

## **Karma and Rebirth**

Many questions arise on the theme of rebirth. For example, if all people are reborn, why is it that new individuals are born?

If anyone alive today has already been born before, how to explain population increase? And if the theory of rebirth is true, then how can one explain the birth of our planet Earth?

Rebirth implies that the so-called death of the body is not final, not the end of our existence, but that something survives. This is taught by all religions in one form or another. Without this crucial element in religious education, God and life would be meaningless. If we accept rebirth as a fact, it then follows that there is a form of existence which is not extinguished by the destruction of the body.

In Yoga, we say that the material aspects of the body are merely a stratum, an instrument through which a force can operate. We possess as a part of our being a gross body and a subtle body—the mind. At the root of all this is *kârana-sharira*, the causal body. The Sanskrit word *sharira*, or body, means that which undergoes degeneration, that which is not permanent.

This subject is dealt with in the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita epitomizes Sri Krishna's spiritual teachings to his friend and disciple, Arjuna, who had to fight the battle of Kurukshetra in India. Arjuna was the commanding general of the camp of the Pandavas, who were struggling for control of the capital of India (then located near the town of New Delhi). Krishna himself was the charioteer of the war chariot used by

Arjuna.

This epic battle took place between members of the same family divided into two clans. When Arjuna was in position on the battlefield and saw all his family members prepared to fight against each other, he wondered if he was really to be involved in the carnage to come. Among those he had to fight was even Vishva, his own grandfather. While all the time supported by disciples and friends, Arjuna did not approve of this war. He had done everything to avoid it as advised by Sri Krishna, trying to convince his antagonists there were other options to war, but they would not listen to him. When all his efforts proved unsuccessful and battle became imminent, Arjuna was deeply saddened to have to slay his own relatives. So he turned again to his friend and adviser Krishna.

Krishna then spoke up and told him he should show no weakness or cowardliness before his followers, for the indestructible cannot be destroyed. The death of the body is temporary; its essence is indestructible.

If we accept the principle of rebirth, we also have to accept many things that lie beyond the boundaries of Science. We are told by modern scientific theories that life on Earth was originally impossible because of unfavorable conditions. And yet, when the Earth became capable of receiving life, where did it come from? Science affirms that life as we know it was not present at the origin of the Earth.

With the planet's eventual cooling, unicellular life first appeared—the building block of life. Each step of development after this proceeded in an incredible, purposeful and intelligent manner, with a surprising efficiency, until the appearance of humans approximately a million years ago. This must

reasonably foreshadow the sign of an exceptional intelligence in the background. This, the transformation of the single cell into a very complex multi-cellular organism in which a mind appears and enables individuals to work, think and live, is not explained by Science.

Theoretically related to this subject is the scientific quest to explore the universe and discover its incredible vastness and dimensions. No life like ours has yet been discovered in other parts of the universe and it is not widely conjectured to exist, yet our views and conclusions are always limited by human senses and our faculty of understanding, no matter how sensitive and extensive our scientific instruments may be. Is it not a foolish and narrow conception to think that life exists nowhere but on Earth?

Scientists talk of animate versus inanimate matter. Matter endowed with life is called animate (thus forming the protoplasm of living tissue), whereas matter without manifested life is called inanimate. When the principle of life disappears from protoplasm, which is inseparable from the animate matter, the cells within the protoplasm are bound to die. The biological process begins to undergo destruction by which different parts disintegrate into their constituent substances. There is no strength or intelligence to prevent this; it is the fate of all animate matter and thus all human beings.

But what makes our body follows this course? The body is composed of inanimate matter, but at some deeper point, something makes it alive, different and special, with a behavior distinctly different from that of inanimate matter. And when this disappears, the body returns to the state of simple, inanimate matter.

Given that the living tissues of the body and the inanimate matter out of which it is ultimately composed consist of similar elements (electrons,

protons, etc.), we must question why the two differ dramatically in terms of organization. Whence does the body come, who assembles and disassembles it, and why does it come to take on different characteristics than inanimate matter?

We must logically admit that there is something at work which is not limited to the effect of matter, something extra-material which is expressing itself as life and standing behind it as a greater Intelligence. There must be a non-material field which in relation to matter, or by its creative elaboration of matter, renders physical existence possible on Earth. In accepting this, we have a most rational explanation, which is fully harmonious with the notion of rebirth.

That same extra-material Intelligence is the actual cause of the development of a particular body, enabling it to become a serving instrument to that principle. Body is therefore only one dimension, and its destruction does not extend to the essence, which remains unaffected. In time, it will find as many new bodies as are necessary for the fulfillment of its final purpose. All bodies have the same common destiny of birth and death, but the spiritual aspiration extends towards a deathless existence.

## **The Enigma of Rebirth**

From Sri Krishna's teachings to Arjuna, in Chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita, we learn: "*wise is he who does not grieve at the death of the body.*" We are not really affected by death. Arjuna is instructed that all of those who were assembled to fight the Battle of Kurukshetra "*were in the past, are now and will be again afterwards.*" This unambiguous teaching of the principle of

rebirth indirectly points out the fact we are not really affected by death. We thus have to understand that the body is transient, while the inner power that utilizes the body is not subject to death.

Consider for a moment the physical body. Never identical to itself, it constantly changes. Within a period of 50 to 70 years of life, it passes from childhood to adolescence, and then from youth to old age with a final change, which is death. Just as we throw away old, worn-out clothes to use new ones, so too when the body has become too old or inefficient to fulfill the mission of life, a new birth emerges in time. It is for this reason that Krishna clearly states that wise men do not mourn the death of the body, as they know that a new body will be forthcoming to replace it.

From the various facets of previous births come the differences and tendencies that manifest in the newborn child. Science attempts to explain these matters by pointing to the chromosomes and genes of the parents, yet there are signs of a high intelligence at work in every stage of the growth and unique development of the fertilized egg—an intelligence that seems incredible in magnitude and depth.

From where does this intelligence arise? If we say it resides in the little ovum cell, we then affirm that the cell itself was not intelligent at all prior to fertilization. Once the ovum is fertilized, the whole process of evolution is subject to the influence of a great and purposeful intelligence, which did not express itself previously. How did that intelligence come forth?

No reasonable answer to this question has yet been given from the strictly physical point of view. Many differences can be explained genetically and so on, but individual bodies have many unique characteristics. How did they develop? How are they maintained and shaped into certain patterns?

Here we should like to propose that, instead of looking at limited, purely physical explanations, we should envisage our bodily experience as the gross material aspect of our real existence, a self-aware "I."

Quite naturally, the "I" is affected by whatever concerns the body. If, for instance, we cut off one of our fingers, there will be the feeling of losing something we own, a part of a property, something which is "mine", although distinct from the "I" itself.

So it is indeed in relation to the "I" that the body is elaborated from the very beginning, with the idea that the "I" will function in and through a body previously conceived for its specific purpose. The body is thus developed in a characteristic way by this higher intelligence, which will guide and control the entire process from life to death.

After the body dies, all of the other constituent parts of the individual survive. The *sukshma-sharira*, the source of our sense of experience which influences our thinking, attitudes, and feelings and conduct, will remain and influence us to think, act and behave in the same fashion in successive rebirths. Along with this, a double-tendency will emerge with the wishes (positive, negative or mixed) to have, avoid or discard certain things under the influences of the principles of *raga* (attraction) and *dvesha* (rejection). All these subliminal impressions (known collectively as *samskâras*) remain within us as latent powers. That is why we so often feel that, in many areas of our lives, not everything is done. We often have the feeling of having acquired insufficient knowledge and having many projects or achievements yet to be fulfilled. If there was but a single life to live, we would have no opportunity to fulfill all of our specific aims, despite our wish and will to achieve them. Only new *samskâras* would be created and the rest remain unfinished.

As far as the body is concerned and its mission in life as an instrument is for the achievement of *samskâras*, death really is the end. A new body is therefore needed. For after all, is it reasonable to think that "someone" creates the body and the "I" is born in it out of nowhere? Is it not more plausible that latent *samskâras* are responsible for this?

Patanjali indicates three main effects, or fruits, issued out of the *samskâras*: *jati*, *ayu* and *bhoga*. *Jati* is the template of the physical body of the human species, *ayu* is the lifespan and *bhoga* is the potential of all the experiences to come in via the body. *Samskâras* are stored in the inner subtle body (*hridâya*) and they operate at the background of the selection of an appropriate physical medium. The development of the fertilized ovum is influenced by the particular *samskâras* operational at that time.

All of this intelligently elaborated work is achieved by a particular group of activated *samskâras*, responsible then for the development of a body suitable for the future experiences of the I-principle. The *samskâras* are not activated directly, but are in contact with a superior Intelligence.

People often wonder why we do not remember previous births, but can we even remember all of the details of our present life as it evolves? We possess the memory of certain facts of our lives, which then disappear into the abyss of oblivion. The same principle applies to our past lives, which existed irrespective of our ability to consciously remember. The question of remembering past lives seems, therefore, irrelevant.

While a whole life's experiences cannot be contained in our objective consciousness, all of the experiences are stored in *hridâya*, the mind's deeper strata. In general, these specific life imprints cannot be retrieved

into the objective field of consciousness. Only rarely have specially gifted people actually remember their past lives, although such cases have been documented.

The deep strata of the unconscious field of consciousness, *hridâya*, can actually be controlled, especially through deeper concentration whereby the dormant *samskâras* can be brought to the light of consciousness.

Concentration is the best method for this rare achievement.