

Title

Vedanta Philosophy
Five Lectures on Reincarnation

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About this eBook

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I. Reincarnation

The visible phenomena of the universe are bound by the universal law of cause and effect. The effect is visible or perceptible, while the cause is invisible or imperceptible. The falling of an apple from a tree is the effect of a certain invisible force called gravitation. Although the force cannot be perceived by the senses, its expression is visible. All perceptible phenomena are but the various expressions of different forces which act as invisible agents upon the subtle and imperceptible forms of matter. These invisible agents or forces together with the imperceptible particles of matter make up the subtle states of the phenomenal universe. When a subtle force becomes objectified, it appears as a gross object. Therefore, we can say, that every gross form is an expression of some subtle force acting upon the subtle particles of matter. The minute particles of hydrogen and oxygen when combined by chemical force, appear in the gross form of water. Water can never be separated from hydrogen and oxygen, which are its subtle component parts. Its existence depends upon that of its component parts, or in other words, upon its subtle form. If the subtle state changes, the gross manifestation will also change. The peculiarity in the gross form of a plant depends upon the peculiar nature of its subtle form, the seed. The peculiar nature of the gross forms in the animal kingdom depends upon the subtle forms which manifest variously in each of the intermediate stages between the microscopic unit of living matter and the highest man. The gross human body is closely related to its subtle body. Not only this, but every movement or change in the physical form is caused by the activity and change of the subtle body. If the subtle body be affected or changed a little, the gross body will also be affected similarly. The material body being the expression of the subtle body, its birth, growth, decay and death depend upon the changes of the subtle body. As long as the subtle body remains, it will continue to express itself in a corresponding gross form.

Now let us understand clearly what we mean by a subtle body. It is nothing but a minute germ of a living substance. It contains the invisible particles of matter which are held together by vital force, and it also possesses mind or thought-force in a potential state, just as the seed

of a plant contains in it the life force and the power of growth. According to Vedanta, the subtle body consists of Antahkaranam, that is, the internal organ or the mind substance with its various modifications, mind, intellect, egoism, memory, the five instruments of perception: the powers of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching; the five instruments of action, such as the powers of seizing, moving, speaking, evacuating, and generating, and the five Prânas. Prâna is a Sanskrit word which means vital energy or the life-sustaining power in us. Although Prâna is one, it takes five different names on account of the five different functions it performs. This word Prâna includes the five manifestations of the vital force: First, that power which moves the lungs and draws the atmospheric air from outside into the system. This is also called Prâna. Second, that power which throws out of the system such things as are not wanted. It is called in Sanskrit Apâna. Third, it takes the name of Samâna, as performing digestive functions and carrying the extract of food to every part of the body. It is called Udâna when it is the cause of bringing down food from the mouth through the alimentary canal to the stomach, and also when it is the cause of the power of speech. The fifth power of Prâna is that which works in every part of the nervous system from head to foot, through every canal, which keeps the shape of the body, preserves it from putrefaction, and gives health and life to every cell and organ. These are the various manifestations of the vital force or Prâna. These subtle powers together with the non-composite elements of the gross body, or the ethereal particles of subtle matter, and also with the potentialities of all the impressions, ideas and tendencies which each individual gathers in one life, make up his subtle body. As a resultant of all the different actions of mind and body which an individual performs in his present life, will be the tendencies and desires in his future life; nothing will be lost.

Every action of body or mind which we do, every thought which we think, becomes fine, and is stored up in the form of a Samskâra or impression in our minds. It remains latent for some time, and then it rises up in the form of a mental wave and produces new desires. These desires are called in Vedanta, Vâsanâs. Vâsanâs or strong desires are the manufacturers of new bodies. If Vâsanâ or longing for worldly pleasures and objects remains in anybody, even after hundreds of births, that person will be born again. Nothing can prevent the course of strong desires. Desires must be fulfilled sooner or later.

Every voluntary or involuntary action of the body, sense or mind must correspond to the dormant impressions stored up in the subtle body. Although growth, the process of nourishment and all the changes of the gross physical body take place according to the necessarily acting causes, yet the whole series of actions, and consequently every individual act, the condition of the body which accomplishes it, nay, the whole process in and through which the body exists, are nothing but the outward expressions of the latent impressions stored up in the subtle body. Upon these rests the perfect suitability of the animal or human body to the animal or human nature of one's impressions. The organs of the senses must therefore completely correspond to the principal desires which are the strongest and most ready to manifest. They are the visible expressions of these desires. If there be no hunger or desire to eat, teeth, throat and bowels will be of no use. If there be no desire for grasping and moving, hands and legs will be useless. Similarly it can be shown that the desire for seeing, hearing, etc., has produced the eye, ear, etc. If I have no desire to use my hand, and if I do not use it at all, within a few months it will wither away and die. In India there are some religious fanatics who hold up their arms and do not use them at all; after a few months their arms wither and become stiff and dead. A person who lies on his back for six months loses the power of walking. There are many such instances which prove the injurious effects of the disuse of our limbs and organs.

As the human form, generally, corresponds to the human will, generally, so the individual bodily structure corresponds to the character, desires, will and thought of the individual. Therefore the outer nature is nothing but the expression of the inner nature. This inner nature of each individual is what re-incarnates or expresses itself successively in various forms, one after another. When a man dies the individual ego or Jîva (as it is called in Sanskrit), which means the germ of life or the living soul of man, is not destroyed, but it continues to exist in an invisible form. It remains like a permanent thread stringing together the separate lives by the law of cause and effect. The subtle body is like a water-globule which sprang in the beginningless past from the eternal ocean of Reality; and it contains the reflection of the unchangeable light of Intelligence. As a water-globule remains sometimes in an invisible vapory state in a cloud, then in rain or snow or ice, and again as steam or in mud, but is never destroyed, so the subtle body sometimes remains unmanifested and sometimes expresses itself in gross forms of animal or human beings, according to the desires and tendencies that are ready to manifest. It may go to heaven, that is, to some other planet, or it may be born again on this earth. It depends on the nature and strength of one's life-long tendency and bent of mind. This idea is clearly expressed in Vedanta. "The thought, will or desire which is extremely strong during lifetime, will become predominant at the time of death and will mould the inner nature of the dying person. The newly moulded inner nature will express in a new form." (Bhagavad Gîtâ.) The thought, will or desire which moulds the inner nature has the power of selecting or attracting such conditions or environments as will help it in its way of manifestation. This process corresponds in some respects to the law of "natural selection."

We shall be better able to understand that process by studying how the seeds of different trees select from the common environments different materials, and absorb and assimilate different quantities of elements. Suppose two seeds, one of an oak and the other of a chestnut, are planted in a pot. The power of growth in both the seeds is of the same nature. The environments, earth, water, heat and light are the same. But still there is some peculiarity in each of the seeds, which will absorb from the common environments different quantities of elements and other properties which are fit to help the growth of the peculiar nature and form of the fruit, flower, leaves of each tree. Suppose the chestnut is a horse-chestnut. If, under different conditions, the peculiar nature of the horse-chestnut changes into that of a sweet chestnut, then, along with the changes in the seed, the whole nature of the tree, leaves, fruits will also be changed. It will no more attract, absorb or assimilate those substances and qualities of the environments which it did when it was a horse-chestnut. Similarly, through the law of "natural selection" the newly moulded thought-body of the dying person will choose and attract such parts from the common environments as are helpful to its proper expression or manifestation. Parents are nothing but the principal parts of the environment of the re-incarnating individual. The newly moulded inner nature or subtle body of the individual will by the law of "natural selection" involuntarily choose, or be unconsciously drawn to, as it were, its suitable parents and will be born of them. As, for instance, if I have a strong desire to become an artist, and if after a life-long struggle I do not succeed in being the greatest, after the death of the body I will be born of such parents and with such environments as will help me to become the best artist.

The whole process is expressed in Eastern philosophy by the doctrine of the Reincarnation of the individual soul. Although this doctrine is commonly rejected in the West, it is unreservedly accepted by the vast majority of mankind of the present day, as it was in past centuries. The scientific explanation of this theory we find nowhere except in the writings of the Hindus; still we know that from very ancient times it was believed by the philosophers, sages and prophets of different countries. The ancient civilization of Egypt was built upon a