

LESSON 4

REINCARNATION

The concept of reincarnation has a fundamental place in the theosophical philosophy. It is a key that unlocks the door to understanding of a great deal about human life that otherwise remains inexplicable. In the Western world, the most generally accepted doctrine about the soul is that it is newly created at birth of the physical body. However, there is in religious circles today a revival of interest in the theory of reincarnation, and the subject is even being discussed in the areas of psychology and anthropology.

Many thoughtful men and women have never been able to accept as a just God who brings some individuals into conditions of abundance and affluence and others into poverty and privation; who gives to some intelligence or artistic talents and denies these benefits to others; who endows some with great physical beauty and visits upon others the affliction of deformity. These inequalities and a myriad of others are seen on every hand. How, asks the thinking and compassionate person, can they be reconciled with the concept of a God of justice and love if indeed each soul is an outright creation?

Theosophy postulates a different process altogether in the doctrine of reincarnation. As pointed out in Lesson 2, each of us is considered to be an evolving fragment of the life of the Logos of our solar system -- the Divine Mind immanent in every element of creation. While there must certainly be transcendence as well as immanence, we cannot conceive of the old idea of the deity as a "Heavenly Father" who, for some inexplicable reason, plays cruel games with his own offspring and demands their unquestioning love in return.

Further, most people would agree that whatever begins in time must end in time. Yet, according to advocates of the traditional view, the soul is supposed to have an endless future although it has no past. This is no more reasonable than postulating a stick with only one end.

The theory of evolution is generally accepted in these days, and Theosophy sees it as a law applicable to man's spiritual growth as well as to material form. Three hypotheses are presented concerning the method through which evolution works toward the desired goal of wisdom, goodness, and skill: First, that death in some miraculous way makes everyone--at least everyone entitled to enter heaven--all-wise and entirely good; second, that life after death provides complete opportunity for growth to the point of perfection; and third, that the soul returns again and again to earth, to learn all that the school has to teach just as a child returns to school day after day and year after year until

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graduates.

The first hypothesis seems inadmissible, for a uniform agency operating in a uniform manner should produce uniform results, yet the evidence of clairvoyant investigation is that those who have gone on are no more alike in faculty or disposition than was the case when they were functioning in physical bodies; they are still capable of error in both fact and judgment. Even leaving clairvoyant observation aside, we may logically assume that since the body decays, it must be the consciousness which continues. When we observe how slowly and with what effort we achieve growth of consciousness during all the years of earth life, it seems irrational to expect that in the few moments of dying, it suddenly becomes “full blown” so to speak. This would not even be continuity; it would be a violent break, and we would suddenly become strangers to ourselves! To accept this would be to think in terms of science fiction.

The second hypothesis, that life after death leads to all wisdom, is open to the objection that the soul’s knowledge of earth conditions and human life could not be completed or perfected in conditions so drastically modified after death. If this were possible, there would have been no point in coming into a physical body at all. We would not think it reasonable for a man who goes to the expense and trouble of training himself in some specialized profession, say a doctor or lawyer, for instance, to select some totally unrelated activity as a career. Would we then expect a human being who receives a specialized education in the problems of this world to pass forever into some sphere where the things he has learned have no value or utility? Since earth life is an undeniable fact, it must serve an important purpose in the evolutionary process. It was pointed out in an earlier lesson that only through limitation is awareness achieved. The life after death, being completely subjective, could hardly offer the type of limitation necessary for the achievement of that full awareness which is the goal of evolution.

Theosophy, therefore, rejects the first two hypotheses and accepts the third as the most logical, as most in harmony with the concept of an orderly system based on the impersonal justice of law. The analogy of a school is indeed an apt one. We know that we are not ready to graduate from a university when we have completed the first grade, nor when we have finished both our primary and secondary schooling; we must complete each phase of our education before we can go on to the next. So we complete our cosmic education by obligatory attendance in the school of life.

The word reincarnation is derived from re, again, in, into, and carn, flesh. It therefore signifies “repeated entering into fleshly covering.” In other words, man is a spiritual intelligence, a spark of the life of God, clothed in bodies of

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and coming to earth in order to learn. He has to undergo a long succession of earth lives in order to develop his latent powers through struggle with circumstances and within a network of relationships with other souls. Through each of these recurring lives in a body of flesh, the human soul gathers experience which, during the period between incarnations, he works into faculties and powers needed for further growth in spiritual stature. The process might be likened to the manner in which the food we eat is transformed during the process of digestion and assimilation into the things the body needs. Or, to return to the analogy of a school, it may be likened to the manner in which the periods of active study, during which we cram information into our brains, are followed by periods during which all this study is transmuted into knowledge and understanding. This process goes on in some manner beneath the level of our awareness, just as do digestion and assimilation of foods, but we cannot deny that it does take place. So does the transmutation of experience take place, during the time spent in the heaven world, at a level beyond our objective, earthly awareness, and the soul returns to successive bodies better equipped to continue its schooling in more advanced grades. Occasionally an incarnation may seem to be a failure, in that the ego is unable to make its influence felt through the personality, and little progress is made. In fact it may even slip back a little when opportunities for growth are wasted, as pupils in school may sometimes fail and have to repeat a grade because they were not willing or able to do the work required. But ultimately nothing is wasted; failure too is educative and can be turned to good account in strengthened determination and renewed effort in later incarnation.

Unfortunately, reincarnation is sometimes confused with transmigration, which means the return of a human being to earth life in the body of an animal. This, however, would be against the law of evolution. We have seen, in a previous lesson, that the human monad never has been anything but a human monad and that, at the beginning of a cycle of involution and evolution, it waits to enter the process until form has evolved to the point where it can be used for human occupancy. So it is inconceivable that at any later stage it could suddenly do that which it has never done, even at the most primitive levels. The life that has become individualized in the human kingdom cannot regress into the animal kingdom; this would be as impossible as it would be for a baby, once born to go back into its mother's womb and be an embryo.

Less evolved souls are simply like children in a lower class at school. Those who are nearing graduation either came into the present cycle of birth and death at an early point in time, or else they have made greater efforts and have learned the lessons of the human school more rapidly than the majority. The greatest criminal and the greatest saint have the one divine life in common and have equal possibilities for growth. The difference may be that the criminal came into each life much later than the saint and has yet to tread the long road already taken by his more advanced brother. Or he may have learned much

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as the order of learning varies in every individual case, the criminal may have learned some particular lessons with which the saint has yet to deal. It is said that even a soul nearing perfection still may lack some fundamental quality already possessed by many who are much less evolved in all other respects. He would be like a child taught all subjects but arithmetic; he would be far behind others in that one subject yet far ahead in everything else to be learned.

Parenthetically, it should be understood that when such term as "at the beginning" is used, it refers to cycles of manifestation and not to life itself, which is eternal, beginningless and endless. The cycles, however, begin in time and end in time, even though the aeons involved are inconceivable to us. And since the process is really in spirals, rather than repetitive cycles, each new one begins where the last one left off. There is said to be, at each new "beginning", a rapid recapitulation of all previous experience, just as, in the lesser cycle of a human life, the whole of physical evolution is recapitulated during the period of gestation, and the whole of psychological evolution during the time from infancy to maturity. We are at the present in the human spiral. When we enter the stage beyond the human, it will be with the richness of our experience transmuted into divine powers with which to meet the challenges of that period of growth toward something still higher.

Reincarnation provides a basis for the explanation of much that is unexplainable by the theory of the outright creation of a soul at each physical birth. It explains the vast inequalities on every hand -- the varying circumstances into which we are, born for example-- in one case into ease, in another into hardship and privation; in one case to loving parents, in another to a childhood of neglect; in one case with physical beauty, in another disfigured or deformed; in one case a genius, in another perhaps an idiot. Heredity does not supply the reason for the almost unending variations in circumstances, talents, capacities, abilities. Indeed, even twins are frequently not only different in appearance but even more often develop quite different interests and abilities. If reincarnation is accepted as a working hypotheses -- even if not as a proven fact -- these differences are understandable: each soul coming into a physical body brings his own wages with him, wages earned in previous existences. Genius is no gift, but the result of lives of toil and struggle along a particular line of endeavor. Even when idiocy occurs there is some lesson for the ego by which it will unfold, even though the physical expression and experience are limited by a poor brain as a transmitter in the present incarnation. Reincarnation explains, too, the different ideas of right and wrong that are prevalent throughout the world. Environment cannot do this, for a soul with a well developed conscience may be found in a sordid environment, while a person with almost no ethical sense may flourish amid wealth and culture. Conscience is the fruitage of the past, the indelible record of lessons learned in other lives and in other bodies; it is not to be expected that the young and less evolved soul

will have the moral and ethical standards of the sage or the saint.

Again, reincarnation offers an acceptable explanation for the existence of feminine men and masculine women. The soul itself has no sex, but wears in one life a male body, in another a female. If it has dwelt for several lives in a series of masculine bodies, experiencing life in the masculine manner, it is obvious that when a change of sex takes place, masculine traits will remain and it will be necessary to develop a feminine response to experience. In the same way, a soul who has been learning the lessons of a woman for several incarnations may find that the change to a masculine body requires an effort of adjustment. All sorts of lessons are necessary for the developing ego, and when we understand this, we are less prone to judge harshly what we may consider inadequacies in others whom we meet.

The doctrine of reincarnation is by no means either new or uncommon. It is taught in the great epics of the Hindus, in the scriptures of the Egyptians, in the teachings of the Buddha and of the Greek Pythagoras. It was taught and accepted among the Jews of the time of Josephus, and later in the Kabala. It was current among the early Christians, and again in these days many Christians are examining it seriously as a logical hypothesis and finding in it inspiration and hope. That Jesus himself accepted it is apparent from his statement to his disciples that John the Baptist was Elijah returned.¹ Origen, one of the most learned of the Christian fathers, declared, "Every soul comes into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defeats of its previous lives." The earlier teachings of the Christian fathers and the Gnostics came gradually to be misunderstood, however, and in A.D. 553, at the second Ecclesiastical council of Constantinople, it was declared of anyone who should support the teaching of reincarnation, "let him be anathema." The teaching was therefore banished from official Christianity. But while it was no longer included among Christian doctrines, it has been kept alive by individuals here and there who have had the mystic vision and the courage to speak their convictions. Among more recent believers in reincarnation were Emerson, Huxley, Goethe, Shelley, Schopenhauer, Whittier, Whitman, Browning, and Tennyson. The American inventor Thomas Edison and industrialist Henry Ford, as well as the one-time poet laureate of England John Masefield, have proclaimed their acceptance of the doctrine. General George Patton, of World War II fame, was firmly convinced of its reality.

Almost inevitable it is asked, "if I have lived before, why do I not remember?" This is well answered in the Key to Theosophy, by H.P. Blavatsky:² "The principles which we call physical are disintegrated after death, together with Their constituent elements, and memory along with the brain. This vanished

¹ Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13

² Section VIII: Why Do We Not Remember Our Past Lives?

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of a vanished personality can consequently neither remain or record anything in the subsequent reincarnation of the ego. Reincarnation means that the ego will be furnished with a new body, a new brain, and a new memory...It would be absurd to expect ;this new memory to remember that which has never recorded.” Elsewhere in the same volume* she points out that the ego does remember the past personalities through which it has gained experience “...as well as you remember what you did yesterday.” We should not suppose, she says, that because the present personality does not remember past personalities, the ego has forgotten them. The ego’s method of transmitting memory or making it available to the personality, is through conscience, through aspirations and ideals, through the talents which are “innate” in us, through the instantaneous recognition of a friend in someone who perhaps we have to met before in the present incarnation, and in many other ways which we take so for granted that we do not realize their significance. Nature’s method is to extract the values and discard details; details are but the bodies through which truths manifest. The bodies disintegrate but the truths endure.

The ego can be likened with some accuracy to an actor who plays many roles, expressing some part of himself in each of them, using all the powers and increases of skills he has developed through previous roles but setting these roles aside completely to concentrate on the task at hand. The actress Helen Hays has commented, for example, that before attempting any role she “wipes her mind clean” of every past role; otherwise she could not play the new one satisfactorily. She of course remembers that she has played the other roles and brings all she has gained through them to bear upon whatever the current one may be. In a somewhat similar manner, the ego is said to carry the memory of past incarnations and develop increasing ability to make the most of every new life opportunity.

There are some people who have achieved the necessary sensitiveness to recapture some remembrance of past lives, but as a rule they are quite reluctant to discuss this because of the likelihood of being misunderstood. Cesare Lombroso, for instance in his book The Man of Genius, wrote of “the strange insane poet, John Clare, who believed himself a spectator of the Battle of the Nile, and the death of Nelson; and was firmly convinced that he had been present at the death of Charles I”. For all Lombroso knew, Clare may have had quite a valid memory of these experiences, although he may have been unwise to speak freely of them. There are, of course, instances of people suffering from overactive imagination in this respect. It is considered well to remain as objective as possible where this faculty of remembering past lives is concerned, for time and our own attitudes will test its validity.

* Section VIII: On Individuality and Personality

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incarnations, there are said to be three principal factors which operate to determine the circumstances of the next birth of an individual. First, there is the great law of evolution, which tends to press a person into a position in which he can most effectively develop the qualities that he most needs, and in which he will have opportunities to learn new lessons and unfold powers as yet untouched in his development. But this law operates within boundaries set by another law -- the law of cause and effect, the law of justice. The man's actions in the past may have been such that he has earned the greatest possible opportunities; or they may have been such that he will have to put up with second-best, or even less. The third factor is that he must be brought into incarnation at a time and in a place where he will meet the egos with whom he has formed strong ties of love or hate, or helpfulness or injury, in days of long ago. Opportunities come to heal old wounds, to pay debts incurred with others, to receive compensation for former injuries, to develop talents that may have been frustrated in a previous life owing to still earlier causes. All these factors must enter into considerations of the future, but whatever the outcome in the individual case, the law is impartial and ultimately beneficent; it works always for the growth of the soul. When we realize this, we can face life, whatever its joys or vicissitudes, with greater courage and confidence, knowing that we can through our own efforts build a better future, not only for ourselves but, in cooperation with others, for all mankind.

Diagram IV illustrates in graphic form the process of reincarnation by which the spiritual ego takes on many forms in successive lives, and thus unfolds his full potentialities. Beyond this in the higher spiritual realms there remains the divine Monad, the immortal fragment of the Universal Divine Life which is the unchanging eternal Self, the God in man..

References for Supplementary Reading:

Reincarnation, Fact or Fallacy, Geoffrey Hodson

How We Remember Our Past Lives, C. Jinarajadasa

Reincarnation in Christianity, Geddes Mac Gregor

Reincarnation, Annie Besant

Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology, compiled and edited by Joseph Head and S.L. Cranston

Through Death to Rebirth, James S. Perkins

The Key to Theosophy, H.P. Blavatsky, Section 8 (Quest abridgement)

CONSIDERATION

1. Explain what is meant by reincarnation. Differentiate between reincarnation and transmigration.
2. What seems to you the most important reasons for and against the doctrine of reincarnation?
3. How may the difference in the mental and moral faculties of an individual be explained by reincarnation?
4. Has the ego any sex? What type of lesson is learned in masculine bodies?
5. What evidence is there from the past that reincarnation is not a new teaching?
6. Why is it so difficult to remember details of past lives? Would it always be helpful or wise to remember past lives or to foresee what the future holds? What reasons do you suggest to uphold your own thinking on the subject?
7. In what ways does the ego or soul remember past incarnations? What do the theosophical teachings offer on the subject of relationship to our loved ones in future lives? Can you recall personal experiences that seem to substantiate the teachings on reincarnation offered in this lesson?
8. When and why will the soul cease to reincarnate?
9. What three principal factors operate to determine the place and events of a future life?
10. If the teachings on reincarnation become more widespread in the Western world what difference do you think it might make in the life and activities around us?