

Re-Incarnation

by T.B. Harbottle

May 5, 1888

Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 1

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

[Page 1] IN approaching the subject of re-incarnation, we are confronted at the outset with a very serious difficulty. Like all other portions of the Esoteric Doctrine, re-incarnation, when considered alone, is not only incapable of satisfactory proof, but has no intelligible *raison d'être*. It is only when examined as an integral part of the whole system that its place and function in the scheme of human evolution become apparent, and that the arguments in its favour can be advanced, and those brought against it be repelled, with any degree of success. On the other hand, it is impossible within the scope of a short paper to give any adequate idea of the Esoteric doctrine as a whole. It is therefore necessary to assume on the part of the readers of this pamphlet a certain acquaintance with the broad outlines of Theosophic teaching, so much at least as will render the occasional references to other and cognate doctrines not wholly unintelligible to them.

The main idea of re-incarnation is the persistence, through a succession of physical lives, of a unit of consciousness. This idea suggests at once two questions. What is the relation of this unit of consciousness to man as we are accustomed to observe and study him on earth ? and what is the cause of this unit, after having once shaken off the limitations of earth life, returning to them again ? Briefly what is it that re-incarnates ? and why is re-incarnation necessary ? To answer the first question it is necessary to give some attention to the constitution of man. The second entails an inquiry into the intermediate states, between two earth lives and their relation to physical existence.

The constitution of man, in its seven-fold aspect, is dealt with at considerable length in Mr. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. A very brief survey will be all that is possible here. Taking first the highest side of man, we have the sixth principle, the Divine soul, which is the vehicle of the seventh, the universal spirit. These two form the monad, existing from the beginning of manifestation, and overshadowing the future man throughout the earlier periods of evolution, but without consciousness of, or contact with, the gradually progressing entity. At the other end of the scale, we have the physical body, consisting of three principles, gross matter, life, and form, which are so far from being the special appanage of man as to [Page 2] belong also to the animal and vegetable kingdoms. Then we come to the fourth principle, the animal soul, representing the instincts, the passions, the unreasoning emotions which are present not in man only but in the animals. We have thus as it were two distinct entities, the Divine nature represented by the two higher, and the animal nature by the four lower principles, but up to this point they are in a sense disconnected, and at least have no consciousness one of the other. At this point in the human evolution appears the fifth principle, the reasoning faculty, the human soul. Herein is present the reflective self-consciousness of man, which forms the connecting link between knowledge and passion, between the Divine and the animal, and renders possible that conscious progress towards higher things, the capacity for which constitutes the difference between man and the animals. It follows, then, that the

evolution of the human soul marks the point at which man first becomes responsible, and consequently that the measure of the human development will be the strength of the attraction of the human soul towards the higher or lower principles between which it is placed.

This dual aspect of the human soul, as the advocate on the one hand of the nobler, on the other of the baser side of man's complex nature, enables us also to consider it as the principle of free-will in the microcosm, as being that which offers to the reflective self-consciousness, the choice between good and evil, and the possibility of identification with one or other of two courses. Almost everyone is conscious during life of the continual struggle which goes on between his two natures. Every victory obtained over the lower self adds to the strength of the higher, and slowly prepares it for the movement when man, centering therein all his consciousness, is enabled to dominate completely his lower self, and becomes fitted for that higher state of which, intellectually at least, it is in vain to attempt to form any conception.

We have seen that the human soul provides the point of contact, and the battle-ground for the struggle between the highest and lowest aspects of man's nature. It is only natural, therefore, that we should find therein the point of separation between the transitory personality and the permanent individuality — permanent, that is, as far as concerns the period of human evolution. The words "personality" and "individuality" are here used somewhat arbitrarily, but it is difficult otherwise to discriminate satisfactorily between the two aspects of human self-consciousness, and no confusion need arise if it be understood that individuality is used to express the "Ego" which inhabits successively many distinct personalities.

At the end of every earth life, man leaves behind him first the material body, which, with the life principle and the astral double, or form principle, is disintegrated, and becomes capable of entering into fresh combinations, [Page 3]

Man is left then with his four higher principles, which for a certain period may be considered as constituting a partially conscious entity. It is plain, however, that by the loss of the body, the fourth principle has lost its power of objective activity, and it cannot therefore have any continued existence, unless it is enabled in some way to attach itself to matter. On the other hand the spiritual nature in man is rendered freer by the absence of the body, and is enabled to shake off the fourth principle, carrying with it the higher portion of the human soul, while the lower fades slowly out with the fourth principle. Thus the personality is completely dissolved, and the Karma which has been generated during the past life attaches itself the Individuality, which enters into the state of Devachan.

Devachan is a purely subjective state, and quite as much a state of illusion as the earth life — that is to say it is just as little a state of true knowledge, and it is even more self-centred. It is of the nature of a vivid dream, the actors in which have no existence outside the consciousness of the dreamer. It is purely a state of bliss, in which man receives compensation for the undeserved misery of the past life, and the satisfaction of his nobler aspirations. But it is a state in which spiritual progress, or the acquirement of true knowledge, is impossible. It is rather a state of rest, after the exhausting struggle of the previous earth life — a period of quiescence, during which the victories of the past life are consolidated and synthesised into a measure of the progress made, and from which the individuality again re-enters physical existence with all the added power due to such progress.

It may be said that all this is baseless assumption, and quite incapable of proof. Perhaps so; but does it or does it not agree with the view we have put forward as to the human soul? If it does so agree, we have something to start from which is not an assumption, but a personal experience to the majority of mankind; namely, the existence in them of the two opposing natures, the Divine and the animal, and the constant struggle maintained between the two, in which the two aspects of the human soul are the actual combatants, and man's self-consciousness the arbiter.

First as to the division of the human soul after death. Its higher portion during life has been attracted by the Divine, and permanent in men, and has been its expression on the intellectual plane. Hence it survives, with the Divine principles. The lower side has represented intellectually the desires, the passions, the animal instincts, which derive their vitality from the physical body. Hence it must perish with the body, for its persistence for a short period after death can hardly be considered as constituting an independent existence. It is merely a question of the more or less lengthened period required for disintegration.

Then, as to Devachan. It is purely a blissful state, because the evil [Page 4] done in the past life has been done in spite of and in opposition to the efforts of the higher portion of the human soul. It would, therefore, be impossible to inflict punishment upon it without a violation of the supreme law of the universe — justice. And if it is to be blissful it must be subjective and dreamlike, because, with an imperfectly developed human soul, the presence or absence of other entities would entail a mixture of pain and pleasure, if those entities were objectively conscious of each other.

Then, as to the question of spiritual progress and the acquirements of knowledge, the idea of the responsibility of the human soul, and of its dual nature again gives us the clue. If we are correct in asserting that man's progress is accomplished by the victories gained over self in the conflict between his two natures, it follows that progress must be stopped whenever such victories are no longer possible.

But we have seen that death removes from man the incentive to evil, and that the higher nature of man is therefore temporarily released from its contact with the lower; hence the possibility of a continuance of the struggle, and of any progress in the direction of emancipation must necessarily cease, until the time arrives for the next incarnation. So also with knowledge. True knowledge is acquired by self-conquest, not by mere study and intellectual effort. Its attainment, therefore, is just as much dependent on the presence of the lower self. Indeed, spiritual progress and the attainment of true knowledge are so nearly identical, that the argument in the one case holds good absolutely in the other. The question as to undeserved evil, for which the Devachanic existence offers compensation, is one which may be more fittingly referred to later, when we come to deal with the conditions under which the Ego re-incarnates; but one other point arises, which may be discussed in this place: Why does the Karma, generated in any one earth life, pursue the Ego, after its period of Devachanic repose, into its succeeding life? If the higher portion of the human soul has not deserved punishment, and has been free from it in the Devachanic condition, how is the continuity between crime and punishment preserved, if a totally new personality is produced for the next life? This may be answered in two ways. First, by considering that the human soul as a whole is responsible for the evil done, and that where the higher self has failed in the struggle, bad Karma has been generated by the individuality, which it must work out in its next, or some succeeding, incarnation; secondly, by looking on earth lives as affording those lessons which have to be mastered, and Karma as the schoolmaster who insists on the accomplishment of the task. From this point of view the results of bad Karma are not so much punishments for sin as the necessary

consequences of ignorance, the ignorance being due to a failure to learn the lessons of the previous life.

The length of the Devachanic period is of course no more fixed than is [Page 5] the length of the earth life, but may be considered as bearing a more or less constant ratio to it. The other factors which have to be considered are the amount of undeserved evil to be compensated, and the strength and vitality of the higher aspirations, as opposed to the lower selfish desires, which have been generated during the course of the life. These two factors will necessarily vary in amount, if not in character, with the duration of life, and together will govern the length of the period which must intervene before the balance is redressed, and the Ego is again ready to take-upon it the burdens of the flesh.

It is consequently a mistake to expect simultaneous re-incarnation for groups of persons who have been associated in their previous life. The general rule indeed must be the other way, as the three factors upon which depend the period passed in Devachan are capable of almost indefinite variation, while there is yet another factor to be considered in this connection, namely, the character of the Karma generated, which will govern the conditions of the new life and render even more improbable any resumption by the reincarnating ego, of its previous relations with other egos. There are doubtless exceptions to this general law, when very strong Karmic affinities are generated between two persons. For instance, in the case of a murderer and his victim, we are given to understand that Karma will in some future incarnation, not necessarily the next one, bring them together in some close relation. There are other exceptions which need not here be considered in detail, but the ordinary course of evolution does not tend in the direction of the association of the same egos in successive lives.

When we proceed to the consideration of the reasons which make reincarnation a necessary portion of the scheme of human evolution, we are again brought back to the original postulate of the responsibility of the human soul, and its dual nature. The Esoteric doctrine teaches us that man is absolutely his own saviour, and that he obtains emancipation by the conquest of self, thus by conscious efforts scaling the heights of spiritual development, which culminate in Nirvana. But man can only so save himself by perpetual conflict with the evil in his nature, and unless the good and the bad in man are brought into contact, this warfare cannot proceed. Devachan is a state of rest from the weariness of the struggle, but it can only be a temporary one, and the fight must be renewed, time after time, until the final victory is won, and man is freed from the bondage of evil, and becomes as a god. If it were not so we should be forced to believe either that any man could and the good man did accomplish this task within the limits of one short earth life, or else that the struggle was perfectly unnecessary, and an arbitrary imposition emanating from the supreme will of a personal and irresponsible deity, who is able when he chooses to raise man to unthinkable heights of spirituality by the exercise of his measureless power.

An examination of some of the teachings of religious systems on this point will show that they are all more or less vitiated by one or the other of these misconceptions. Protestantism, for instance, offers no scheme of punishment for those who are partly bad; no reward for that which is good in those who are partly evil. It is forced to divide men into two categories, the good and the bad, though all experience shows us that each man is and must be a compound of these two opposite qualities.

What is necessary, according to the teachings of Protestantism, is repentance and faith. Repentance, a sincere sorrow for evil done, but carrying no guarantee that the evil would be resisted if a similar temptation had again to be passed through. Faith, a firm belief in the power of God to wash away sin and

its consequences, and free the human soul from all the evil influences of the flesh. With these, a man is released from the necessity of fighting his lower nature; so much so that the repentant criminal on the scaffold, if he have faith, thinks himself as sure of eternal bliss as had he been a saint who had spent his whole life in the service of humanity.

The Church of Rome has preserved, in her doctrine of purgatory, a punishment for the evil done by those who are not wholly bad, and so far her teaching is somewhat more philosophical and logical than that of Protestantism; but she teaches, also, that faith is the first requisite — those denying the Church being without hope of future salvation. In neither section of Christianity, indeed, is there any recognition of the necessity of that self-conquest which is the basis of the Theosophical system of Ethics. Both believe in a Divine grace, which, descending into the heart of man, takes, as it were, the battle out of his hands and relieves him from responsibility and possibility of failure.

If we turn for a moment to the views held by a very large section of the Spiritualists, that there are successive grades of spiritual stages through which man progresses slowly, becoming gradually purified in the process, we are met again by the same difficulty. Under no one of these systems is provision made for the case of the man who dies before he has conquered his lower animal nature; in other words, for the case of almost every human being now passing through physical existence. But it is evident that in no case can this victory be won on any other plane but that of the passions — of the animal nature itself — for only there can the two opposing forces be brought into contact. Hence those who deny the necessity of re-incarnation have either to deny the necessity of this final victory, as do the Christians, or, like the Spiritualists, so to confuse spirit and matter as to imagine the struggle and consequent gradual purification as taking place on the spiritual plane.

Re-incarnation, then, is a necessary consequence of the responsibility of the human soul, and of its double nature. The Karma which has been [Page 7] generated during one earth life, is the agent which draws back the Ego into incarnation after the full and due enjoyment of the Devachanic bliss. The Ego is composed of the two highest principles, together with the higher part of the human soul, which has been attracted towards them, at the time of the dissipation of the last personality. It must not be forgotten that the disintegration of the personality is complete, and has only left behind the product of the life it has passed through, with its affinities for good or evil, in the shape of the Karma, attendant upon the permanent individuality. It is then an entirely new personality which has to be created, not a mere re-birth of the old, with a few slight variations produced by the progress of the past incarnation. The question then arises: What governs the character of the new personality, temporarily acquired by the Ego? The answer may be put briefly thus: — The Karma is attracted by its affinities with the characteristics, personal and hereditary, of the man and woman to whom the child is born. The new personality cannot be described as the work of the Karma, but is absolutely the result of the combination of the two sets of characters, physical and moral, represented by the father and mother, and of their inherited though possibly dormant peculiarities. It is precisely in this curious persistence of characteristics, in a more or less dormant state through several generations, and the possibility of transmitting them to their children, though they may not apparently possess them, that render the possible variations to be derived from any man and woman numerous enough to give scope to the action of Karma. Were it not for this, it would assuredly happen often that no fitting opportunity of re-birth could be found at the proper moment, especially when we consider that not the physical only but the mental and moral characteristics have to be derived from the parents, but must at the same time be in consonance with Karmic affinities of the incarnating ego. There is nothing, therefore, in the theory of re-incarnation which conflicts with the

conclusions arrived at by students of heredity, as to the persistence and the power of transmission of dormant characteristics. Re-incarnation, in fact, offers an explanation of the causes which may lead to the re-development of such dormant tendencies, thus filling up the other side of the picture in a by no means unsatisfactory manner.

It cannot, however, be supposed that even with the wide range of possibilities thus offered it will be always possible for the Karma to find precisely the right field for the due working out of its effects. It must often happen that either its attempt is a failure, in which case premature death, and immediate re-birth will result, or that when the conditions as a whole permit of due re-incarnation being effected, they are yet not absolutely those which are demanded. In such cases (and probably every instance of re-birth is thus affected in some degree) there must be a [Page 8] certain amount of injustice done, and it is this injustice which meets with compensation in Devachan, or at least forms a part of that so compensated.

How then, to sum up, are we to reply to those who ask for proof of the doctrine of re-incarnation ? Proved positively it cannot be, any more than Christians can prove positively their heaven, or Materialists their negation of a life after death.

But in regarding re-incarnation as a portion of a complete scheme of evolution, does it, or does it not, adequately fill up an otherwise empty space, and offer a rational interpretation of certain mysteries otherwise insoluble ? Theosophists say emphatically, Yes. Firstly, due regard is shown by it to the admittedly double nature of man; secondly, provision is made by it for the possibility of that conquest of self, the necessity for which, though denied dogmatically by certain schools of thought, is nevertheless intuitively realised by most thinking men; thirdly, it does not conflict with, but supports, the scientific conclusions as regards heredity; and, lastly, the system is in accord with the highest possible ideal of Divine justice, as punishment and reward, or, more properly speaking, their equivalents in the terms of cause and effect, are duly meted out for all sinful or meritorious conduct, while undeserved misfortune has its due compensation in the intermediate periods between the earth lives.

It remains only to reply to the argument that we have no memory of our past lives. In the first place, it may be returned: "How can it be asserted positively that we have no memory of our previous experiences on the higher planes of existence ? What we call intuition, is it not the memory of knowledge acquired in a past life, and recorded in the permanent individuality which is ourselves, when we raise our consciousness to its level ? Should we expect that the memory of the events in the life of a vanished personality should remain with the Ego, when we see that even in the Devachanic state immediately following the life of that personality the memory is only a dream-memory, and only has reference to one side of the life ? "

Yet it must not be supposed that the memory of past lives is really destroyed. Each life leaves its impress in detail on the astral light, and to those who can read therein it is given to read the past and the history of their own experiences. But the attainment of knowledge is the necessary preliminary to this power; and well that it is so, for the ills of one life are enough to bear, and man would be too heavily weighted if he were for ever haunted by all the evil he had done and suffered from the commencement of his period of responsibility.

The ethical bearing of the doctrine cannot be lightly passed over, but must here be suggested rather than discussed. Re-incarnation is the necessary consequence of man's inability to learn in one life all the lessons which *life* [Page 9] has to teach, and of his failure in the attempt, if indeed the attempt be really made, to conquer self. Truly none can accomplish the impossible, and therefore none hope to escape from the inexorable law which compels them to suffer and to learn, that in the end they may conquer.

But the final deliverance must be brought out by man for himself, and it lies with him to hasten or to retard it. Even the desire for personal immortality, for personal development on the spiritual plane, cannot of itself free the man from the ever-recurring series of earth lives, each followed by a period of Devachanic repose. It is only by the destruction of self that this apparently endless chain can be broken; by fixing the consciousness in the eternal and the changeless that the cycle of change can come to an end.