

Life After Death

At some point during our lifetime questions arise from deep within us. Who am I? What is my purpose earth? Is there such a thing as life after death? We will consider various sources that can shed light on these fundamental questions. We will consider the work of some prominent and well respected doctors, scientists and researchers. We will also look at the wisdom and knowledge given by saints, philosophers, spiritual masters and the Worlds Religions.

We are living in a time where belief in spirituality is beginning to grow. A survey was taken in 1969 which showed that nearly 20 % of the American public believed in life after death (Gallup Poll). In 1981, another survey revealed that 23% of all Americans believed in reincarnation (1). In 1989 research analyst Walter Martin stated that “the latest survey on reincarnation indicates that more than 58% of Americans polled either believed in it or believed it to be a distinct possibility (2). According to the “World Statistics” survey published in July 1996 “More Americans believe in reincarnation than ever before, and more and more Europeans are accepting the doctrine with increasing frequency.” People living in the East are very quick to admit in their belief in reincarnation. According to statistics, four out of five people surveyed that they completely believed in the doctrine of reincarnation (3). This means that over half the world’s population believes in Reincarnation!

Why is there such a rise in a belief in reincarnation?

There are three main reasons according to research analysts. 1) A deep interest in Eastern Philosophies which is full of wisdom and offers a holistic approach to living a life of balance. 2) A growing interest in the West with the subject of death. 3) The validity of Past Life Therapy.

Over the course of history many spiritual masters, prophets, philosophers, scientists and prominent members of society have talked about the doctrine of reincarnation. If we were to take a closer look at the worlds major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we come to realize that reincarnation plays an important role. For a lot of us this concept is logical, based on justice and implies a universal law of nature that naturally and fairly applies to all of us. Without this universal law the world would seem cruel, illogical, random and confusing. Why is one child born in a wealthy family and another surrounded by extreme poverty. One born healthy and another with a terminal disease. Why are some surrounded by extreme suffering and others live a life of Joy. The doctrine of reincarnation and Karma allows us to view these questions with a much larger perspective.

The word reincarnation is composed of five latin elements and was introduced into the English language in the nineteenth century. The five elements it breaks down to are: (re = again) (in = into) (carn = flesh) (ate = become) (ion = process). The literal meaning of reincarnation means “The process of coming into flesh again”(4).

“Transmigration is another word that is commonly used which is much older than reincarnation. This word has been used since the sixth century. It comes from Latin and breaks down to the following. (trans = across) (migr = to go or move) (ation = process of causing or becoming (5)). Transmigration is the process of moving across, from one to the other. This is referring to the soul moving from one body to another. The words rebirth and pre-existence can also be used to mean the same thing.

The concept of reincarnation and Karma go hand in hand. Karma in its basic form implies action. Every action has a reaction. “What you sow so shall you reap”. All the actions that we performed in our past lives good and bad, it’s result will re manifest in this life. We have to learn and improve on our actions in this lifetime by using our freewill. Predestination from our past actions and our freewill from this life are both fundamental factors that determine our future destiny.

“As the embodied soul continually passes, in this body, from childhood, to youth, to old age, the soul inhabits another body at the time of death”. Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita (Song of God) is an ancient holy scripture that was revealed over 5000 years ago. This sacred text contains the essence of all the holy scriptures. It was revealed by the divine master Lord Krishna in a dialogue with his faithful disciple (Arjun). The Gita is a timeless fountain of wisdom, knowledge, spirituality, and enlightenment written in a very poetic and easy to understand manner. It is a source of wisdom for scholars, ordinary people, religious ceremonies, and millions of individuals in India and around the world. The Gita is part of a larger sacred text “The Mahabharata” which was put in written form by the great Sage Ved Vyassa.

India has given birth to some of the greatest sages and masters in the history of mankind. The wisdom of these masters has guided the rest of the world over the course of history. India is the ancient holy land of Spiritually enlightened masters like Sri Krishna, Ram, Buddha, Ved Vyassa and many others. Reincarnation has been mentioned in the wisdom left behind by these great masters. It has been mentioned in the Holy Gita, The Holy Vedas, Mahabharat, Ramayan and other holy scriptures.

“O learned and tolerant soul, after roaming in waters and plants, a person enters the womb and is born again and again. O soul, you are born in the body of plants, in trees, in all created animate objects, and in waters. O soul, blazing like the sun, after

cremation, having reached the fire and the earth for rebirth and residing in the belly of your mother, you are born again. O soul having reached the womb, again and again, you auspiciously lay in your mother's body, as a child sleeps in her mother's lap. (Yajur Veda 12.36-37).

In the late 19th century there was a popular scholar by the name of Richard Garbe. Although he wrote on behalf of Christianity, he believed that India was the original influence on early greek (and eventually western) thought(6). Arthur Osborne the historian/indologist claimed that the basic Indian practices such as religious mysticism, holistic medicine and a vegetarian diet eventually got introduced to western philosophy and literature. Osborne was also of the belief that it was the wisdom from India that allowed the doctrine of reincarnation to be introduced to western philosophers and writers.

Buddhism originated in India approximately 2500 years ago. There are several branches of Buddhism and millions of people follow this spiritual tradition. One of the principle branches is Tibetan Buddhism led by the Dalai Lama, the concept of rebirth and Karma are very important principles. Several Zen masters whose main focus is on meditation techniques and living in the moment have also emphasized on reincarnation. The ancient Chinese Taoists also believed in the doctrine of reincarnation.

The Jewish mystical tradition known as the Kabbalah firmly believe in the concept of transmigration. Although mainstream and orthodox Judaism do not focus on reincarnation, references to this concept can be found in jewish literature. Many rabbis and other scholars have referred to it. Some of the more prominent Kabbalists who were also influential with the mainstream audience were Abraham Abulafia (c.1240-1290), Joseph Karo (1488-1575) and Moses Cordovero (1522-1570) to name a few.

“The souls must re-enter the absolute, from whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this end they must develop the perfections; the germ of which is planted in them. And if they have not developed these traits in this one life, than they must commence another, a third and so forth. They must go on like this until they acquire the condition that allows them to associate again with god”

The Zohar

Most Christians do not focus on the doctrine of reincarnation. However, some of the earlier followers of this religious tradition were firm believers in rebirth. Origen who

lived from AD 185-254 was described by St Jerome as “the greatest teacher of the church after the apostles” believed that:

Every soul...comes into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defeats of its previous life. Its place in this world, as a vessel appointed to honour or dishonour, is determined by its previous merits or demerits. Its work in this world determines its place in the world which is to follow this... (7)

Origen was punished and imprisoned for his views. Many years later the emperor Justinian condemned the belief in rebirth in the year 543ad at the second council of Constantinople. The emperor did this by declaring his “Anathemas against Origen”.

“I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as a plant and rose to an animal, I died as an animal and I was Man. Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?”

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273)

Through out the history of mankind, God has always provided us with saints, sages, prophets and spiritual masters to share their knowledge and wisdom with mankind. Each spiritually enlightened master has in their own unique way given us a fountain of knowledge to constantly guide us. There are many great religions in the world today that revolve around the knowledge that comes from a holy scripture. Some of these include the Holy Vedas, Torah, Bible and the Quran. The verses in these holy scriptures have come down in the form of allegories, parables and symbolism. The majority of the followers of these scriptures seem to follow the literal meanings of the verses in the holy books.

Sufism is the mystical esoteric tradition in Islam. Their focus is much deeper than the basic principles of Islam. Their aim is to constantly focus on spiritual enlightenment and ultimately merge with the essence of God (Allah). Most of the followers of Islam do not focus on reincarnation, Muslims for the most part follow the basic principles (sharia or Islamic laws). Transmigration of the soul is confined to the smaller more esoteric circle of Sufism.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad has claimed that the Holy Quran essentially has an esoteric foundation: It was “sent in seven dialects; and in every one of its sentences there is an external and an internal meaning...I received from the messenger of God two kinds of knowledge: One of these I taught...[but] if I had taught them the other it would have broken their throats”. Here “broken their throats” was a popular saying of that time and it meant that it would “put them in utter confusion”(8). Understanding

the concept of rebirth requires a deeper understanding of Karma, evolution of the soul and a mature level of consciousness. Each person is at a certain level of consciousness. Some of us are young souls and a few of us are older souls. The older the level of the soul the deeper the level of understanding and awareness.

“How do you disbelieve in Allah, seeing that you were dead and He gave you life! Then He will cause you to die, then He will give you life, then unto Him you will return” [Al Qur'an (2:28)]

“Allah has caused you to grow as a growth from earth, and afterwards he makes you return thereto, and he will bring you forth again” [Al Quran 71:17-18]

Traditionally, most scholars associate verses that refer to death and life after death to the concept of resurrection. However, prominent sufi poets like jalaluddin rumi, saadi and hafiz have commented on the deeper meaning of these verses.(9) These verses are pointing to reincarnation.

One of the greatest sufis of all time Mansur al-Hallaj is very popular for his poetic spirituality and enlightenment. In this little quotation, he points to the doctrine of reincarnation:

“Like the herbage I have sprung up many a time on the banks of flowing rivers. For a hundred thousand years I have lived and worked and tried in every sort of body”.

The great preeminent greek philosopher Socrates and his outstanding student Plato are two of the most important western advocates of reincarnation. There are clear references to this doctrine in Plato's famous writings the “Meno” , “Phaedo” and “Republic” . These two great personalities have committed a great deal of time and energy teaching the concept of transmigration.

Dr. Brian Weiss, Chairman of psychiatry at the mount Sinai medical center in Miami and graduate of Columbia university and yale medical school is a firm believer in rebirth. He uses past life regression therapy to heal his patients. He was a guest on the Oprah Winfrey show where he did a group regression as well an individual past life regression. He explained as a prominent doctor and scientist how his life changed through one of his clients (Catherine). This doctor has become a champion of rebirth and one of the worlds leading past life therapists as he tours the world training others in past life therapy. He is convinced that we bring all our karma, strengths and weaknesses from past lives and it manifests in this life. A lot of health issues, emotional blockages, fear and phobias are directly connected to our past and quite

often when no other form of medical treatment works, past life therapy is very effective. His popular books are “Many lives - Many masters, Messages from the Masters and Same Soul Many Bodies”.

There is a phenomenal book called Journey of Souls by Michael Newton(Phd). Michael is a counselling psychologist with more than 40 years of experience. He is a firm believer of rebirth without any religious bias. He also does past life therapy but he goes deeper to a state called “life between lives” in a “super conscious state”. Once he regresses his client to this state, the client can clearly recall and visually see a place in the spirit world where the client (in spirit form) is getting ready to come to earth. The client is making actual decisions (under the supervision of higher master spirits) like what parents will be chosen, the type of body (its features, health, strength and weaknesses), the city and country, the religion and what soul mates it will come in contact with when it comes to earth! Michael describes earth as a big school with many lessons to learn. We all have different lessons to learn, the lives we choose are based on the lessons we have to learn. Michael also talks about different levels of the soul. There are young souls, old souls and those in between. This incredible book is highly recommended to anyone interested in spirituality!

Dr. Ian Stevenson, who was the chairman of the department of neurology and psychiatry in the school of medicine at the University of Virginia, has spent 30 long years of research on childhood reincarnation cases. He has worked with thousands of children from India, Shri Lanka, Middle East, Europe, Africa, America and many other places. Dr. Stevenson claims that children remember their past much more easily than adults since they are less blocked. Kids often “pretend to be other people” and Dr. Stevenson studied over 3000 cases and over half of these cases ended up being specific people that the child very accurately describes. This is a very strong indication of a child remembering their past life. Dr. Stevenson is a respected scientist, without religious bias, whose work has been published in prestigious academic journals. These include “The journal of the American Medical Association, The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease and The international Journal of Comparative Sociology”.

Other Prominent members who have expressed their belief in reincarnation: Henry Ford - the automobile entrepreneur, Richard Wagner – The composer of The Flying Dutchmen and Tannhauser, David Lloyd George – British Prime minister (1916-1922), Count Leo Tolstoy - author of Anna Karenina and War and Peace, Edgar Cayce – Healer & Clairvoyant, Sylvia Browne – Psychic, Shirley McLain - actress, Sylvester Stallone - actor and many others...

As we can see, the doctrine of reincarnation is prevalent in the history of the world. Many saints, sages, spiritual masters, scientists and doctors concur with this universal law of nature! This concept teaches us that we are the masters of our own destiny. We have to take responsibility for our actions as ultimately our actions become our sins or they take us towards salvation. We have a choice to act like animals or humans. We can go backwards or we can naturally move forward in our journey as is meant to be by the universal laws. Our soul is a spark from god that gradually grows through spiritual progress, starting at the basic level of awareness and growing to a much greater level awareness. The soul comes from god and eventually makes it way back of God, this is the ultimate aim for every soul!

References

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