

# Reincarnation

Robin Ghosh

**Abstract:** *Reincarnation or the theory of life after death is a topic of bitter controversies these days. Volumes of books have been written on the topic. Articles and pamphlets are pouring in and yet the mystery of an after-life still remained unresolved. The different systems of philosophy which have spoken in favour of rebirth have not convinced scientifically minded people for they hold that such philosophical concepts also need to be supported by observation and experiments. The para psychologists are trying their best to unfold the mystery of life. We know that life itself is a mystery and death is second mystery and certainly then life after death is to be categorized as third mystery. Aurobindo too has not been able to solve this mystery of life after death. The doctrine of karma-conditioned rebirth is also an attempt of our country to solve why men are born with different tendencies and different aptitudes even in the same family. Eustace Miles, a believer in the theory of rebirth, in his book says "Life after Death" that science has not explained, "Though it unproved" says Miles, still it explains phenomenon which science leaves unexplained. It satisfies the craving which science does not satisfy. The inequalities of life cannot be explained if we do not believe in the theory of life after death.*

**Keywords:** Reincarnation, Karma, The Life Devine, Sh Aurobindo, E. Palmstierna, Swami Abhedanand

Re-incarnation or the theory of life after death is a topic of bitter controversies these days. Volumes of books have been written on the topic, articles and pamphlets are pouring in and yet the mystery of an after-life remains unsolved.

The different systems of philosophy which have spoken in favour of rebirth have not convinced scientifically minded people for they hold that such philosophical concepts also need to be supported by observation and experiment. We have already discussed the arguments and counter arguments for the existence of rebirth considered the major objections raised against the theory with suitable replies, discussed the para-psychical phenomena, and also studied the parapsychological evidences for the existence of rebirth through a large number of cases collected from different part of the world. Even then we have not been able to come to any final conclusion either in favour or against rebirth. Studies and investigations in such a para-psychical phenomenon is still in progress on a scientific line. The parapsychologists are trying their very best to unfold this mystery of life. Meanwhile, we are to satisfy ourselves merely with the arguments advanced so far analogies etc. by the philosopher and the parapsychologists.

We know that life itself is a mystery, death is a second mystery and certainly then a life after death is to be categorized as a third mystery. So, we are roaming in the world of mysteries trying to find one solution or another in our walks of life. Sri Aurobindo has summed up the ideas very beautifully in chapter XX entitled "The Philosophy or Rebirth" outlined in his immortal book "Life Divine". According to him—

*"Birth is the first spiritual mystery of the physical universe, death is the second which gives its double point of perplexity to the mystery of birth; for life, which would otherwise be a self-evident fact of existence, becomes itself a mystery by virtue of these two which seem to be its beginning and its end and yet in a thousand ways betray themselves as neither of these things, but rather intermediate stages in an occult process of life. At first sight birth might seem to be a constant outburst of life in a general death, a persistent circumstance in the universal lifelessness of Matter. On a closer examination it begins to be more probable that life is something involved in Matter or even an inherent power of*

*the Energy that creates Matter, but able to appear only when it gets the necessary conditions for the affirmation of its characteristic phenomena and for an appropriate self-organizations, But in the birth of life there is something more that participates in the emergence, -- there is an element which is no longer material, a strong upsurging of some flame of soul, a first evident vibration of the spirit.*

*All the known circumstances and results of birth presuppose an unknown before, and there is a suggestion of universality, a will of persistence of life, an inconclusiveness in death, which seem to point to an unknown hereafter"<sup>1</sup>*

Aurobindo too has admitted that man has not yet found the final solution of the mystery of birth and death. As he says – "what were we before birth and what are we after death are the questions, the answer of the one depending upon that of the other, which the intellect of man has put to itself from the beginning without even now resting in any final solutions"<sup>2</sup>.

So, here we find that life is full of so many puzzling and mysterious facts that one may go on putting questions one after another, but the mysteries will still remain unsolved. What is there beyond death is almost impossible for a living man to prove on empirical basis. We on simply make conjectures on the basis of some observed facts but we shall never be able to prove them.

Men as we know are born with certain habits, tendencies and intellectual powers. We have seen earlier that the new born babies show signs of love, fear, and anger and we presume that such signs would not have been possible had they not acquired such traits in their previous existence.

-----

1. Sri Aurobindo – The Life Divine – Vol. II, pp. 683-684.
2. Ibid, p.684.

Western psychology, however, describes these activities as instinctive ones and seeks to explain them with the help of heredity and evolution, Even then there is much controversy regarding the how and why of these hereditary transmission. Scientific psychology has not been able to give a final verdict on this issue.

The doctrine of karma-conditioned-rebirth is also an attempt our country to solve why men are born with different tendencies and different aptitudes even in the same family.

If we believe that the life-stream is single and limited to the present birth only then man will lose confidence in the moral force and law of justice pervading the universe. Life stream is flowing in innumerable currents and cross-currents and each current is undergoing expansion and contraction being fed by the actions of a living being. When a particular current contract, its gross cover falls off and when it again expands, it does so with the help of a fresh cover. It is also a psychological fact that habits and complexes formed in early life continue to influence the whole of the later life. In the same life if the thoughts and habits remain active despite the intervention of such a length of time and moulds the next life then advancing the same principle a bit beyond, it can be said that the actions of one life takes its shape in the next life.

The materialistic science which believes that death is complete extinction of life cannot be accepted in the light of the argument that life is not merely a conglomeration of consciousness and matter. It is something higher than the physical forces and chemical action which determine life. It has certain spiritual forces within which it dominates. The guiding principle of conscious life is the soul and because of the non-destructibility of the soul we have to believe in the transmigration theory the soul transmigrates from one body to another. The soul, as E. Palmstierna says, can be compared to the shell of the clock. According to him –

*“Cannot man understand that what makes the body functioning is he spirit, which, naturally, the physical eye cannot see, but which, without the flash possesses infinitely stronger everything of value, that is love and beauty in the true sense, music, passion etc. All these are independent of the body and as on earth you enter flesh, they use flesh – or rather the organ—as medium None of you feel love, enjoy music, poetry etc. with the body, but having a body so gloriously calculated for enabling the spirit to demonstrate all heavenly sensations, it becomes impossible for souls to understand that in reality the flesh is the barrier for complete advance. The spirit never tires as it is eternal, but the body tires. It is perishable and tires of things connected the body. The spirit never sleeps”<sup>1</sup>*

Swami Abhedanand in his book “Life beyond Death” has explained very explicitly that death is not the end of life. In his words – “Death does not mean annihilation of anything, or destruction, or reduction into nothingness of anything but it means disintegration. It means that the instrument which has served its purpose must be thrown away, and another instrument must be rebuilt, out of the same material, perhaps, who can tell that the atoms and molecules which made up the body of Cleopatra thousands of years ago, are not used in the bodies of living beings today? The same atoms and molecules that are buried in the dead bodies, have been

Dissolved and taken up by the vegetable life, have reappeared in the forms of plants or cereals, and we may be

eating them and taking them in again, and they are forming parts of our own body. So, it is revolution. Nothing is destroyed. The atoms and molecules go into one body, get out and enter into another body. And in this continuous process, of evolution and involution, the living soul is the master.”<sup>2</sup> So the soul rules the body. Those who disbelieve in the immortality of the soul and say that it is an illusion are therefore, mistaken. The soul is immortal though practically we cannot prove the existence of immortality of the soul on the basis of observation and experiment.

- 
1. E.Palmstierna – The Herisons of Immortality, pp 944-945
  2. Swami Abhedanand – Life beyond Death – pp. 50-51.

Eustace Miles, a believer in the theory of rebirth, in his book ‘Life after Life’ says that it explains much that science has not explained. “Though it is unproved”, says Miles, “Still it explains phenomena which science leaves unexplained. It satisfies the craving which science does not satisfy – the craving to know how the world can possibly be explained as a just and fair arrangement. According to Reincarnation – or the theory of life-after-life, since each life results from previous lives and action, and is full of opportunities all creations (or evolutions) have eventually an equal chance. In every creation is latent the possibility of a higher evolution”<sup>1</sup> Miles, has in the aforesaid book given the views of different persons i.e. believers in the theory of re-incarnation. An extract from the same book of professor Frederick Henry Hedge, is given here by way of example. According to him—

*“whether a new soul is furnished to each new body or the body given to a pre-existing soul. It is a question on which theology throws no light, and which psychology but faintly illustrates. But so far as the faint illustration reaches it favours the supposition of pre-existence. That supposition seems best to match the supposed continued existence of the soul hereafter”<sup>2</sup>.*

Death, on the supposition of immortality is infact a change of form and nothing more. It implies a change for a new life. Death has no such power to see voice of justice as nuts. No man can escape the just consequences of his own voluntary actions even by death, For, according to our philosophy, life is a heavy responsibility which a man has to carry. He cannot lead an irresponsible life because each of his actions will influence him and his social environment from one birth to another. “We take nothing with us except ourselves, but we ourselves go out in a free condition, amid fresh surroundings; not in a bodiless state, but in what is described as a full bodied condition still”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus we find that if we believe in rebirth, then death assumes a new meaning for us. It no longer stands as a symbol of total annihilation, reducing a living, glowing and palpitating life to unthinkable blankness; on the other hand it is just a gate to a new existence vibrating with new hopes and aspiration. In this way, a belief in rebirth may exercise a soothing influence on the life and mind of man by removing the fear of a life negating death.

Further, if rebirth is believed to be Karma-conditioned, then this may inspire a man to lead a good life and to practice

socio-ethical virtues which will automatically create favourable social relations resulting in social solidarity. These life-saving and peace enhancing effects of the concepts of rebirth and karma cannot be wholly overlooked.

### Expert Opinion on Rebirth

#### Walker

Walker in his work on 'Reincarnation' says –

“The Hindu conception of Reincarnation embraces all existence – gods, men, animals, plants, minerals. It is believed that everything migrates, from Buddha down to inert matter. Hardly tells us that Buddha himself was born an ascetic eighty three times, as the soul of a tree forty three times, and many other times as ape, deer, lion, snipe, chicken, eagle serpent, pig, frog, etc., amounting to four hundred times in all. A Chinese authority represents Buddha as saying, ‘The number of my birth and deaths can only be compared to those of all the plants in the universe’. Birth is the gate which opens into every state, and merit determines into which it shall open. Earth and human life are an intermediary state, resulting from many previous places and forms, and introducing many more. There are multitudes of inhabited worlds upon which the same person is successively born according to his attractions. To the earthly life he may return again and again, dropping the memory of past experiences, and carrying, like an embryonic germ, the concisest summary of former lives into each coming one. Every act bears

- 
1. Eustace Miles – Life after Life, p. 102.
  2. Ibid, pp.66-67.
  3. Oliver Ledge – Science and Human Progress, p.179

upon the resultant which shall steer the soul into its next habitation, not only on earth, but in the more exalted or debased regions of ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’. Thus ‘the chain of the law, binds all existences, and the only escape is by the final absorption into Brahm.

“We have seen that Origen refers to pre-existence as the general opinion. Clemens Alexandrinus (Origen’s master) taught it as a divine tradition authorized by St. Paul himself in Romane V.12,14,19. Rujjinus in his letter to Anastasine says that ‘This opinion was common among the primitive Fathers.’

Later, Jeroms relates that the doctrine of transmigration was taught as an esoteric one communicated to only a select few. But Nemesius emphatically declared that all the Greeks who believed in immortality believed also in metempsychosis. Delitzsch Says, ‘It had its advocates as well in the synagogues as in the church’.

“The Gnoetics and Manichacans received it, with much also, from Zorastrian predecessors. The Neo Platonists derived it chiefly from a blending of Plato and the Orient. The Church Fathers drew it not only from these sources, but from the Jews and the pioneers of Christianity. Several of them condemn the Persian and Flatonic philosophies and yet hold to reincarnation in other guises. Aside from all authority, the doctrine seems to have been rooted among the inaugurators

of our era in its adaptation to their mental needs, as the best explanation of the ways of God and the nature of men.

*“Many of the Orthodox Church Fathers welcomed Reincarnation as a ready explanation of the fall of man and the mystery of life, and distinctly preached it as the only means of reconciling the existence of suffering with a meriful God. It was an essential part of the Church Philosophy for many centuries in the rank and file of Christian thought, being stamped with the authority of the leading thinkers of Christendom, and then gradually was frowned upon as the Western influence predominated, until it become heresy, and at length survived only in a few scattered sects.”<sup>1</sup>*

#### Professor Francis Bowen

“Our life upon earth is rightly held to be a discipline and a preparation for a higher and eternal life hereafter. But if limited to the duration of a single mortal body, it is so brief as to seem hardly sufficient for so grand a purpose. Threescore years and ten must surely be an inadequate preparation for eternity. But what assurance has we that the probation of the soul is confined within so narrow limits? Why may it not be continued, or repeated, through a long series of successive generations, the same personality animating one after another an indefinite number of tenements of flesh, and carrying forward into each the training it has received, the character it has formed, the temper and dispositions it has indulged, in the stage of existence immediately preceeding? It need not remember its past history, even while bearing the fruits and the consequences of that history deeply ingrained into his present nature. How many long passages of any one life are now completely lost to memory, though they may have contributed largely to build up the heart and the intellect which distinguish one man from another? Our responsibility surely is not lessened by such forgetfulness. We are still accountable for the misuse of time, though we have forgotten how or on what we wasted it. We are even now reaping the bitter fruits, through enfeebled health and vitiated desires and capacities, of many forgotten acts of self-indulgence, wilfulness, and sin-forgotten just because they were so numerous. Then a future life even in another frail body upon this earth may will be a fate of just and fearful retribution.

“But no one can complain of the dispositions and endowments which he has inherited, so to speak, from himself that it, from his former self in a previous stage of existence. If, for instance, he had neglected his opportunities and fostered his lower appetites in his childhood, if he was then wayward and self-infulgent, indolent, deceitful, and vicious, it is right and just that, in his manhood and old age, he should experience the bitter consequences of his youthful follies. If he has voluntarily made himself a brute, a brute he must remain. The child is father of the man, who often inherits from him a sad patrimony.

- 
1. Eustice Miles – “Life after Life” – pp.50-52.

“All the inequalities in the lot of mankind, which have prompted what are perhaps the bitterest of all complaints,

and have served skeptics like Hume and J.S. Mill as a reason for the darkest imputations upon divine justice in the government of the world, disappear from the picture altogether, Excepting only what we have just considered, the retributive consequences of more or less sin, there are no inequalities. All start from the same point, and journey through the same vicissitudes of existence, exhausting sooner or later all varieties of condition. Prince and peasant, bond and free, barbarian and cultured, all share alike whatever weal or woe there is in the world, because all must at some future time change places with each others But after these two large deductions from the amount complained of, what remains? Very little, certainly, which we cannot even now see through; that is, which we cannot assign and adequate reason for; and to the eye of faith nothing remains”<sup>1</sup>

### Eustice Miles

E. Miles, the author of ‘Life after Life’ has expressed his belief in reincarnation. In the ‘Preface’ to the book he has remarked – “I think that the theory of Reincarnation namely, that one life is this world follows after another life.

Usually with an interval between – is likely to give us a sense of infinite hope and of infinite responsibility, it is likely to make us helpers of ourselves and or others, if we assume it to be a certain established fact, and act accordingly.”

In Chapter XXIX of the said book has stated –

“It seems to me a rational theory, aiding us to realize the justice, love and wisdom of the power, encouraging us to work sensibly, without worry and fear, without carelessness or narrow selfishness, setting a premium on an all-round training of the self, supplying many strong motives for right thought and action, and so forth. And, for my own part, I cannot see any objection to it that is serious to me”<sup>2</sup>

### W. Lutoslawski

W. Lutoslawski, in his book ‘Pre-existence and Reincarnation’, explains about the different motives for Reincarnation such as genius – an aim for all men, sanctity, longing for unknown counterpart and National life, He believes that an afterlife is necessary to fulfil such motives. Speaking about the motive of genius he holds that practice develops capacities. “These capacities which we desire require practice under the same conditions in which we live at present, with the help of a body of increasing perfection and growing obedience to will power. Thus passionate craving for the creative power of genius is a powerful motive for returning after death to earthly life yet again. Incorporal existence does not fully satisfy a spirit that longs for objective realization. Such a creative

Activity needs material instruments and a permanent objective field of action. The body is a necessary instrument of the soul, and the proper field of action for those spirits whom we know best is the earth. Therefore, the fullness of spiritual life requires a body and this accounts for the universal dogma of the resurrection of the body.

Resurrection occurs many times, and everytime it should be in greater splendor and excellence, until all those who faithfully persist in their endeavours attain with Divine help, the sublime power of original genius. Then life will be worth living and we shall no longer need to die”<sup>3</sup>. Again, “Intercourse with more creative minds collaboration with them in natural aid, is a goal that Draws us on and invites to rebirth, reinforcing the more personal craving for individual development. As we reach higher levels of spiritual life the genius is essentially unselfish and disinterested in its love of creative activity”<sup>4</sup>.

### **References**

- [1] Quoted from Eustice Miles book ‘Life after Life’ pp.64-66
- [2] E. Miles – Life after Life, p.170.
- [3] W. Lutoslawski – Pre-Existence and Reincarnation, pp. 63-64
- [4] Ibid, p.64.