

IS THERE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR REINCARNATION?

By Steven Richheimer, Ph.D.

Throughout human history, even among diverse cultures, there has been an almost universal belief in some form of afterlife. Some of the earliest examples of this are from archeological evidence of Stone Age burial rituals. Implicit in such burial and funeral practices is the assumption that death is not the end, but it marks a transition. Other examples are those of native peoples and ancient civilizations such as the Greeks and Egyptians. Moreover, almost all the folk religions of yore and today's major religions proclaim that our existence does not end with death.

The question advanced here is whether the scientific method can provide evidence for the continuation of consciousness or life after death and for reincarnation in particular. I believe the answer is a resounding yes. For anyone willing to look at the evidence with an open mind will discover that the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that a part of our being (we might call it our unit mind) continues following death of the body.

The strongest scientific evidence for survival of our existence following death of the body comes from children and adults that have detailed and verifiable memories of their past lives. Additional evidence comes from people that display exceptional talents and genius that defy rationality. Finally there is strong evidence for the continuation of consciousness after the cessation of brain activity from people's near-death and out-of-body experiences in which they are able to accurately describe events that took place when their brain was shut down.

Memories of past lives imply reincarnation, which is simply the transmigration of an individual's unit mind from one body to a new body following death. It is a fundamental tenet of all the Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.). However, it was also a belief of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Vikings, Celts of Great Britain, folk religions of Africa, Australia, East Asia, and Siberia, shamanism of South America, and the indigenous Oceanic peoples. In addition, Native Americans have a long history of belief in reincarnation, and today the Iñupiat people of northwest Alaska, the Aleuts of the Aleutian Islands, and the Tlingit Indians of Canada maintain this belief. In addition, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have deep ties to this doctrine; and to this day, the Kabbalist and Hasidic sects of Judaism and the Sufi, Ismaili, and Druze sects of Islam accept and teach the doctrine.

Children Who Remember Their Previous Life

Undoubtedly, the best evidence confirming reincarnation is the personal accounts of children who provide detailed and factually accurate descriptions of their previous life. Normally such children spontaneously start talking to their parents at an early age (2-5) about their previous life. If the child offers enough details, then the person they describe can be identified and their life story checked against the facts provided by the child.

Dr. Ian Stevenson was a pioneer in the study of children's past life memories. He founded the University of Virginia School of Medicine's Division of Perceptual Studies, and took a rigorous scientific approach to

researching the phenomenon of children's memories of past lives. Stevenson traveled extensively over a period of forty years, investigating three thousand cases of children around the world who related veridical memories of living in another body before this one. For anyone who takes the time to study his work carefully, there is no explanation but reincarnation for the knowledge these young children have of a deceased person.

Stevenson's first book on the subject was *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.¹ Half the cases were of children living in India and Sri Lanka where reincarnation is culturally accepted as fact, while the other ten cases were from Brazil, Lebanon, and from the Tlingit Indians of the southeastern coast of Alaska. Most of the cases he studied were of a small child of two to four years of age who began talking to their parents or siblings of a life they led in another time and place. Most of these children felt a considerable pull toward the locale and events of their previous life. They frequently pestered their parents to let them return to the community where they felt they formerly lived. If the child made enough specific statements about their previous life, Stevenson would verify that their memories accurately recalled details from the life of a deceased person that the child had identified.

In a second book entitled *Children Who Remember Previous Lives: A Question of Reincarnation*,² Stevenson described fourteen cases typical of children who remembered previous lives. He detailed how such studies were conducted, cultural influences, and how reincarnation might explain many of the unusual abilities, inclinations, behaviors, and abnormalities in children that have no known cause.

No doubt, Stevenson's greatest contribution to research on reincarnation **was (is)** his two-volume, 2268-page publication *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects*.³ The study contains 225 case reports of children who remembered previous lives and who had physical abnormalities that matched those of persons described by the child. Many of his subjects had unusual birthmarks or birth defects, such as finger deformities, underdeveloped ears, or being born without a foot. There were also hypopigmented birthmarks and port-wine stains that corresponded to a wound (often fatal) that the deceased person suffered, whose life the child recalled. These cases were normally confirmed by autopsy findings and photos.

Stevenson was an expert on psychosomatic medicine and suspected that strong emotions like a traumatic death may be related to a child's retention of past-life memories. Many of the children he studied claimed that they had met a violent end in their previous life and sometimes the child's fears and abnormal behavior could be linked to the way they died. For example, a girl who claimed to have drowned in her previous life might have a fear of water, while a boy who died from a fall from a height might display a fear of heights. He came to believe that neither environment nor heredity could account for certain fears, illnesses, and special abilities, and that some form of personality or memory transfer provided an explanation for these. Stevenson came to believe that almost everybody has experienced past lives, but only a small percentage of children retain any memories of their previous life.

Another contributor in such research is Jim B. Tucker, MD who took over the leadership of the Virginia School of Medicine's Division of Perceptual Studies following the death of Ian Stevenson in 2007. Tucker has authored two books on children's memories of previous lives: *Life Before Life*,⁴ and *Return to Life*.⁵ Like his mentor, his research has primarily been of children that remember their previous life and provided enough details that the person the child described could be identified.

One such case Tucker detailed in his book *Return to Life* gained national attention when it was highlighted on the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt on March 20, 2015.⁶ It was the case of a boy named Ryan Hammons who lived in Oklahoma. At the age of four, Ryan began describing his vivid dreams of his

earlier life as a bit actor and Hollywood agent. Ryan provided many details of his previous life, such as being married five times, having one daughter, two sisters, meeting actor Rita Hayworth, taking trips to Paris, dancing on Broadway, and living on a street with the name rock in it. His mother said his stories were detailed and extensive, unlike something a child would make up. One day, when going through some old Hollywood picture books, Ryan immediately identified himself in a picture. However, the picture did not name the actor, and Ryan's mother could not find any more information about the man.

After hearing of the work of Jim Tucker, she approached him for help in identifying the man in the picture. After considerable research, Tucker was able to identify the man as Marty Martyn and confirm that he had been a bit actor turned Hollywood agent. Numerous details about Martyn's life that the boy had provided checked out. For example, Martyn had danced on Broadway, traveled to Paris, worked with Rita Hayworth, been married five times, had two sisters, one daughter, and lived on Roxbury Drive. Indeed most of the details about Martyn's life and professional career as a Hollywood agent (mainly supplied by his daughter) checked out with the facts supplied by Ryan. Tucker was able to confirm fifty-five details provided by Ryan that accurately described Martyn's life.

To date researchers at the University of Virginia Medical School's Division of Perceptual Studies have compiled over 2500 reports of children from around the world who claim to remember their past lives. The data obtained by these researchers provide convincing evidence for reincarnation. They provide solid evidence that mind and consciousness survive death.

There are numerous accounts of adults remembering previous lives—most often, under what is termed “regression hypnosis.” Past-life regression is a technique that uses hypnosis to recover what practitioners believe are memories of past lives. Past-life regression is typically undertaken in pursuit of a psychotherapeutic cure—particularly of irrational fears (phobias). Although remembrance of past lives may occur spontaneously in some adults, it is much more common when undergoing hypnotic regression. As it turns out, almost anybody who can be deeply hypnotized can be regressed by a hypnotist and relate their experiences of past lives. The experiences are most often visual and take on a life of their own without intercession by the therapist. Subjects identify strongly with a particular individual and feel the emotions of that person during the regression. Often these feelings mirror problems faced by the subject in their current life. Finally, most of the subjects feel like a weight has been lifted from their mind after they relive a particularly traumatic experience from a previous life.

Dr. Raymond Moody has been a prominent researcher of past-life regressions. He began as a confirmed skeptic with regard to reincarnation. But as he began to investigate both psychologically healthy patients and those with phobias who under deep hypnosis suddenly began describing in vivid detail episodes from other historical periods they could not possibly have known, Moody's interest in the meaning of these visions intensified. He found that many of his patients were cured of their phobias when they relived a traumatic event from a previous lifetime.⁷ Questioning what his patients were describing, he decided to undertake his own journey into the mysterious realm of past-life experiences. He performed self-hypnosis and became aware of nine of his former lives.

Another researcher into past-life regressions is Dr. Brian Weiss. He was a traditional psychiatrist who discovered that some of his patients recovered from chronic neuroses following past-life regressions in which they described events related to their current fears and anxieties. Initially he was a skeptic about reincarnation, but his skepticism was gradually eroded when he was able to confirm elements of his patient's stories through public records and was able to cure their neuroses. Today Weiss is convinced that elements

of human personality survive death and that many phobias and ailments are rooted in past-life experiences that when relived by the patients have a curative effect.⁸

Currently one of the best-known practitioners of past-life regressions is Carol Bowman. She has done thousands of past-life regressions in her practice. She was first introduced to past-life regression in 1987 while living in Asheville, North Carolina. She underwent a regression to see if she could identify the cause of her chronic lung problems. In just one session, she experienced two lifetimes in which she had died due to afflictions of the lungs—dying of consumption in the nineteenth century and then in the gas chambers of World War II. That one session changed the course of her illness and convinced her that we really do live more than once. Bowman has written two books on reincarnation. In her first book, *Children's Past Lives*, she revealed overwhelming evidence of past-life memories in children; and showed how young children remember their past lives—spontaneously and naturally. Bowman explained that such memories are far more common than most people realize.⁹ In her second book, *Return from Heaven*, she describes her research into cases of reincarnation within the same family.¹⁰ She documents the emotions and relief that families experience when they discover that a deceased family member has returned in a new body as a child in the family.

Bowman currently oversees a popular website called the Reincarnation Forum, where people can post their reincarnation and past-life experiences. The Reincarnation Forum currently has over a hundred thousand posts.¹¹

Other Evidence Suggestive of Reincarnation

A considerable body of evidence that comes from people's anecdotal descriptions of near-death and out-of-body experiences demonstrate the continuation of consciousness after the cessation of brain activity. People consistently describe having fully functioning, lucid consciousness, and self-awareness while witnessing their lifeless body from above. This could occur only if the mind and consciousness can function independently of the brain/body.

Xenoglossy is the ability to speak or write a language without having learned it. Stevenson reported a handful of cases of xenoglossy, including two where subjects under hypnosis allegedly conversed with people speaking a foreign language they did not know.

The medical literature has reports of people with dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality disorder) where one of the personalities can speak a foreign language fluently that they had not previously studied. One such case was that of an Indian woman named Uttara who grew up in Nagpur, India speaking the Marathi language. She had an unremarkable life as a teacher at the local college until at the age of thirty-two she began to undergo personality changes and at regular intervals would take on a second personality. In this dissociated personality, she was Sharada, a Bengali woman that lived in the 1800s. When the Sharada personality took over, Uttara could speak fluent Bengali, much as it would have been spoken in the early nineteenth century, yet Uttara had only a cursory knowledge of Bengali before she began suffering from the disorder.¹²

Déjà vu is French for “already seen.” It is the experience or feeling that one has lived through the present situation before, or the feeling of familiarity with a place that they have never visited. Reincarnation is an explanation for the déjà vu experiences of some people. They may know their way around a locality that they are visiting for the first time. The whole place, or at least a significant part of it, may seem familiar to them.

Children who develop unusual interests, extraordinary skills, abilities, or genius—often in contrast to expectations of their family—might be attributed to reincarnation. Stevenson reported on a number of such cases. A young Bengali girl began to produce elaborate songs and dances without prior training; a young Indian boy started playing the classical drums or tablas with great skill; and another child displayed unusual aptitude working with marine engines.¹³

Scientists cannot currently explain why some children seem to be born with an exceptional knowledge, talent, ability, or interest when there is nothing in their nurturing or genes to explain it. If we are solely a product of our genes and upbringing—that is the materialist model—then where do these exceptional abilities come from? A more reasonable hypothesis is that the body is only temporary but the unit mind is permanent, and it can carry knowledge, abilities, and inclinations from previous lives to the current life. This hypothesis leads inescapably to the concept of karma.

Reincarnation and Karma

Reincarnation and karma go hand in hand, but there is no viable scientific method to study the veracity of the so-called “Law of Karma” (we reap what we sow). Nonetheless, it is valuable in any discussion of reincarnation to see how this concept fits logically into spiritual ideology, which claims that reincarnation is the mode by which an individual progresses on the path to eventual unity with Cosmic Consciousness.

The Sanskrit word karma means action, but it also means the sum of our actions, both good and bad, that we have sowed but not yet reaped—what could be called our “karmic bag.” According to Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, the mechanism by which reactions to our mental and physical actions are stored in our mind involves what in Sanskrit are termed samskaras. Samskaras are created when the mind is vibrated by a mental or physical action. Hence, samskaras can be thought of as stored reactive momenta that hold the potential for future actions. When a stored reactive momentum or samskara is expressed, it is said to be “burned.” In other words, the fruit of an action has ripened. The burning of a reactive momentum returns the mind to a “cleaner” state. An analogy might be to make a dent in a hollow rubber ball with your finger. The depression may last for a while, but if the ball is warmed with the hand, the dent can pop out, creating a symmetrical ball once again. In this example, the dent represents a samskara. When the dent pops out, it is burned.

Such stored reactions are different than memories since when they are expressed or burned, they are accompanied by the release of kinetic mental or physical energy equivalent to the mental energy or impression that created the action in the first place. However, the type and quality expressed will be different. For example, you do selfless service by helping victims of a flood. The reaction to such kindness will be stored in your mind and perhaps come back to you later in the form of help someone provides to you, but it probably will not be help recovering from a flood. In a subtle, often unconscious way, the reaction teaches us that it is good to do good deeds and be nice to other people. Similarly, a bad deed will ultimately bounce back, creating hardship, pain, unhappiness, or suffering. That mental disturbance reminds us either consciously or unconsciously that the action that created the reactive momentum was bad, and we will be less apt to repeat such action. This is the basic mechanism by which this reward/punishment system—the Law of Karma—teaches us to be better, wiser, more self-aware, and move forward on the path to self-realization.

How to End the Cycle of Reincarnation

According to spiritual ideology, our purpose in life is to discover and fulfill our deep, innate potential. This is a journey of transformation that is at the mystical heart of all religions. It is a journey to meet the Higher Self and simultaneously meet the Divine. In other words, our ultimate goal in life is to obtain union with Supreme Consciousness. Naturally, we find many terms to describe the process and the attainment of union, and many practices to achieve this goal. However, they all boil down to discovering who we actually are and becoming one with God when we leave our physical body.

The concept of karma explains both why we reincarnate and why when reborn we might have many of the same personality traits and conflicts that we experienced in our previous incarnations. At the time of death, our unit minds will have many unburnt samskaras, and unless we are able to completely surrender every last trace of our individuality or ego at this time, we will need to return in human form to experience the fruit of our remaining karma. In rebirth, we can continue progressing on the path of self-realization until we are able to surrender everything of our being (including our unburnt samskaras) at the time of death. However, such surrender is difficult to accomplish without the benefit of sincere spiritual practices and unconditional love for God. Hence, for most people it takes many lifetimes to attain union with Supreme Consciousness.

The one redeeming feature of the Law of Karma is that actions performed without the “I do” of ego do not create samskaras. Therefore, the actions of others, actions performed unconsciously, and acts of God, such as floods or windstorms do not in themselves create reactions. In addition, if an action is performed with the ideation that God is performing the action, then the mind suffers no reaction to that action. The thought can be, “I am the machine, and God is the machine operator.” The Sanskrit term for this type of ideation is *madhuvidya*, which means seeing God in every living organism and object. This practice allows one to carry on a normal worldly life and not create additional samskaras.

Conclusions

As Carol Bowman states in her essay: *Beyond Disbelief: Children's Past Lives and the Continuum of Personality*: “...the best evidence for the continuation of consciousness beyond death is the spontaneous past life memories of very young children. The children are remembering being here before, in other bodies, as distinct individuals. Which means, therefore, that some form of identity—a cluster of personality, memory, emotion—survives bodily death and travels full circle to be reborn: the working definition of reincarnation. It's a natural phenomenon, supported by thousands of cases reported all over the world, from all cultures, regardless of religious beliefs—including Western cultures that don't believe in reincarnation.”¹⁴

Skeptics of reincarnation like to attribute memories of living in a previous body to cryptomnesia (a forgotten memory that returns without its being recognized as such). However, such an explanation does not work when it comes to children who lack extensive life experiences and could not possibly know details about the person they are describing. Others have attributed veridical memories of past lives to ESP, but this would not explain why some of these children also bear birthmarks or birth defects consistent with those of the deceased person they identify with. As renowned skeptic, Carl Sagan put it, “Young children sometimes report the details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation.”

We are forced to conclude that there is overwhelming scientific evidence for reincarnation and the continuation of consciousness following death. Reincarnation is not only real, but also a central mystical element of human life. It changes the way people look at death—there is no longer a morbid fear of death because it is seen as a transition and not an end.¹⁵

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15. For readers who would like more on the history, spiritual significance, and evidence for reincarnation, I would recommend my book *Reincarnation: Science of the Afterlife*. Available in print or eBook version at the following link: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07SW1PPBH>. For readers interested in Christianity's deep ties to reincarnation, I would recommend reading Elizabeth Prophets book *Reincarnation: The Missing Link in Christianity*.

About the Author

Steven Richheimer, Ph.D. is a retired research chemist who received his doctorate from Stanford University and has practiced tantric meditation for over fifty years. He is the author of numerous scientific papers and patents in the arena of natural products and the author of several books on science/spirituality including, *The Unity Principle: The Link between Science and Spirituality*; *The Nonlocal Universe: How Science Validates the Spiritual Worldview*; *Reincarnation: Science of the Afterlife*; and *The Fallacy of Materialism: How Consciousness Creates the Material World and Why it Matters*. You can contact him via his website: <https://stevenrichheimer.com/>