The Mystery of Reincarnation (1)

The Esoteric View and Reincarnation

The basis for our discussion of reincarnation in this course is what I shall refer to as the "esoteric view." I must explain, however, that there is, in fact, no such thing as the esoteric view. As I shall use the expression, the esoteric view refers to a collection of claims made by various sources, all of which can be considered "esoteric" in the sense they presume to present a picture, or an aspect of a picture, of human beings (and also reality) that has its basis in some form of trans-normal experience. That is, a type of experience which provides knowledge which is not available through ordinary--"normal"--means. For our purposes, much of what I am referring to as "trans-normal" experiences can be equated with "trans-sensory"--frequently referred to as "extra-sensory"--experience (ESP). However, when most people refer to extra-sensory experience they have in mind experiences which involve certain specific faculties such as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, etc. Such experiences qualify as trans-normal, but the expression "trans-normal" includes many other types of experience: out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, post-mortem communications, mystical experiences, and others.

The connection between the esoteric view and trans-normal experiences is that the latter can be said to provide "special" knowledge, knowledge not available through "normal" sources. The very general meaning of "esoteric" is "understood by or meant for only the select few who have special knowledge with respect to a particular subject or area." Using this definition, we could consider anyone in any field who possessed "special knowledge" of that field to have "esoteric" knowledge of that field. A quantum physicist, for example, could be said to have esoteric knowledge of physical reality. However, as we shall use the term, "esoteric," it will concern what is purportedly special knowledge regarding ultimate reality, human beings, and the meaning and purpose of human life.

In the previous sentence the word "purportedly" is included in order to reflect the realization that, perhaps needless to say, very many people, including many people who are regarded as among the greatest intellects of their time, both past and present, have ignored or rejected, and, today, continue to ignore or reject, knowledge claims made by esoteric sources. Indeed, it seems fair to say that, among Western intellects at least, this has been--and continues to be--overwhelmingly the case. However, having paid lip service to this fact, in the future I shall not qualify these claims in this manner. I will simply state the claims. Quite understandably, many people cannot accept these claims at face value; they are offered merely for consideration, and one must decide for oneself what credence to lend to them.
In order to provide a basis for our further discussion of the esoteric view, we may cite a number of points about which there is general agreement among various esoteric sources:

(1) There is one, and only one, reality: consciousness/energy.
(2) Everything that exists is a manifestation of this consciousness/energy.
(3) Human beings are spiritual beings, units of God-consciousness ("souls"), which, while incarnate, are having a human experience.
(4) The cosmos is multi-dimensional, and human beings (qua souls) are multi-dimensional beings. This means that both cosmos and human beings manifest at several different levels, of which the physical level is the "lowest." (See Addendum)
(5) For human beings, life on earth is but one phase of a vast evolutionary process, having as its goal the transcendence of humankind as they proceed to higher and higher levels of spiritual self-realization.
(6) The ultimate goal of this evolutionary process is conscious union (or reunion) with the Source of all existence, "God."

One of the most pervasive ideas in esoteric literature is reincarnation and the ancillary concept of karma. Reincarnation is, of course, the process whereby an entity (usually, this is referred to as the "soul," re-enters the flesh is reborn), and a standard definition of "karma" is "the sum of one's actions in this and previous lives viewed as deciding one's fate in future lives".

We may regard the following as a "standard" description of the reincarnation and karma as depicted by esoteric sources:

1. Life on earth is designed as a learning experience, the ultimate goal of which is the discovery of what one truly is (a spiritual being) and the development of one's spiritual faculties.
2. The self with which we identify, the self we call "I," the personal ego, represents only an extremely limited aspect of the total Self which we are. Indeed, some esoteric sources regard the personal ego as a total illusion.
3. Important aspects of the personal ego represent a continuation of tendencies which have had their origins in previous incarnations. Though we inherit from our parents certain genetically transmitted traits, these by no means fully account for our tastes, talents, personality traits, etc. (This is frequently referred to as "Continuative" karma.)
4. Being only the most recent manifestation of the Self in the physical realm, we “inherit” (from ourselves) any number of consequences of actions, thoughts, desires in which we engaged in previous incarnations (karma). (“Retributive” karma.)

5. Our overall life situation and many of the events of our life, including interactions with many of the people we know, are the result of decisions made by the Self before the present incarnation took place. Many esoteric sources speak of "soul groups" which refers to souls which tend to incarnate together. (Note: "soul groups" should not be confused with "group-souls.")

6. Different individuals are at different stages of spiritual evolution. Some are at a very early stage (“Young Souls”), others are quite advanced (“Old Souls”).

7. An immature (“Young”) soul ordinarily views reality primarily—if not exclusively—in terms of the needs and interests of the personal ego, since it is, while incarnate, relatively unaware of, and, therefore, unconcerned about, the needs and interests of the soul. A mature (“Old”) soul, being intuitively more aware of its spiritual nature, attempts to attend to the needs of the soul—which it now perceives to be its true identity. (This, of course, is a matter of degree; a totally "mature" soul would do this completely, but it would seem that very few persons who are incarnate at a particular time are manifestations of a totally mature soul.)

8. Between lives on earth, the soul manifests in other dimensions for an indefinite time. The period of time between lives varies greatly from individual to individual. As a rule, “Young” souls tend to reincarnate more quickly than “Old” souls, for at least two reasons: “Young” souls are in greater need of the kind of experience which physical existence provides in order to develop spiritually. Also, the less spiritually mature entity feels more “at home” in the physical world and so has a greater “urge” to return there. However there are many reasons why one individual might reincarnate more quickly than another.

9. After physical death the individual at some point experiences a review of its previous life, and before the next incarnation decisions are made, with the assistance of more spiritually advanced beings, regarding the kind of life situation which will best promote the individual’s spiritual progress in the coming life.

Notably missing in this delineation of reincarnation and karma is any reference to group-souls. As we shall see, though what we may call the "mechanism" of reincarnation/karma is far from clear even without introducing group-souls, it is far less so if we do.
In addition to the issue of group-souls, there is also the problem of the reality of time. Many esoteric sources maintain that time is an illusion, an illusion peculiar to the manner in which human beings understand, and experience, the world. Of course, if time is indeed an illusion, then the entire concept of reincarnation must be re-formulated. This is because, if time does not exist, one incarnation cannot be temporally before or after another incarnation.

Before considering these extremely important issues, let us first sketch the way belief in reincarnation leads us to see our lives differently than if we do not consider it, then examine the different perspective of human life which emerges if we factor the doctrine of reincarnation.

In the Western world, reincarnation is a doctrine that, traditionally, has not been widely accepted. This is largely due, no doubt, to the fact that it is not a feature of the teachings of any of the West's three major religions. In cultures in which reincarnation has no place, the belief of most people is that one begins to exist at birth (or at some point during gestation) and that one's present life is the one and only occasion in which one will be alive in the flesh. Indeed, it is believed that this is the only time one will exist anywhere at all, unless one believes, as so many people do, that there are spiritual realms, "heaven" and perhaps also "hell," where, after physical death, one will continue to exist in some form or other. As for "where" one will find oneself after death, for very many persons this depends on how one has lived one's life; one's future destination, for eternity, will be determined by this. For many others, what will happen is that one will simply cease to exist. For still others, this a matter about which they have no opinion and, very often, no interest.

For persons who hold any of these beliefs about human life, then, unless they hold the view that whatever happens is somehow "God's will," whatever happens in one's life is simply a "brute fact." They view life as something that simply "happens." We may call this a "one-dimensional" view of life.

In the following passage Raynor Johnson refers to this as believing in the "givenness" of things. Whatever happens is simply a "given;" that is, it "just happens." In this passage from The Imprisoned Splendour (1953) entitled "The Strangeness of Existence," he writes,

We came into the world, so far as we know, without being consulted, and we shall be bundled out of it likewise without choice.... Consider the strangeness of existence from the individual's standpoint. There are those who seem the favorites of fortune. They have good health, able minds, all the advantages of a cultured environment and training and the blessings of friendship. Opportunity knocks on their door at the right time. For others the race of life is one long struggle against handicap, suffering and
tragedy. These inequalities are strange and baffling from the individual's standpoint....(pp. 19-20)

From a one-dimensional perspective, life is indeed "strange." Another word we might use is "mysterious." And there are some people who would go further than this; life, they say, is "absurd."

Those who refer to life as "absurd" would also say that it is "meaningless." It is Macbeth's "Tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." And one might ask: why do not more people take this view of life? What view of life do they hold that prevents them from doing so?

As stated above, for many people, though life is mysterious, whatever happens, however incomprehensible to us it may seem, it is "God's will." There are times, of course, when even the most religiously devout person must wonder why certain things, personal or otherwise, things that seem unspeakably horrible or unfair, occur. Why does God "permit" such things to happen?

Let us now consider how our view of the events in our lives is changed by introducing the doctrine of reincarnation. For persons who believe in reincarnation, there is another way to view life, one which attempts to explain events in life in terms of cause and effect. This concerns the concept of karma. A standard definition of "karma" is the doctrine that

The sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence decide their fate in future existences.

Unfortunately, many people who believe in this doctrine frequently overly use it, and apply it to any event, situation, or condition, particularly if the event, situation, or condition is negative. (A notorious instance of such overuse is the use of the doctrine to justify the caste system in India. Into whatever caste one is born, it is said, it is the result of how one has lived one's previous life.)

Of course, if one believes in the doctrine of karma, it is indeed difficult (perhaps impossible) to know when it is appropriate to apply it and when it is not. We cannot discuss this particular problem here. The point being made is that if one believes in reincarnation, there is available another level of explanation for things that happen in human lives. The doctrines of reincarnation and karma place human life in a much larger context, a context which we might even term "cosmic," and permit us to view events in our lives "two-dimensionally." Events in our lives, at least the important events, have a cause and significance that is far greater than they seem to have if viewed one-dimensionally and taken at face value; that is, as events that simply "happen," or, as Johnson says, "givens."
This is an extremely important point for understanding the esoteric view of human life. It is, arguably, the single most important point of all from the perspective of trying to understand why, in our lives, we experience the various conditions, situations, and personal relationships that we do, in fact, experience. Keeping in mind that we are not speaking of all conditions and all relationships, only those which have a significant impact on the way our lives unfold, the esoteric view of human life is that none of these is a matter of pure chance. According to esoteric sources, there is a high degree of predestination in our lives. In terms of the passage cited above by Johnson, important events and relationships are not simply "givens."

It must not be assumed, however, that the predestined nature of these conditions and relationships imply that human beings do not have free will. What is predestined is that certain events and certain relationships will emerge in our lives. But it is not predestined that we will respond to them in any particular way. It is in connection with our responses that free will is manifested.

Before proceeding further, it should be pointed out that though not everyone who believes in reincarnation does so, esoteric sources view human life in terms of a spiritual evolutionary process in which human beings are engaged, and it is from this perspective that we shall view reincarnation and karma; and from this perspective, the fundamental purpose of reincarnation is to provide opportunity after opportunity for the reincarnating entity to achieve a higher level of spiritual development.

The assumption behind this view of reincarnation is the notion that life on Earth is, in effect, a "school," and that the purpose of incarnating is to learn certain lessons which such a life can teach. (Indeed, it is maintained by some esoteric sources that these particular lessons can be learned only through living on Earth, but we need not assume this to be the case.) In order to attempt to provide a thorough understanding of the lessons that life on Earth is held to teach, it would be necessary to consider a number of theories which purport to show how human life on Earth first came about. This, of course, is not possible here, and it will be assumed that it is sufficient to say that the essential point upon which these theories are in agreement is that at the present time, and for countless years prior to this time (according to some esoteric sources, hundreds of thousands of years) human beings are, and have been, unaware of their spiritual nature and their spiritual destiny—which is to become "mature," "awakened" spiritual beings and, eventually, to become united, consciously united,*** with the spiritual matrix of all existence, "God." ***

***The word "consciously" is crucial here. Esoteric sources maintain that human beings are now, and always have been, "at one" with God. Indeed, the esoteric view is that everything that exists, including, of course, human beings, is itself a particular manifestation of God. (In connection with this point, it should be kept in mind that the esoteric view of reality is that, as stated above--p. 2, items 1 and 2
-- the only reality is consciousness/energy, and everything that exists is a manifestation of this consciousness/energy. There is no such thing as "dead matter." However, this is not, of course, the view held by the vast majority of human beings, who, if they believe in God at all, regard God as a separate entity.

Because the word "God" is usually understood to denote an entity, it may be misleading use this term when referring to the esoteric concept of God. For esoteric sources, "God" is not an entity, but the "ocean of Being" from which everything that exists emerges; that is, everything that exists is a "form" of God. Whenever the term "God" is used in connection with the esoteric view, it should be realized that it does not refer to an entity.

A metaphor which is commonly used to characterize the condition in which human beings find themselves while incarnate on Earth is to compare them with "seeds" that are in the process (the cosmic process) of unfolding their spiritual potentiality. In his essay, "How is it That We Live After Death and What is the Meaning of Life?" (1980) Richard Steinpach summarizes this view as follows:

**Man is not a fully developed spirit. His spirit-core is a seed-grain, a spiritual germ. Like every seed-grain, it contains the full potentials of species, but gradual ripening is required for them... We are in the world of matter for the maturing of our own species, the spirit.** (p. 44)

To describe the human condition on Earth in another way, we may say that we are here to "grow" spiritually. In connection with this issue of "growth" the following passages from *We Live Forever* (2004) by Phyllis Atwater, are pertinent:

**Growth events come is all shapes and sizes. They can be negative or positive or both; they repeat if we miss one, or they can be a series, one right after another....A growth event is any kind of sudden, unexpected twist in life that twirls you around and changes your attitudes and stretches your mind.**

**Growth events give us an opportunity to face our inner selves and "clean house," to glimpse...higher realities, to expand past that which limits.**( p. 47)

Though Atwater says that growth events can be either negative or positive, one would think that it is negative events--those which result in some form of suffering--which would be more likely to be the stimulus for growth of the sort she is referring to. And, needless to say, "growth events" do not, in fact, always produce growth. Indeed the "opportunities" which growth events make available to us to grow are usually not treated as opportunities for growth, but are met with resistance and complaints. Her point, of course, is that as we live our
lives and encounter growth events--and, presumably, virtually everyone will do so--we should treat them as opportunities for growth, spiritual growth. (Much more easily said than done, of course.)

One reason, almost certainly the primary reason, why more people do not take advantage of growth opportunities is that they do not recognize them as such. And if one has what we referred to earlier as a "one-dimensional" view of life, then the concept of a growth opportunity seems nonsensical. "Growth?" If an event causes suffering, it just "hurts." It may be regarded as something that must be endured, but an "opportunity for growth"? Virtually everyone admires a person who faces adversity with fortitude, but they usually view it--as does the "victim"--as evidence of strength of character, nothing more. Not that strength of character is not an extremely admirable virtue. The point is that, unless one sees the display of strength of character in the context of spiritual growth--which is possible, of course, only if one accepts the concept of spiritual growth--that is all that it is. This is not to say that the person who undergoes the suffering does not him/herself attain spiritual growth by facing adversity with fortitude; it is entirely possible that this does happen even if he/she does not view it as the purpose of the adversity.

Of course, the concept of "growth events" is not the exclusive property of those who believe in the doctrines we are considering here. Many people who have no concept of reincarnation, karma, or spiritual evolution recognize that certain events or situations in a person's life can result in that person becoming a better, stronger, more mature person. However, if one believes that one has only one opportunity (one lifetime) to "grow," and we fail to do so, what happens then? It seems much more coherent to think in terms of life on earth as a "school" in which one spends more than one day (or one year) in which everything must be learned. (I am aware of no belief-system, religious or otherwise--except the esoteric view--that maintains that learning can continue after physical death. So, for most people, if it is not learned in this one short span of life on Earth, then it cannot be learned at all.)

Factoring in reincarnation and karma, then, makes the concept of growth, spiritual growth, much more understandable. If we (our souls) experience multiple lives in the Earth-school, then we (our souls) have the opportunity to learn much more than could be learned in one lifetime. And, according to the esoteric view, learning is what life is all about.

If we consider life on Earth to be a learning opportunity, it would be immensely helpful if we could have access to what it is that we are supposed to learn in this lifetime. In Many Mansions (1950), Gina Cerminara, drawing on the "life readings" of the renowned psychic, Edgar Cayce (1877-1945), refers to as the "super-conscious (spiritual) life goal," which she defines as "the basic purpose for which the soul took incarnation." It is "the central and unifying principle of a life, which makes intelligible all the external events
and the ostensible purposes of a personality.” She adds, “IF THE PERSONALITY BECOMES AWARE OF THE INNER PURPOSE FOR WHICH IT TOOK INCARNATION ... THEN PROGRESS CAN BE MADE MUCH MORE SWIFTLY BECAUSE THE PERSONALITY PUTS UP LESS INNER RESISTANCE TO THE EDUCATIVE EXPERIENCES OF LIFE.” (p. 205, caps added)

What Cerminara says here is extremely interesting, but it is difficult to imagine how one could consciously become aware of one’s super-conscious life goal, except perhaps through some extraordinary, trans-normal experience, such as a near-death experience. Of course, most persons have no concept of such a goal and becoming aware of this goal would never occur to them.

In a passage in We Live Forever, Phyllis Atwater maintains that this awareness did come to her--as a result of her near-death experiences:

I came to know that the reason for my birth, growing up, living and dying (in 1977 Atwater had three NDEs) in the manner that I did, was to do this work. (Her research regarding NDEs and the numerous books she has written about NDEs). I could at last recognize how the soul's will had operated in my own life; slowly, carefully, sometimes pushing, sometimes pulling, other times strangely silent, yet always and ever guiding me toward the completion of my life task. The same can be said for others, not just me. (p. 37)

Such experiences are, unfortunately, exceedingly rare; indeed, almost unique. For most people, perhaps the most they can do is to "keep alert" for indications of what their super-conscious life goal might be. And it may be that thinking in terms of such a possible goal might, eventually, lead one to become aware of it.

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Addendum--Levels of the Cosmos

For our purposes it is not necessary to try to determine precisely how many dimensions or levels there are said to be. The usual number given is seven, but this is not true of all esoteric sources. Moreover, the different ways the levels are divided in different esoteric systems, and the different nomenclature which is sometimes used to describe the same level render it unclear just how to compare what is being said in different systems. The important point for our purposes is that the cosmos consists of a number of different levels and that the ultimate goal for human beings is to reach the highest level, for which there is no agreed upon name, but which, for lack of a better term, we might call "cosmic."
Perhaps the most commonly used names for the first five levels are as follows: (1) physical, (2) astral, (3) mental, (4) causal and (5) buddhic. (It should be understood that these names, except, perhaps the physical, are somewhat, though not completely, arbitrary.) Frequently the mental level is divided into two parts, and the causal level is regarded as the "higher mental." In some esoteric systems, notably Theosophy, the causal level represents the level at which human souls became distinct, separate entities as they proceed "downward" from the Source.

It is necessary to realize that THESE DIFFERENT LEVELS ARE NOT SPATIALLY ARRANGED, ONE "ABOVE" OR "BELOW" ANOTHER ONE. ALL LEVELS "OCCUPY" THE SAME "SPACE." THE ORDER OF THESE LEVELS IS DETERMINED BY THE VIBRATORY RATE OF THE ENERGY WHICH EXISTS AT THAT LEVEL. TO SAY THAT ONE LEVEL IS "HIGHER" OR "LOWER" THAN ANOTHER ONE (AS WHEN IT WAS STATED ABOVE THAT THE PHYSICAL LEVEL IS THE "LOWEST") IS TO REFER TO THE RELATIVELY HIGHER OR LOWER VIBRATORY RATES OF THE ENERGY OF THE LEVELS IN QUESTION.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the esoteric view of the various bodies, one might visualize them as forming a series of concentric circles, each one larger than the previous one and enclosing it. The size of the circle indicates the degree of awareness of the cosmos to which a person functioning at that level has access. The innermost, and smallest, circle may be said to represent the physical level of consciousness, which, for the most part, is limited to the portion of the cosmos accessible through the senses.

For at least the first three of these levels, there is said to exist a corresponding vehicle which serves as a "body" or "vehicle" through which the consciousness (or "soul") functions when the consciousness of an individual is "focused" at that level. While we are alive on the physical level, consciousness is, of course, focused in the physical body. It should, of course, be understood that none of these bodies is the soul. The soul functions "through" them, but it itself is something quite different.

The astral body is of supreme importance in the immediate life after death, for it is the vehicle through which consciousness functions immediately after the death of the physical body and for an indefinite time thereafter.

The next circle represents the mental body, about which we need to say here only that it is at this level that consciousness begins to "come into its own" as the true essence of human beings. After the demise of the astral body, referred to in some esoteric sources as the "second death," the remnants of the emotional aspect of the persona which still exist in the astral body fade away, and one becomes more nearly "pure mind." Not mind in its merely "intellectual"
aspect, but in all its facets, including, importantly, creativity and non-emotional love.

The next circle we shall consider is frequently referred to as the causal body. With respect to the causal body, consider this passage from The Basic Ideas of Occult Wisdom (1970), by Anna Kennedy Winner:

When each man first attained individualization, there was formed around him a subtle sheath sometimes called the “causal body,” which became the real vehicle for his separated individuality, and which has remained the center or focus of his being all through the many incarnations into earthly life....When the time comes for the man to transcend humanity, then this sheath...must be dropped...and his consciousness will awaken on a higher plane, known as the “intuitional” or “buddhic” level, where there is no longer any barrier or film of separation, but each center of consciousness feels itself one with the Whole. (p. 90)

As for the buddhic body, it is impossible to consider this body as having a circumference, for, as Winner says, once one has transcended the causal body, one no longer exists as a separate ego. One has then become part of the Whole. It should be noted, however, that even though, at this stage, one is no longer a separate individual, one is, nonetheless, still an individual.

Immediately following the passage just cited, Winner adds,

Yet there is no loss of essential individuality, because all the long experience of earthly lives has formed so strong a center that it can still maintain its focus, and know and experience from its own center, even when its circumference expands to include the whole “plane,” and is, as it were, superimposed upon countless other circumferences. Each spirit has its own center, and retains the memory of all its past human lives, yet knows itself one with the rest, and somehow shares in their memories too.

The phrase, “yet knows itself one with the rest, and somehow shares in their memories too” points to the concept of a group-soul which we will discuss at length at a later time.

With regard to the series of circles just described, it is important to realize that what is represented by each of these circles is just as "natural" as any other; that is, none of these should be considered to be "supernatural." Moreover, no human being could be a human being unless he/she were in possession of all the levels of consciousness which these circles represent and of the various "bodies," physical and non-physical, associated with each of these levels of consciousness.

We will have more to say about these levels at a later time.