



Exploring Reincarnation

Course Handout

Introduction

Do we reincarnate and if we do what exactly is it that reincarnates? Is there evidence to prove that reincarnation happens? Why would we want to go through another life on earth?



A definition of reincarnation

Reincarnation means “to be born again in the flesh,” from the Latin re- “again,” in “in,” and carn, “flesh.” It is the theory or belief that human beings are born into the physical body, not just once, but multiple times. In many religions and teachings, it includes being born into animal bodies, but in others, such as in theosophy, only in human form.

Who believes in reincarnation?

Belief in reincarnation is an ancient one. In the East, it is an integral part of Hindu philosophy and religion, and may be found in the Laws of Manu, Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Puranas and even in the earliest of the Vedas, the Rig Veda. It is also called Samsara or the cycle of birth and rebirth from which every aspirant seeks release to attain liberation or Moksha. The cause of such return is trishna or thirst — due to attachment to people and things. The Laws of Manu teaches rebirth into animal form. It is invariably linked to the doctrine of Karma, or the law of cause and effect.

Reincarnation is also part of Buddhist belief (as rebirth), despite the fact that Buddhism denies the existence of an enduring Self or Atman. The reincarnating entity is composed of Skandhas or aggregates which are manifested from life to life.

Among African traditional beliefs, we also find reincarnation, such as in the Yoruba and Edo-speaking tribes. The indigenous peoples of Australia and the Pacific Islands similarly hold such beliefs, such as among the Maori, Tasmanians, Tahitians, Fijians and others (*The Phoenix Fire Mystery*, p. 192)



In the West, belief in reincarnation is more universal than is usually thought, especially in the ancient pre-Christian periods. The earliest Greeks embraced belief in reincarnation. It can even be found in the Orphic myths. In the 6th century BCE, Pythagoras included it among his teachings. Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE) speaks of it as part of the Egyptian religion. Socrates and Plato (427-347 BCE) taught reincarnation, such as in his *Republic* (Book 10) and in the dialogue *Meno*:

The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all.

The list is long, and it includes Cicero, Lucretius, Apollonius of Tyana, Plutarch, Plotinus and Neo-Platonists such as Lamblichus and Proclus.

Judaism

The Judeo – Christian tradition has had an ambivalent attitude towards reincarnation. The Jews during the time of Christ were composed of three main groups: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. The Pharisees, which is the most influential of the three, believe in reincarnation. The Sadducees did not even believe in immortality. The historian Josephus speak of the belief of the Pharisees as follows:

They also believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again. (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Bk XVIII, Ch. 1, 3)

They say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. (*The Wars of the Jews*, Bk II, Ch. 8, 14)



Philo Judaeus (20 BCE - 54 CE), the Jewish philosopher, wrote that:

...the air is full of souls; those who are nearest to earth descending to be tied to mortal bodies return to other bodies, desiring to live in them (*De Somniis*, quoted in *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology*, 35).

The Talmud calls reincarnation *gilgul neshamot*, and distinguished it from *ibbur*, which is inhabiting not through birth but by possession.



The Old Testament (Apocrypha) contains verses that imply reincarnation. The following were part of the original King James 1611 translation of the Bible (Appendix). In the Wisdom of Solomon, it states:

19: For I was a witty child, and had a good spirit.

20: Yea rather, being good, I came into a body undefiled.

Then in Ecclesiasticus or Book of Sirach:

8: Woe be unto you, ungodly men, which have forsaken the law of the most high God! for if ye increase, it shall be to your destruction:

9: And if ye be born, ye shall be born to a curse: and if ye die, a curse shall be your portion.

These portions are however somewhat differently translated in later versions such as in the New American Bible.

A well-known Rabbi, Manasseh Ben Israel, who wrote *Nishmath Hayyim*, wrote:

The belief or the doctrine of the transmigration of souls is a firm and infallible dogma accepted by the whole assemblage of our church with one accord, so that there is none to be found who would dare to deny it . . . Indeed, there are a great number of sages in Israel who hold firm to this doctrine so that they made it a dogma, a fundamental point of our religion. We are therefore duty bound to obey and to accept this dogma with acclamation . . . as the truth of it has been incontestably demonstrated by the Zohar, and all books of the Kabbalists. (Quoted in *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Fire Mystery*, pp. 132-3)

Belief in reincarnation or gilgul in Judaic thought continues to this day in the Kabbalah, or the mysticism of the Jews. As Gershom Sholem, the foremost modern authority on the Kabbalah, states: "Transmigration is taken for granted in the Kabbalah from its first literary expression in the *Sefer h'Behir*" (*Kabbalah*, p. 345). The same is true with another branch of Judaism called Hasidism which began in Poland in the 18th century (cf. *Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia*).

Christianity

During the time of Jesus, the doctrine of reincarnation was apparently a common belief. Thus, when Jesus asked who the people think he was, the disciples told him that "Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets" (Matthew 16:14) – an evident indication that reincarnation was commonly accepted. The response of Jesus to this report was even more revealing:

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist . . . And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. (Matthew 11:11, 14)



At another time, Jesus was asked by his disciples about a man who was born blind: “Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:1-3).

This question not only assumed that reincarnation was one of the possible reasons, but that the man was blind because of the law of cause and effect – karma, the twin doctrine of reincarnation.

The New Testament Apocryphal books also contains numerous references to reincarnation. The *Pistis Sophia*, a Gnostic gospel, states: “The discarnate soul which has not solved the mystery of the breaking of the bonds of the seals is brought before the virgin of light, who, after judging it, hands it over to her agents, who carry it into a new body” (*Reincarnation: East-West Anthology*, p. 56)

In the century after the death of the apostles of Jesus, the doctrine of reincarnation continued to be embraced by the early Christian leaders. The most prominent among these were Justin Martyr (100-165), Clement of Alexandria (150-220), and Origen (185-254).

Origen, who was called by St. Jerome as “the greatest teacher of the early Church after the Apostles,” wrote:

Is it not in conformity with reason, that every soul . . . is introduced into a body, and introduced according to its deserts and former actions? It is probable, therefore, that the soul which conferred more benefit by its [former] residence in the flesh than that of many men . . . stood in need of a body not only superior to others, but invested with all excellent qualities. (*Contra Celsum*, I, 32; quoted in *Reincarnation: Phoenix Fire Mystery*, p. 147)

There were contrary views. Thus Tertullian (c. 160-225) and Ireneus c. 120-200) did not



subscribe to transmigration of souls. Ireneus' main reason was that we do not remember our previous lives (*Against Heresies*, II, 33, 1).

By the third century, however, the Christian world had become sharply divided in its views not only on the matter of reincarnation but on many other crucial issues, such as whether there were secret teachings of Jesus, or whether Jesus was God or man. When matters came to a crisis, councils were

convened and resolved by votation. In the year 543, at the Council of Constantinople convened by the Emperor Justinian (and with the protestation of the reigning Pope Vigilius), Origen's view of the pre-existence of the soul was declared anathema.



The validity of this council has been questioned. The Catholic Encyclopedia states:

Were Origen and Origenism anathemized? Many learned writers believe so; an equal number deny that they were condemned; most modern authorities are either undecided or reply with reservations. ("Origen and Origenism")

Beginning this period, however, reincarnation became a heretical doctrine, despite its acceptance among Jews and the great Church leaders of the first several centuries, including the Gospels themselves. The Western Church, particularly after the schism of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, solidified its monopoly over dogmas of Christianity with the backing of temporal political power. Reincarnation as a doctrine faded away from mainstream Christian literature and discussion.

It re-emerged powerfully in certain Christian sects in the 10th century, namely, the Cathars, Albigenses, Waldenses and Bogomils. These were violently suppressed by the inquisition and many adherents were burned at stake. They were finally obliterated in the 14th century.

Despite the suppressive atmosphere, one still finds the teaching on reincarnation among prominent Christian writers, such as Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), William Alger (1822-1905), Henry More (1614-1687). More wrote of this in his poem "A Platonick Song of the Soul":

I would sing the Prae-existency Of human souls, and live once o'er again
By recollection and quick memory All that is past since first we all began.
(Quoted in Oderberg, 1973)

The Reformation of the 16th century and the scientific revolution that started in the 17th century led to the weakening of the Church's monopoly on "truth." Add to this was the rapid growth of comparative religious study that led to much wider religious tolerance. By the 19th century, the doctrine of reincarnation slowly mushroomed again in Christian countries, such as in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and the Transcendentalists in the U.S., the growth of Spiritualism, and the establishment of the Theosophical Society. By the 20th century, we find Christian churches that officially accept reincarnation, such as the Liberal Catholic Church and the Unity Church of Christianity, in addition to the re-emergence of Gnostic groups that reawakened interests in the teachings of the early Gnostics. This has resulted in the open and liberal inquiry into the role of reincarnation in Christian dogma, such as Hans Kung's *Eternal Life?* Open acceptance of reincarnation as part of Christianity can be found in such books as *Reincarnation in Christianity* by Dr. Geddes McGregor, an Anglican theologian and priest, and *The Case for Reincarnation* by the Rev. Leslie D. Weatherhead. But overall, Christianity generally remains opposed to the doctrine as contradictory to the teaching on resurrection and judgment after death. Surveys of populations of Christian countries, however, appear to indicate a significant percentage of Christians who believe in reincarnation. Gallup polls in 1981 in the United States, for example, showed 25% of Catholics and 21% of Protestants believe in reincarnation.



Islam

Orthodox Islam does not endorse reincarnation as a doctrine, but Sufis, the mystics of Islam, do. It is called *tanasukh* in Arabic. The most famous statement of the evolutionary role of reincarnation was made by the Sufi mystic Rumi:

I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
With angels blest; but even from angelhood
I must pass on.

The Epitaph of Benjamin Franklin written by himself:



The body of B. Franklin, Printer
(Like the Cover of an Old Book Its Contents torn Out
And Stript of its Lettering and Gilding) Lies Here, Food
for Worms.
But the Work shall not be Lost; For it will (as he
Believ'd) Appear once More
In a New and More Elegant Edition Revised and
Corrected
By the Author.

In *The Key to Theosophy* (Section 8), Madame Blavatsky explains the difference between memory and reminiscence:

For us, while *memory* is physical and evanescent and depends on the physiological conditions of the brain . . . we call *reminiscence* the *memory of the soul*. And it is *this* memory which gives the assurance to almost every human being, whether he understands it or not, of his having lived before and having to live again. Indeed, as Wordsworth has it:

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath elsewhere had its setting,
And cometh from afar.”



Modern research

In the latter half of the twentieth century, studies in reincarnation took a new turn when researchers began to actually verify the claims of people (particularly children) who said that they remembered their previous lives. One of the events that triggered this direction was a book entitled *The Search for Bridey Murphy* written by Morris Bernstein, about a woman who, under hypnosis, spoke about her past life. The case became controversial after some investigators claimed that it was a hoax, but it was sufficient to arouse the interest of independent researchers to do their own verifications.

The most famous, as well as the most extensive, research done on reincarnation was made by Dr. Ian Stevenson, Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry in the University of Virginia. He investigated more than 2,000 cases of documented claimed memories of previous lives from more than ten countries and built up a remarkable body of evidence that strongly demonstrated not only survival after death but also reincarnation. His essay on his initial researches, *The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations*, won the William James Award of the American Society of Psychical Research.

The strength of his research lies in the fact that many of his subjects were children whose claims were authenticated by later verification. He has published detailed accounts of these cases in many books, particularly *20 Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, and a multi-volume work on the details of different cases in different countries.

Stevenson further found additional sources of evidence of reincarnation through xenoglossy (or the knowledge of a language not learned in this life but which was known to the person in a previous remembered life) and birth marks (where the present life exhibit physical evidence of the manner of death of the previous life, such as absence of specific fingers at birth which corresponds to the amputated fingers in the remembered life). He published one case of unlearned language in detail under the title *Xenoglossy*, and wrote two other books on birthmarks, entitled: *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*.

What eminent people say of reincarnation

I am certain that I have been here as I am now a thousand times before, and I hope to return a thousand times.

THOMAS H. HUXLEY

I know I am deathless. No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before. I laugh at what you call dissolution, and I know the amplitude of time. . . .

And as to you, Life, I reckon you are the leaving of many deaths, (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

WALT WHITMAN

The soul comes from without into the human body, as into a temporary abode, and it goes out of it anew it passes into other habitations, for the soul is immortal.



It is the secret of the world that all things subsist and do not die, but only retire a little from sight and afterwards return again. Nothing is dead; men feign themselves dead, and endure mock funerals... and there they stand looking out of the window, sound and well, in some strange new disguise.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Reincarnation contains a most comforting explanation of reality by means of which Indian thought surmounts difficulties which baffle the thinkers of Europe.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

My life often seemed to me like a story that has no beginning and no end. I had the feeling that I was an historical fragment, an excerpt for which the preceding and succeeding text was missing. I could well imagine that I might have lived in former centuries and there encountered questions I was not yet able to answer; that I had been born again because I had not fulfilled the task given to me.

CARL JUNG