

Reincarnation: Back From the Dead

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Abstract

It is in the nature of human beings to search for the meaning of life. In this connection the idea of reincarnation is steadily gaining greater credence in the West. In this essay the author takes a critical look at the various aspects of the reincarnation concept and presents the arguments of both its supporters and detractors. He continues by explaining why reincarnation is increasingly attractive to many people, examines the various possible research approaches and launches a plea to concentrate on the following fundamental question: could a properly constructed experiment settle the matter once and for all. Finally he gives a look ahead to the future of reincarnation research.

Keywords: Past Lives, Reincarnation, Soul, Spiritual Archaeology, Time Capsule

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1. Reincarnation: The Belief

The phenomenon we call a human being, according to some, is nothing more than a self-conscious body, a mass of cells that is aware of its existence.

When the nuclei of sperm and ovum melt together the genetic material of the biological parents is combined. The specific sequence of bases of the nucleic acids then form the code for the potential characteristics of the body, intellect and nature of a new individual. At the risk of oversimplifying one could say that the creation of a person is nothing more than the merger of two sets of macromolecules in favourable conditions, whereas its growth and development is to be described as a little goblet of matter that undergoes a complicated series of chemical reactions.

If a person is just matter or at least has a markedly material nature, is any form of survival possible after the destruction of the body? In the strictly material view consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon of the brain: once the brain stops working, consciousness comes to a complete full stop. In this view believing in life after death is just wishful thinking by people who are unable to accept their mortality.

Christians look at things differently: they believe that once the physical body dies the immortal soul will continue to exist as a conscious entity. On the other hand, if the soul does not need matter to survive – the Christian view – why should the soul need matter to come into being? The question about life after death is thus intrinsically linked to the question about the life of the soul before conception. This then leaves us with the question of what the meaning is of a human life on earth. Is it perhaps a physical interlude in the continuous stream of the development of the soul? That would imply that a person does not have a soul but is a soul temporarily in possession of a body. If this, then, is the case, is it so that more than one of these physical interludes is possible or even necessary?

It is this latter consideration that brings us to the heart of reincarnation – etymologically speaking 'back in the flesh' – which in the common view means that you are repeatedly reborn as a human being. Here we should add that this contrasts with the Hindu view of the transmigration of souls which considers that people can also return as animals.

A central element of reincarnation teachings is the karma principle, according to which a person is confronted life after life with the consequences of his or her actions, and as result of this confrontation is stimulated, usually unconsciously, to perform actions that have ever better consequences, that is to say that more joy and harmony is created within the person and for the person's surroundings. Karma is in other words a guiding teaching principle in a constant cycle of action and correction, creation and recreation, in which a person is ultimately able to stabilize and his or her sense of oneness with the entire structure becomes ever more profound.

Is this really such a strange idea to the Westerner? It rather depends on how you look at it. Proverbs like 'As you sow, so shall you reap', 'The chickens come home to roost', 'As you make your bed so you must lie on it' all come close to the same idea.

Indeed people apparently believed in reincarnation when Jesus was alive. Just think of the disciples when they were asking Jesus about a blind man, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2, KJV). Here you might ask yourself when the

man would have committed a sin, he was after all born blind. A failure to think things through by the questioners? Or an implicit reference to a current belief in reincarnation?

Until recently in the West unbelievers as well as advocates of reincarnation were tiny minorities in a sea of Christian belief. Nonetheless the persuasive power of Christian doctrine on the afterlife has lessened significantly in recent decades. People are no longer prepared to believe in the old story of an eternal afterlife in heaven or hell. Either they drop the whole concept and declare, "I don't believe in anything anymore, dead is dead"; or they start to take an interest in reincarnation. There can be quite a difference between the two extremes, which I might illustrate with the following anecdote.

During a discussion a young woman fails to convince her non-believing brother of her pro-reincarnation views, and vice-versa. When at last he realises that further argument is pointless, he sighs with disappointment, "How can you possibly believe in reincarnation, I thought you were so smart!" Her reaction is prompt, "How odd! I was just thinking that you were so smart! Why can't he believe in it?"

Pre-Christian literary sources from Scandinavia and other parts of Europe also suggest a widespread acceptance of the concept of reincarnation in the past. For example we may recall that Julius Caesar noted in his book, *"The Gallic Wars"*, that the Druids teach that "souls do not die, but after death pass from one body to another". The growing interest in reincarnation in the West is possibly not entirely due to cultural-religious influences from the East, but may be equally well regarded as a revival of local ancient beliefs, quite apart from the fact that people are increasingly inclined to think for themselves about the great questions of life (Haraldsson, 2006).

People in our western situation who believe in reincarnation, do not usually have the sense they blindly believe in something, but rather that they have finally discovered how life really works. For this reason they do not just view reincarnation as a belief but rather as a basic law of nature, which you are inevitably subject to, whether you believe in it or not. From that point of view objecting to reincarnation is as meaningful as signing a petition against gravity.

2. Reincarnation: The Disbelief

Believers point out that belief in reincarnation has existed throughout human history and has been present in all cultures, and they like to rattle off quotes by famous people who believed in reincarnation. As might be expected this cuts no ice at all with the critics. After all for how long did people believe that the world was flat? The respectable age of a belief system is thus absolutely no guarantee at all of its correctness: old nonsense is still nonsense.

Anybody who looks for an answer to the great questions of life in religion, often gets the impression that the people who are required to give the 'expert explanations' do not really seem to know the answers themselves but that they have to believe it, either because somebody in authority says so, or because that's what it says in one or other holy book. Moreover it is perfectly clear that both in the past and at present decent honest people believe in wildly different, often contradictory, things. The authenticity of belief is thus apparently no guarantee of the content of that belief. In other words the human capacity of self-delusion is inexhaustible.

Anybody who says that reincarnation is not a belief but a natural law and that consequently reincarnation happens to everybody, whether you believe in it or not, is faced with an even greater problem. Thousands of millions of people must have been reincarnated but this process is still not recognized everywhere in the world. A major problem one might think. Why is this so? What is the difficulty really about? Or does it have something to do with the essential nature of reincarnation itself?

People who do not believe in reincarnation are often quick to say, "But nobody has ever come back!". Closer examination though quickly reveals this to be a weak argument. For example imagine that your beloved grandfather is reborn during your lifetime and that this joyful event were to take place in your circle of acquaintances, how would you recognize your granddad? Do you expect his pipe, from which he was inseparable, and his old walking stick to be lying in the cot with him? Or would you be expecting the baby to look like grandpa, or to have a similar character? Might be difficult, especially if it turns out that it's not the personality but the soul that is reborn.

3. Reincarnation: The Self-Evidence

Believers in reincarnation usually assume that when the person experiences death the identity is absorbed as a subpersonality into the entirety of the soul and that in the next life the incarnating soul will be attracted to an embryo whereof the genetic traits, living environment and key people fit in with the life plan of the soul and the amount of karma that must be lived out. In this process any memory of a previous life will be no more than an unclear echo of emotion, rather like the vague sounds reminiscent of a previous recording you sometimes hear on a taped-over cassette. Most people do not even notice these echoes of their previous lives, they are drowned out by the noise of everyday consciousness.

The mind is generally not capable of chronologically invoking detailed information about past lives, because the new-born person has of course a new brain and past life data are simply not available, at least not in the same easily accessible way that is used when retrieving memories of the current life. So not only do you not recognize your reincarnated granddad, the man (or woman) concerned has no idea that he (or she) was once your beloved grandfather. The most that you will notice is that for one or other inexplicable reason you get on very well together.

In practical terms this means that nearly everybody starts again with a virtually complete lack of memory about any of the previous lives.

Again according to the believers such ignorance initially has only advantages. You can begin over and over and again with a clean sheet, without being consciously much hindered by the echoes of the traumas and setbacks of previous lives. Of course the consequences, the burdens and the challenges continue to be present but you blame them entirely on unpredictable external factors, which does not mean that you do not deal with them, absorb them and make the best of them, or sometimes not. Thus everybody goes their own way, unconsciously clearing up the baggage of the past and building their near and distant futures.

Just as you cannot keep on ordering pizzas and letting the remains and the empty boxes pile up in the kitchen, as time goes by, usually a lot of time, the longing to tidy up and clean up the kitchen starts to grow and you want to sort out all the baggage you are still carrying around with you from your previous lives. The ignorance that was a blessing at the start of

your cycle of incarnations becomes steadily more burdensome as time goes by, say believers. You want to examine exactly who you are and what you were – or, more precisely, your soul was – in the past and for this reason you develop the sensitivity of your internal perceptions. This is not always a joyful period because the more that the mist rises the more clearly you recognize your own role in who you are and what happens to you. It can be a sobering experience, moreover it is not just somebody who makes a lot of mess who finds his/her life turned upside down, the person who cleans up thoroughly may also experience tremendous upheaval. Of course there are also advantages to having a big spring clean. People who clear up their karmic lines faster than usual are convinced that their power and clarity increase, that they draw greater enjoyment from (very) old friendships and that they acquire a broader understanding of the recurring strong and weak aspects of the entirety of their life experiences, so that they know better who they really are and what they still have to do.

Believers thus expect that reincarnation will become self-evident to ever growing numbers of people, which for them is just as self-evident as the fact that water is wet.

4. Reincarnation: The Research

Memories of past lives, acquired under hypnosis or otherwise, have always existed. Nonetheless even believers question to what extent such memories may be unconsciously influenced by what the person concerned might already know about the period in question, for example by reading about it. As a matter of fact, hypnosis does not enjoy a very good reputation with respect to ‘recovered memories’ in general. Under hypnosis these may be indeed abundant, lively and detailed, but – as research has shown – they are not necessarily accurate. Apparently imagination and fantasy continue to function perfectly well during hypnosis. This, by the way, is also the reason why information obtained under hypnosis is not acceptable as evidence in a criminal investigation, but must be handled in the same way as tips, which require further verification.

Likewise the fact that reincarnation therapy (i.e. psychotherapy that uses past life regression) might work, is of course neither proof of reincarnation as such, nor of the historical accuracy of the recovered material. Even so anybody who has had the privilege of conducting an extensive series of ‘reincarnation sessions’ with one and the same patient will have been surprised by the immense panorama of experiences and interwoven traumas, and all the accompanying emotions and perceptions. When there is an improvement in the quality of life in the ‘here and now’ of the patient upon working through these – the object of any therapy – this still does not constitute proof but it does suggest that further investigation of the subject might have merit.

Another line of research could be the ‘identified reincarnations’. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition such persons are referred to as *tulkus*, who are viewed as the reincarnation of certain keepers of specific teaching lineages. It sometimes happens that prior to his death ‘an enlightened lama’ will give an indication of where to look for the following incarnation so that he can be sought out by the senior figures of the monastery where he lived. This is put into practice with a great deal of stringency, and various tests are also applied. For example the young child is expected to ‘recognize’ the favourite personal items of his predecessor. The Dalai Lama is also identified anew by means of such techniques. The recognition and official installation of a tulku is an event that results in great religious and financial status, both for the tulku and for his family, which of course is not refused. Occasionally though the selection of the tulku is disputed and becomes a source of friction. Has the ‘true’ tulku been selected?

Has the selection of a particular tulku not brought undeserved benefits to one or other family? And what happens when rival factions designate different tulkus? It has even happened that a tulku has noted to his disappointment that he had no influence whatsoever in his monastery, and that he was only being used as a sort of religious publicity stunt in order to collect donations from enthusiastic believers (Kapstein, 2002). In other words, things are not always so elevated and holy as it might seem at first sight. The selection of tulkus is thus not proven absolutely, certainly not when you apply Western scientific standards, although the principle as such is thought-provoking in the extreme.

The godfather of reincarnation research is undoubtedly the late Ian Stevenson (1918-2007), a psychiatrist who worked for the University of Virginia. The author of more than ten books on the subject, his *“Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation”* (1974) became a bestseller. Stevenson travelled the world over a period of forty years, collecting around three thousand cases of children who claimed to remember previous lives. Many case histories were impressive: the children were not only capable of saying who they had been, where they had lived and who their family members had been, they were often able to provide remarkable details about their previous lives, including details of how they had died. They revealed elements that they could not ‘possibly’ have known and which upon inquiry turned out to be nearly all true. Particularly striking were birthmarks and birth defects that appeared to have a direct connection with a traumatic termination of the previous life¹.

The reaction of the scientific community was mixed. Stevenson had supporters who took him seriously, but most scientists considered him gullible and simply ignored his work. A major criticism from his detractors was that he had been hunting for evidence in favor of reincarnation and that he had taken too little account of less elaborate explanations like fantasy and fraud. Stevenson (1997) himself thought that these case histories were as such not proof of reincarnation, but that reincarnation was the best available explanation for many cases.

When Stevenson retired in 2002, his research was taken over by Jim B. Tucker, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia.

5. Reincarnation: The Experiment

The argument between believers and non-believers has already been going on for a couple of millennia. It is thus not something that could be thrashed out during a frank and open-hearted discussion. We will have to take a different approach. For this reason I think that both the believers and the non-believers should abandon their fortified positions and work together to find the truth. To the scientists, who are usually non-believers, I would say, “Don’t be afraid of the unknown”, whereas I would advise the believers, “Don’t be afraid of the scientific method.” My point is, if reincarnation really takes place, then it is not a belief but a law of nature and there are only two things you can say about a law of nature: one is that natural laws do not cease to exist when we do not really understand how they work or when we disagree with them, and two is that any natural law can in principle be shown to exist, or at least that should be our ambition.

¹ One hypothesis is that these case histories could be the result of an ‘incomplete death experience’: because of the traumatic previous end of life, the personality was not absorbed into the entirety of the soul, but reincarnated immediately often while maintaining the character and preferences of the previous personality.

Setting up a conclusive experiment will not be easy, but every era has its own particular problems. Just as Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) put an end to the discussion about air pressure by sending independent observers up the Puy de Dôme with a tube full of mercury, it should in principle be possible to design an experiment that would settle the discussion about reincarnation one way or another, however difficult or impossible such may appear to be at first sight.

A way of understanding an ‘incarnation cycle’ might be to think of a line of dashes, but where you can see no further than the end of your current dash. Investigations of reincarnation usually limit themselves to the dashes that lie behind us. The testimonies of individuals may then be exceptional and the observed synchronicities truly remarkable, such as for example in Ian Stevenson’s case studies, nonetheless this is merely retrospective research. Anybody who really wants fully to demonstrate reincarnation must necessarily also do prospective research.

As soon as an individual thinks that he² knows where his future life will take place, he might take the trouble to conceal a time capsule at that spot so that he can recover it in that subsequent life. A remarkable achievement indeed, one which not only would require that the person concerned has some idea of his distant future, but also that in the future he will be capable of seeing (fragments of) his distant past, or shall have at least the awareness that he once hid something away and can moreover find that hiding place. Such a procedure bears comparison with the selection of a tulku, but with the difference that the tulku is not ‘found’ by third parties, but that the person concerned ‘discovers’ it for himself and tries to prove such by finding ‘his’ time capsule again.

The idea of hiding things and recovering them at a much later date is moreover by no means new. The Tibetan religious traditions speak of *termas*, valuable ritual objects and sacred texts that are carefully hidden, and of *tertöns*, persons who discover such hidden treasures at some auspicious time occasionally hundreds of years later.

In our experiment the time capsule would of course have to be recovered by the person who hid it away in a previous life, and only by him. This would mean that the capsule would have to be so well hidden that nobody else could find it, not even by accident.

Even if the time capsule were to be recovered in the future, certain other conditions would obviously have to be met before one could speak of a successful experiment. For example the subject would have to hide the object unseen but also ensure that nobody else was aware of the project so that the hider could not be forced to reveal the hiding place. Moreover to ensure that he would not voluntarily reveal the secret, the content would have to be sufficiently valuable to ensure that the subject had every reason to keep it secret, at least if he wanted to prevent somebody else becoming its new owner in the future.

You might regard this as an inappropriate form of long-term egoism – a far from spiritual attitude. Even so it would be a guarantee. Compare this situation with that of your local craft baker. If this person were to make delicious bread just for the love of humanity, you might reasonably worry that one day he might get fed up and stop, but if he is making top quality

² In order to ensure the easier reading of the text, the shorter masculine spelling is used on behalf of both genders.

loaves simply to earn a living, you might justifiably expect him to go on baking until he reaches retirement age. In this case egoism is thus more reliable than altruism.

To summarize: if the time capsule contains undeniable proof of the identity of its maker, cannot be found accidentally, revealed by coercion, and is sufficiently valuable for the maker to have every interest in remaining silent about its existence, the basic conditions of a sound experiment will have been met.

It would be a nice bonus if the talents of the subject would permit not just the prediction of the broad lines of the future life, but also the ability to foresee the circumstances in which the time capsule would be recovered and would be able to enclose a handwritten description of these in the time capsule. Should in the future the finder remember the hiding place it would be best if he were to announce this in advance, so that this hermetically sealed space could be opened in the presence of witnesses. The chronology of the events, from recall to effective opening should be accurately recorded. If the contents of the capsule are intact, including the handwritten statement about the circumstances of its recovery, then I would think that a trustworthy link between individual past and individual future will have been established and the dashed line referred to earlier will have been shown to exist.

In closing I would like to say this. Anybody who is convinced that reincarnation takes place but does not want to resolve the reincarnation question by experimentation is lost to science. Does it matter? Perhaps it matters more than you might at first think. When somebody objects, "What you are saying about reincarnation has no basis in science", what he actually means is not what you are saying about reincarnation is not true, but rather, "I have no reliable way of determining what you say is true or otherwise". It is not an attack on your views but a criticism of the obscurity of your views. Making your position transparent is thus the essential thing. Reformulate your view so that it is transparent, measurable and testable. Give a number so that we can calculate. Fix a place and a time so that we can go and see. Provide an object so that we can feel. This is not rigidity or the arrogance of science, to the contrary: it is the longing to be satisfied with nothing less than the truth. What belief could be satisfied with less?

6. Reincarnation: A Look Ahead

Reincarnation cannot be fully understood when one continues to hold to the outdated view that a person has a soul. As explained above a person does not have a soul, rather a person is a soul and it is the soul that has a body. This is a Copernican shift in point of view and how one regards human evolution down the ages. Once you start seeing things in this way, everything becomes much easier to understand.

My recommendation that talented believers could help substantiate their claims with a verifiable time capsule experiment does not mean that we should all rush to start concealing time capsules. Even if you do not conduct any experiments and simply lean back and relax, clarification will come of itself. After all it is a typically human trait to hide all kinds of valuable objects. With the increasing lucidity of humanity, it will be inevitable that there will be a few individuals who start to 'remember' where they have hidden things in the past. That the persons concerned would then want to check the whole thing out goes without saying, indeed they do not need me for that. My role is little more than that of the trend spotter who gives notice that this kind of 'spiritual archaeology' is likely to increase in future. In fact I would heartily recommend documenting such finds with all due scientific rigour. In my

estimation we are going to be increasingly confronted with discoveries of this nature in the coming decades.

The most recent trend in reincarnation research concerns the comparison of previous life lines. This is an activity where people compare their individual previous life experiences – however they may have uncovered these – and then jointly work to see if they can piece together the historical elements to arrive at a coherent whole, in order to answer questions such as “who was who” and “what exactly happened”. The ‘recognition’ stemming from previous lives, including each person’s share in ongoing ambitions and projects throughout time, leads not only to a deeper understanding of the incarnation cycle and the karmic connections of a whole group of like-minded people, it sometimes provides a surprising insight into the behind-the-scenes events of the documented historical past. Should such consensual information be confirmed by new historical or archaeological inquiry, this would rightly be regarded as a breakthrough. To the best of my knowledge this has not yet happened, but some research groups are so careful and thorough in the examination of their data that surprises might well be expected in due course.

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