

Reincarnation. Fact or Fable? Arthur and Joyce Berger.

Chapter 8

by Susan Blackmore:

**Beyond The Self: the Escape from Reincarnation in Buddhism and
Psychology**

PP 117 to 129

Blackmore, S. (1991) Chapter 8: *Beyond The Self: the Escape from Reincarnation in Buddhism and Psychology* . pp 117 to 129, in Berger, A.S., 1991. Reincarnation: fact or fable? Aquarian Press. ISBN-13 : 978-1855381117

8.

Beyond the Self: the Escape from Reincarnation in Buddhism and Psychology

Susan Blackmore

Reincarnation is an extremely appealing concept but, in its most common form, is simply nonsense. This does not mean, however, that all forms of the idea are nonsense, or that there is nothing to the notion of stepping off the wheel of death and rebirth. In analysing five ways of looking at reincarnation, I shall reject the idea of the rebirth of a persistent self and offer some alternative interpretations.

Reincarnation of a persistent self

This concept can take at least two popular forms: the ideas based on Hinduism and the increasingly popular modern Western belief. A recent definition of reincarnation is 'the belief that each individual possesses an element, independent of his physical being, which after his death can be reborn into another body'.¹ In Hinduism this is related to the idea of karma: that good and evil deeds have later consequences, that each individual is born with a pre-existing karma and, unless one escapes from the round of death and rebirth (samsara), one will take one's karma on after death into a new life. This implies being reborn into more or less desirable lives; even into that of an animal.

The concepts of karma and samsara appear also in Buddhism but in a less concrete form. Popular Western beliefs in reincarnation, seemingly closer to the Hindu beliefs, are as varied as the many interpretations within Eastern religions.

All, however, depend upon the same idea of a persistent self that enters into one life and carries on into other lives. The evidence for reincarnation, consisting of recall of previous lives, hypnotic regression to past lives and physical signs carried over from previous lives, is taken to be, also, evidence for this continuing self.

The appeal of such an idea is obvious. Firstly, it seems to satisfy our craving to exist; to be something. It shows that we are persistent individuals; each with a soul or atman with a history and a future. Secondly, it seems, at least superficially, to stave off the fear of death. If you are good in this life you can expect an even better life next time round. Thirdly, it appears to make sense of human suffering. Instead of the bewildering unfairness of what happens to people, their suffering can be blamed on their own actions in past lives (incidentally, this belief can become the basis for blame, retribution or inertia in the face of human suffering and it has been a powerful prop to the Indian caste system). Fourthly, it can appear to account for otherwise inexplicable fears, neuroses or personality characteristics. Popular (and lucrative) modern therapies are based on recalling traumas from past lives. It should be noted that, although these might work well as therapy, there need not be any truth in the idea on which they are based.

That basic idea does not make sense — firstly from the point of view of cognitive psychology (based on theories tested by experiment) and, secondly, from the point of view of Buddhism (based on analysis and experience).

Psychology and the idea of a persistent self

What is a self? You cannot look inside a person's body or brain and find something there called a 'self'; it would not make sense to say 'the self is located in the right temporal lobe' or 'The self is in the corpus collosum 2cm from the left hemisphere.' This would be a category mistake; mistaking the self for a concrete or separable thing is, indeed, what some dualists do. Popper and Eccles² entitle their book *The Self and its Brain* but this dualist attitude is far from the approach of modern cognitive psychology.

The self is seen as a construction, a mental model that develops and changes throughout life. Cognitive psychologists look on the brain as an information processing system constructing models of the world. They are not models in the

sense of being physical copies of an object, rather they are mental (or informational) constructs that describe the world. So, in perception our perceptual systems construct models of what we see and hear, building up a 'picture' of what is 'out there'. In no sense can this 'picture' be located within the brain; it is more a way of looking at the processes taking place. By analogy you can think of a robot that needs to have programmed into it a map of the factory it works in. Otherwise it couldn't move around or grasp things. The programmer puts the information in but the map itself is not located in a specific place.

The models are not necessarily of anything that exists, so one can imagine a persistent self as it does not need to be seen as a separate entity for it to be modelled or represented by brain processes. It is the same with the concept of self, which is a dynamic and very complex mental model with many aspects. There is the body image; a representation of our arms and legs and all the other parts we need to represent in order to function appropriately. Then there is the self-image. We know our names and we attribute personality characteristics to ourselves. We know who we are by all the social and linguistic processes by which people develop ideas about themselves and each other. As we grow throughout our lives we have an ever-changing concept of who we are.

This approach makes it possible for psychologists to study the development of the self, the ways in which it is adaptive or pathological, the life events that affect it and how people can be helped to have positive and stable images of self. It is quite clear, nevertheless, that the self is not a thing; it has no height, weight or location and cannot be found. It is a process in flux and dependent upon a functioning brain. Although the idea of Sue Blackmore will go on after the death of her body, the flowing process of her brain-construction of a self will stop when her brain stops. Without the information in memory and the processing capacity of that brain there can be no more construction of self. There is no self, only a process of self-construction.

From this point of view, then, the idea of reincarnation of the self makes no sense at all. It is a category mistake, an entire misunderstanding of the nature of the self.

Buddhism and the idea of a persistent self

One of the central doctrines of Buddhism is anatta or 'no-self'.

Hinduism has atman, and Christianity the soul. In these and many other religions we are all supposed to be (or have) this persistent, unchanging, absolute entity — it is the thinker of thoughts, the feeler of sensations and initiator of actions; it earns rewards and deserves punishments. One of the Buddha's great insights, however, (and one that provided the basis for long doctrinal clashes with Hinduism) was that there is no such self.

In Buddhism, there is no unchanging self but only an idea of self. Furthermore, this idea of self is the root of all suffering and ignorance. It is because we each crave to be a self that our ideas, of mine and yours, selfish desires, attachments, and hatred arise. The idea of a persistent self is the root of ignorance. If only we could see the emptiness of the concept of self these things would disappear.

The doctrine of no-self is not easy to understand. It is not equivalent to saying, 'I have no self' for that, too, implies a separate being. It means that there is no permanent unchanging self of the sort we like to imagine. The Buddha himself was extremely logical and analytical and the idea of no-self can be approached in this way, as well as by experience and direct insight. According to Buddhism everything is composed of the five aggregates. By looking into that world the Buddha argued that no self can be found there, only processes made up of the aggregates. There can be no self outside everything else, for everything is interdependent and conditioned.

In the *Alagaddupama-sutta*, the Buddha says to the monks, 'When neither self nor anything pertaining to self can truly and really be found, the speculative view, "The universe is that atman; I shall be that after death, permanent, abiding, everlasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity" — is it not wholly and completely foolish?' He certainly made himself clear!

He also realized how hard it is to accept no-self. When a monk asked him, 'Is there a case where one is tormented when something permanent within oneself is not found?' the Buddha answered that of course there is and explained that a man hearing of the doctrine might think, 'I will be annihilated, I will be destroyed, I will be no more'. Then the man 'mourns, worries himself, laments, weeps, beating his breast, and

becomes bewildered.³ The point, of course, is not that you will be destroyed but that there was never anything to destroy. Acceptance of this means no fear of dying because there was never any self to die.

The idea may be hard to accept, but it is much more honest and has more insight than to avoid the fear of death by supposing that a persistent self goes on for ever, reincarnated through many lives.

In logical fashion the Buddha also tells his monks that they should accept a soul-theory if its acceptance does not involve grief and suffering. 'But, do you see . . . such a soul-theory in the acceptance of which there would not arise grief, lamentation, suffering, distress and tribulation?' he asked. Thus, by analysis and by direct personal insight, the Buddha saw the emptiness of self and its implications for living. In Buddhism there can be no reincarnation of a persistent self, for the idea of a persistent self is absolutely rejected. The doctrine of reincarnation in Buddhism, therefore, must mean something quite different.

Both these approaches, then, demolish the idea of reincarnation of the self. If it were to be resurrected these powerful arguments from two entirely disparate cultures would have to be addressed.

Reincarnation in parts

If the idea of a persistent self is rejected, perhaps there is something else that is reincarnated; something that could satisfy our desire to carry on, and make sense of the evidence for reincarnation. Some possible candidates are personality, memory, consciousness, and the soul. I think there are good reasons for rejecting them all.

Personality The idea of personality, like that of the self, is easily mistaken for something concrete. In the early days of psychical research and, indeed, in all the so-called 'evidence for survival' one comes across the notion of survival of the personality.⁴ It was supposed to be the thing that makes each of us unique. In a sense it is, but the personality is a unique way of behaving, speaking or acting, in different circumstances. When we speak popularly of someone's personality we mean the kind of person he or she is. When the psychologists speak

of an extrovert, introvert or neurotic personality they refer to types of people as revealed by questionnaires and other behavioural measures. These are all entirely dependent upon there being a body that acts, writes and speaks. Behind the behaviour of that body we may invent the idea of a persistent personality but, without that body, it could not be expressed; thus, it is a vacuous notion.

Presumably, when we speak about the reincarnation of personality, we mean the expression of the same personality in a different body at a later time. This requires a change in the meaning of personality so that it comes to refer to some persistent or transferable thing; I cannot imagine what kind of thing it would be.

Even if my personality in some sense could be expressed in a person living in the early twenty-first century, I cannot see in what sense it would be a reincarnation of me. That person would not necessarily remember anything of me. There would be no continuity of consciousness and nothing else to link us except a certain similarity. 'Reincarnation by similarity' will be discussed later; for the moment, I reject the idea of reincarnation of the personality.

Memory Central to my concept of self is memory. It is memory that enables this brain to keep on constructing a model of myself and it is memory that gives it continuity and distinguishes my actions from someone else's. It is tempting to think that if my memories went on then so would 'I'. Is it feasible to suppose the reincarnation of memories?

Memory depends upon information stored in the brain. In recent years the mechanism of this storage has become much clearer. Brains do not store information as bits in specified memory locations (like most computers); brains consist of multiple neural networks. Incoming information changes the strengths of connections in these networks so that patterns of activity can be more or less reconstructed later. From this aspect, memories must die with the brain's death.

Years ago, when the physiological basis of memory was less well understood (and it is far from perfectly understood now), I experimented with theories of external memory storage — perhaps, memory was 'out there' in some sort of Akashic record, accessible by ESP. For many reasons I eventually rejected this idea.⁵ If memories are to be reincarnated, then a

theory must be developed that is not only compatible with what we know of brain storage mechanisms, but that also adds an extra something that could survive their death. There would need to be strong justifications for doing this and many problems to solve.

As with personality, supposing that my memories could be reincarnated in a person living in the next century who remembered everything about me, that person would find it rather hard to live his/her own life and could not have anything approaching a normal childhood and development. If only parts of me were remembered (which is far more likely and compatible with the stories of reincarnation), then there would be no sense in which this was really 'I'.

Consciousness For many people it is the continuity of consciousness that is the crux of either survival after death or of reincarnation. Only if 'my' consciousness went on could I feel that 'I' had been reincarnated. This is even more problematic than the previous 'candidates' for we do not have any idea what consciousness is.^{6,8} Although most psychologists and physiologists assume that it is dependent upon brain function, there are many competing theories. The most usual ones relate consciousness to different kinds of cognitive activity, in particular to the sorts of representations or mental models being used.

When I waken in the morning what makes this consciousness seem to be mine? To me it is the continuity provided by the familiar body, familiar place and setting and the memories that connect this morning to last night. Without all of this there is no sense in which 'I' would be conscious. Consciousness is as much an ever-changing process as self. So the appearance of a bit of consciousness somewhere else, some time after my death, would not make sense of reincarnation.

The soul It may be flippant to suggest that the idea of a soul was invented only to fill the gap when all other ideas had patently failed but, if the soul is to be reincarnated, we need to know what it is; otherwise this idea, also, becomes totally vacuous. It is most commonly allied with the self, but we have discussed the reasons for rejecting that notion. If the idea of reincarnation of the soul is to make any sense, we must do more than simply imagine that there is some deep and meaningful entity underlying our existence.

There is no reincarnation

Given the previous arguments, it might seem logical to dismiss the idea of reincarnation altogether but these arguments do not exhaust the possibilities. Indeed, the Buddhist ideas already outlined leave us hanging. It is said to be possible to step off the wheel of death and rebirth — yet, there is no self to step. What can this mean? The following two explanations are not to be taken as Buddhist doctrine. They are my own speculations that are loosely based on Buddhist teaching.

Moment-to-moment rebirth

In the popular interpretation of reincarnation, the wheel of rebirth is taken to be a series of lives, karma is the effects of actions in past lives and release from rebirth is not being reborn into another life. These three ideas can be seen, alternatively, as applicable right now to the way we live.

Psychology and the endless construction of a self

The self, like the external world we perceive, is a mental construct. What gives it continuity is that a similar model of self keeps on being built moment by moment. In exceptional cases, such as multiple personality, this is not so. For most people, too, there are times when they seem to be 'not quite themselves' and in those times a somewhat different model of self is being constructed. In sleep it is different yet again. Despite such variations we go on believing that there is 'really' a self. To this imaginary self we attribute actions, decisions and responsibilities; this self seems to be the subject of blame, suffering, happiness or wanting. Perhaps it is possible for the system to stop the constant reconstruction moment-by-moment of a model of self and to stop the process of attributing actions to the self.

What would it be like if the brain constructed no model of self? Imagining this would, I think, be tantamount to living it, to being liberated. There are some states in which this happens, for example in some kinds of mystical experience, in some near-death experiences (which can increase belief in reincarnation),⁹ and in meditation.¹⁰ The sense of release and joy is ineffable; there is clear consciousness without any self being conscious.

Presumably, it would mean a human being acting, speaking or working but without the false belief that those actions were driven by a self. Without such a self there could be no blame or praise, no results of the actions of the self. The person would be simply part of the flowing universe of organisms, acting according to the way his/her physiology and chemistry dictated. Perhaps such a terrifying prospect explains why most of us are not free of a self.

Buddhism and the momentary self

We have seen that, according to the Buddha, there is no permanent, unchanging substance or being that passes from one moment to the next. Therefore, as Rahula³ says, 'quite obviously, nothing permanent or unchanging can pass or transmigrate from one life to the next. It is a series that continues unbroken, but changes every moment. The difference between death and birth is only a thought-moment: the last thought-moment in this life conditions the first thought-moment in the so-called next life which, in fact, is continuity of the same series. During this life itself, also, one thought-moment conditions the next thought-moment. So from the Buddhist point of view, the question of life after death is not a great mystery, and a Buddhist is never worried about this problem.' As Hayward¹¹ says, 'the Buddhist is not especially excited by the idea of "reincarnation"'.

To understand this attitude we should consider the Buddhist doctrine of contingent origination or dependent co-origination, which is, perhaps, a theory of causation. It admits of nothing uncaused or miraculous but also does not divide things into causes and effects. Rather, the whole situation at one moment leads into the whole situation at the next as an unbroken, flowing whole. It is only we, with our conceptual approach to everything, who divide continuity into things and events.

There is a saying that 'when the opposites arise, the Buddha mind is lost'. The most obvious pair of opposites is self and other. While we see things in a false way, we see a separate self perceiving a world and we want to hang on to that self and acquire things for its survival. When we see clearly, we see that there is no self, nothing but the unbroken whole to continue and so there is freedom from the desire for rebirth. In this way the cycle of death and rebirth is broken.

It seems to me that, from either of these perspectives, we can make sense of the idea of stepping off the wheel of death and rebirth, and of freedom from karma, without invoking any mysterious entities that have to be reincarnated.

Reincarnation as the illusion of continuity

I would like to consider one last idea. If we accept that selves are continuously recreated moment by moment, then we should ask what gives us a sense of continuity. I think it is the similarity of the constructed self from one moment to the next. This can be seen from the psychological point of view — the same brain goes on constructing similar models of self on the basis of the information available; or, from the Buddhist point of view — the conditions keep on giving rise to the clinging to self. From either aspect this continuity is an illusion.

This suggests the possibility of yet another way of looking at reincarnation that is speculative rather than firmly based on any accepted religious ideas. If there is continuity because 'I' am similar to my previous selves (of a moment or a day before), then there is apparent continuity in whatever way 'I' resemble any other self model or other creature. Thus, wherever similar selves arise there is a kind of reincarnation. Wherever arise greed, longing, desire, hate, fear or pleasure there is reincarnation of those characteristics. In the complete letting-go of self, all those things cease. Perhaps this is another interpretation of stepping off the wheel of death and rebirth. Perhaps compassion for all arises when there is no more individual self and the similarity is complete rather than piecemeal. We return to the idea of dependent co-origination. Without the false idea of a separate self, there is no reincarnation.

The Evidence

What then of the evidence for reincarnation and what can it tell us? At face value it suggests that some children and some adults under hypnosis display knowledge of a certain amount of information that seems to come from another person's life.¹²⁻¹⁵ This appears to be compatible with, and evidence for the first (persistent self) or the second (reincarnation of parts) theory. None of the other theories outlined would predict such evidence. I have argued that the first two theories do not make sense. How then can one interpret the evidence?

There are at least three approaches. Firstly, the evidence can be criticised on many grounds and some have chosen to dismiss it altogether. For example, when children in Asia apparently recall past lives there are problems with Western researchers having to work through interpreters, and there is an incentive for the children to attract the interest of Western visitors as well as to escape a poor life by claiming to belong to a richer family. There are certainly cases of deception or self-deception.¹⁶ Such issues have been well addressed, particularly by Pasricha and Stevenson,¹⁷ Stevenson and Chadha,¹⁸ and Wilson.¹⁹

As far as cases of hypnotic regression to past lives are concerned there is much evidence to suggest that they are fabrications. Studies of hypnotic regression within this life show that adults consistently over-estimate the abilities of children at any given age when they are 'regressed' to that age. This does not imply that they are being deliberately misleading but, rather, are throwing themselves into a role constructed from the information available. There are many well-known cases in which the source of the information needed to construct a past life has been identified.¹⁹ A good example comes from the regressions of a Finnish psychiatrist, Reima Kampman.¹⁹ By regressing subjects within this life and asking them to recall the first time they heard of their supposed past life, in many cases he has been able to find the exact book, television programme, or picture, from which all necessary information came.

Perhaps most important from this perspective, is to see that, if the idea of reincarnation of a persistent self makes no sense, then this kind of evidence has to be interpreted in some other way. Dismissing it is one possibility but perhaps that would not do justice to it.

An alternative view is that the evidence is not actually evidence for past lives but is, nevertheless, evidence for something paranormal. However, given that we know little or nothing about paranormal phenomena and have no adequate theory of how ESP or PK function, this approach is not very helpful.

Finally, if neither the normal nor paranormal interpretations seem acceptable, then one may agree with Stevenson and others who argue that it is evidence for the reincarnation of some aspect of the person. But what aspect? In spite of all the

problems, does one opt for a self or soul theory, or dismiss that and accept reincarnation of just memories, or just personality or something else?

Personally, I conclude that the idea of reincarnation of a separate self makes no sense and, therefore, whatever this evidence suggests, it is not reincarnation. I hope that current research will lead eventually to some clearer idea of what it is.

This raises, for me, an interesting question. Should we keep looking for evidence; should we think clearly and logically and apply reasoning to the problem; should we sit and meditate and allow experience to provide wisdom? Can we combine all three approaches?

It is said that there are many paths. Although the intellectual path is often frowned on in contemporary spiritual disciplines, it is clear enough in Buddhism. My hope is that psychology, by understanding the constructed nature of self, can provide another intellectual path to wisdom — one that leads to freedom from all those desires that keep us clinging to the false idea of personal reincarnation.

References

- 1 R. Cavendish, *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained* (Arkana, 1989).
- 2 K.R. Popper and J.C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain* (Springer International, 1977).
- 3 W. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Gordon Fraser, 1959, pp. 56-9).
- 4 Frederic W.H. Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1903).
- 5 Susan J. Blackmore, *The Adventures of a Parapsychologist* (Prometheus, 1986a).
- 6 —, 'Consciousness: Science Tackles the Self', *New Scientist*, (April, 1989), 38-41.
- 7 C. Blakemore and S. Greenfield, *Mindwaves* (Blackwell, 1987).
- 8 D.A. Oakley, *Brain and Mind* (Methuen, 1985).
- 9 Kenneth Ring, *Heading Toward Omega* (William Morrow, 1984).
- 10 Susan J. Blackmore, 'Who Am I? Changing Models of Reality in Meditation', in G. Claxton, ed., *Beyond Therapy* (Wisdom, 1986b).

- 11 J. Hayward, *Shifting Worlds, Changing Minds* (Shambhala, 1987, p. 254).
- 12 Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (University Press of Virginia, 1974).
- 13 —, *Children Who Remember Previous Lives* (University Press of Virginia, 1987).
- 14 Helen Wambach, *Life Before Life* (Bantam, 1979).
- 15 J. Iverson, *More Lives Than One?* (Pan, 1977).
- 16 Ian Stevenson, Satwant Pasricha and Godwin Samararatne, 'Deception and Self-deception in Cases of the Reincarnation Type: Seven Illustrative Cases in Asia', *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 82 (1988), 1-31.
- 17 Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson, 'Indian Cases of the Reincarnation Type Two Generations Apart', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 54 (1987), 239-246.
- 18 Ian Stevenson and N.K. Chadha, 'Can Children Be Stopped from Speaking about Previous Lives?', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 56 (1990), 82-90.
- 19 Ian Wilson, *Mind out of Time?* (Gollancz, 1981).