

Life After Death: Conceptions of the Afterlife

The question of survival beyond physical life on Earth has confounded the human mind throughout history. The religions of the world invariably propose some form of survival, though views of the afterlife vary across traditions and divide significantly over the question of reincarnation. Buddhism and Hinduism both point to some type of reincarnation, while modern Judeo-Christian theologies do not.

Many consider the evidence for both survival and reincarnation to be compelling, though not irrefutable. The literature on near- death

experiences, summarized by Raymond Moody (Moody, 2015) Kenneth Ring (Ring, 1985), Michael Sabom (Sabom, 1981) and others, as well as the phenomenon of communication with deceased souls, such as described in the books of James Van Praagh (Van Praagh, 1999), certainly provide credible evidence for the idea of survival. Ian Stevenson's extensive research on reincarnation, summarized in his book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, provides strong, though not invincible, evidence for the return of souls to earth through a series of lifetimes (Stevenson, 1980).

The intriguing question is not just whether we survive physical life and reincarnate; for both of

these there seems to be reasonably compelling evidence brought forth in the extensive literature. The question addressed here is, what exactly happens to us after death? Two issues of particular interest are: 1) What is it that actually survives? and 2) Do something like the so-called realms of “heaven” and “hell” actually exist?

There are many different accounts of the afterlife that overlap in certain respects and vary in many others. The most well-known and widely believed examples come from traditional religious doctrine, expressed in classic works such as the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Koran, and the Kabbalah. Many other detailed accounts have been provided by

mystics, perhaps the most famous of which were the detailed visions of heaven and hell by Emmanuel Swedenborg and modern-day psychics like Edgar Cayce in the first half of the twentieth century. There are also more recent accounts by psychics such as James Van Praagh (Van Praagh, 1999) and Sylvia Browne (Browne, 2002). Some hypnotherapists, particularly Michael Newton in his books *Journey of Souls* and *Destiny of Souls*, have claimed to regress their clients to “between life” experiences and have constructed theories of the afterlife based on their clients’ reports.

All of these accounts agree on one point: there appear to be many “planes” or “levels” of

existence in the afterlife. When Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions,” he quite possibly was referring to the fact that there appear to be many different realms one can inhabit after death. These are not, of course, physical places. More likely they are different “vibrational spaces,” much like different stations or frequency bands on a radio.

An obvious question is: Who goes where and why? If we were to believe fundamentalist Christianity, souls go either to a beatific heaven or a horrific hell based simply on whether they have been “saved” by Jesus Christ. This, to many of us outside of mainstream Christianity, seems overly simplistic and patently unfair. It

begs the question of what happens to the billions of people on earth who do not grow up with or are ever exposed to Christianity. Also, it seems ridiculous that just going through a ritual where one is ostensibly “saved” should be the determining factor in one’s fate for eternity.

Furthermore, the idea of “eternal damnation” for souls who don’t make the cut is completely incompatible with the concept of an all-loving God. In fact, the idea of “eternal anything” is very unsatisfying if it doesn’t allow for a soul to continue evolving toward some more refined or enlightened state. The idea of a non-evolutionary, static universe where souls are condemned to remain in the same state for all eternity (infinite time) based on their

development during an average seventy to eighty-year lifetime on Earth seems not only horrific but absurd. Whether reincarnation as we understand it is true or not, a more plausible universe is one where everything is capable of evolving and moving on: in short, a universe that is in continual process rather than one that is static.

If Deity resides within us, and most theologies posit that we are ultimately all “parts of the Godhead,” then it seems unlikely that an all-loving God would condemn any part of Him/Herself to a static eternity, particularly a hellish one. . Why would a Deity presumed to

be all-loving and forgiving condemn a soul for all eternity?

Traditional religions such as Tibetan Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity speak of both heavenly and hellish realms following life on earth. The intensive visions of Swedenborg over many years attest to the same spectrum of realities.

Over the past few decades, the literature on near-death experiences has offered primarily heavenly visions of the afterlife with very few, though occasional, glimpses of hellish places.

Psychics such as Van Praagh and Browne have all but dismissed hellish realms but allow that such places exist for “the very most depraved souls.” Browne believes that hell has a

“revolving door policy” and that a soul does not spend much time there before reincarnating.

However, other accounts, such as the one explored in Steven Simon’s film *What Dreams May Come*, imply the possibility of getting “stuck” in dark, gloomy places for long periods of time after death. The hero of the movie, played by Robin Williams, descends into such a place in search of his wife, who took her own life. It is deeply ironic that Robin Williams himself ultimately took his own life.

No one who has had visions of hellish realms seems to have encountered the fire and brimstone of the Bible. No devils with pitchforks have shown up. Instead the hellish realms of the

afterlife seem to be dark and lonely, cut off from the light of God. Or else they are places full of large numbers of people of a kind: one place for murderers, another for people who took sadistic delight in tormenting others, yet another for those who took advantage of others out of greed and self-interest. Most of the accounts, including Swedenborg's, indicate that God does not punish or reward people by assigning them to hell or heaven. God does not operate like our criminal justice system. In fact, God, Christ, Buddha, and all of the most enlightened beings are totally *beyond* duality — beyond a place where the distinction between heaven and hell makes any sense.

So how do we end up where we happen to go after death? Some ancient theologies spoke of “judges” or “lords of karma.” More modern accounts suggest that it works according to the metaphysical “law of attraction.” We are drawn or attracted to the vibrational level that is commensurate with our own level of ethical/spiritual development upon death.

The law of attraction groups us automatically with others like us at the level that best matches our own inner development. If our life was saintly and holy, we get to commingle with others like us in higher “heavenly” realms. If we were an average Joe or Jane who led an average life of good and not so good, we will be drawn

to a dualistic realm in the afterlife not too unlike our existence on earth. It will contain a mixture of light and dark, beauty and ugliness, good and evil. Finally, if we were violent, malicious, and deliberately cruel, we get congregated with others of our kind in a not-so-heavenly realm. We are drawn to a negative place by our own beliefs and corresponding behaviors. We might get stuck there for a while because everyone else is like us and unable to perceive a better place.

However, as in Steven Simon's movie, there is always help available. No one gets condemned to a terrible place forever. There are guides who enter the dark regions to help people abandon

their negative beliefs, grow spiritually, and “move up,” so to speak.

Again, there is an assumption here of an *evolutionary* rather than static view of our spiritual condition. We can grow spiritually through lessons learned during earthly life, and presumably this evolution continues in the afterlife.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation-- a belief shared by Buddhism, Hinduism, and certain esoteric Christian groups such as the Rosicrucians-- allows for the possibility to return to earth in order to work off bad karma that may have landed us in a not-so-wonderful situation following death. This return

may happen tens of even hundreds of times. Even if it turns out that reincarnation, as we understand it, doesn't occur, an evolutionary view of the soul allows for the opportunity to grow and evolve, moving in an continuous progression toward an eventual alignment or "at-one-ment" with God. "As in Heaven, so on Earth," so the famous dictum goes (a universal principle shared by most religions and also incorporated into the Lord's Prayer). It seems likely that the opportunity to grow and evolve exists in both places.

What makes earthly life unique is that *people of all levels of soul evolution are thrown together*, from criminals to saints. This provides for unique

opportunities to learn patience and forgiveness.

Souls of differing levels of evolution do not seem to be mixed up together in the afterlife.

Most accounts of the “other side” suggest that we are grouped with others according to our particular level of soul development. We might be permitted to visit souls residing in realms of the astral spectrum that are “lower” than our own, but they are unable to come “up” to visit us. What locks anyone into a particular level is their belief system and corresponding actions.

As we grow and adopt more enlightened beliefs, we can move to more enlightened places.

Animals

What about animals? Where do cows and birds go after death?

Many people have had dreams of their deceased pets that seem especially vivid, raising the possibility of an afterlife for all creatures. What this might be like and how it might interface with afterlife dimensions for humans is not clear to this author. Some accounts from Hinduism and theosophy hold that all creatures, from the lowest one-celled organism up to humans, continually evolve through countless incarnations. Many of us have known certain dogs and cats that seemed like they were on the cusp of moving from an animal existence to a

human one. Indeed, cherished pets often seem more evolved than humans because they are unconditionally loving and do not appear to have fallen from grace, like us. Perhaps after death they exist in a more angelic-type realm. The idea of an animal going to hell seems absurd.

Only humans, with *free will*, are able to create heaven or hell on earth (individually and/or collectively) and are likely able to continue a dualistic existence in the afterlife. Human life seems to be a unique “experiment” on earth. We are given the Godlike power of free will, and thus get the opportunity to create our own universe according to our beliefs. We are like

parts of God (the well-known channeled book, *A Course in Miracles* calls us “sons of God”) given a relative degree of independence to create our own realities, and yet we have the opportunity to receive help and guidance (from spirit guides and angels) in order to “get it right” and create a reality that is in alignment with the Cosmic intelligence or the flow of Divinity. Or we can go our own way and create a reality that is mediocre or even hellish.

Inequities of Life

It seems likely, though, that the total situation of human life is even more complex than this.

People are born into a wide spectrum of situations ranging from very privileged to

downright horrendous. Also, throughout life, things just happen independent of one's belief system, some of which are beatific and others that seem truly awful. Some individuals are weighted down with a life of continuous tragedy; others are not. Good people suffer continuous trauma, and less-than-wonderful people seem to prosper. What are we to make of this? One approach is to throw our hands up and conclude the world is purely material as well as totally capricious and random.

This is possible, but not a very appealing choice if we believe that the cosmos has any spiritual foundation. If everything is random, including each individual human's fate, then either there

is no spiritual basis of the world or the gods are indifferent. Certain philosophers, dating all the way back to Epicurus, have taken this viewpoint.

A more appealing alternative is to assume that something like karma and soul evolution (with or without reincarnation) actually exist. Being born into a horrible situation or being the victim of child abuse, for example, is the working out of karma one brought in from a previous existence. It is not just accidental. To believe otherwise leaves us with an existence that seems totally arbitrary.

Evidence for the Afterlife

Conventional science makes no commitment and remains agnostic to these two alternatives.

Experimental science cannot be applied to questions regarding the soul (dubious attempts to “weigh” the soul in the early 20th century notwithstanding). If the scope of mainstream science does not extend beyond the observable physical universe, then such a science is not likely to be open to investigating non-physical, afterlife realms, let alone the nature and possible evolution of the soul.

In short, the choice to believe in notions of the soul and soul evolution--particularly as the reason why humans are born into such vastly different circumstances—has to rely on the best evidence we have. That evidence is of the type described earlier: case studies of near death

experiences, communications from deceased souls through trance mediums, and reports of young children's recollections of experiences of being "someone else before their current life."

This evidence is widely scattered, but it is possible to get a reasonable sample by reading the three authors previously mentioned: Sylvia Browne, James VanPraagh, and Ian Stevenson.

In the end, the choice whether to believe in a completely random, capricious world or one in which soul evolution explains individual differences in circumstances, is not simply a matter of choosing what seems more appealing. It comes down to a matter of deciding what level of evidence do you accept as credible. If

you reject the evidence from the field of parapsychology and accept only the very highest standard of scientific evidence-- evidence only from your five senses-- you are left with a material world that possesses a certain intrinsic beauty but ultimately has no purpose or spiritual foundation.

Stages of the Transition to the Afterlife

First recognition that you are dead

Recognition that you are dead and have left your body is not always immediate or easy. For many, the experience may be like being in a protracted dream, and there may be a sense of confusion as to where you are that continues for some time. Also, awareness continues to be as

vivid as when you were alive, so, for people who never believed in an afterlife, it may be hard to come to terms with the fact that they are dead.

Protracted states of confusion and “limbo” following death are said to be especially common following violent deaths or deaths by suicide.

Eventually, though, you come to recognize that you are in a different environment than the one you inhabited during life. Also, you recognize that you are separated from your body. Finally, there may be spiritual guides who greet you and give you a broad orientation to the new environment in which you live.

All three of these circumstances contribute to the recognition that you are dead. Apparently for some souls this takes place very quickly, while for others it occurs over a protracted period of time.

Passing through the levels

A majority of afterlife accounts indicate there are several *levels* (sometimes called “planes”) that a soul passes through in its journey of transition. These levels differ in vibratory frequency, pleasantness, and degree of light. Some of them are dark, gloomy, lonely places that are traditionally referred to as the “lower astral planes.” Most souls are said to pass through these unpleasant, lower levels and move on to a

higher level where they are first greeted by spiritual friends and guides. However, in some accounts, some souls are said to get “stuck” on the lower levels where they can remain for a short or long time depending on a variety of circumstances. So the three relevant questions would be *who* gets stuck, *why* do they get stuck, and for *how long do they remain* stuck in the lower astral realms?

The two most common types of souls reported to get stuck are suicides and those who committed many serious wrongdoings during their lives. Apparently suicides get stuck not because they are being punished, but because they need to remain in a kind of limbo state

until the normal time allotted for their life comes to an end. If they were supposed to die at the age of eighty, and committed suicide at the age of sixty, they remain in limbo for twenty years. Souls who were morally corrupt and committed many crimes end up on the lower levels for the reasons described earlier in this essay, they are naturally drawn to be among individuals at a similarly lower level of spiritual evolution. Yet another group who gets stuck are those who are completely closed to spiritual teachings and spirituality in general. Many sources agree that spiritual teachers and guides are available to provide help to souls on these lower levels. However such a soul cannot benefit without

being open and willing to learn from what these guides have to teach.

Beyond these generalities, various sources disagree on how long a soul can remain stuck on these lower levels. Length of time varies quite a bit according to how open a soul is to learn, grow, evolve spiritually, and move on. Some older accounts, which align with traditional Christian notions of hell, imagine certain souls being stuck in the lower levels forever. As previously stated, this seems objectionable both in the sense that it is unfair (no mortal, *finite* crime should deserve *eternal* punishment) and does not allow for the possibility of at least eventual evolution and growth on the part of the

soul. For souls who are resistant to any such growth, though, being stuck could go on for a long time.

Another statement encountered in the literature is that souls who die an accidental, sudden death end up on the lower planes. Supposedly they have to remain there until the allotted end of their life. Again, this seems quite unfair to the author, as accidental deaths are usually not voluntary, as in the case of suicides. It's hard to see how there would be any supposed "cosmic justice" in such a case. So the accounts of accidental deaths leaving souls on lower levels of the afterlife seem questionable

Reunion with friends and loved ones

Upon leaving their body, a majority of souls pass through a tunnel of light (this tunnel is commonly reported in near death experiences) and move beyond the lower levels to a place where they meet up with friends and loved ones who have already passed over.

The reunion with already deceased loved ones often has a celebratory and festive atmosphere, helping the newly arriving soul to feel at home and resolve grief about having left earthly existence. This so-called “celebration” may be small or large, and may include persons unknown to the soul being greeted, either because they died when the person was a small child or are connections from other lifetimes.

Beyond simply greeting, some of the loved ones may help the newly arriving soul to get fully oriented and move on to the “right” level, where they can continue out their afterlife existence.

These loved ones stay with the new soul and continue to provide company.

It is reassuring to know that most of us have friends and are not alone in the afterlife, just as was the case while we lived on earth.

Recovery

A “recovery phase” generally occurs after the reunion with loved ones, but in some cases before. In this phase, the soul moves into a phase of rest and recuperation. Recovery occurs in settings that have been described by psychics

and mediums as “retreat centers,” “rest centers,” or even “hospitals.” The soul will rest with a small number of other souls or sometimes even alone. “Rest” can include long periods of sleep.

Souls need a period of time to rest and recuperate for two reasons. First, a majority souls went through a period of illness prior to death. Apparently there is some trauma to the *subtle body* (see the essay on life force energy for a description of subtle bodies) from physical illness, and these bodies require a period of rest and/or sleep following death in order to recuperate. Secondly, transitioning to the afterlife itself takes an emotional and sometimes physical toll. The soul has to adjust to a new and

very different environment, and a rest period helps make this adjustment easier and more gradual.

During the rest and recovery phase, a new soul receives assistance from healers and so-called “spirit doctors.” They may also receive infusions of positive energy to help counteract negativity left over from their previous life and prepare them to eventually enter a community of like-minded souls.

The recovery phase can extend for a short or a very long time (by earth standards) according to how much rest and recuperation a particular soul needs.

As they continue to move on through further levels of the afterlife, souls may periodically return for additional periods of rest and recuperation.

Life Review

Nearly all accounts of the afterlife from various sources speak of the soul reviewing in detail the events of its previous life. This review is not just watching a movie of the former life but *actually re-experiencing* each significant life event chronologically in detail. It is a long process and can be very hard on a soul. Who can imagine going back over an entire lifetime and not wanting to avoid revisiting (and especially re-experiencing) certain situations and events?

During the life review the soul not only re-experiences former life events but witnesses *how its actions affected other people*, actually feeling what others went through in response. This increases the intensity of the life review even further, opening up many opportunities for regret and remorse.

The life-review does not usually occur all at once. Instead, it occurs over various intervals and is likely to be intertwined with periods of rest and recovery, healing, and other spiritual activities. It would simply be too much for most souls to do it all at once.

Judgement occurs during the life-review process. Ancient religions always speak of the judgment

occurring from outside. In the *Egyptian Book of The Dead*, the soul is weighed against the feather of Ma'at, representing the goddess of truth and order. In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, souls are taken down into an underworld (lower astral planes?) and Yama, the Tibetan god of death, weighs their good deeds against their wrongdoings. Most modern resources since the 18th century shift responsibility for judgment from outer sources to the soul itself. Each soul has to review and judge its own previous life, looking back over the past and eventually coming to an understanding of what is needed to bring about a balance. If reincarnation is part of the overall scheme, the soul must return to

earth for another lifetime in order to balance out the karma of one or more previous lifetimes.

Thus, notions of punishment from older religions are not part of the modern viewpoint toward the life review. The soul judges its own actions and impact on others. *Intentions* of actions count for more than consequences of actions. Having to re-experience not only one's previous life but the impact one's actions had on others can be a harsh, even brutal experience, but one from which considerable learning and increased capacity for compassion may be gained.

Suicide and the Afterlife

It is difficult to make a general statement on the status of the afterlife for persons who commit

suicide. The postmortem scenario for suicide likely varies depending on the motivation for taking one's life, whether the act of suicide was impulsive or planned out, and the degree of pre-existing physical and/or emotional illness on the part of the person who commits suicide. There is a considerable difference between a teenager who takes her life impulsively and an elderly person with a terminal illness who receives some kind of "assisted suicide." Just as there is a difference between ending one's life out of severe depression versus undergoing suicide as a part of a terrorist mission.

Many reports from those who took their lives have come through mediums. Sometimes

mediums contact the souls of suicides out of their own interest of exploring what the afterlife is like for this particular group. In other cases, a family member of the suicide will have a medium try to contact their departed loved one on the other side to see how they are doing.

While these reports may be helpful, they have the potential problem of being *biased by the personal beliefs of the medium about suicide*

and its consequences for the afterlife. Reports from mediums about afterlife are in general susceptible to bias, yet this appears to be even more likely in the case of suicides.

Nearly all modern accounts of the afterlife for suicides report that they are not punished or go

to “hell” for taking their lives. Given how unhappy most persons are before actually taking their own life, it seems reassuring (though certainly not further incentive for ending one’s life) that they are not punished or condemned. That’s the good news. The not so good news is that such souls will still have to go through a life review and see (and feel) the impact of their suicide on loved ones who survived them. For most souls, this is likely to bring up a great deal of regret. In fact, a number of reports of suicides, obtained by mediums, indicate that regret is the biggest issue that needs to be dealt with. There is both regret felt about having hurt loved ones as well as regret through the realization that they might have

found other ways to deal with their problems while still alive, rather than taking their life.

Another common feature of accounts of suicides in the afterlife is that they take their problems with them. *The emotional problems that led to the suicide: depression, anger, and despair are not solved but remain.* Illnesses and discomfort specific to the physical body will be lifted, but emotional patterns of despair, depression, and anger will continue in the afterlife until they are resolved.

There is some diversity in the accounts of how suicides fare during the early stages of the afterlife. Some suicides tend to get stuck repeating the same patterns of misery they were stuck in while alive.

They remain in a kind of limbo state, on a lower plane, until they work their way out of it. If they're stubborn and just want to wallow in misery without working out their problems, they could remain stuck for a long time. This limbo state might further be compounded by confusion about whether they are dead, if they never believed in an afterlife, or confusion about whether there is any spiritual help available, if they didn't believe in a deity of some sort.

Many accounts also suggest that this limbo state can continue until the appointed time that the individual was supposed to die. If they were supposed to live until eighty and ended their life at sixty, then the time in limbo could last twenty

years by earthly standards, though the subjective experience of time may be different on the other side.

All of this assumes, of course, that each of us is given (by whom?) a certain “life plan” before birth that prescribes a certain life span. The fact that some people having near death experiences report that they were told (again by whom?) that “it is not yet their time” and they “have more to do on earth” provides some evidence for this notion of a pre-designated life plan.

Attachment can also keep any soul, including suicides, lingering in “lower” states or realms after death. Attachment to one’s home, possessions, or certain persons in earthly life

may postpone the soul's ability to move on to levels where it would have a lighter and freer existence. The phenomenon of ghosts is attributed to such earthbound souls who hang around and "haunt" earthy homes or people with whom they were involved. In the case of suicide, if the suicide was motivated by anger toward a specific person, for example, "I'll show you by killing myself," the attachment of the soul of the suicide to the soul of that particular person (and the reciprocal attachment on the part of the person still alive) may keep the soul earthbound for a period of time.

Survivors of any person who has passed over, whether naturally or by suicide, can help that

person by speaking to them as if they were present and encouraging them to forgive themselves, let go of their previous life, and move on toward the light.

Not all suicides get stuck in limbo. The factors that determine this outcome are not altogether clear, but it seems to have a lot to do with: 1) whether suicide was a reasonable option (as in the case of someone in pain with a terminal illness) and 2) the willingness and openness of the person to work through emotional difficulties that led to suicide after they are on the other side. Angels and guides are said to be available to help souls work through their difficulties if they are called on and asked. In

short, if you are open to getting help and actively seek it out, you may receive a lot more help in order to progress forward than if you remain stubbornly stuck in your problems.

Actually, it is the same on earth. Those who actively seek out help for their difficulties and make conscious changes in their attitudes end up growing and progressing more than those who do not. Are there guides and helpers that actively seek out struggling souls in the afterlife to try to help them? Many accounts suggest that there are, but it is somewhat unclear how soon they arrive after the suicide passes over.

Logically, it would seem that by the time the soul advances to the place of reunion with loved

ones who previously passed over, ample help would be available. How long it takes the suicide to get to that point, however, is unclear and may vary from one soul to another. Overall, the good news is that every soul who commits suicide can ultimately work through his or her difficulties, often with help from guides, and move from less enlightened to more enlightened levels on the other side.

Reincarnation models maintain that a soul unable to work out long-standing or difficult problems must return to earth to work them out there. Traditional reincarnation models claim that karma left unresolved at the time of a person's death will draw the person back to

another lifetime in order work out the unfinished karma.

To sum up, it seems reasonable to assume that both your willingness as well as attitude affect your situation in the afterlife (whether death is due to suicide or not), much the same way they do while on earth. The more attached you are to carryover emotional problems-- as well as to places and/or persons left behind on earth-- the slower will be your progress toward higher, freer, lighter levels of the afterlife realm. On the other hand, the more you can let go, forgive yourself, accept help from available spirit guides and other helpers -- and work through long-standing emotional patterns -- the sooner you

will progress to more comfortable and pleasant environments. “On earth, as it is in heaven.”

Indefinite afterlife vs. reincarnation

Older Western sources about the afterlife were dismissive of the idea of reincarnation up until the 20th Century. Mostly aligned with Christianity, they spoke of an indefinite afterlife that could stretch out for eternity. Since the mid-nineteen-fifties, Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of reincarnation have become increasingly popular in Western metaphysics, though different sources give different accounts. There are disagreements on *what* it is that actually carries the imprint of the soul from one lifetime to the next. It may include much of the

personality of the previously deceased individual or, in some accounts, the personality may be stripped down to some kind of essential spiritual core that persists through successive lifetimes. On the other hand, the notion of an “oversoul” and certain Buddhist approaches maintain that, after death, the soul is completely reintegrated into some kind of unified entity (oversoul) which then creates a new “offshoot” to create the next lifetime. With this kind of model, the continuity of single individual soul across many lifetimes is less clear. However, if you give up the idea of continuity of one and the same soul across lifetimes, it is harder to explain how that soul works out its karma or meets soul mates from one lifetime to the next. The idea of

some kind of continuity or retained individuality through all our successive lifetimes is, of course, more appealing to our ego. But if there is anything that is retained, it is certainly not our ego or superficial self-image.

Most accounts agree that a human soul reincarnates to another human form and cannot go back to being an animal or a plant. A majority of accounts also speak of many lifetimes involved in reincarnation, but the number can vary from tens of lives to hundreds.

Timing of Reincarnation

Reincarnation usually occurs after the life review and after the soul has had some time to reflect on successes and failings of the previous

lifetime. There is disagreement on how long this time period may be. Its extent, ranging from a few days to thousands of years, depends upon the needs and inclinations of the soul as well as the particular source of information regarding the “life- between-life” period. The relativity of time suggests that our perception of the passage of time on earth probably doesn’t match the perception of time passed on “the other side.”

The timing of the next reincarnation may be entirely up to the soul or may be worked out between the soul and its guides who are there to assist the soul in learning its lessons and working out its karma. There are some indications that a soul who dies suddenly due to

an accident may reincarnate quickly. One might like to imagine that more advanced souls have more discretion in choosing when they can return to earth, while less advanced souls carrying heavier karma will be exhorted, if not required, to return sooner. In the literature there is a long list of other factors that can have an influence on how long it takes a soul to reincarnate. A few accounts even mention reincarnation as an option rather than a requirement. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be consistent or definitive information across multiple sources on the inevitability or timing of reincarnation.

Planning Out the Next Lifetime

Another topic commonly discussed in the metaphysical literature is how each of our souls plans out significant details of its forthcoming lifetime prior to being born in a body. This is done while we're in spirit form together with special guides or angels who are assigned to us. The broad outlines of what needs to be learned, what is likely to happen, and, very important, with whom one is to be involved, are all prearranged by the soul, often with the assistance of its guides. Beyond the broad outline or "soul plan," as it is often called, the details of the forthcoming life are left to the soul's free will in conjunction with a certain degree of "random play" in overt circumstances

on earth. Not everything is predetermined down to the minutest detail.

Such things as: 1) the parents to whom we are born, 2) the place where we are born, and 3) the major people with whom we will be involved during our life are all selected in advance. Even more telling is that the major adversities in our lives-- things like serious illness, drug addiction, having to raise a handicapped child, death and divorce from loved ones, or accidents—are all usually selected in advance. One reason for this is that the soul can learn positive traits like compassion, patience, and courage more fully by having to weather adversities which persist over time.

Another reason, not necessarily exclusive of the first, is the balancing of karma. It is not that karma is a punishment for misdeeds in a former life. It is often rather a reciprocity or “role switch.” If we were a caretaker to someone who is ill in one life, we may switch roles from being caretaker to patient (and vice versa for the other person) in a subsequent lifetime. Role reversals occur over subsequent lifetimes between parents and children, brothers and sisters, those who leave and those who are left in a significant relationship, and among a variety of possible role relationships. It is “playing out both sides of the role relationship” that is needed for each soul to balance its karma. Further information and case studies about how life’s adversities

are planned in advance of an incarnation can be found in the book *Your Soul's Plan*, by Robert Schwartz (Schwartz, 2009).

Re-Entering the Next Body

Once again, there is not a lot of information on how the soul re- enters a new body or *the timing of such an event* (i.e., at conception, some stage of fetal development, or birth). The most interesting account the author has read on this subject is in a book published in 1984 by Helen Wambach, entitled *Life Before Life* (Wambach, 1981). The book is currently out of print and hard to find. According to Wambach, the soul joins with the developing fetus rather early in fetal development, but not at the very beginning.

If we could truly establish when this joining happens—or some time frame in which it happens -- it would certainly affect at least some people's opinions on the proper time for doing abortions (i.e., prior to vs. after the soul joins with the developing embryo or fetus).

Conclusion

The basic theme of this essay is that life continues after death. After we die, we spend a certain amount of time as a discarnate spirit going through a number of evolutionary stages, including at least the following: 1) first recognizing that we are dead, 2) passing through various vibratory levels or planes, 3) reunion with already deceased loved ones and

friends, 4) rest and recovery from the “shock” of having died, 5) life review and evaluation, and 6) participating in some type of spiritual work. At this point we may continue to evolve in discarnate form or eventually return to earth for another physical lifetime.

Reincarnation assumes a return to earth, but reincarnation theories differ as to whether the return is voluntary or mandatory. Typically, if there is unfinished business, i.e., “karma to be worked out,” a soul is required to return to the physical earth to complete learning experiences in certain situations and with certain people.

How many cycles of reincarnation are necessary

for a soul again varies across different accounts, ranging from a few to thousands in number.

From a strictly spiritual standpoint, both life on earth and in the afterlife are all about spiritual growth—the soul mastering challenges and lessons for the purpose of its ongoing evolution.

Ultimately the soul, after completing its full evolution, returns to live in harmony with the Spiritual Source from whence it long ago departed. The whole journey, including periods of backsliding, stagnation, and gradual or rapid progress, is the great “cosmic adventure” of the soul, occurring over eons of time. Whether the *original departure* of the soul from Source was voluntary (as stated in the Bible) or an inevitable

part of Source working out all of its potentials (as stated in a number of metaphysical sources) is an open question.

In the meantime, it seems wise to pay heed to the messages we receive from guides and loved ones on the other side of this world. We can accept responsibility for our actions and be aware of the potential consequences of what we do for others. We can strive to overcome patterns of petty selfishness and fear, remembering the ultimate importance of love and compassion for others and for ourselves.

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