament and character on the part of these twins. At least there should not be marked differences in their dispositions and temperaments. But the facts are otherwise.

Dr. H. H. Newman, Professor of Zoology, University of Chicago, who made a specialist study of twinning, says with regard to the original “Siamese twins,” Chang and Eng: “The author of a study made when the twins were in London was impressed with the lack of any strong resemblance between Chang and Eng. Much emphasis was placed on their different dispositions and temperaments. Chang was inclined to drunkenness, while Eng was a teetotaler.” [40]

With regard to these identical twins, in general, his observations are as follows: “In describing several pairs of these strange twins, writers have commented upon their lack of close similarity. Such twins have been regarded as the only kind of twins that are beyond question derived from a single egg and therefore surely identical in their hereditary make-up. One would expect such twins, since they have not only a common heredity but a common environment (for they must be in the same environment all

the time), to be even more strikingly similar than pairs of separate twins that are not so intimately associated. The fact is, however, that Siamese twins are almost without exception more different in various ways than any but a very few pairs of separate one-egg twins. One of the most difficult problems faced by the twinning specialist is that of accounting for this unexpected dissimilarity of the components of Siamese twin pairs." [41]

Could this difference not be due to a third factor other than heredity and environment, namely, the psychological past of the two individuals? If so, is it not likely that even in other individuals as well there could be capacities, skills, temperaments, weaknesses etc., which are due to "memories" (in the secondary sense defined above) of prior lives rather than to the factors of heredity and environment? Geniuses or child prodigies, whose extraordinary accomplishments cannot be accounted for in terms of heredity or environment, would only be special cases of such a carry-over of skills from one life to another.

Apart from the use of the word "memories" in the above secondary sense, we use the word in its primary sense to denote the "recall of authentic experiences of one's past." In this sense there are quite a few who have claimed to have remembered experiences of their alleged prior lives. Some of them are spontaneous cases of recall while others are due to the intervention of hypnotists, who have carried out age-regression experiments. How authentic are these memories and what reason have we to believe that they are potentially

present in many if not all human beings? These are questions that we shall seek to answer in the subsequent talks on this subject.

# V. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma

It may be useful to summarize briefly the argument so far.

The Buddhist doctrine of re-becoming (*punabbhava*) was a novel theory in so far as it spoke of survival without a self-identical soul or substance. There was continuity (*santati*) of personality after death, and rebirth or the return to an earth-life was only a special case of such continuity. The doctrine was propounded after taking into account all the possible theories that could be advanced with regard to the problem of an after-life.

The Buddhist doctrine of karma merely taught that there was correlation between moral acts and their consequences, without implying any sort of fatalism. In fact, its implications were the very opposite of fatalism in that man by his understanding of his own nature could control his present and determine his own future.

In the two previous talks we examined some of the objections that could be levelled against this doctrine of re-becoming. We investigated the objection against any theory of survival from the alleged state of relationship that exists between the brain and the mind, and found that the

evidence against the possibility of survival was by no means crucial. Survival is neither proved nor disproved in the light of the modern findings regarding the brain-mind. Any theory of survival, therefore, stands or falls on the basis of independent evidence.

We also examined some of the objections raised specifically against rebirth. We found that the objection that rebirth was a self-contradictory concept was not valid since we can speak significantly of a single individual having many lives where there is a continuity of memory and mental dispositions. The argument from the increase in the human population could not be levelled against the Buddhist theory of rebirth since Buddhism entertains the possibility of prior lives among animal, human, or non-human ancestors on this or other planets. The objection from biogeneticists also was not valid since rebirth took place at a higher level of animal evolution.

The objection regarding the lack of memory of prior lives was far from valid. "Memory" may be used in one of two senses: (i) the recall of genuine experiences of one's past and (ii) the presence of capacities and skills acquired in the past. In the second sense we found that there was evidence for the existence of such "memories."

Identical twins when joined together (called "Siamese twins") have a common heredity and common environment. Yet psychologists observed that they differ in character and temperament. It is likely, therefore, that this

difference was due to a third factor (other than heredity and environment), namely the “carry over” of past skills and attitudes from prior lives. Geniuses or child prodigies, whose extraordinary accomplishments cannot be accounted for in terms of heredity or environment, would only be special cases of such a “carry over” of skills from one life to another.

In the former sense of memory, namely of the recall of genuine experiences in one’s past, it is claimed that there is evidence of the recall of genuine experiences from prior lives. Such claims have to be carefully examined.

## Unsatisfactory Arguments

Yet, before we proceed to do so, it is necessary to dispose of some unsatisfactory arguments that are sometimes adduced in support of the doctrine of rebirth. They may take many forms.

There is a tendency to urge that some belief is true because almost everybody holds it. Yet the universality of a belief does not entail its truth. Nor at the same time does it entail its falsity. It is sometimes maintained that many primitive peoples of the ancient world believed in survival or the doctrine of rebirth. But this does not imply that the belief is

either true or false. Its truth or falsity has to be established independently.

The relevance of the universality of the belief as evidence of its truth becomes more interesting when it is realised that everyone in a state of deep hypnosis gives an account of experiences in alleged prior lives, lived on earth, whatever their conscious beliefs may be. There is evidence that Materialists and Theists holding a variety of views on the subject of survival after death, without subscribing to the doctrine of rebirth or pre-existence, give alleged accounts of prior lives, recounting details of their experiences.

Does this imply the truth of the belief? Not necessarily, for it is possible that all of their beliefs could be illusory, though the universality of such an illusion has to be accounted for. But the experiences they recount certainly constitute evidence for the truth or falsity of the belief in rebirth. We shall carefully examine this evidence later on.

Another form in which an argument for survival is presented is that a human need or want implies the existence of what is needed or wanted. We need or want, for instance, food. Therefore, it is suggested, there must be food. Many people feel the need for immortality or at least survival after death. Therefore, it is suggested, there must be such immortality or survival.

However, this is an argument that cuts both ways. For others may argue that we believe in rebirth or survival because we need to believe or desire to entertain such a

belief. But what we like to believe is not necessarily true and, therefore, this is no evidence of the truth of the belief.

Freud in his work called *The Future of an Illusion* tries to show that people entertain certain religious beliefs, like the belief in the existence of God, for instance, because there is a deep seated craving in us for security amidst the insecurity of life and the uncertainty of the beyond. According to him people believe in God dogmatically because of such a deep-seated craving. It is an object of wish-fulfilment, and, in this special case, an 'illusion.'

This does not, however, necessarily mean that the belief is false. As Freud himself pointed out, a girl may believe in the existence of a Prince Charming who may, one day, come and propose to her. Because she likes to believe this, it does not necessarily mean that such a person does not exist. So the desire to believe in rebirth or survival does not necessarily show that the belief is false, just as the desire to disbelieve in rebirth does not imply that the contrary belief is false.

The Buddhist view on this material is both relevant and interesting. Our desires influence or condition our beliefs, to which we tenaciously cling (*tanhā paccayā diṭṭhūpādānaṃ*), but this does not necessarily mean that these beliefs are always false, for when they happen to be "right beliefs" (*sammā diṭṭhi*), they are in fact true.

So although desires affect our beliefs, this fact has no relevance to the truth or falsity of the beliefs. We have,

however, because of our emotional involvement with these beliefs, to weigh the evidence for or against their truth or falsity without prejudice. As Buddhists we have to examine the truth even of the belief in rebirth objectively without being prejudiced for—(*chanda*), or against—(*dosa*), or being affected by fear (*bhaya*) even if it be the fear of the beyond, or being guided by our erroneous beliefs (*moha*). So the desire to believe or not to believe does not affect the truth or falsity of the belief, but we have to guard against the prejudice resulting from these desires in our quest for truth.

## Authority and Revelation

Another set of arguments for survival is based on authority. It may be stated that many poets and mystics, as well as rational thinkers brought up in a tradition which condemned the belief, nevertheless professed the belief.

The classic case is that of Giordano Bruno, who is said to have stated in his profession of faith before the Inquisition: “I have held, and hold, souls to be immortal ... Speaking as a Catholic, they do not pass from body to body, but go to Paradise, Purgatory or Hell. But I have reasoned deeply, and, speaking as a philosopher, since the soul is not found without body and yet is not body, it may be in one body or in another, and pass from body to body. This, if it be not

(proved) true, seems, at least, likely ...” [42] Over two hundred and fifty well-known poets, philosophers and writers of the Western world have either held or professed some sort of belief in rebirth.

All that this seems to suggest is that the belief is worth examining, and it does not in any way imply the truth of the belief.

The argument from revelation is also unacceptable to science and Buddhism. It is true that certain texts in the *Vedic* tradition, particularly the middle and late *Upaniṣads*, profess a belief in rebirth, but there is a variety of views on the subject of survival in the Vedic tradition itself. In one of the early *Upaniṣads* rebirth is denied. It is said: “... there are these three worlds, the world of men, the world of departed spirits, and the world of the gods. The world of men is obtained through a son only, not by any other means.” [43]

While there are these contradictions within revelational traditions, the different theistic revelations also contradict one another on the problem of survival. So the doctrine of rebirth cannot be established by an argument from authority or revelation, since authority and revelation are not acceptable means of knowledge.

## Metaphysical and Ethical

# Arguments

The metaphysical arguments are no better. Apart from the fact that they make use of unverifiable concepts like “soul,” the arguments are of doubtful value and are generally discredited today. One of the traditional arguments for survival has been that the “soul is a substance, substances are indestructible; therefore the soul is indestructible, i.e. immortal.” But apart from the difficulty of the concept of a “soul,” the notion of an indestructible substance is discredited today.

With regard to rebirth, we have already met with a sample of such a metaphysical argument in that of Giordano Bruno (see above). Such arguments, based on pure reasoning, intended to prove the truth of rebirth, are to be met with, for example, in a work called *Some Dogmas of Religion* (Ch. IV) by Professor John McTaggart of Cambridge. But they have little appeal today since it is recognised that matters of fact cannot be proved by pure reasoning, (*takka*), as the Buddha himself pointed out (*mā takka-hetu*).

The ethical argument has a greater appeal, but this is so only for those who accept its presuppositions. We have already stated this in the talk on the Buddhist doctrine of karma. There we pointed out that according to the Buddha karma was one of the predominant factors responsible for human inequalities.

This has often been represented as embodying the following rational, ethical argument consisting of an empirical and ethical premise, viz. “people are of unequal status; those of unequal status ought to be such by virtue of their own actions—therefore, since this is not due to their actions in this life, it should be due to their actions in prior lives. This means that both pre-existence and karma are the case.”

This is an argument that has appealed to many thinkers down through the ages, but most modern thinkers would not accept the second ethical premise, namely that “those of unequal status ought to be such by virtue of their own actions.” This is because most people believe today that the universe of nature is amoral, and there is no ethical reason why anything should or should not be so. On the other hand many hold that ethical statements are neither true nor false. It is nevertheless a fact that many people brought up in a belief in the inherent justice of nature ask questions of the form, “why should so-and-so be born healthy while I am in a state of ill-health from birth etc?”

It is only the modern scholars who have made an argument of this since the Buddha merely stated as an observed fact that the predominant cause of these inequalities was karma. The fact is, in principle, unverifiable, but the argument appeals to one’s moral sense, and is of value only if such a moral sense is universally present and shared by all mankind.

# The Evidence

The above arguments are, therefore, for one reason or another, unsatisfactory and have little force in proving the truth of rebirth or survival. The truth or falsity of rebirth, therefore, rests on the relevant empirical evidence.

We may classify the main evidence into two sorts: (i) experimental and (ii) spontaneous. The other evidence may be considered separately.

The experimental evidence is based on age-regression. Under hypnosis a subject can recall or re-live his past experiences. With regard to this life when regressed to age six, for instance, the subject would behave, write and talk as he or she did at that time and recall the past experiences, which it may not be possible to recall by normal means. The handwriting and the memories could be independently checked. Such experiments have convinced psychologists and psychiatrists today that the authentic buried memories of one's childhood experiences, which cannot be called to mind via normal consciousness, can be unearthed by hypnosis. It may be asked whether the subject is not just responding to the suggestions of the hypnotist and is merely play-acting or shamming. That this is not so has been proved experimentally.

Dr. H. J. Eysenck states that "in one case it was found that when a twenty-year-old girl was regressed to various ages

she changed the chalk to her left hand at the six-year-level; she had started writing with the left hand, but had been forced to change over at the age of six." [44]

In another case a thirty-year-old was hypnotized and regressed to a level of about one year of age, on a chair arranged in such a way that with the release of a latch it would fall back into a horizontal position. When the latch was released the behaviour elicited was not that of an adult but of a child. An adult, it is said, would quite involuntarily extend both arms and legs in an effort to maintain balance. Since the subject made no movement of the limbs but screamed in fright and fell backward with the chair, urinating in the process, Eysenck comments, "It is unlikely that such behaviour is simply due to play-acting." [45]

Intelligence and achievement tests have been used to assess the nature of the behaviour of regressed subjects and it has been found that "people tend to behave on tests of this type in a manner roughly appropriate to the given age."

Eysenck's observations with regard to the possibility of faking such behaviour are as follows: "Such reactions, of course, could easily be faked, but it has been shown that when, for instance the eye movements of subjects are photographed, a considerable lack of ocular co-ordination and stability is found when regression to a relatively young age occurs. Such physiological phenomena are characteristic of young children and are difficult, if not impossible, to produce voluntarily." [46]

A remarkable fact is that the psychological experiences had, when the physiological condition of the body was different, are re-enacted. To quote Eysenck again, “Even more impressive is another case of a subject who had a colloid cyst removed from the floor of the third ventricle. Prior to this removal, the subject had been suffering from blindness in the left half of the right eye: After the operation, vision had become normal, but when the subject was regressed to a time shortly before the operation the visual defect again re-appeared during the regression.” [47] The expected physiological reaction is not only appropriate to the age but reflects the physiological condition of the body at the time.

In the light of the experimental evidence Eysenck concludes: “Experiments such as those described in some detail above leave little doubt that there is a substantial amount of truth in the hypothesis that age regression does, in fact, take place, and that memories can be recovered which most people would think had been completely lost.” [48] This is the consensus of opinion among orthodox psychologists today.

So genuine memories not accessible to normal recall are generally evoked or the experiences re-lived at the suggestion of the hypnotist in age-regression. So at least as far as this life is concerned, to say that the memories recalled under age-regression are hallucinatory or delusive is not correct. We shall take up for consideration later in the light of the experimental data, the question as to whether the recall of alleged experiences of prior lives under

hypnotic regression is hallucinatory.

# VI. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Kamma

In the preceding talk we stated that the evidence for the doctrine of rebirth was mainly of two sorts. There was (1) the experimental evidence from age-regression and (2) the spontaneous evidence based on a historical study of people, mainly children, from different parts of the world who claimed to recall their alleged prior lives. There is also a category of evidence which may be considered apart from the above two.

## Age-Regression

The experimental evidence is based on age-regression. In this experiment the subject is hypnotized and gradually taken back in time to the past. In the course of this the subject recalls and re-lives past experiences. Much of these experiences cannot be evoked by normal memory. These experiments have proved to the satisfaction of modern psychologists and psychiatrists that authentic memories of

this life, which cannot be called to mind in normal consciousness, can be recalled by these means.

We quoted in the previous talk the view of Dr. H. J. Eysenck, who was Professor of Psychology at the University of London, namely that “there is a substantial amount of truth in the hypothesis that age-regression does, in fact take place, and that memories can be recovered which most people would think had been completely lost.” This is in fact the consensus of opinion among orthodox psychologists today on the basis of the experimental findings. Dr. L. M. Wolberg observes “The consensus at the present time is that ‘regression actually does produce early behaviour in a way that obviates all possibility of simulation;’ this is the opinion of such authorities as Erickson, Estabrooks, Lindner, and Spiegel, Shor and Fishman. My own studies have convinced me of this fact, although the regression is never stationary, constantly being altered by the intrusion of mental functioning at other levels.” [49]

It is a remarkable fact that in the course of these age-regressions even the physiological condition of the body undergoes changes appropriate to the past time at which the subject is having the experiences concerned, even when the present state of the body or the physical environment cannot be responsible for this. Drs. Brennan and Gill report a case where a patient some months after being exposed to a particular situation was regressed back to that time hypnotically. It is stated that “the subject spontaneously began to perspire and complain of the heat: This was rather

surprising in view of the fact that this particular phase of the study took place in winter. The experimenters then recalled that on the day to which the patient was now regressed, Kansas had experienced one of its hottest summer days.” [50]

## Prior Lives

The majority of these orthodox psychologists and psychiatrists, however, are reluctant to concede that the accounts given of and the experiences lived through alleged prior lives are genuine. In such cases they tend to dismiss these accounts and experiences of prior lives as fantasy or a product of dramatization and role playing based on material derived from the experiences of this life. They are prepared to grant that the subject’s behaviour “will give the appearance of reincarnation,” [51] but deny that the reincarnationist interpretation is valid.

So the position is that practically all the modern psychologists and psychiatrists are prepared to concede the fact that under age-regression a hypnotized subject will give detailed descriptions of an alleged prior life; but would not agree with the validity of a reincarnationist interpretation of the data.

The main reason for this seems to be the logical methodological difficulties involved in accepting an explanation in terms of the hypothesis of rebirth rather than a careful attempt on the part of these psychologists and psychiatrists to understand or explain the data itself.

In the previous talks we have tried to show that neither these logical nor methodological difficulties are valid. We pointed out that the concept of rebirth does not lead to contradictions. Even a positivist philosopher such as Professor A. J. Ayer of Oxford has stated that the concept of rebirth was meaningful. Besides, there is a growing realization that the phenomenon of consciousness cannot be explained away purely in terms of physico-chemical phenomena, while the validity of extra-sensory perception requires that psychological explanations be contained (where the data requires this) within the narrow and limiting framework of mechanistic materialist assumptions. The data therefore require to be examined with an open mind.

There have been however a few psychiatrists who have accepted the reincarnationist explanation as valid. Dr. Alexander Cannon refers to “one thousand three hundred and eighty-two reincarnation sittings to date” in his book *The Power Within*. [52] His own reactions to these and the final conclusion he came to are summed up in the words: “For years the theory of reincarnation was a nightmare to me and I did my best to disprove it and even argued with my trance subjects to the effect that they were talking

nonsense, and yet as the years went by one subject after another told me the same story in spite of different and varied conscious beliefs in effect until now, well over a thousand cases have been so investigated, and I have to admit that there is such a thing as reincarnation.” [53]

## The Evidence

All-important is the nature of the evidence and its authenticity, and the legitimate conclusions that we can come to in explaining this evidence with the help of the various hypotheses that may be adduced to explain it. When hypotheses cannot be accepted or rejected outright, they may be held with varying degrees of probability according to relevant criteria.

One of the earliest recorded experiments of psychologists was that of Professor Theodore Flournoy, Professor of Psychology in the University of Geneva, who experimented with one of his subjects at the end of the last century and recorded the data and findings in a book published in 1899. [54]

One of the prior lives of his Swiss subject was as an Arab chief’s daughter, who married a Hindu prince about four centuries before. The subject spoke and wrote in the

language (Arabic and Prākṛit), which she knew in the regressed state but not in her normal life, and gave details of experiences in this life, re-enacting and re-living some of the scenes. The facsimiles of the writing are reproduced at pages 289 and 313 of Flournoy's book.

Before we examine this case, we may turn our attention to a more popular work published in 1942. This would enable us to see the issues involved in the interpretation of the data more clearly. Since Buddhists are or ought to be interested only in objective facts or in "things as they are" (*yathābhūta*) it is important that we approach the subject with a critical mind without an initial bias for or against the theory of rebirth.

## "Researches in Reincarnation and Beyond"

The work is by Rev. A. R. Martin, an ordained preacher of the Coptic Church, and is entitled *Researches in Reincarnation and Beyond*, [55] (It is dedicated to "all seekers for truth whether or not it be in accordance with their former teachings or preconceived ideas." [56] The book records the alleged experiences of people hypnotized by him or trained to recall their prior lives.

His comments with regard to the evidence and the records are as follows: “The questions and their answers thereto were carefully recorded, usually in shorthand, exactly as given. Great care was taken to ask no leading questions, thereby eliminating the possibility of implanting ideas in the mind of the reviewer, thus making certain to bring out only that which was recorded in the reviewer’s subconscious mind. These correlations of important persons and events often occurring hundreds of years ago, were carefully checked in reference books, histories, encyclopaedias etc., and were found correct as given by the reviewer. This information was known to come solely from the knowledge already in the reviewer’s subconscious mind, for it was known that such knowledge was not contained in his intellectual mind of this present life.” [57]

He claims that these explorations into the subconscious minds of various people “worked out through powers of mind, absolutely without the use of any kind of drug” was attempted, after a group of about twelve persons of various ages had for years examined various conflicting teachings of speculative philosophy on the subject of an after-life and were dissatisfied with them.

The author lists a number of beliefs about the nature of an after-life held by people in the West. The first was that “death ends all ...;” [58] the second that “the consciousness-soul dies and is buried with the body and remains there until a time called the resurrection when all persons who have ever lived from the beginning of creation to the time of

the resurrection will come forth, from the land or the sea or wherever they may be, to be judged and sent either to an eternal heaven or an eternal hell of fire and brimstone from which there is no escape;" [59] the third was the view that there is "an intermediate place of punishment or remorse from which the dead can be released through prayer, and liberated into an eternal heaven ..." [60] Several other such views are listed. The author says that he "has lived all of his present life (to this time) in the United States," [61] and was himself "raised to manhood under the instruction of the second belief," [62] and that none of these who thus met regularly to investigate these matters "even "leaned towards reincarnation." [63]

If this is so, then considering particularly the fact that no "leading questions" were asked, it is all the more remarkable that they were able to recall prior lives lived on earth. It is a curious fact, which calls for an explanation by itself, that those who in their normal conscious experience are materialists or theists, who do not believe in pre-existence or rebirth, invariably give alleged accounts of prior lives under deep hypnosis. Where the subject is asked to concoct an account of an alleged "prior life," this may be attributed to the suggestion of the hypnotist but where such prior lives are described without any express instructions on the part of the hypnotist to do so, this fact in itself calls for an explanation.

In an article appearing in the magazine *Two Worlds*, [64] the writer states:

“Sometimes the subject during what is called “wakeful state” is not a reincarnationist, or even has never heard about such an idea, or else “belongs to a creed that denies it emphatically.”

“One very intelligent man, a Protestant, asked the hypnotist in a deep, booming, slow voice, ‘Why do you ask such a question?’ The question was repeated, ‘Were you or were you not born for the first time?’

“He still hesitated, as if to conquer a strong inner opposition, and then, began to describe his life a couple of centuries ago in a monastery somewhere in Spain.

“When he awoke slowly and by reversing the age-regression process, the tape was played back to him. He was amazed because he did not know about reincarnation and never thought it possible.

“A bright, beautiful, mature woman talked freely about reincarnation and other related subjects. When she listened to the playback she said, ‘I must be crazy to say such things.’ She is a diehard Roman Catholic.” [65]

## Origin of Phobias

Granted that the experiences related in the above mentioned book are authentic and factual, many of our problems in this life can be understood in terms of their causal origins in a prior life.

This is very much like the manner in which the submerged traumatic experiences of this life (as explained in Freudian psychology) are the causal factors which account for symptoms.

Dr. Eysenck records the case of a Mrs. Smith who suffered from recurrent asthmatic attacks. Her work necessitated her going into various hospitals but in doing so she experienced a very strong fear reaction. The sight of a pair of hairy arms, or knives, also produced such a reaction. Under hypnotic age-regression, she was able to recall and re-live the incidents which were responsible for this condition. It was the shock caused by an operation for mastoiditis performed on her at the age of sixteen months, which she had forgotten. Dr. Eysenck describes the situation as follows: "During a self-induced trance one day, she was regressed to an early age, when she experienced a previously completely forgotten incident with unusual clarity. She seemed to be lying on a table under brilliant lights. A man was standing beside her holding a small knife. A vague, threatening object was descending from above her head and settled down over her face. She was terror-stricken and tried to rise, but two hairy arms grabbed her and roughly forced her back. She continued to struggle but was violently shaken and slapped repeatedly by someone. Finally, the object

came down over her face and smothered her. On inquiry, it was found that at the age of sixteen months a mastoidectomy had been performed on her and that she had been very sick afterwards with complications, caused by severe shock." [66]

The origin of this phobia was traced to a childhood incident in this life. But it is interesting to compare in this connection one of the experiences recorded in the book mentioned above, which locates the origin of a phobia in an incident of an alleged prior life. It is described as follows: "A middle aged woman ... when riding in a car driven twenty miles an hour or more, the motion produced such a fear within her that she would become very nervous and ready to jump out of the car. As a result she could ride only in cars driven around fifteen miles an hour. This fear of speed made it almost impossible for her to travel by train, bus etc. Upon entering upon a past-life review, she found herself to be a young girl travelling on a train with her parents, brothers, and sisters. As the train passed over a trestle bridge it was wrecked, killing all the members of the family but herself, along with many others who were on the train. Her injuries were so severe that she was badly crippled and rendered an invalid for the remainder of that life. The speed had been such a dominant factor in this accident and its impression was so deep that the subconscious fixation out-manifested in this life as intense fear whenever any degree of motion was felt by her." [67]

We may recount some of the observations of a like nature

made by Dr. Cannon on the basis of his case-studies. He says: "The majority of people do not benefit from psycho-analysis because the trauma lies not in this life but in a past life. Let me give you three examples: Mr. A. is a business-gentleman of undoubted capabilities, but all his life he has suffered from a phobia or fear of going down in lifts. He is a common-sensed individual and has studied psychology and psycho-pathology quite seriously and intelligently, and yet he has gained no benefit from it and is at a loss to know why he has this fear of travelling in lifts. Hypnotic experiments reveal that some centuries ago he was a Chinese general who fell from a great height and was accidentally killed. This had resulted in the phobia or fear of descending lifts in this life." [68]

## Karma?

If the experiences recounted in Rev. Martin's book *Researches in Reincarnation and Beyond* are authentic and factual, they also appear to throw some light on the operations of karma.

In one case five previous lives of a person are recorded. "In the fifth life previous to the present, the person's first recollection was that of awakening as a white baby in a log cabin." [69] The cabin was attacked by Red Indians, one of

whom took her along and brought her up as a Red Indian maiden. Eventually, she was taken away by a British trader "with whom she lived in a small hut" until he decided to leave her and cross the mountains in search of gold. He offered to take her back to the Indian tribe, but conscious of her white parentage and the coming motherhood she refused. Instead, faced with the prospect of being alone in the hut, it is said that she committed suicide by shooting herself on "the right side of her face."

In the very next birth, she is stated to have been born as a crippled child named Sammy, whose entire right side was paralysed. The subsequent birth is supposed to have been as a U. S. soldier of the South during the Revolution, when he was accosted by a British subject who stabbed him in the right side of the abdomen, causing his death.

In the following birth she was born as a girl named Nancy, whose mother worked for a wealthy family. A son of this family, it is said, fell in love with this girl and wanted to marry her but his parents objected and got her married to a farmhand. She subsequently journeyed West in a covered wagon and settled in Illinois, where two children were born. Nancy died at the age of thirty as a result of abdominal disorders. Her next life was as a person who became well-known as an operatic singer called "Miss Nellie," a daughter of a wealthy family near Baltimore, Maryland. She was happily married but before long her husband was shot dead and it is said that she "died of a broken heart." The author describes and comments on part of her present life as

follows: “When she was fifteen years old, the first of these negative conditions resulted in a paralysis of the right side of the face and neck. At this age she knew nothing of reincarnation or of the influence of past lives upon the present. The overcoming of the paralysis, slight traces of which are still apparent, was accomplished in a period of six to seven years through rest and quiet.” [70]

If the facts are as stated, are we to attribute her birth as a child paralysed on the right side in her fourth previous life and her paralysis of the right side of the face and neck in this life as well as, perhaps, her deaths from abdominal injuries or disorders, as karmic consequences of her suicide while being with child in her fifth previous life?

Taken literally if the experiences recounted here are authentic and true records of prior lives, they exemplify the truths of both rebirth and karma. But what justification have we for accepting these experiences at their face value?

## Normal Hypotheses

A person with a sceptical frame of mind may very well indulge in doubt and claim that one of several hypotheses other than rebirth could adequately account for the alleged facts. Some may even doubt whether the book I refer to

even exists, and whether all of this is not a concoction of mine! This would be the extreme hypothesis of Fraud. The reply to this is that the book is to be found in some libraries, e.g. the library of the University of Ceylon. A less extreme position that one could take would be to doubt whether the author of the book was not merely trying to bring out a sensationalist publication from which he might financially benefit and that the entire account is a concoction of his. One way of verifying this would be to contact the author and through him the people concerned, as the author himself wants those interested to do so. But this is unnecessary, since this kind of evidence can be made available with the help of a suitable hypnotist and hypnotizable subjects.

Once it is established that the book contains an account of authentic experiences accurately recorded, we may still doubt the assumption that they are genuine memories of past lives. We may try to explain them as being due to the role playing of the subject who has proceeded to give dramatized accounts of alleged prior lives the basis of material drawn from this life. We would then resort to the hypothesis of fantasy *or* self-deception, unless the author can prove to us, as he says he could, that "it was known that such knowledge was not contained in his intellectual mind of this present life." [71] This hypothesis would be difficult to exclude in the present circumstance unless it could be shown that specific items of knowledge later verified from encyclopaedias etc., were not known to the subject (as the

author claims to be the case). However, the fact that some of these alleged experiences solved some of the present psychological problems of some of these subjects, is a factor to be taken into consideration in judging the genuineness of these experiences, though this test is by no means conclusive.

Another “normal” explanation would be to assume that such “experiences” can be derived genetically from one’s ancestors. Apart from the fact that there is no independent evidence of such hereditary derivation of specific “memory experiences” (leaving out capacities and aptitudes), the hypothesis requires an ancestral link between the two personalities. This is very unlikely at least in those cases in which the prior life is located in such countries as Persia or Egypt.

## Paranormal Hypotheses

If the normal hypotheses fail to account for the facts, we have to resort to paranormal hypotheses to explain the evidence.

Granted that the “memories” correspond with historical facts, and knowledge of them is not derived from any experience in this life, it is possible to suggest that they are

the product of a telepathic, clairvoyant or retro-cognitive faculty operating along with dramatization and role playing. On such a hypothesis, these persons did not actually live in the past but acquired information about past events by paranormal or extra-sensory means and dramatized such a past life. Such a hypothesis appears to be more extravagant than a simple hypothesis of "rebirth." For, apart from not explaining all the data (e.g. the claim to identity, the serial nature of the recall in age-regression etc.), there is little evidence of such wide and penetrative powers of telepathic, clairvoyant or retro-cognitive perception except perhaps in a few extraordinary individuals.

For similar reasons, the hypothesis of spirit-possession appears to be less plausible in accounting for the data. For, in spirit-possession the alleged spirit communicating through the medium claims to be a different person from the personality associated with the body. In the case where a claim to rebirth is made, this is not so.

If a paranormal explanation is to be preferred, "rebirth" therefore appears to be more plausible than the others, the data being what they are. But the data presented in Rev. Martin's book do not clearly rule out the possibility of explanation in terms of fantasy or self-deception, as defined above, unless it can be shown and not merely stated that specific items of knowledge regarding the past were not available to the subject in the course of his present life (for which in this book we have merely to take the author's word). This can be shown to be the case in some of the

better-documented case studies, which we shall take up in the next talk.

# VII. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma

We have hitherto examined some of the major problems involved in presenting the case for survival, rebirth and karma. We have also mentioned some of the evidence suggestive of rebirth. It is proposed in this talk to present some typical samples of the authentic evidence available and to indicate some of the conclusions we may draw from them.

As we said earlier, the evidence for rebirth (which is only a special case of re-becoming) falls into three categories: (1) the experimental evidence, (2) the spontaneous evidence and (3) the other evidence.

## The Experimental Evidence

We have already given samples of the experimental evidence. In the previous talk we gave a brief account of the researches of the Rev. A. R. Martin with his subjects, [72] many of whom, it is said, were able to recall specific details

of their prior lives although they did not start with any preconceptions, presumptions or prejudices about pre-existence being a fact.

However, one may criticise these experiments as not “being conducted under strictly controlled conditions,” although the author mentions several precautions he had taken to eliminate subjective bias.

Let us now take examples where the experimental controls appear to have been more satisfactory. In the case investigated by Professor Theodore Flournoy, the account given reads as follows:

“It appeared that Helene Smith had twice lived upon the earth before her present incarnation. Once, five hundred years ago as an Arab chief’s daughter (Simandini by name), she became the favourite wife of a Hindu prince. This prince, Sivrouka, reigned over the kingdom of Kanara, and constructed, in 1401, the fortress of Tchandragiri. This romance was developed with a wealth of detail, and the astonishing features of it were, first, that research in old and little-known books on Indian history confirmed some of the details, such as the names of places and persons described; secondly, that Simandini uttered (in the trance automatisms) many Hindu words and phrases, sometimes appropriately used, sometimes mingled with other words which the experts failed to identify, and wrote also similar

phrases in Arabic script. Further, the entranced medium would act the role of Simandini, putting other members of the circle into the vacant places of the drama." [73]

In the Professor's own words: "All this various mimicry and this exotic speech have so strongly the marks of originality, of ease, of naturalness, that one asks with stupefaction whence comes to this daughter of Lake Lemman, without artistic training and without special knowledge of the Orient, a perfection of art which the best of actresses might attain only at the cost of prolonged studies or by residence on the banks of the Ganges." [74]

The Professor confesses that he has not been able to resolve the mystery, especially the Hindu language and the historical statements about the kingdom of Kanara, which were verified in an old and rare book to which the subject had had no access. Yet he concludes that the "Hindu drama was a subconsciously elaborated fantasy, incorporating, very skilfully, fragments of knowledge picked up in haphazard fashion." [75]

His explanation is the standard explanation resorted to by most orthodox psychologists when confronted with evidence of this sort, namely, that here we get only dramatization and role-playing based on elements of information picked up in this life. Professor Flournoy is however constrained to "admit that some knowledge was displayed, the acquisition of which by normal means would

seem to have been well-nigh impossible.” [76]

Yet, this does not seem to explain the ease, the spontaneity and accuracy with which she sang Hindi (Prakritic) songs and wrote in a Prakritic script. Nor does it explain the factual information she gave, the claim she made that she was in fact the wife of a Hindu prince in her previous life, and the serial account of the life and the incidents she gave.

Let us take another case, the case of Mrs. Anne Baker reported by Dr. Jonathan Rodney. [77] Mrs. Baker, a Lancashire housewife 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 Antoinette 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 investigations revealed that the name Marielle is rare now, but it was much in vogue about 1794, and although there was no such street at present, there was in fact a street of that name in that vicinity one hundred and seventy years back. [78] Here again a normal explanation would not do. Apart from the knowledge of French, one would have to say that the knowledge about the streets of Paris about two centuries back was acquired either clairvoyantly or telepathically from the dead.

An explanation in terms of spirit-possession is also possible though highly improbable. One could say that the discarnate spirit of the dead Marielle Pacasse now inhabits

the body of Mrs. Baker. Normally, in the case of spirit-possession, the discarnate-spirit claims to be a separate personality and possession is not continuous, whereas in this case whenever Mrs. Baker was hypnotized she claimed to be Marielle Pacasse in her previous life. So to account for all the facts, "rebirth" is the simpler, paranormal hypothesis.

Another case which cannot pass unnoticed is the famous "Bridey Murphy" case. When Mrs. Virginia Tighe was hypnotized on six occasions between November 1952 and August 1953, she recalled a life as Bridey Murphy in Ireland. It created a wide interest in "rebirth." It will be interesting to see Professor C. J. Ducasse's assessment of the case when it first came into the limelight and later after careful reflection in the light of the verified facts.

In an opinion published in *Tomorrow* in 1956 [79] soon after the case became known, Professor Ducasse suggests three hypotheses to account for it: "That the former is a reincarnation of the latter is *one* hypothesis that would account for the veridicality of those details. A *second* hypothesis that would also account for their veridicality is that of illusion of memory that is, the hypothesis that Mrs. Tighe, in childhood or later, heard or read of the life of an Irish Bridey Murphy and then forgot this, and that, under hypnosis, the ideas so acquired were recalled by Mrs. Tighe but not the manner in which she had acquired them; and hence that they were indistinguishable by her from memories of events of a life of her own. A *third* hypothesis, which would also explain the veridicality of the verified

details, is that while in deep hypnosis, Mrs. Tighe exercises powers of paranormal retro-cognition latent at other times, and vastly more far-reaching than those whose reality has been experimentally proved by Rhine, Soal and others." Going on the assumption that Mrs. Tighe's knowledge of Ireland was erroneous (as was thought at the time), Ducasse favoured the *second* hypothesis.

Later, when further investigation vindicated the truth of Mrs. Tighe's statements and the attempts at "debunking" the rebirth theory were seen to be mainly inspired by religious prejudice and based on false assertions, Professor Ducasse changed his views and favoured the first hypothesis (i.e. rebirth) without ruling out the possibility of the third. He does so in his book, "*A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life After Death.*" [80]

Here he refers to the items mentioned by Bridey, which could not be easily explained away. One of the most significant was that in her previous life she bought foodstuffs from Farris and John Carrigan. Extensive research on the part of Mr. John Bebbington, Belfast Chief Librarian, disclosed the fact that these two grocers were found listed in a Belfast city directory for 1865–66. Bridey died in 1864. Besides, they were "the only individuals of those names engaged in the foodstuffs business there at the time."

Bridey also referred to a rope company and a tobacco house which were in operation in Belfast at the time, and this too was found to be correct. Another remarkable fact was that

Bridey's statements, which according to experts on Ireland were irreconcilable with known facts, were shown after further investigation not to be so. Ten such facts are listed. To take one example, one of Bridey's statements was to the effect that her husband taught Law at the Queen's University in Belfast, sometime after 1847. *Life Magazine*, on the basis of so-called expert opinion, attacked this on the ground that there was no law school there at the time, no Queen's College until 1849, and no Queen's University until 1908. However, further investigations showed that this was incorrect. There was documentary evidence to show that on December 19, 1845, Queen Victoria ordained that "there shall and may be erected one College for students in Arts, Law, Physics ... which shall be called Queen's College, Belfast." [81] "The Queen's University in Ireland" was founded by her on August 15, 1850. [82]

Such accuracy may be due either to extraordinary clairvoyant powers on the part of the subject, or to the simple fact that these were genuine memories of her past life. Since she did not display any such clairvoyant powers in other respects during hypnosis, the latter appears to be the more plausible explanation.

## Spontaneous Evidence

The spontaneous evidence consists of accounts given by individuals, mostly children, of their alleged prior lives, which when subsequently checked prove to be historical and accurate and could not have been derived from any normal source in this life.

There are several such cases from all over the world and reports of them are to be found in newspapers and magazines. But in coming to valid conclusions on their basis one has to rely on the trustworthy, verified accounts of scientists. The evidence should be first recorded without bias and one should then see what theory best accounts for the data.

In this respect, one of the best studies so far is that of Dr. Ian Stevenson, Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry, School of Medicine, University of Virginia. He makes a detailed study and evaluation of twenty cases in one of his books. [83]

Let us briefly review the case of Imad Elawar, as studied and reported in this book. Imad was born on December 21, 1958 at Kornayel and talked of a previous life when he was between a year and half and two years old. He mentioned a considerable number of names of people and some events in this prior life, as well as certain items of property he claimed to have owned. He said he lived in the village of Khriby and had the name Bouhamzy. He had a woman (mistress) called Jamille, who was beautiful, and a brother called Amin, who lived at Tripoli, etc.

The father, however, discredited the story and scolded Imad

for talking about an imaginary past life. Once, it is said, he even recognized a resident (Salim el Aschkar) of Khriby in the presence of his paternal grandmother. The parents attached more importance to Imad's statements after this. But no systematic attempts to verify the authenticity of Imad's statements were made until Dr. Ian Stevenson undertook to investigate the case.

Khriby was situated about 25 miles away from Imad's home. The road from Kornayel was an extremely winding mountain road. The items were carefully recorded prior to the investigations at Khriby. It was revealed that of the fifty-seven items mentioned, fifty-one were correct. In Dr. Stevenson's own words, "Of the fifty-seven items in the first tabulation Imad made ten of the statements in the car on the way nearly all on the first visit to Khriby before we reached that village; but of these ten, three were incorrect. Of the remaining forty-seven items, Imad was wrong on only three items. It seems quite possible that under the excitement of the journey, and perhaps sensing some expectation of hearing more statements on our part, he mixed up images of the "previous life" and memories of his "present life." In any case, his "score" for this group of statements definitely fell below that for the forty seven made before we left Khriby." [84]

Some of the items were very specific, as when he said that they were building a new garden at the time of his death, and that there were cherry and apple trees in it, and that he had a small yellow automobile, a bus etc.

Besides the verification of these items of information, there were significant recognitions of persons and places, sixteen of which are listed; for example, we may note the recognition of the place where Ibrahim Bouhamzy (the previous personality) kept his dog and his gun. He also recognized the sister of Ibrahim, namely Huda, and the portrait of Ibrahim's brother, Fuad. He was also able it is said to recall his last words before death, which his sister, Mrs. Huda Bouhamzy remembered, and which were, "Huda, call Fuad".

When we consider the above, as well as the similarity in the character traits between the previous and the present personalities, chance or coincidence has to be virtually ruled out. Since neither fraud nor self-deception nor racial memory could account for the evidence, a paranormal explanation is called for. And of all the different paranormal explanations such as telepathy-cum-clairvoyance plus personation, spirit-possession etc., rebirth appears to be the most plausible. This was, in fact, Dr. Stevenson's own general conclusion after studying several cases of this type.

In the spontaneous case there is no hypnotist to put any suggestions into the mind of the child. We may say, however, that the child's beliefs about a prior life are a product of his fantasy. But such an explanation ceases to be plausible in the above instance when the so-called "fantasies" turn out to be historically true and were not derived from any source in this life.

# The Evidence

We have already referred to other evidence for rebirth when we tried to suggest that temperamental differences in identical twins, which cannot be due to heredity and environment, may be accounted for in terms of the impact of the psychological past of the person, which goes back into prior lives. We have also seen how some phobias prevalent in this life have not only been traced to traumatic experiences in prior lives, but have been cured by re-living the experience and discovering its origin.

Although it is possible to give other explanations of the so-called *déjà vu* experiences, the experience of feeling “I have been here before,” some of them at least seem to point to or call for an explanation in terms of pre-existence. There is a recorded case of an American couple who found that some parts of Bombay were extremely familiar to them, despite the fact that they were visiting the place for the first time. To test their memories, it is said, they went to a certain spot where they expected to see a house and a banyan tree in the garden. They, however, did not find them but were told by a policeman in the vicinity that he recalled having heard from his father that they had been there, when the house belonged to a family named Bhan. Curiously, this couple had called their son Bhan, because they liked the name. [85] Such stories are however anecdotal and one cannot attach

much importance to them. They are of value only when one is certain of their authenticity.

Dr. Raynor C. Johnson suggests that certain recurrent dreams may be memories of experiences “had in prior lives.” [86] A brief excerpt from an account of one such dream reads as follows:

“The dream was of being a prisoner in a place that I knew to be the Tower of London. I had not seen it in real life, but I had no doubt where it was. It was very cold weather (in waking life, a hot summer). I was aware that I had been condemned to death ... This I used to dream over and over again and after being in the dream a vigorous man, to wake up and be a little girl felt rather strange. At last the dream changed, and I was standing on a scaffold which must have been newly erected as it smelt of sawdust.

Everything was decorous and decent. The executioner knelt and apologized for what he was about to do. I took the axe from his hand and felt it, and handed it back, bidding him do his duty ...

When I woke up I made a drawing of the axe, which was of a peculiar shape. Some time after this I asked to be taken to the Tower of London, and I explained to a friendly gunsmith that I wanted to write history but could not understand the battles perfectly until I understood the weapons. ‘You are right, Missy,’ he said, and demonstrated to me the various uses of lance, crossbow etc. I then asked had he an axe that

beheaded people. He said, 'Yes this certainly beheaded the Jacobite Lords, but it is supposed to be very much older.' Somehow, I was not surprised, for the axe proved to be the exact shape of the axe in my dream." [87]

Here again we can suggest that this is not the only explanation possible, but when one has read about several such dreams one begins to wonder whether they are not hangovers from the person's past-life experiences

We have further evidence for rebirth from clairvoyants. The best attested case in the twentieth century is that of Mr. Edgar Cayce. A general account of his life and doings is to be found in a book by Dr. Gina Cerminara. [88]

There is good evidence that Cayce had remarkable clairvoyant powers, with which he successfully diagnosed illnesses even without actually seeing the patient. But what is more remarkable is that he went on to give accounts of the prior lives of some of these individuals (some of which were historically verified). He also gave the alleged karmic causes of their present illnesses.

We have already seen how suicide had certain karmic effects in subsequent lives. Cayce in his readings (which are still preserved and are available for study at the Association for Research and Enlightenment, Virginia Beach, U.S.A.) records the different kinds of karmic effects following in the wake of the different kinds of actions done in the past. In

one case, it said, a person was born blind in this life because in his third life previous to this, circa 1000 BCE, he was born in Persia as “a member of a barbaric tribe whose custom was to blind its enemies with red-hot irons, and it had in been his office to do the blinding.” [89]

# Notes

1. Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 8–12.
2. see J. J. C. Smart, *Philosophy and Scientific Realism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
3. for modern versions see, “*The Identity Hypothesis: A Critique*” in J. R. Smythies, *Brain and Mind*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1965.
4. Kaṭha Upaniṣad, I. 20.
5. Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 5. 13 6.
6. “*yāva udabindumhi me dayā paccupaṭṭhitā hoti: mā’haṃ khuddake pāṇe visamagate saṅghātaṃ āpādessanti,*” M I 78.
7. see DN 23.
8. MN 100.42/M II 131.
9. “*sukhabahulā vedanā vediyamānaṃ,*” MN 12.40/M I 75.
10. “*ekanta-sukha-vedanā vediyamānaṃ,*” ibid.
11. “*ekanta-sukha-vedanā vediyamānaṃ,*” ibid.
12. MN 120.
13. “*na punareti gabbhaseyyaṃ*” Sn 99.
14. *The Concept of a Person*, London, 1963, p. 127.
15. H. H. Price, “*Survival and the Idea of ‘Another World’*” in J. R. Smythies, *Brain and Mind*, International Library of

Philosophy & Scientific Method, London, 1965, pp. 1–33.

16. e. g. G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*.
17. *The Neurophysiological Basis of Mind*, London, Oxford University Press, 1953 pp. 278 ff.
18. See *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology*, ed. Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston, New York, 1961, p. 260.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
20. *yāvatakaṃ takkāya pattaḃbaṃ anuppattaṃ tayā*, S I 56.
21. *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*, Vol. II. Part II. Cambridge University Press, 1938, pp. 614–15.
22. D I 81.
23. Quoted from Professor Hornell, *The Enigma of Survival*, Rider & Co., London, 1959, pp. 218–19.
24. *Brain Mechanisms and Consciousness: A Symposium*, published 1954.
25. "Some Aspects of the Brain-Mind Relationship" in *Brain and Mind*, International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method, London, 1965, p. 69.
26. S. A. Barnett, *A Study in Behaviour*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1963, p. 238.
27. "Frontiers of Knowledge," Modern World Series, p. 99.
28. News report from Toronto in *The Times Weekender*, Friday, April 12th, 1968.

29. W. Russell *Brain, Mind, Perception and Science*, Oxford, 1951, pp. 4–9.
30. *The Neurophysiological Basis of Mind*, London, Oxford University Press, 1953, pp. 278 ff.
31. *Brain and Mind*, pp. 50–51.
32. *The Enigma of Survival*, p. 219.
33. “*yaṃ rūpaṃ nissāya manodhātu ca manoviññādhātu ca vattati*” —Paṭṭhāna I.2.
34. *The Concept of a Person*, London, 1963, p. 127.
35. It is of course possible that their saṃsāric ancestors were from other planes of existence.
36. MN 12.47/M I 78.
37. Philosophical Library, New York, 1950.
38. Illinois, 1961.
39. See Ducasse, op. cit., p. 114.
40. *Multiple Human Births*, New York, 1940, pp. 64–65.
41. Op. cit. pp. 67–68.
42. *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology*, Ed., J. Head & S. L. Cranston, New York, 1961.
43. Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 1.5.15.
44. *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology*, Pelican Books, A 385, Reprint 1961, p. 48.

45. Ibid., p. 49.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., p. 51.
49. *Medical Hypnosis*, Vol. I.
50. *A Scientific Report on 'The Search for Bridey Murphy,'* Ed. Milton V. Kline Ph.D., The Julian Press Inc., New York, 1956, p.185.
51. F. L. Marcuse, *Hypnosis: Fact and Fiction*, Pelican Books, A 446, Reprint 1961, p. 184.
52. Rider & Co., 6th Impression, 1950, p.183.
53. Op. cit. p. 170.
54. *Des Indes a la Planete Mars*, Geneva, 1899.
55. First ed., Pennsylvania, 1942.
56. p.11.
57. Ibid., pp. 7–8.
58. Ibid., p. 4.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
61. Ibid., p. 3.
62. Ibid., p. 6.
63. Ibid.

64. H. C. Miranda, *Can Reincarnation be proved by Hypnotism?* May 1964, pp. 247–49.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
66. *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology*, Pelican Book, Reprint, 1961, pp. 51–52.
67. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.
68. *Op. cit.*, p. 171.
69. *Op. cit.*, p. 90.
70. *Op. cit.*, p. 94.
71. *Op. cit.*, p. 8.
72. *Researches in Reincarnation and Beyond*, First Ed., Pennsylvania, 1942
73. William McDougall, *An Outline of Abnormal Psychology*, reprint 1952, p. 511.
74. *Ibid.*, pp. 511–512.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 512.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 515.
77. *Explorations of a Hypnotist*, Elek Books, London, 1955.
78. see pp. 165–66.
79. Vol. 4, No 4, pp. 31–33.
80. Springfield, Illinois, 1961.
81. *op. cit.*, p. 286.

82. Ibid.
83. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, New York, 1966.
84. op. cit., pp. 257–271.
85. W. C. White , “Cruise Memory,” *Beyond the Five Senses*, ed. E. J. Garrett, J. B. Lippincott, New York, 1957, cited by Dr. Stevenson.
86. *Religious Outlook for Modern Man*, Hodder and Soughton, London, 1963, pp. 184 ff.
87. Op. cit., pp. 184–185.
88. *Many Mansions*, William, Sloane Associates, New York, Twelfth Printing, 1960, pp. 304 ff.
89. Op. cit., pp. 50–51.

# THE BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or write an e-mail or a letter to the:

Administrative Secretary  
Buddhist Publication Society  
P.O. Box 61

54 Sangharaja Mawatha  
Kandy • Sri Lanka  
E-mail: [bps@bps.lk](mailto:bps@bps.lk)

web site: <http://www.bps.lk>  
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283 • Fax: 0094 81 222 3679

# Table of Contents

Survival and Karma In Buddhist Perspective	2
I. The Buddhist View of Survival	4
Misconceptions	4
Historical Background	6
Single After-life Theories	7
Materialists	9
Skeptics	11
Buddhist Solution	12
The Five States of Existence	14
Intelligibility	17
II. The Buddhist Doctrine of Karma	21
Misconceptions	21
Meaning	22
Basis for Doctrine	24
Verifiability	27
Relation to Causal Laws	31
Medieval Analysis	32
Distinction	33
Fatalism, Heredity and Karma	35
Central Teaching	37
III. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma	39
Novel Theory	40
Two Views	42

Neurology	43
Memory	44
Instrumental Theory	47
Buddhist View	50
Other Objections	51
<b>IV. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma</b>	<b>54</b>
Body-Mind Problem	54
Another Objection	60
<b>V. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma</b>	<b>67</b>
Unsatisfactory Arguments	69
Authority and Revelation	72
Metaphysical and Ethical Arguments	73
The Evidence	76
<b>VI. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma</b>	<b>80</b>
Age-Regression	80
Prior Lives	82
The Evidence	84
“Researches in Reincarnation and Beyond”	85
Origin of Phobias	88
Karma?	91
Normal Hypotheses	93
Paranormal Hypotheses	95
<b>VII. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Survival and Karma</b>	<b>98</b>

The Experimental Evidence	98
Spontaneous Evidence	104
The Evidence	108
Notes	112