

# Reincarnation: Myths, Mystery or Satya Sanatan

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### Introduction:

Reincarnation is the religious or philosophical belief that after biological death, the soul or spirit begins a new life in a different body, which may be human, animal, or plant. The concept, known as "samsara" in Sanskrit, entails the soul's progression through multiple births on its journey towards "moksha" or liberation. The term "reincarnation" is derived from Latin, meaning "to take on the flesh again," reflecting the idea of the soul inhabiting a physical body anew. Discussions on this subject date back to around the 6th century BC in the philosophical traditions of both India and Greece. Various terms are used across ancient Indian scriptures, such as punarāvṛtti, punarājāti, punarjīvātu, punarbhava, āgati-gati, and in Buddhist Pali texts nibbattin, upapatti, and uppajjana (R. W. Neufeldt, 1986). Additionally, it is referred to by other terms including "rebirth," "metempsychosis" (from the Greek), "transmigration" (the English equivalent of metempsychosis), "disambiguation," "palingenesis," among others (Obeyesekere G, 2002). The belief in soul's rebirth or migration (metempsychosis) finds expression in the thoughts of certain Ancient Greek historical figures, such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato (Charles et al., 2010). It constitutes a central tenet and a key concept in Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While the majority of denominations within Christianity and Islam do not initially endorse reincarnation, in recent decades, many Europeans and North Americans have shown an interest in the concept, as evidenced by numerous contemporary works (Haraldsson, E, 2006).

### Reincarnation and Religion

#### Hinduism:

Hindu traditions consider the soul to be the unchanging

Hindu Dharma preaches that while death may destroy the body, the jiva is immortal—it never dies. As long as the jiva is enwrapped in maya, it remains attached to material desires and is subject to the cycle of births and deaths.

In Hinduism, the holy book Rigveda, the oldest extant Indo-Aryan text, makes numerous references to rebirths. One verse says: "Burn him not up, nor quite consume him, Agni: Let not his body or his skin be scattered."

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eternal essence of a living being, which journeys across reincarnations until it attains self-knowledge.

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O Jatavedas, when thou hast matured him, then send him on his way unto the Fathers... let thy fierce flame, thy glowing splendor, burn him with thine auspicious forms, O Jatavedas, bear this man to the region of the pious. Again, O Agni, to the Fathers send him who, offered in thee, goes with our oblations. Wearing new life let him increase his offspring: Let him rejoin a body, Jatavedas" (Krishnamacharya & Sooktham, 1994)."

The Bhagavad Gita states: "Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be. As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from childhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change." and "Worn-out garments are shed by the body; worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller within the body. New bodies are donned by the dweller, like garments" (Bhaktivedanta, 1994).

According to the Purāṇas, the jiva passes through 8,400,000 different births, which include all of the phyla in the animal and plant kingdoms, before it attains a human form. Depending on our karmas, our jiva will regress into a lower life form due to base karmas or progress into a higher life form due to righteous karmas.

A jiva's birth into a human body is the highest and rarest of all births. In a human birth, the jiva's main purpose is to worship God in order to achieve moksha and to free itself from maya and the cycle of births and deaths.

According to the Hindu sage Adi Shankaracharya, the world as we ordinarily understand it is like a dream: fleeting and illusory. When all desire has vanished, the person will not be born again. When the cycle of rebirth thus comes to an end, a person is said to have attained liberation (moksha) (Tapasyananda & Lahari, 2001).

**Jainism:** In Jainism, karma forms a central and fundamental aspect of the faith, intricately connected to other philosophical concepts such as transmigration, reincarnation, liberation, nonviolence (ahimsa), and non-attachment.

Actions are believed to have consequences, both immediate and delayed, extending into future

incarnations. Therefore, the doctrine of karma is not solely considered in relation to one lifetime but also in connection with past lives and future incarnations.

It is understood that karma is the root cause of birth and death, with souls bound by karma perpetually cycling through existence. The suffering or pleasure experienced in a present life is attributed to choices made in the past.

As a result, Jainism places supreme importance on pure thinking and moral behavior.

Jain texts postulate four gatis, or states of existence: Deva (demi-gods), manusya (humans), naraki (hell beings), and tiryanca (animals, plants, and microorganisms). Depending on their karma, souls transmigrate and reincarnate within this cosmology of destinies. The four main destinies are further subdivided into categories and smaller subcategories.

Overall, Jain texts describe a cycle of 8.4 million birth destinies in which souls repeatedly find themselves as they cycle within samsara (Jacobi 1895).

### **Buddhism:**

The Buddhist concept of reincarnation differs from others in that there is no eternal "soul," "spirit," or "self," but only a "stream of consciousness" that links life with life. In Buddhist doctrine, the evolving consciousness (Pali: samvattanika viññāna) or stream of consciousness (Pali: viññāna sotam), upon death (or "the dissolution of the aggregates"), becomes one of the contributing causes for the arising of a new aggregation. At the death of one personality, a new one comes into being, much like the flame of a dying candle can serve to light the flame of another. The consciousness in the new person is neither identical to nor entirely different from that in the deceased, but the two form a causal continuum or stream.

Transmigration is the effect of karma (Pali: kamma) or volitional action. The basic cause is the abiding of consciousness in ignorance (Pali: Avijja, Sanskrit: Avidya): When ignorance is uprooted, rebirth ceases (Davids, 1899-21).

Vipassana meditation employs "bare attention" to mind states without interference, ownership, or judgment.

Observation reveals each moment as an experience of an

feeling, or a perception that arises, exists, and ceases. This practice limits the power of desire, which, according to the second noble truth of Buddhism, is the cause of suffering (dukkha), and leads to Nirvana (nibbana, vanishing [of the self-idea]), in which self-oriented models are transcended, and “the world stops.” Thus, consciousness is a continuous birth and death of mind states: Rebirth is the persistence of this process (Harvey, 1995).

### **Sikhism:**

In Sikhism, the path of “Bhakti” is indeed emphasized as a means to achieve spiritual liberation or salvation. Sikhs believe in the concept of reincarnation, wherein the soul undergoes a cycle of birth and rebirth until it merges back with the divine. However, Sikhism does not explicitly state that the soul passes from one body to another in a linear progression until liberation. Instead, Sikhs believe in the importance of living a righteous life and cultivating a strong relationship with the Creator through devotion and good deeds. Good actions and remembering the Creator are seen as essential for spiritual growth and attaining a higher state of consciousness. Conversely, engaging in sinful deeds may lead to spiritual regression or experiencing suffering in future lives, but Sikhism does not explicitly mention being incarnated in “lower” life forms as a consequence.

### **Islam:**

The Quran unequivocally rejects the concept of reincarnation, affirming instead the belief in a single earthly birth followed by the Day of Judgment, where individuals will be held accountable for their actions and either face punishment in hell or attain union with God. However, it is noteworthy that certain minority sects within Islam, particularly some branches of Shia Islam (known as Ghulat (Wilson 1998)), and other groups like the Druzes (Seabrook 1928), have embraced the idea of reincarnation.

For instance, some Ghulat Shia Muslim sects regard their founders as divine incarnations (hulul), and there are historical practices among South Asian Isma'ilis that suggest beliefs in reincarnation, such as performing chantas for sins committed in past lives. Additionally,

figures like Rashid al-Din Sinan, (r. 1162-92) associated with the Alawi sect, are believed to have subscribed to the transmigration of souls, possibly influenced by Isma'ilism. Moreover, certain modern Sufi groups, such as those following Bawa Muhaiyadeen, embrace the idea of reincarnation. While these beliefs diverge from mainstream Islamic doctrine, they illustrate the diversity of interpretations within the Muslim world. (Wilson 1998; Seabrook 1928; Wasserman 2001)

### **Judaism:**

Reincarnation is not an essential tenet of traditional Judaism. The 16th-century Isaac Luria (the Ari) brought the issue to the center of his new mystical articulation for the first time and advocated for the identification of the reincarnations of historic Jewish figures, which were compiled by Haim Vital in his Shaar HaGilgulim.

### **Christianity:**

Christianity, on the other hand, rejects the concept of reincarnation. Christians believe that when a person dies, their soul sleeps in the grave along with their corpse until the "last day" or "final judgment." However, there is evidence in the Bible of Jesus himself teaching reincarnation. Recent studies have indicated that some Westerners, including certain contemporary Christians, modern Neopagans, followers of Spiritism, Theosophists, and students of esoteric philosophies such as Kabbalah, accept the idea of reincarnation (Walter & Waterhouse, 1999). The belief in reincarnation is particularly high in the Baltic countries, with Lithuania having the highest figure for the whole of Europe at 44%. According to a survey by the Pew Forum in 2009, 24% of American Christians expressed a belief in reincarnation (PEW Forum, 2009). Geddes MacGregor demonstrates in his book "Reincarnation in Christianity: A New Vision of the Role of Rebirth in Christian Thought" that Christian doctrine and reincarnation are not mutually exclusive belief systems (Cranston, 1990).

All spiritual schools accept the concept of reincarnation, albeit with some differences. The only spiritual guru who has given a different explanation for reincarnation is "Osho Rajneesh." He states that the mind of an individual exists

as a set of memories, both good and bad, which are energy in a very subtle form. Memory, being energy, cannot be destroyed even at death but is liberated into the cosmos and dissolved. Individuals' memories are pooled up, only to enter another womb. Thus, in the true sense, the person is not born again, only their memories are expressed in another individual. When an enlightened person dies, they leave no memories to be picked up by other beings, so they are not born again (Osho and reincarnation, 2008).

### Reincarnation research:

Reputable medical and academic professionals, including a team of researchers at the University of Virginia School of Medicine's Division of Perceptual Studies, have been studying the science of reincarnation for nearly half a century. After investigating thousands of stories of people who claim to remember a past life, their meticulous research has emphasized that:

(I) 33% of Americans believe in reincarnation: The Pew Research Center conducted a study on New Age beliefs and found that one-third of Americans believed they would be reborn in another body after death.

(ii) 65% more people believe in reincarnation now compared to 20 years ago. According to Gallup, reincarnation appears to be making a comeback (pun intended).

(iii) 36% of Catholics believe in reincarnation. Reincarnation is central to the beliefs of many Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, but the concept is also more popular among Christians than many may realize. According to the study conducted by the Pew Research Center, one in four Protestants and one in three Catholics believe their soul will return in another body after death, even though such an idea is not part of their religion's official doctrine.

(iv) 70% of people who remember a past life remember dying a violent or unnatural death. Dr. Jim Tucker, a psychiatrist and past-life researcher at the University of Virginia, discovered that the vast majority of cases he investigated involved people who remembered past lives as men, not women. He wondered if gender had something to do with why some people remembered living before.

Upon further analysis of over 2,000 cases, he determined the cause was likely due to another factor. 30% of the cases he studied involved a past life of someone who had died a natural death. These cases were evenly split between males and females, reflecting the general population. However, of the remaining 70% of cases, where the past life ended in an accidental or unnatural death, a whopping 73% involved males. These percentages mirror death statistics almost perfectly. Far more men than women die unnaturally. Men tend to have more dangerous jobs, fight in wars, and get into more bar fights. Therefore, Dr. Tucker reasoned that someone may be more likely to remember a past life if it ended in a violent or unnatural death.

v) 9% of people who remember a past life exhibit an unusual skill related to that former life. Sometimes genetics or environmental factors can explain it, but in many cases, scientists don't know why some people demonstrate extraordinary talents. Researchers at the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies found that nearly one in ten people who remember a past life exhibit a skill related to that former life.

(vi) 35% of people who remember dying accidentally in a past life have an extreme fear of dying the same way again. Many of the cases investigated by the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies included people who believed they were murdered or accidentally killed in a past life. The subjects in over one third of these cases exhibited an intense fear of that particular cause of death. They exhibited avoidant behaviour, like refusing to fly on airplanes, or had an exaggerated startle response to loud noises.

(vii) 26% of people who remember a past life demonstrate some other form of unexplained psychic abilities. Psychiatrist Dr. Jim Tucker has written about the unexplained psychic abilities of people he's investigated who recall living before.

(viii) 20% of people who remember a past life believe they lived as a deceased family member. It has been found out in many instances of supposed reincarnation within the same family. Psychiatrist Dr. Brian Weiss hypothesized that we may have a soul family—a cluster of spirits that we are



drawn to, life after life.

(ix) 58% of people who remember drowning in a past life have an extreme fear of water. As previously mentioned, scientists have documented many cases of people with phobias that appear to stem from remembered past lives. Aquaphobia, the fear of water, seems to be one of the most common. Past-life researcher Dr. Jim Tucker speculates this may be because “drowning victims spend more time in the process of dying than individuals who are killed in an automobile accident or shot to death.” Thus, the past-life trauma from drowning is more likely to stick with them in the next incarnation.

(x) 23% of people who remember a past life believe they once lived as a different gender. In many of these cases (which the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies has thoroughly investigated and coded), the individual strongly associated with the gender of their remembered past-life personality. Perhaps this is evidence for a universal soul, that can express itself as any or all genders, regardless of the body's anatomical gender.

(xi) 20% of people who remember a past life also remember something from the time between death and rebirth.

(xii) 2% of people who remember a past life can accurately describe their previous funeral. Researchers found that in 25 out of 1,100 cases of people remembering a past life, the subject shared eerily accurate details of their previous identity's funeral. They claim to have been there, watching the ceremony unfold, even though they no longer inhabited their former body. Ian Stevenson documented through their extensive research that one girl named Ratana was upset because her family had scattered the ashes of her former identity rather than burying them. She even knew the precise spot where they had done it: under the bo tree, inside the temple complex.

Théodore Flournoy was among the first to study a claim of past life recall in the course of his investigation of the medium Hélène Smith, published in 1900, and defined the possibility of cryptomnesia (Théodore 1900). Carl Gustav Jung also emulated him in his thesis based on a study of cryptomnesia in psychism. Later, he emphasized the

importance of the persistence of memory and ego in the psychological study of reincarnation. Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) was a Canadian-born psychiatrist based at the University of Virginia and best known for his pioneering work on the phenomenon of past life memories among young children, as described in his landmark study *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* and other publications. He investigated many reports of young children who claimed to remember a past life. He conducted more than 2500 case studies over a period of 40 years and published 12 books. Stevenson methodically documented each child's statements and then identified the deceased person the child identified with, and verified the facts of the deceased person's life that matched the child's memory. He also matched birthmarks and birth defects to wounds and scars on the deceased, verified by medical records such as autopsy photographs, in *Reincarnation and Biology* (Cadoret 2005). Stevenson published a book on European Cases of the Reincarnation Type because the majority of Stevenson's reported cases of reincarnation originated in Eastern societies, where dominant religions often permit the concept of reincarnation. There are a few important Indian incidences of reincarnation emphasized and pointed out by Stevenson along with other Indian experts like (a) Shiva Tripathi, born on October 24, 1962, to a family of the Brahmin caste in the village of Dibiyapur, city of Etawah (U.P), versus Sumitra Singh, who was born around 1968 in Sharifpura, Angad ka Nagla of Etawah (U.P) (Stevenson & Pasricha 1989), (b) Toran Singh, or 'Titu' to all who knew him, was born in the village of Baad, about eight miles from the city of Agra in the province of Uttar Pradesh in northern India (Wehrstein 2017), and © Shanti Devi (born on December 11, 1926, in Chirawala Mohulla, a small locality of Delhi) is one of the best cases of children's past life memories ever to be recorded. It was investigated by a team appointed by Mahatma Gandhi, who accompanied Shanti Devi to the village of her past-life recollections and recorded what they witnessed.

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organization), written by Dr. K.S.Rawat, a Stevenson-style researcher based in India. Dr. Rawat is a frequent contributor to the Past Life Forum (Rawat & Rivas 2005). There are some other people like Jim B. Tucker, Brian Weiss, and Raymond Moody who have undertaken reincarnation research. Psychiatrist Jim B. Tucker (1934-2013) was director of the Division of Perceptual Studies, a section within the University of Virginia (UVA) medical school's psychiatry department. Tucker is known for his investigations of children's memories of past lives, continuing the work of pioneering reincarnation researcher Ian Stevenson, a previous holder of the role. He has published numerous books and papers on the topic like Past Life Memories Research and Birthmarks in Reincarnation Cases. Tucker has used television to share reincarnation research with the public, collaborating with documentary-makers and giving interviews for TV and print media. He has appeared on Good Morning America, Larry King Live, CBS Sunday Morning, and the Dr. Oz Show. Since the 7th to 8th decades, there have been several works done on reincarnation:

1960a	Stevenson, I.	The evidence for survival from claimed memories of former incarnations. Part: Review of the data. <i>Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research</i> 54, 51-71.
1960b	Stevenson, I	The evidence for survival from claimed memories of former incarnations. Part II: Analysis of the data and suggestions for further investigations. <i>Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research</i> 54, 95-117
1966	Rhine, L.E	Review of Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation by I. Stevenson. <i>Journal of Parapsychology</i> 30, 263-72.
1967	Chari, C.T.K.	Reincarnation: New light on an old doctrine (Review of Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation, by I. Stevenson). <i>International Journal of Paraosychology</i> 9, 217-22
1972	Stevenson, I.	Are poltergeists living or are they dead? <i>Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research</i> 66, 233-52.
1974	Stevenson, I	Xenoglossy: A Review and Report of a Case. Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: University Press of Virginia
1977	Stevenson, I.	The explanatory value of the idea of reincarnation. <i>Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease</i> 164(5), 305-26
1982	Wilson, I.	All in the Mind: Reincarnation, Hypnotic Regression, Stigmata, Multiple Personality, and Other Little-Understood Powers of the Mind.

1983	Stevenson, I	Cryptomnesia and parapsychology. <i>Journal of the Society for Psychical Research</i> 52, 1-30. (1983a). American children who claim to remember previous lives. <i>Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease</i> 171, 742-48.
1984)	Stevenson, I.	Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy. Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: University Press of Virginia.
1987	Stevenson, I.	Children Who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation. Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: University Press of Virginia.
1989	Preuss, P.	Reincarnation: A Philosophical and Practical Analysis. Lewiston, New York, USA: Edwin Mellen Press.
1990	Matlock, J.G.	Past life memory case studies. In <i>Advances in Parapsychological Research</i> 6, ed. by S. Krippner, 184-267. Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland
1992	Almeder, R.	Death and Personal Survival. Lanham, Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield.
1994	Mills, A., Haraldsson, E., & Keil, H.H J.	Replication studies of cases suggestive of reincarnation by three independent investigators. <i>Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research</i> 88, 207-19
1997a	Stevenson, I.	Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects (2 vols). Vol. 1, Vol. 2. Westport, Connecticut, USA: Praeger
1997b	Stevenson, I	Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect. Westport, Connecticut, USA: Praeger
1997	Bowman, C.	Children's Past Lives: How Past Life Memories Affect your Child. New York: Bantam Books.
1999	Shroder, T.	Old Souls: The Scientific Evidence for Past Lives. New York: Simon & Schuster.
2001	Stevenson, I.	Children who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation (rev. ed.). Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland.
2005	Jim B Tucker	Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives
2008	Mills, A.	Comments on Ian Stevenson, M.D., director of the Division of Personality Studies and pioneer of reincarnation research. <i>Journal of Scientific Exploration</i> 22, 104-6.
2008	Alvarado, C.S., & Zingrone, N.L.	Ian Stevenson and the modern study of spontaneous ESP experiences. <i>Journal of Scientific Exploration</i> 22, 44-53.
2008	White, K.L.	Ian Stevenson: Recollections. <i>Journal of Scientific Exploration</i> 22, 11-17.
2009	Lund, D.H.	Persons, Souls and Death: A Philosophical Investigation of an Afterlife. Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland.
2013	Kelly, E.W. (ed.)	Science, the Self, and Survival after Death: Selected Writings of Ian Stevenson. Lanham, MD, USA: Rowman & Littlefield

In India, the foundation for reincarnation and spiritual research was founded in 1985, especially to focus on reincarnation as well as follow up on the technique developed by American parapsychologist Ian Stevenson. Jamuna Prasad is the leading researcher connected with the foundation. Integral to the program of the foundation was the attempt to discover correlations between the results of scientific research and the teachings of the ancient Hindu (Vedic and yogic) literature of India. Satwant Pasricha, a Professor of Psychology, is the authority on the scientific study of reincarnation. Her research methods are similar to Stevenson's. She documents the child's statements, then identifies the deceased person the child remembers being, and verifies

the facts of the deceased person's life that match the child's memory. She has even correlated the birthmarks of the child with the physical trauma or deformity present in the deceased person of the past life the child has remembered by verifying his medical records (Pasricha 2008). She has also presented cases of “Xenoglossy” (ability to speak a different language without having learned it normally) and “Spirit Possession” (In which case the spirit possessed actually existed but in a different location wherein both the families never knew each other) (Pasricha 2008a). Over two decades, she has researched over 500 cases.

Worldwide, children can be found who reported that they have memories of a previous life. More than 2,500 cases have been studied and their specifications have been published and preserved in the archives of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia (United States).

Many of those children come from countries where the majority of the inhabitants believe in reincarnation, but others come from countries with different cultures and religions that reject it. In many cases, the revelations of the children have been verified and have corresponded to a particular individual, already dead. A good number of these children have marks and birth defects corresponding to wounds on the body of his previous personality. Many have behaviours related to their claims to their former life: phobias, phobias, and attachments. Others seem to recognize people and places of his supposed previous life, and some of their assertions have been made under controlled conditions. The hypothesis of reincarnation is controversial. We can never say that it does not occur or will obtain conclusive evidence that it happens. The cases that have been described so far, isolated or combined, do not provide irrefutable proof of reincarnation, but they supply evidence that suggest its reality (Ernesto Bonilla 2015).

### **Conclusion:**

If reincarnation is to be examined from an unbiased scientific point of view, it is necessary, first to find a way of bypassing such unscientific barriers as religious bias. Neither is there strong objective evidence nor specific

research methods that can discover the mystery of reincarnation. However, not everything can be known by humans with their current mind and intelligence, which are far limited to perceive such paranormal phenomena (Nagaraj 2013). Thus, there is nothing much to conclude.

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