

Rebirth: mystery, myth or a model

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The Rebirth hypothesis can be stated as follows:

Every Living being has a soul. The soul and body are different entities. Body is made of matter. Body (without soul) can not, by itself, perform its functions. Soul manages the body functions.

Then there are two options:

(i) When the body becomes incapable of performing its functions (as in an accident), it dies; soul together with its karma leaves the body and is born again, according to its karma, in one of the four gatis (human, animal, deva or Naraki). The cycle repeats, till all the karmas are exhausted. Then it attains salvation.

(ii) When ayushkarma is exhausted, soul leaves the body and body dies.

These hypotheses require

1. An eternal soul

2. Mechanism for karmas to be attached to the soul; a soul-karma interaction/ attraction force/mechanism. Also a mechanism for shedding karmas. Here properties of soul and pudgal have to be considered.

3. Karma particles have to be weightless, frictionless, superfluid, non-interactive with any familiar matter, to survive decay and death, and to travel with soul, with super luminous speed, wherever it goes for its next birth.

4. If past births can be recalled, then their memory should be stored in some part of the brain or mind. Can this be identified experimentally?

- If rebirth of the same soul does occur, it is a miracle, mysterious to be sure. We see people dying and also new ones taking birth. Human mind may try to correlate these phenomena and rebirth is just a plausible model to explain it.?
- Rebirth also explains certain phenomena, for example,

1. Some people have unlearned talents, not learnt in the current life.

2. Some people have physical and mental problems at the time of birth, which remain unexplained and may be attributed to past karmas.

- Are both these above phenomena genetic? controlled by some genes becoming active or some genes becoming dormant? Possible.

Thus the question arises: can rebirth be proved. One can resort to scriptures, what enlightened souls have told or look for scientific proof.

Rebirth is closely linked to the concept of soul. In fact the concepts of soul, chetana, karma, death and rebirth, etc. are closely linked and none of them can be discussed in isolation.

There are 4 ways by which the rebirth theory can be substantiated:

1. Philosophical arguments/ Scriptures: needs faith (self-hypnosis) to believe
2. personal experiences, of near death experience, out of the body experience, Past life regression: possibility of hypnosis or self-hypnosis make the 'proof' doubtful. Also under extreme pain, such experiences may be imagination, come into play because of escapist approach to mitigate the pain. But once one is *convinced*, no other proof is required.
3. Case studies: Many case studies exist; (Stevenson, Tucker, Weiss, and others, discussed by other scholars in this RTM)
4. Scientific studies: Many renowned scientists, Max Planck, Erwin Schrodinger, John Eccles, Brian Josephson and many others have argued in favour of the need of something like a 'soul' or consciousness, but do not talk of rebirth.

1. Scriptures

Questions related to rebirth have been answered by all the enlightened Seers including Mahavir, Buddha, Vedic Maharshis and even the modern philosophers, and most of them favour rebirth of the same soul, till all the karmas are exhausted.

Let us begin with Mahavir. Existence of soul was the first question asked by Ganadhar Gautam as recorded in Ganadharvad.

Indrabhuti Gautam: I have doubt if the soul really exists?

Mahāvīr: I give you two reasons showing that the soul exists.

1. We experience same "I" in the past, present and future. Since the body keeps on changing every moment, The experience of 'I' or Self remains the same. As we say:

"I am doing; I did; I will do; I am speaking; I spoke; I will speak". Who is this 'I'. This is the soul.

2. In dense darkness, where one cannot see one's body, one can experience himself and knows that 'I' exist or "I am." At any time, we do not get a doubt regarding 'I' even in that stark darkness. Such a doubt never arises, "Am I existing or not"? The 'I' is always there. This 'I' is really the soul.

Indrabhuti Gautam: Who has built this amazing human body which works like a factory? Who governs, controls and organises all the functions?

Mahāvīr: All the bodily activities and organs work spontaneously, when required, the way they are required, in synchronicity, harmony, mutually dependent, without interfering with functions of other organs, as One entity. The body cannot be considered the owner, directing and controlling various activities, because it is only a combination of various sensory and other organs. The body is not an independent or intelligent entity. Even the mind cannot control all functions because it is dependent. The soul is the one who manages it so well.

The same question was asked of Buddha "if there is no self, who is reborn". It feels like there's someone inside watching, feeling, thinking: a permanent self. This sense of 'I' follows us everywhere. It feels so natural, so real. Some say we have a soul, a kind of invisible core, that never changes. When the body dies this soul moves on, perhaps to another life or to another world.

Buddhism denies the existence of soul but believes in chitta, karma, emotions, sanskaras, habits etc. and rebirth. There is no permanent self inside, no 'I' that lives forever. This is termed as '*Anātmavāda*'. If that's true then comes the question: if there's no self, no *ātmā*, then who is reborn? who is thinking? Buddhism explains our existence in the framework of '*Kṣhanikavāda*'; everything is transient, including the self, soul and our thoughts. The Buddha likens the self to a lamp; One lamp can light the other and that is rebirth. It is not the first lamp which extinguishes, and lightens again; It is another, independent lamp which starts giving light from the flame of the first. That is rebirth. Even in one lamp, the flame is not the same all the time; the old one gets exhausted every moment and replaced by a new one with new oil, afresh. Thus, there is continuity, but with transientness.

If one compares the views of Mahavir and Buddha, Both talk of continuity. It is, thus, obvious that one should not worry about "the name": Call it *ātmā* or *chitta*, it does not matter, they may be synonymous.

The question is then reduced to : Is *ātmā* immortal or not. Accordingn to Jainism, *ātmā* has two components: essence (pure *ātmā*, A) and its *karma* covered 'mode', which is transient, a function of time because karmas change all the time.

The hierarchy according to Jainism is: *ātmā* (soul)-*chitta* (*chetana*)- *ahankāra* (individual identity or I- ness)-*mānas* (mind and memory)-*buddhi* (intellect). *Buddhi* and *mānas* are explicit, enfolded , manifested forms and soul is the implicit, unfolded form.

Vedantic view:

The vedantic view is different. They create the whole material and living universe from, an omnipotent, omnipresent, *Brahmn*. each living being has a small fraction of the same brahmn (soul!). So there is a hierarchy of Brahmn (paramātmā to ātmā).

Raman maharshi, a recent seer, quotes a conversation on rebirth between Atreya and Vamdeva from Upanishads, which claims that rebirth is an illusion born out of human ego.

Atreya: If souls take birth again and again, who is it that reincarnates?

Vamdeva said: tell me when you dream at night and become a king, who's the King.

Atreya replied: It is I , though in the dream I forget my real self.

"and when you wake up, what becomes of the King?"

Atreya said: He vanishes because he was never real to begin with.

Vamdeva: Exactly! reincarnation is like a dream within the vast sleep of ignorance that 'I' that thinks it is born, lives, dies, and takes birth again. It is but a shadow of the mind. birth and rebirth appear like a cycle. Scriptures speak of karma, rebirth and the soul's journey. These are not real. They are real only to the one who is asleep in ego. As long as you believe you are the body and the mind, karma binds you and rebirth appears like a cycle.

What is the True self?

"That which is ever present even in deep sleep where no world exists. It neither comes nor goes....." .

Elsewhere, arguments are given which claim that waking, sleeping and dreaming are not permanent states, but in all these three states, there is some one present (call it the 4th state, or turiya) which is the real self. But this can at best be taken as the existence of self, but not of rebirth. The 4th state (*turiya*) is an abstract concept, quite appealing but discards rebirth, even birth.

Scientific view

Let us see what science, firmly entrenched in materialistic view of the universe, says about rebirth: not believing in ātmā, Karma and rebirth, yet the 'I' ness (ahankara) exists. Many scinetists have hypothesised that Chitta (consciousness) is created spontaneously, when neural network attains a certain level of complexity, like a Jinn in Alladin's lamp.

a. Observation of nature

Yet if we observe any natural system, like a small living cell of an animal or a plant or a large physical system, like our solar system or galaxy we find that there is a phenomena of 'One-ness' between its different constituents in all its operations.

The concept of Oneness: Consider a simple cell, for example, which produces thousands of proteins every second.



Fig.1: Phenomena governing universe and life at all scales, supporting One-ness and intimate connectedness of everything, leading to the concept of Gaia or *Parasparopagraho Jivanam-ajivanam*.

A cell is made of a large number of components, like nucleus, mitochondria, cytoplasm, centrosome, membrane, etc. and every component of this cell works coherently. Coherence implies that all the processes occur in steps (phase), not in random order. We not only see coherence, but all reactions occur in order, all the components are interdependent, that is whatever happens to one component, happens to all of them, Not only in steps by all the components work in coordination, unison, synchronously, harmony, as if there is instant connectivity between all of them. I can call it 'deep coherence'. We can say that all the components are entangled with each other. There seems to exist a dynamic equilibrium between all of them. They all get into action spontaneously, without prompting, as if they know i.e. they have a psyche. They wait for their turn and there seems to exist a cyclicity. In addition, they all work in the most efficient way, with no wastage of resources and if some time, anything goes wrong, they have the capability of self-correction. Thus there is tendency to come together, in a particular order, to accomplish the objective, say production of a certain protein, what can be called centropy.

All these traits taken together means that, there is a kind of 'One-ness' between all the components of a system. There is a hierarchy of systems, as in a human body, which

from individual cells, grow into tissues, into functional organs, into a single body. At each stage there is a unity between all the components. This *one-ness* encompasses all levels and may be taken as an evidence of a unified consciousness or existence of soul. Without such a uniting factor, it is impossible to imagine a mechanism which may accomplish this one-ness.

The other argument is that some cells of every living being die every moment and in a year so one has all together a new body. There were arguments that neurons are not regenerated, which give the feeling of I-ness and memory, but some recent studies indicate that even some neurons are being replaced. Can this death of a 'cell' and its replacement, be taken as a proof of its rebirth?

a. Views about process of death

- Jainism: Death occurs in two stages: first soul moves through the universe as a wave while remaining attached to 8 points of the body near navel, identify the new parents, returns to the body and then goes to the designated yoni with all the *ātma pradeshas* as a particle; carrying karma with it: death and rebirth are instantaneous----- takes only 1-4 *samay*.

First there is *gati* bandh (Realm of birth) according to the 2/3rd law. The next life (*gati*, i.e. human, animal, *deva* or *nārakī*) is decided when 2/3 of life span is over, if not then in the remaining 2/3rd life span; if not then in the remaining life span....ad infinitum. If not, the *Bhāv* or thought at the last moment of life decides the next *gati*. The subtle bodies i.e. the *Tejas* and *Karman* bodies accompany the soul and they reincarnate in a new body according to the karmas.

- Buddhism (The Tibetan book of the dead, by Robert Thurman; The Tibetan book of living and dying by Sogyal Rinpoche): Death is gradual: First Outer body, i.e. aura etc. dissolves, then earthly components (bones, muscles, smell organs); liquid components (blood, taste organs etc.), then fire (energy, vision, body heat etc.), then air (breath, touch etc.) and then *ākāsh* (skin, auditory system etc.) dissolve sequentially. It takes about 3 days to complete this process of dissolution.

Thereafter soul goes through a tunnel through frightening light and sound experience; sees light at the end: this flash of light, before total death has been proven scientifically and the explanation is that the flash is produced by remnant oxygen in the brain, which ultimately burns at the end. Death is gradual: 5 *indriyas* dissolve, then mind, etc.. A whole sequence : 3 days the soul roams in the place of death; 21 days for complete departure; etc.

- Hinduism, believes in rebirth but gives an entirely different version. The dying soul goes to *pitralok*- meets (souls of) ancestors, who help it - then moves around in *chidākāsh* for long period of time till it finds appropriate parents, according to its karma.

b. GAIA

The British astronomer James Lovelock has gone a step further and proposed that the whole earth acts as a macro-organism and called it GAIA, (named after the ancient Greek goddess of Earth). The earth has many components, some living (biosphere), some only material, (hydrosphere, geosphere and atmosphere etc.) but they all exhibit the various properties we have mentioned above, like coherence, synchronicity, spontaneity, non-interference with each other and gives the evidence of One-ness and cyclicity. The Gaia hypothesis, proposes that Earth and its biological systems behave as a huge single living entity, various reservoirs mutually supporting each other, and working in cycles. This entity has closely controlled self-regulatory negative feedback loops that keep the conditions on the planet within boundaries that are favourable to life. Lynn Margulis, a microbiologist, considering various components of a plant cell, has taken this concept further by developing the endosymbiotic theory of eukaryotic cell development. Based on her study of DNA, she found that the three fundamental organelles: the mitochondria, photosynthetic plastids and bodies of flagella were once themselves free-living (prokaryotic) cells and now live together within a cell, working symbiotically. Indeed, according to the Jain concept, the whole universe may function like a single living organ, in which everything depends on everything else.

c. Case histories

There have been several case studies of past life regression, Near Death Experience, Out of Body Experience, Past life recollections, and communication with the dead (or their souls), many compelling enough to be considered as proof of rebirth. Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism mention case histories of past lives of many great men and women and also provide vivid description of what happens after death and journey of soul to the next birth. The case of srimad Rajchandra in the modern era, may be quoted as an example, in which he claims that he could recall his past birth. But there is a problem of hypnosis (self-hypnosis) as well as of fake stories (see article by Dr Anil Kumar Jain), which refrains us to take these as definite proofs of rebirth.

Then there are cases galore of children born with exceptional qualities, not learnt in this life, such as in music, painting, language and computations etc. including the

case of the great mathematician, Ramanujam. Was this acquired from last birth or is it genetic??

The question is : Taking clue from the above thoughts, can we perform any experiment to verify any of the concepts.

Conclusions:

Based on scriptural references and scientific observations, several points and questions arise:

1. Call it by any name: soul, chitta, self or 'I', something exists, at least in this life, which gives continuity with aging (persistence of thoughts, memory), and regulate the function of living as well as non-living systems, giving rise to the phenomenon of "one-ness". This can be a proof of existence of 'soul' but not of rebirth.
2. A large number of cells die every moment in the body and are replaced by new ones. Can this be taken as an evidence of rebirth of the cell? In this case one has to assume that every cell has an independent soul and there is a hierarchy of souls in a body.
3. If rebirth really occurs, then the memory of past life may be stored in some part of the mind or brain (conscious/subconscious/or superconscious mind). Modern techniques should be able to identify such parts of the brain. That will be real proof of rebirth.

About the Author

Professor Narendra Bhandari, Ph.D. (physics) from Tata Institute of fundamental Research, Bombay. He carried out research in space sciences at University of California, San Diego, USA and on moon samples brought back by USSR and NASA and founded the Planetary sciences and exploration division at ISRO. He has made pioneering contributions to India's first missions to Moon- Chandrayaan-1, as Member of the Moon Mission Task Force, Chandrayaan-1 Science Advisory Board and Instrument's Selection Committee for Mars Orbiter Mission of ISRO. For the past few decades he is working on establishing the scientific foundation of Jain darshan and has published many articles and edited several books on Jain philosophy.

He has received many awards for his contributions to scientific foundations of Jain philosophy, including Life Time Achievement Award by Institute of Indology, Acharya Hasti award, and JAINA Global Award. Prof. Bhandari has served as President of the International Lunar Exploration Working Group. For his contributions to planetary and space sciences, Professor Bhandari has been honoured with 'Outstanding Achievements Award of ISRO', Vikram Sarabhai award in Planetary and Space Sciences, National Mineral Award of Government of India and Special Certificate of Recognition by NASA. He has also been given the Marwar Ratna Award and Service award of the Meteoritical society, USA.