

REINCARNATION AND PAST LIFE MEMORIES

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One of the more common objections to the idea of reincarnation is the inability of most people to recall past life memories. “If I have lived former lives, why is it that I cannot remember any of them?” This response is predictable and easily addressed.

The short answer is that Nature does not really intend for us to recall our past lives. Imagine the psychological weight of carrying vivid memories of our past limitations, disappointments, and failures from former incarnations. Imagine the debilitating guilt accompanying the conscious awareness of previous acts of injury, betrayal, and malfeasance, had we, in fact, committed such acts. Burdened with this handicap, cynicism and despair would be the natural inclination of youth, not optimism and hope. Fortunately, Nature shows herself to be both wise and beneficent by blocking conscious access to the past life ledger which catalogues our deeds and misdeeds of former lives. Those memories are no more necessary in this present life than it is for an actor presently engaged in playing a part in Hamlet to remember lines from a previous performance of Othello.

Theosophy teaches that such memories are retained by the Soul in what Theosophy refers to as the causal body. The causal vehicle is the repository of the distilled wisdom gained by our personalities through a long series of deaths and rebirths. Although such memories normally cannot be recalled by the brain consciousness, they do manifest in a given life as specific abilities, talents, and inclinations—or what we might call indirect memories. Direct memory recalls the specific details of a past event, whether it occurred two hours ago or two years ago.

Indirect memory recalls only the lessons learned from past experience. Even within the span of a single lifetime, we demonstrate certain skills while forgetting the mechanics of how we acquired those skills. For example, a concert pianist does not need to remember the endless hours of repetition spent practicing scales and chords in order to perform splendidly on stage before a live audience. An experienced actor does not need to remember the plot, character, and lines from roles performed years ago in order to perform brilliantly today in a brand new role. In the same way, we do not need to recall the countless details of our past lives in order to employ the wisdom, skills, and capacities built up within the causal body over a long series of reincarnations.

None of this is meant to suggest that authentic past life memories are none existent. Some people do claim to remember something of their previous lives. The fascinating work of the late Dr Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia offers ample evidence to support such claims, especially as it has been exhibited in hundreds of cases involving young children from around the world. But the plausibility of reincarnation as a viable theory does not suffer because we are unable to retrieve memories of our former lives.

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