

REINCARNATION AND THE LAW OF KARMA

A Study of
the Old-New World-Doctrine of
Rebirth, and Spiritual
Cause and Effect

BY

WILLIAM WALKER ATKINSON

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I. The Early Races

By "Reincarnation" we mean the repeated incarnation, or embodiment in flesh, of the soul or immaterial part of man's nature. The term "Metempsychosis" is frequently employed in the same sense, the definition of the latter term being: "The passage of the soul, as an immortal essence, at the death of the body, into another living body." The term "Transmigration of Souls" is sometimes employed, the term being used in the sense of "passing from one body into another." But the term "Transmigration" is often used in connection with the belief of certain undeveloped races who held that the soul of men sometimes passed into the bodies of the lower animals, as a punishment for their sins committed during the human life. But this belief is held in disrepute by the adherents of Reincarnation or Metempsychosis, and has no connection with their philosophy or beliefs, the ideas having sprung from an entirely different source, and having nothing in common.

There are many forms of belief - many degrees of doctrine - regarding Reincarnation, as we shall see as we proceed, but there is a fundamental and basic principle underlying all of the various shades of opinion, and divisions of the schools. This fundamental belief may be expressed as the doctrine that there is in man an immaterial Something (called the soul, spirit, inner self, or many other names) which does not perish at the death or disintegration of the body, but which persists as an entity, and after a shorter or longer interval of rest reincarnates, or is re-born, into a new body - that of an unborn infant - from whence it proceeds to live a new life in the body, more or less unconscious of its past existences, but containing within itself the "essence" or results of its past lives, which experiences go to make up its new "character," or "personality." It is usually held that the rebirth is governed by the law of attraction, under one name or another, and which law operates in accordance with strict justice, in the direction of attracting the reincarnating soul to a body, and conditions, in accordance with the tendencies of the past life, the parents also attracting to them a soul bound to them by some ties in the past, the law being universal, uniform, and equitable to all concerned in the matter. This is a general statement of the doctrine as it is generally held by the most intelligent of its adherents.

E. D. Walker, a well-known English writer on the subject, gives the following beautiful idea of the general teachings: "Reincarnation teaches that the soul enters this life, not as a fresh creation, but after a long course of previous existences on this earth and elsewhere, in which it acquired its present inhering peculiarities, and that it is on the way to future transformations which the soul is now shaping. It claims that infancy brings to earth, not a blank scroll for the beginning of an earthly record, nor a mere cohesion of atomic forces into a brief personality, soon to dissolve again into the elements, but that it is inscribed with ancestral histories, some like the present scene, most of them unlike it and stretching back into the remotest past. These inscriptions are generally undecipherable, save as revealed in their moulding influence upon the new career; but like the invisible photographic images made by the sun of all it sees, when they are properly developed in the laboratory of consciousness they will be distinctly displayed. The current phase of life will also be stored away in the secret vaults of memory, for its unconscious effects upon the ensuing lives. All the qualities we now possess, in body, mind and soul, result from our use of ancient opportunities. We are indeed 'the heir of all the ages,' and are alone responsible for our inheritances. For these conditions accrue from distant causes engendered by our older selves, and the future flows by the divine law of cause and effect from the gathered momentum of our past impetuses. There is no favoritism in the universe, but all have the same everlasting facilities for growth. Those who are now elevated in worldly station may be sunk in humble surroundings in the future. Only the inner traits of the soul are permanent companions. The wealthy sluggard may be the beggar of the next life; and the industrious worker of the present is sowing the seeds of future greatness. Suffering bravely endured now will produce a treasure of patience and fortitude in another life; hardships will give rise to strength; self-denial must develop the will; tastes cultivated in this existence will somehow bear fruit in coming ones; and acquired energies will assert themselves whenever they can by the Law of Parsimony upon which the principles of physics are based. Vice versa, the unconscious habits, the uncontrollable impulses, the peculiar tendencies, the favorite pursuits, and the soul-stirring friendships of the present descend from far-reaching previous activities."

The doctrine of Reincarnation - Metempsychosis-Rebirth - has always been held as truth by a large portion of the human race. Following the invariable law of cyclic changes - the swing of the pendulum of thought - at times it has apparently died out in parts of the world, only to be again succeeded by a new

birth and interest among the descendants of the same people. It is a light impossible to extinguish, and although its flickering flame may seem to die out for a moment, the shifting of the mental winds again allows it to rekindle from the hidden spark, and lo! again it bursts into new life and vigor. The reawakened interest in the subject in the Western world, of which all keen observers have taken note, is but another instance of the operation of the Cyclic Law. It begins to look as if the occultists are right when they predict that before the dawn of another century the Western world will once more have embraced the doctrines of Rebirth - the old, discarded truth, once so dear to the race, will again be settled in popular favor, and again move toward the position of "orthodox" teaching, perhaps to be again crystallized by reason of its "orthodoxy" and again to lose favor and fade away, as the pendulum swings backward to the other extreme of thought.

But the teaching of Reincarnation never has passed away altogether from the race - in some parts of the world the lamp has been kept burning brightly- nay, more, at no time in human history has there been a period in which the majority of the race has not accepted the doctrine of Rebirth, in some of its various forms. It was so one thousand years ago - two thousand - five thousand - and it is so to-day. In this Twentieth Century nearly if not quite two-thirds of the race hold firmly to the teaching, and the multitudes of Hindus and other Eastern peoples cling to it tenaciously. And, even outside of these people, there are to be found traces of the doctrine among other races in the East, and West. So Reincarnation is not a "forgotten truth," or "discarded doctrine," but one fully alive and vigorous, and one which is destined to play a very important part in the history of Western thought during the Twentieth Century.

It is interesting to trace the history of the doctrine among the ancient peoples - away back into the dim recesses of the past. It is difficult to ascribe to any particular time, or any particular race, the credit of having "originated" Reincarnation. In spite of the decided opinions, and the differing theories of the various writers on this subject, who would give Egypt, or India, or the lost Atlantis, as the birthplace of the doctrine, we feel that such ideas are but attempts to attribute a universal intuitive belief to some favored part of the race. We do not believe that the doctrine of Reincarnation ever "originated" anywhere, as a new and distinct doctrine. We believe that it sprang into existence whenever and wherever man arrived at a stage of intellectual development sufficient to enable him to form a mental conception of a Something that lived after Death. No matter from what source this belief in a "ghost" originated, it must be admitted that it is found among all peoples, and is apparently an universal idea. And, running along with it in the primitive peoples, we find that there is, and always has been, an idea, more or less vague and indistinct, that somehow, someday, sometime, this "ghost" of the person returns to earthly existence and takes upon itself a new fleshly garment - a new body. Here, then, is where the idea of Reincarnation begins - everywhere, at a certain stage of human mental development. It runs parallel with the "ghost" idea, and seems bound up with that conception in nearly every case. When man evolves a little further, he begins to reason that if the "ghost" is immortal, and survives the death of the body, and returns to take upon itself a new body, then it must have lived before the last birth, and therefore must have a long chain of lives behind it. This is the second step. The third step is when man begins to reason that the next life is dependent upon something done or left undone in the present life. And upon these three fundamental ideas the doctrine of Reincarnation has been built. The occultists claim that in addition to this universal idea, which is more or less intuitive, the race has received more or less instruction, from time to time, from certain advanced souls which have passed on to higher planes of existence, and who are now called the Masters, Adepts, Teachers, Race Guides, etc., etc. But whatever may be the explanation, it remains a truth that man seems to have worked out for himself, in all times and in all places, first, an idea of a "ghost" which persists after the body dies; and second, that this "ghost" has lived before in other bodies, and will return again to take on a new body. There are various ideas regarding "heavens" and "hells," but underlying them all there persists this idea of re-birth in some of its phases.

Soldi, the archaeologist, has published an interesting series of works, dealing with the beliefs of primitive peoples, who have passed from the scene of human action. He shows by the fragments of carving and sculpture which have survived them that there was an universal idea among them of the "ghost" which lived after the body died; and a corresponding idea that some day this "ghost" would return to the scene of its former activities. This belief sometimes took the form of a return into the former body, which idea led to the preservation of the body by processes of mummifying, etc., but as a rule this belief developed into the more advanced one of a re-birth in a new body.

The earlier travelers in Africa have reported that here and there they found evidences and traces of what was to them "a strange belief" in the future return of the soul to a new body on earth. The early explorers of America found similar traditions and beliefs among the Red Indians, survivals of which exist even unto this day. It is related of a number of savage tribes, in different parts of the world, that they place the bodies of their dead children by the roadside, in order that their souls may be given a good chance to find new bodies by reason of the approaching of many traveling pregnant women who pass along the road. A number of these primitive people hold to the idea of a complex soul, composed of several parts, in which they resemble the Egyptians, Hindus, Chinese, and in fact all mystical and occult philosophies. The Figi Islanders are said to believe in a black soul and a white soul, the former of which remains with the buried body and disintegrates with it, while the white soul leaves the body and wanders as a "ghost," and afterward, tiring of the wandering, returns to life in a new body. The natives of Greenland are said to believe in an astral body, which leaves the body during sleep, but which perishes as the body disintegrates after death; and a second soul which leaves the body only at death, and which persists until it is reborn at a later time. In fact, the student finds that nearly all of the primitive races, and those semi-civilized, show traces of a belief in a complex soul, and a trace of doctrine of Reincarnation in some form. The human mind seems to work along the same lines, among the different races - unless one holds to the theory that all sprang from the same root-race, and that the various beliefs are survivals of some ancient fundamental doctrine - the facts are not disturbed in either case.

In the last mentioned connection, we might mention that the traditions concerning Ancient Atlantis - the lost continent - all hold to the effect that her people believed strongly in Reincarnation, and to the ideas of the complex soul. As the survivors of Atlantis are believed to have been the ancestors of the Egyptians on the one hand, and of the Ancient Peruvians on the other - the two branches of survivors having maintained their original doctrines as modified by different environments - we might find here an explanation of the prevalence of the doctrine on both sides of the ocean. We mention this merely in passing, and as of general interest in the line of our subject.

is far nearer in accordance with the highest Occult Teachings, than the other idea of "Divine Wrath" and punishment for sin, along the lines of a misinterpretation of the Law of Karma, worthy of the worshipers of some ancient Devil-God. Read this little quotation carefully, and then determine which of the two views seems to fit in better with your highest spiritual conceptions:

"A boy went to school. He was very little. All that he knew he had drawn in with his mother's milk. His teacher (who was God) placed him in the lowest class, and gave him these lessons to learn: Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt do no hurt to any living thing. Thou shalt not steal. So the man did not kill; but he was cruel, and he stole. At the end of the day (when his beard was gray - when the night was come), his teacher (who was God) said: Thou hast learned not to kill. But the other lessons thou hast not learned. Come back tomorrow.

"On the morrow he came back, a little boy. And his teacher (who was God) put him in a class a little higher, and gave him these lessons to learn: Thou shalt do no hurt to any living thing. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not cheat. So the man did no hurt to any living thing; but he stole and he cheated. And at the end of the day (when his beard was gray - when the night was come), his teacher (who was God) said: Thou hast learned to be merciful. But the other lessons thou hast not learned. Come back tomorrow.

"Again, on the morrow, he came back, a little boy. And his teacher (who was God) put him in a class yet a little higher, and gave him these lessons to learn: Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not cheat. Thou shalt not covet. So the man did not steal; but he cheated, and he coveted. And at the end of the day (when his beard was gray - when the night was come), his teacher (who was God) said: Thou hast learned not to steal. But the other lessons thou hast not learned. Come back, my child, tomorrow.

"This is what I have read in the faces of men and women, in the book of the world, and in the scroll of the heavens, which is writ with stars." - Berry Benson, in *The Century Magazine*, May, 1894.

But there is still another view of Karma held by some Western thinkers, who received it from the Greek mystics and occultists, who in turn are thought to have received it from ancient Egypt. These people hold that the Law of Karma has naught to do with Man's theories of ethics, or religious dogmas or creeds, but has as the basis of its operations only Universal and Cosmic Principles of Action, applicable to the atom as well as Man - to the beings above Man as well. And that these universal principles of action have to do with the evolution of all things in Nature, according to well established laws. And that the evolving soul is continually striving to find the path along the lines of evolution, being urged to by the unfolding spirit within it - and that that "path" is always along the lines of least spiritual friction, and therefore along the lines of the least ultimate spiritual pain. And that, accordingly, Spiritual Pain is an indication to the evolving thing that it is on the wrong path, and that it must find a better way onward - which message it heeds by reason of the pain, and accordingly seeks out for itself a better way, and one that will bring less spiritual pain and greater ultimate spiritual satisfaction.

This teaching holds that all material things are a source of more or less pain to the growing and evolving soul, which tends to urge it along the line of the least spiritual resistance - the least spiritual friction. It may be that the soul does not recognize the direction of the urge, and insist in tasting this material pleasure (so-thought) and then that - only to find that neither satisfy - that both are Dead Sea Fruit - that both have the thorn attached to the flower - that all bring pain, satiety and disgust - the consequence being that the tired and wearied soul, when rested by the Lethal slumber, and then re-born has a horror and distaste for the things which disgusted it in its previous life, and is therefore urged toward opposite things. If the soul has not been satiated - has not yet been pricked by the hidden thorn - it wishes to go on further in the dream of material pleasure, and so it does, until it learns its lesson. Finally, perceiving the folly and worthlessness of materiality, it emerges from its cocoon and, spreading out its newly found wings, takes its flight for higher planes of action and being - and so on, and on, and on, forever.

Under this view people are not punished "for" their sins, but "by" them - and "Sin" is seen to be merely a "mistake," not a crime. And Pain arises not as a punishment for something done wrongly, but as a warning sign of "hands off"; and consequently Pain is something by which we may mount to higher

things - to Something Better - and not a punishment. And this idea holds, also, that on the physical plane physical law governs, and physical effects follow physical causes; likewise on the mental plane; likewise on the Spiritual Plane. And, therefore, it is absurd to suppose that one suffers physical pain as a punishment for some moral offense committed on another plane. On the contrary, however, this idea holds that from the physical pain which was occasioned by the operation of physical law alone one may develop higher spiritual states by reason of a better understanding of the nature of pain in oneself and others. And this idea refuses to recognize material pleasures or profits as a reward for spiritual or moral actions.

On the whole this last mentioned conception of Karma refuses to use the terms "reward and punishment," or even to entertain those ideas, but instead sees in everything the working out of a great Cosmic Plan whereby everything rises from lower to higher, and still higher. To it Karma is but one phase of the great LAW operating in all planes and forms of Life and the Universe. To it the idea that "THE UNIVERSE IS GOVERNED BY LAW" is an axiom. And while to it ULTIMATE JUSTICE is also axiomatic, it sees not in the operation of penalties and reward - merits and demerits - the proof of that Ultimate Justice; it looks for it and finds it in the conception and realizing that ALL WORKS FOR GOO - that Everything is tending upward - that everything is justified and just, because the END is ABSOLUTE GOOD, and that every tiny working of the great cosmic machinery is turning in the right direction and to that end. Consequently, each of us is just where he should be at the present time - and our condition is exactly the very best to bring us to that Divine Consummation and End. And to such thinkers, indeed, there is no Devil but Fear and Unfaith, and all other devils are illusions, whether they be called Beelzebub, Mortal-Mind, or Karma, if they produce Fear and Unfaith in the All-Good. And such thinkers feel that the way to live according to the Higher Light, and without fear of a Malevolent Karma, is to feel one's relationship with the Universal Good, and then to "Live One Day at a time - Doing the Best you Know How - and Be Kind" - knowing that in the All-Good you live and move and have your being, and that outside of that All-Good you cannot stray, for there is no outside - knowing that THAT which brought you Here will be with you There - that Death is but a phase of Life - and above all that THERE IS NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF - and that ALL IS WELL with God; with the Universe; and with YOU!

Finis.