

Reincarnation, Rebirth and the Progress of the Soul

by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice
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M E M O R A N D U M

To: The Universal House of Justice
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From: Research Department

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A letter dated 25 December 1994 written on behalf of the Regional Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of ... requests material from the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of reincarnation. This Assembly is in contact with some people who believe in reincarnation and have challenged the Bahá'í perspective on life after death. They argue that “psychological data” such as the regaining of past life memories through hypnosis supports the view that this life and one’s previous life are somehow connected to each other, and that this cycle of physical death and physical rebirth repeats itself many times. The Assembly wishes to deepen its understanding of these issues in order to present the Bahá'í perspective accurately. Their request was forwarded to the Research Department and the following is our response.

With reference to the subject of reincarnation, the Spiritual Assembly might wish to study ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), chapters 33, 60, 63, 66 and 81. The attached compilation entitled “On Reincarnation and the Nature and Progress of the Soul” may also be helpful. Outlined below are some points drawn from this compilation; the numbers in brackets identify the extracts from which a point is taken.

1. Reincarnation, the Soul and the Concept of “Return”

1.1 The Spiritual Assembly is correct that Bahá'ís do not believe in reincarnation. We have several references in the Bahá'í Writings which state that the concept of reincarnation is based on an incorrect view of the progress of the soul and life after death. For example,

Reincarnation is a “man-made doctrine” [15, 16]. “No Revelation from God has ever taught reincarnation” [15]. Bahá'u'lláh would have mentioned it in His Teachings if it had any importance or reality [17].

The Bahá'í view of life after death does not accord with the idea that the human soul can pass from one body to another. “We come on to this planet once only.” [12, 17]

“The concept of the soul returning to this physical world is erroneous, and an outgrowth of man-made doctrines which have grown up about the fundamental concept of the progress of the soul.” [16]

- 1.2 It is interesting to contrast the concept of reincarnation with the Bahá'í view of the nature of the soul and its progress toward attaining "nearness to God". Contrary to the view expressed by the Assembly that "death is the beginning of our spiritual journey", the Bahá'í Writings emphasize the important contribution that life in the physical world makes to the soul's "movement ... towards perfection" [7, 8].

From the moment of conception, man's soul begins to progress. However, life on the physical plane is only the first stage of a spiritual journey which does not require us to return to this world again. The progress we have achieved at the moment of death will continue in the "invisible realms which the human intellect can never hope to fathom nor the mind of man conceive" [4]. Thus, to progress, the soul is not required to take a circular path moving again and again through the material world as reincarnationists suggest, but a linear one, moving through this physical world once and then continuing eternally in the worlds of spirit. [7, 8, 9, 16]

From the attached compilation, we wish to call attention to the following points concerning the soul and its progress:

The soul is itself "a testimony" to the existence of the contingent world and to the reality of "a world that hath neither beginning nor end" [2].

The soul is independent of the physical body. "It is entirely out of the order of the physical creation" [6, 8]. It comes into being at conception [15]; after death it keeps its individuality and consciousness [13, 14] and, "it remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body... From the moment the soul leaves the body and arrives in the Heavenly World, its evolution is spiritual, and that evolution is: *The approaching unto God*" [10].

The purpose of life on earth is to develop ourselves, both intellectually and spiritually. What we are doing in this physical life is similar to what the baby does before birth. Before birth, the baby develops all the physical and mental potential it will need for its life here. [4] During our life here, we must develop spiritually "what we will require for the life after death" [17].

Bahá'ís look at the difficulties in this life as challenges inherent in this plane of existence and we are encouraged to rise above our sufferings. [3]

In our life after death, "God, through His mercy, can help us to evolve characteristics which we neglected to develop while we were on this earthly plane. It is not necessary for us to come back and be born into another body in order to advance spiritually and grow closer to God." [17]

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that a major argument of the reincarnationists was that "according to the justice of God, each must receive his due." He explains that we are like infants in the womb and cannot see the "effects and fruitage" of all that we are learning and doing here. But, He assures us that "reward and punishment, heaven and hell, requital and retribution for actions done in this present life, will stand revealed in that other world beyond". [4]

Both "the spirits of heavenly souls" and "the spirits of the heedless souls" will have eternal life, but the former will "attain the highest and most great stations of perfection" while the latter "are in a world of imperfection, concealment and ignorance". [5]

- 1.3 The Bahá'í Writings also provide a perspective on the concepts of "return" and "rebirth" which stand in contrast with the reincarnationist view.

The concept of "return" in the Holy Scriptures refers to the "return of the qualities, conditions, effects, perfections, and inner realities of the lights which recur in every dispensation." "Return" does not refer to "specific, individual souls and identities". [4, 5, 13]

'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that the lives of the Manifestations of God were extremely

difficult and filled with hardship and suffering when He asks: “What peace, what ease and comfort did the Holy Ones of God ever discover” during Their lives in this world that They should wish to return and live this life again? On the contrary, They sought “that ease and solace which will abide forever” in the Realm of Glory. [4]

In the Bahá'í Writings, we find the concept of “rebirth” used in two different contexts. The first “rebirth” occurs “while [one is living] in the world of nature” or the physical world, and refers to awakening to spiritual realities or becoming “informed of the divine world”. The second kind of “rebirth” refers to life after death when “the human soul begins to lead a new life”. In both instances, “rebirth means his release from the captivity of nature, freedom from attachment to this mortal and material life”. [11, 12]

On the other hand, the Bahá'í Writings contain many instances in which “return” refers to the soul’s return to God, for example, Bahá'u'lláh’s promise that if the soul is “faithful to God, it ... will, eventually, return unto Him” [1] and “it will, assuredly, return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved” [2]. It is important to emphasize, here, that “return” in this context should not be confused with pre-existence, as we have been assured that the soul does not pre-exist [14]. Instead, we are reminded of the verse which Bahá'u'lláh revealed to be engraved on the Bahá'í burial ring: “I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Compassionate”.¹

2. The Mind and "Former Life Memories"

The Research Department has not, to date, located any references in the Bahá'í Writings which address the issue of the “former life memories” which have been reported by some individuals when under hypnosis. It is interesting to note, however, that although the believers are warned against “psychic practices”, Shoghi Effendi apparently considered hypnosis to be an acceptable form of medical treatment when used by properly qualified physicians. In a letter dated 15 February 1957 written on his behalf to several believers, it states:

What comes under the heading of psychic practices ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has warned us against; but any form of auto-suggestion or hypnotism which is used by medical science and by properly qualified physicians we are free to take advantage of, if we feel that the doctor using such practices is qualified and will not abuse his rights.

It appears significant that in this statement, hypnosis is associated with “auto-suggestion”, a hypnosis technique whereby, for example, an individual can learn to free himself from unhealthy habits, unreasonable fears and anxieties, or to live with chronic pain. Thus, it is fair to argue that while we are free to accept hypnosis as a useful tool in medical treatment, we are by no means obligated to accept as valid all of its applications, or accept as true all of the “memories” it may elicit from people.

There are also several statements in the Bahá'í Writings concerning the nature of the mind and memory which may be of use to the Assembly in its deliberations on this matter. For example, the following are statements from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers:

Very little is as yet known about the mind and its workings.
(9 April 1948)

Now concerning your question as to whether man can recall experiences prior to the present state of his evolution in this world: he certainly cannot have any such recollection, and the experiences he can remember are confined solely to those through which he has passed in the post-embryonic or earthly stage of his existence.
(30 June 1938)

You yourself must surely know that modern psychology has taught that the capacity of the human mind for believing what it imagines is almost infinite. Because people think they

1 N The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, N 1992), paragraph 129, p. 65.

have a certain type of experience, think they remember something of a previous life, does not mean they actually had the experience, or existed previously. The power of their mind would be quite sufficient to make them believe firmly such a thing had happened.

(22 April 1954)

It is, therefore, suggested that one might well look for explanations for the phenomena of “former life memories” which do not depend upon the reality of the concept of reincarnation.

Attachment