

Madame Blavatsky On Karma and Reincarnation



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In man there are arteries, thin as a hair split a 1,000 times, filled with fluids blue, red, green, yellow, *etc.* The tenuous involucrum (the base or ethereal frame of the astral body) is lodged in them, and the ideal residues of the experiences of the former embodiments (or incarnations) adhere to the said tenuous involucrum, and *accompany it in its passage from body to body.*

— UPANISHADS

“Judge of a man by his questions rather than by his answers,” teaches the wily Voltaire. The advice stops halfway in our case. To become complete and cover the whole ground, we have to add, “ascertain the motive which prompts the questioner.” A man may offer a query from a sincere impulse to learn and to know. Another person will ask eternal questions, with no better motive than a desire of cavilling and proving his adversary in the wrong.

Not a few among the “inquirers into Theosophy,” as they introduce themselves, belong to this latter category. We have found in it Materialists and Spiritualists, Agnostics and Christians. Some of them, though rarely, are “open to conviction” — as they say; others, thinking with Cicero that no liberal, truth-seeking man should ever impute a charge of unsteadiness to anyone for having changed his opinions — become *really* converted and join our ranks. But there are those also — and these form the majority — who, while representing themselves as *inquirers*, are in truth *carpers*. Whether owing to narrowness of mind or foolhardiness they intrench themselves behind their own preconceived and not unseldom shallow beliefs and opinions, and will not budge from them. Such a “seeker” is hopeless, as his desire to investigate the truth is a pretext, not even a fearless mask, but simply a *false nose*. He has neither the open determination of an avowed materialists, nor the serene coolness of a “Sir Oracle.”¹ But

. . . you may as well
Forbid the sea for to obey the moon
As or by oath remove, or counsel shake,
The fabric of his folly . . . ²

Therefore, a “seeker after truth” of this kind had better be severely left alone. He is intractable, because he is either a skin-deep sciolist, a self-opinionated theorist or a

¹ [Cf. “I am Sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!” Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, act I, sc. 1]

² [Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, act I, sc. 2]

fool. As a general rule, he talks reincarnation before he has even learned the difference between *metempsychosis*, which is the transmigration of the human Soul into an animal form, and Reincarnation, or the rebirth of the same Ego in successive human bodies. Ignorant of the *true* meaning of the Greek word, he does not even suspect how absurd, in philosophy, is this purely exoteric doctrine of transmigrations into animals.¹ Useless to tell him that Nature, propelled by Karma, never recedes, but strives ever forward in her work on the physical plane; that she may lodge a human soul in the body of a man, morally ten times lower than any animal, but she will not reverse the order of her kingdoms; and while leading the irrational monad of a beast of a higher order into the human form at the first hour of a Manvantara, she will not guide that Ego, once it has become a man, even of the lowest kind, back into the animal species — not during that cycle (or Kalpa) at any rate.²

The list of queer “investigators” is by no means exhausted with these amiable *seekers*. There are two other classes — Christians and Spiritualists, the latter being in some respects, more formidable than any. The former having been born and bred believers in the Bible and supernatural “miracles” on *authority*, or “thirty-seventh hand evidence,” to use a popular proverb, are often forced to yield in the face of the first-hand testimony of their own reason and senses; and then they are amenable to reason and conviction. They had formed *a priori* opinions and got crystallized in them as a fly in a piece of amber. But that amber has cracked, and, as one of the signs of the times, they have bethought themselves of a somewhat tardy still sincere search, to either justify their early opinions, or else part company with them for good. Having found out that *their* religion — like that of the great majority of their fellow men — had been founded on *human* not *divine* respect, they come to us as they would to surgical operators, believing that theosophists can remove all the old cobwebs from their bewildered brains. Sometimes it does so happen; once made to see the fallacy of first accepting and identifying themselves with any form of belief, and then only seeking, years later, for reasons to justify it, they very naturally try to avoid falling again into the same mistake. They had once to content themselves with such interpretations of their time-honoured dogmas as the fallacy and often the absurdity of the latter would afford; but now, they seek to learn and understand before they believe.

¹ [See “Transmigration, Reincarnation, Gilgulim” in our Confusing Words Series. — ED. PHIL.]

² Occult Science teaches that the same order of evolution for man and animals — from the first to the seventh planet of a chain, and from the first to the end of the seventh round — takes place on every *chain* of worlds in our Solar system from the inferior to the superior. Thus the highest as the lowest Ego, from the monads selected to people a new chain in a Manvantara, when passing from an inferior to a superior “chain” has, of course, to pass through every animal (and even vegetable) form. But once started on its cycle of births no human Ego will become that of an animal during any period of the seven rounds. — Vide *The Secret Doctrine*.

This is the right and purely theosophical state of mind, and is quite consistent with the precept of Lord Buddha, who taught never to believe merely on authority but to test the latter by means of our personal reason and highest intuition.¹ It is only such seekers after the eternal truth who can profit by the lessons of old Eastern Wisdom.

It is our duty, therefore, to help them to defend their new ideals by furnishing them with the most adequate and far-reaching weapons. For they will have to encounter, not only Materialists and Spiritualists, but also to break a lance with their ex-coreligionists. These will bring to bear upon them the whole of their arsenal, composed of the popguns of biblical casuistry and interpretations based on the dead-letter texts and the disingenuous translation of *pseudo* revelation. They have to be prepared. They will be told, for instance, that there is not a word in the Bible which would warrant belief in reincarnation, or life, more than once, on this earth. Biologists and physiologists will laugh at such a theory, and assure them that it is opposed by the fact that no man has a glimpse of recollection of any *past* life. Shallow metaphysicians, and supporters of the easy-going Church ethics of this age, will gravely maintain the injustice there would be in a posterior punishment, in the present life, for deeds committed in a previous existence of which we know nothing. All such objections are disposed of and shown fallacious to anyone who studies seriously the esoteric sciences.

But what shall we say of our ferocious opponents, the Kardecists, or the reincarnationists of the French school and the *anti*-reincarnationists, *i.e.*, most of the Spiritualists of the old school. The fact, that the first believe in rebirth, but in their own crude, unphilosophical way, makes our task the more heavy. They have made up their minds that a man dies, and his “spirit,” after a few visits of consolation to the mortals he left behind him, may reincarnate at his own sweet will, in whom and whenever he likes. The Devachanic period of no less than a 1,000, generally 1,500 years, is a vexation of mind and a snare in their sight. They will have nothing of this. No more will the Spiritualists. These object on the highly philosophical ground that “it is *simply impossible*.” Why? Because it is so unpalatable to most of them, especially to those who know themselves to be the personal Avatar, or the reincarnation of some historically great hero or heroine who flourished within the last few centuries (rebirth from, or into, the scums of Whitechapel, being for them out of the question). And “it is so cruel,” you see, to tell fond parents that the fancy that a *stillborn* child, a daughter of theirs, who, they imagine, having been reared in a nursery of Summer-

¹ [In replying to the question:

Are there any dogmas in Buddhism which we are required to accept on faith?

A *Buddhist Catechism* [*Kalama Sutta* of the *Anguttaranikāya*, quoting H.S. Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*, pp. 55, 56, 1881 ed.] explains:

No. We are earnestly enjoined to accept nothing whatever on faith; whether it be written in books, handed down from our ancestors, or taught by the sages. Our Lord Buddha has said that we must not believe in a thing said merely because it is said; nor in traditions because they have been handed down from antiquity; nor rumours, as such; nor writings by sages, because sages wrote them; nor fancies that we may suspect to have been inspired in us by a deva (that is, in presumed spiritual inspiration); nor from inferences drawn from some haphazard assumption we may have made; nor because of what seems an analogical necessity; nor on the mere authority of our teachers or masters. But we are to believe when the writing, doctrine, or saying is corroborated by our own reason and consciousness.

For this I taught you not to believe merely because you have heard, but when you believed of your consciousness, then to act accordingly and abundantly.

— Cf. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE DOCTRINE OF AVATĀRAS) XIV p. 417

land, has now grown up and comes to visit them daily in the family séance-room, is an absurd belief, whether reincarnation be true or not. We must not *hurt their feelings* by insisting that every child who dies before the age of reason — when only it becomes a responsible creature — reincarnates immediately after its death — since, having had no personal merit or demerit in any of its actions, it can have no claim upon Devachanic reward and bliss. Also that as it is irresponsible till the age of say, seven, the full weight of the Karmic effects generated during its short life falls directly upon those who reared and guided it. They will hear of no such philosophical truths, based on eternal justice and Karmic action. “You hurt our best, our most devotional feelings. Avaunt!”¹ they cry, “we will not accept your teachings.”

*Eppur si muove!*² Such arguments remind one of the curious objections to, and denial of, the sphericity of the earth used by some clever Church Fathers of old. “How can the earth, forsooth, be round?” argued the saintly wise-acres — the “venerable Bedes” and the Manichaeic Augustines.

Were it so the men *below* would have to walk with their heads downward, like flies on a ceiling. Worse than all, they could not see the Lord descending in his glory on the day of the second advent!

As these very logical arguments appeared irrefutable, in the early centuries of our era, to Christians, so the profoundly philosophical objections of our friends, the *Summerland* theorists, appear as plausible in this century of Neo-Theosophy.

And what are your proofs that such series of lives ever take place, or that there is reincarnation at all? — we are asked. We reply:

- 1 The testimony of every seer, sage and prophet, throughout an endless succession of human cycles;
- 2 A mass of *inferential* evidence appealing even to the profane.

True, this kind of evidence — although not seldom men are hung on no better than such *inferential* testimony — is not absolutely reliable. For, as Locke says:

To infer is nothing but by virtue of one proposition, laid down as true, to draw in another as true.

Yet, all depends on the nature and strength of that first proposition. The Predestinarians may lay down as true their doctrine of Predestination — that pleasant belief that every human being is pre-assigned by the will of our “Merciful Father in Heaven,” to either everlasting Hell-fire, or the “Golden Harp,” on the pinion-playing principle. The proposition from which this curious belief is inferred and laid down as true, is based, in the present case, on no better foundation than one of the nightmares of Calvin, who had many. But the fact that his followers count millions of men, does not entitle either the theory of total depravity, or that of predestination, to be called a universal belief. They are still limited to a small portion of mankind, and were never heard of before the day of the French Reformer.

¹ [Go away!]

² [And yet it moves!]

These are pessimistic doctrines born of despair, beliefs artificially engrafted on human nature, and which, therefore, cannot hold good. But who taught mankind about soul transmigration? Belief in successive rebirths of the human Ego throughout the cycles of life in various bodies is a universal belief, a certainty innate in mankind. Even now, when theological dogmas of human origin have stifled and well-nigh destroyed this natural inborn idea from the Christian mind, even now hundreds of the most eminent Western philosophers, authors, artists, poets and deep thinkers still firmly believe in reincarnation. In the words of George Sand, we are:

Cast into this life, as it were into an alembic, where, after a previous existence which we have forgotten, we are condemned to be remade, renewed, tempered by suffering, by strife, by passion, by doubt, by disease, by death. All these evils we endure for our good, for our purification, and so to speak, to make us perfect. From age to age, from race to race, we accomplish a tardy progress, tardy but certain, an advance of which, in spite of all the sceptics say, the proofs are manifest. If all the imperfections of our being and all the woes of our estate drive at discouraging and terrifying us, on the other hand, all the more noble faculties, which have been bestowed on us that we might seek after perfection, do make for our salvation, and deliver us from fear, misery, and even death. Yea, a divine instinct that always grows in light and in strength helps us to comprehend that nothing in the whole world wholly dies, and that we only vanish from the things that lie about us in our earthly life, to reappear among conditions more favourable to our eternal growth in good.

Writes Professor Francis Bowen, as quoted in *Reincarnation, a Story of Forgotten Truth*¹ — uttering a great truth:

The doctrine of metempsychosis may almost claim to be a natural or innate belief in the human mind, if we may judge from its wide diffusion among the nations of the Earth and its prevalence throughout the historical ages.

The millions of India, Egypt, China, that have passed away, and the millions of those who believe in reincarnation today — are almost countless. The Jews had the same doctrine; moreover, whether one prays to a *personal*, or worships in silence an impersonal, deity or a Principle and a Law, it is far more reverential to believe in this doctrine than not. One belief makes us think of “God” or “Law” as a synonym of Justice, giving to poor little man more than one chance for righteous living and for the atoning of sins whether of omission or commission. Our disbelief credits the Unseen Power instead of equity with fiendish cruelty. It makes of *it* a kind of sidereal Jack the Ripper or Nero doubled with a human monster. If a *heathen* doctrine honours the

¹ We advise every disbeliever in reincarnation, in search of proofs to read this excellent volume by Mr. E.D. Walker. It is the most complete collection of proofs and evidences from all the ages that was ever published.

[Reference is here to a work by Edward Dwight Walker (1859–1890) entitled *Reincarnation, a Story of Forgotten Truth*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1888. xiii, 350pp. Several later editions have been brought out, such as the one of 1923, published by the Aryan Theosophical Press, Point Loma, California. — Boris de Zirkoff.

See full text in the same Series. — ED. PHIL.]

Deity and a Christian dishonours it, which should be accepted? And why should one who prefers the former be held as — an *infidel*?

But the world moves on now and it has always moved, and along with it move the ideas in the heads of the fogies. The question is not whether a fact in nature fits, or not, some special hobby, but whether it is really *a fact* based on, at least, inferential evidence. We are told by those special *hobbyists* that it is not. We reply, study the questions you would reject, and try to understand our philosophy, before you dismiss our teachings *a priori*. Spiritualists complain, and with very good reasons, of men of science who, like Huxley, denounce wholesale their phenomena whilst knowing next to nothing of them. Why do they do likewise, with regard to propositions based on the psychological experiences of thousands of generations of seers and adepts? Do they know anything of the laws of Karma — the great Law of Retribution, that mysterious, yet — in its effects — quite evident and palpable action in Nature, which, sooner or later, brings back every good or bad deed of ours to rebound on us, as the elastic ball, thrown against a wall, rebounds back on the one who throws it? They do not. They believe in a personal God, whom they endow with intelligence, and who rewards and punishes, in their ideas, every action of ours in life. They accept this *hybrid* deity (finite, because they endow it most unphilosophically with conditioned attributes, while insisting on calling it Infinite and Absolute), regardless of, and blind to, the thousand and one fallacies and contradictions in which the theological teachings concerning that deity involve us. But when offered a consistent, philosophical and quite logical substitute for such an imperfect God, a complete solution of most of the insoluble problems and mysteries in human life — they turn away in idiotic horror. They remain indifferent or opposed to it, only because its name is KARMA instead of Jehovah; and that it is a tenet which emanates from Āryan philosophy — the deepest and profoundest of all the world philosophies — instead of from the Semitic cunning and intellectual jugglery, which has transformed an astronomical symbol into the “one living God of Gods.”¹ They tell us:

We do not want an *impersonal* Deity, a negative symbol such as “Non-Being” is incomprehensible to Being.

Just so.

The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.²

Therefore they will talk very glibly of their *immortal* spirits; and on the same principle that they call a personal God *infinite* and make of him a gigantic *male*, so they will address a human phantom as “Spirit” — Colonel Cicero Treacle, or “Spirit” Mrs. Amanda Jellybag, with a vague idea that both are at least sempiternal.

It is useless, therefore, to try and convince such minds. If they are unable or unwilling to study even the broad general idea contained in the term *Karma*, how can they comprehend the fine distinctions involved in the doctrine of reincarnation, although,

¹ [See “The Origin of Good and Evil,” and “The Original Sin is a Jewish invention,” in our Black versus White Magic Series. — ED. PHIL.]

² [John i, 5]

as shown by our venerable brother, P. Iyaloo Naidu of Hyderabad, Karma and Reincarnation are,

In reality, the ABC of the Wisdom-Religion.

It is very clearly expressed in the January *Theosophist*:

Karma is the sum total of our acts, both in the present life and in the preceding births.

After stating that Karma is of three kinds, he continues:

Sañchita Karma includes human merits and demerits accumulated in the preceding and in all other previous births. That portion of the *Sañchita Karma* destined to influence human life . . . in the present incarnation is called *Prarabdha*. The third kind of Karma is the result of the merits or demerits of the present acts. *Agami* extends over all your words, thoughts, and acts. What you think, what you speak, what you do, as well as whatever results your thoughts, words, and acts produce on yourself, and on those affected by them, fall under the category of the present Karma, which will be sure to sway the balance of your life for good or for evil in your future development [or reincarnation].¹

Karma thus, is simply *action*, a concatenation of *causes* and *effects*. That which adjusts each effect to its direct cause; that which guides invisibly and as unerringly these effects to choose, as the field of their operation, the *right person in the right place*, is what we call *Karmic Law*. What is it? Shall we call it the hand of providence? We cannot do so, especially in Christian lands, because the term has been connected with, and interpreted theologically as, the *foresight* and *personal design* of a personal god; and because in the active laws of Karma — *absolute Equity* — based on the Universal Harmony, there is neither foresight nor desire; and because again, it is our own actions, thoughts, and deeds which *guide that law*, instead of being guided by it.

For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.²

It is only a very unphilosophical and illogical theology which can speak in one breath of *free will*, and grace or damnation being *preordained* to every human *from* (?) eternity, as though eternity could have a beginning *to start from!* But this question would lead us too far into metaphysical disquisitions. Suffice it to say that Karma leads us to rebirth, and that rebirth generates new Karma while working off the old, *Sañchita Karma*. Both are indissolubly bound up, one in the other. Let us get rid of *Karma*, if we would get rid of the miseries of rebirths or — REINCARNATION.

To show how the belief in Reincarnation is gaining ground even among the unintuitive Western writers, we quote the following extracts from an Anglo-Indian daily.



¹ [*The Theosophist*, Vol. X, January 1889, p. 235. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

² [*Galatians* vi, 7]

Metempsychosis¹

In a missionary production of some pretensions an attempt is seriously made to confute the theory of the “Transmigration of Souls,” which betrays an incapacity for metaphysical presentments and an ignorance of psychology that are unfortunate in any person undertaking such a task . . . The arguments put forward in the paper referred to are worth looking into one by one.

The first is that metempsychosis “disregards the evidence of memory.” . . . It so happens that psychologists from Plato downward have called attention to the familiar mental phenomenon in which persons placed, for the first time in their lives, in peculiar circumstances, are suddenly invaded by the conviction that they have gone through the same experience before . . . There is nothing inconsistent with the highest philosophical teaching, or with the moral lessons or the actual experience of Christ; in the occlusions of memory Christ himself, even in adult manhood, under the stress of physical entanglements, sometimes entirely forgot his pre-existent state . . . why may not any other human nature, not in-laid with an essential divinity, forget for longer or shorter periods its state of pre-existence, if it had one? . . . Theologians may attribute to immaturity of intelligence that apparent unconsciousness of infants, which a keener insight may recognize as the inevitable hiatus between distinct conditions of a human consciousness . . .

The second argument is that metempsychosis involves a “libel on divine justice.” The alleged belief of the Hindus, that suffering in one state of being expiates sin in another, which is not essentially unjust, nor a whit less moral than the dogma of inherited or imported sin, may or may not be unfounded; but the first question is — is the atonement of Christ incompatible with transmigration? . . . In what conceivable way can the theory of a man’s being a fallen spirit or a risen animal, or both, conflict with what Christ actually said? . . .

The third argument is that metempsychosis “is contrary to all sound psychology.” Nine out of ten of the religious teachers who glibly dogmatize in this fashion . . . would be sorely puzzled to explain in what way many of the higher human responsibilities are adjusted between their own psychic and pneumatic natures; and also what becomes of the unity of individual responsibility in the face of this tri-partite allotment.

The fourth argument against transmigration is that it “is opposed to sound ethics.” All that any system of sound ethics can demand surely is that personal responsibility shall be attached to every intelligent exercise of individual will . . . Every thinking man must be aware of a growth in his own moral consciousness by which a gulf has intervened between his present and his past: while his personality has survived to identify him, he is aware of distinct stages in his moral nature to which very different degrees of responsibility attach. How does this fact militate against sound ethics?

¹ [The following passages have been summarized from a longer excerpt appearing in the Allahabad *Pioneer*.]

The fifth contention against metempsychosis is that “it is not in accord with science.” . . . But what is there in science that negatives the idea, if it can be sustained by evidence of a natural selection by which if there be any soul at all, the individual soul of a lower organism may pass by stages into higher organisms?



“Transmigration, Reincarnation, Gilgulim,” in our Confusing Words Series.