

Reincarnating all over again

Spiritual Wisdom

It is absolutely necessary that the soul should be healed and purified, and if this does not take place during its life on earth, it must be accomplished in future lives.

—Saint Gregory of Nyssa

Do you want to come back again?

How do you feel about the possibility of coming back to earth again and again in different forms and circumstances? Does it sound exciting? Exhilarating? Exhausting?

Buddhist and Hindu sages suggest that the ultimate goal of life is to achieve a state of enlightenment where you don't have to keep coming back and going through all this rigmarole of lifetime after lifetime. The idea is to transcend the cycles of birth and death, which are fraught with limitation and suffering, and to move on to a higher level that is somehow better, more pure, and more complete.

As with any theory, this one can also be distorted by human tendencies to simplify and emotionalize spiritual topics with the usual approaches of desire and greed. When I lived in an Indian-based ashram, people would often say things like, "I'm not coming back!" meaning that, within the context of reincarnation, they were not signing on for another tour of duty in this world (clearly forgetting that the "rebirth draft" is alive and well!) One fellow ashramite who was a free-spirited video producer from Canada used to buck this trend and say, "I can't *wait* to come back! I'm having so much fun here. I want to have more fun."

I thought this fellow sounded a lot more enlightened than the people who were so insistent on moving out of the human realm of experience, although I also identify with the desire to move into higher realms. Still, instead of defiantly declaring, "I'm not coming back!" I tend to think more along the lines of, "I do my best, and God's will be done."

Some religious traditions describe a person's life as being one card within a much larger hand of cards. This idea of reincarnation has been prevalent in many cultures, including most eastern religions and some early forms of Judaism and Christianity. Reincarnation has also been researched in scientific studies of young children who seem to have reported accurate details of previous lives.

The basic idea of reincarnation is that a soul takes birth in many increasingly evolved levels of form, beginning perhaps with a rock or plant and moving through the kingdom of life until that soul is lucky and evolved enough to score a human form. Then the soul takes form as a series of increasingly evolved human beings until it graduates to the next level. Most philosophies aren't too specific about what happens after this point due to the inherent difficulty in knowing or writing about nonmaterial realms.

Generally, this idea of finishing up one's time in this world and moving into the next realm is considered a good thing. In the mundane perspective, there are good days and bad days, pleasure and suffering. As Einstein has pointed out, everything is relative. To a spoiled person, a broken fingernail can be the cause of great emotional distress, while to a starving child, a small crust of bread can bring incredible happiness.

However, from the perspective of some spiritual sages, this entire realm of human existence is inherently painful. It's based on ignorance of one's true nature. It's a prison for the bird of the soul that longs to fly free, unencumbered by the chains of worldliness.

In esoteric Judaism, the concept of reincarnation is called *gilgul hánéshamot*, which literally translates as the recycling or transmigration of souls. This teaching describes reincarnation as being like the flame of one life candle lighting another.

The essence of the second flame comes from the first, and contains imperfections inherited from the initial flame that are meant to be corrected. However, the second flame is also an independent entity that is separate from the first.

Some have asked me whether I believe in reincarnation. In my personal philosophy, I tend to hold many theories in my mind, without subscribing fully to any one of them.

I "know that I don't know," and prefer to contemplate and consider different ideas that may even seem contradictory unless you see them as puzzle pieces in a big, multidimensional universe.

From that bigger picture, I tend to think of reincarnation theories as being useful but almost as limited as the usual one-life-per-person scenarios. The idea of reincarnation can be valuable in contemplating the nature and experiences of your life, and at the same time, it is also bound by materialistic limitations of separateness and time, portraying a separate soul as moving forward in time on the same planet, dimension, and level of species.

Reincarnation theories also don't address the spiritual descriptions of this world as being an illusion or dream of the great universal dreamer. In that theoretical view, even the apparently solid histories of people and events in this life dream are made of nothing but illusion. Therefore, any attempts to determine exactly how this illusion of life is structured from within the illusion are inherently incomplete at best.

A Jewish story about reincarnation

Once, on Rosh Hashanah night, the soul of a dead man came to Reb Yekhiel. The apparition appeared exactly as the man had been on earth, and Reb Yekhiel immediately recognized him as the soul of the cantor who used to chant so beautifully from the Torah scroll during the Sabbath services in Reb Yekhiel's town. "What are you doing here on this most holy of nights?" the rabbi asked the dead man.

"Surely the holy rabbi already knows," the soul replied. "On Rosh Hashanah, God himself opens the Book of Life, and judges the whole world. All of the deeds of everyone on earth are clearly written in that Book, in every tiny detail. God looks at our sins and our good deeds and weighs them both in the balance. Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall be born — and to which family? During this night, souls are also judged to be reincarnated once again. I am just such a soul, about to be reborn."

"So tell me," the rabbi asked, "why are you being sent down into the physical world again?"

"It is written in the Zohar that when God desires to take back a person's spirit, then all the days that he has lived in this world pass in review before him," the soul replied, "and this is exactly what happened to me. Just before my death, I recited the confessional, as every Jew is supposed to do, and I thought over everything I had done. Then my entire life passed before me — and I saw that in every instance, I had acted in exactly the right way. My whole life had been totally kosher and totally good. When I realized this, a great feeling of egotistical pride came over me. As luck would have it, right in the middle of this feeling, I died, with no time to repent of that sinful pride.

"When I arrived at the Heavenly Court, that sin of pride was still clinging to me like a soiled coat. And because of that sin, the Heavenly Court decreed that I must return to earth once more, in order to atone for my pride." With that, the apparition vanished.