

Krisna's First Lesson to Arjuna – Reincarnation

Introduction

Students of the Bhagavad Gita will be aware that the first lesson given by Krishna to his student, Arjuna, was on the topic of Reincarnation. This being the first lesson in Yoga it can be assumed that the topic is of first rate importance for a full understanding of Yoga philosophy.

Reincarnation or rebirth is a teaching which, in the West, was at one time accepted by the early church fathers but around about 553 A.D. it was pronounced a heresy with dire penalties for anyone who taught or discussed the idea openly.

To-day, in a climate of far greater freedom of thought, we find that the teaching has resurfaced and serious thought is now being given as to its validity. This has come about following recent academic research which is concerning itself with (a) people who have clear personal memories of past lives (b) reported revelations of such earlier lives through the techniques of hypnotic regression and (c) the migratory nature of consciousness which appears to occur as a result of out of the body experiences and near death experiences.

The present general interest in the subject is largely centred in its application to human lifetimes but the teachings of Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita go much further than this. They indicate that the natural laws underlying the phenomenon of human birth, death and reincarnation are reflections of a great Universal and Cosmic Law of Cyclic Recurrence. Hence there is found in the Bhagavad Gita a reference also to a vast system of Cosmology which tells of the coming into being of the Universe of which humans are part, its subsequent passing away and its coming into being again.

Thus the teaching of reincarnation, as taught by the Yogis, is consonant with those axiomatic statements to be found in all esoteric literature that "Life is One and Indivisible", that "man is a microcosm of the macrocosm" and that the great law is "As above-so below".

For the purpose of this article we shall take a look at the teaching from both points of view, i.e. the individual (The microcosmic) and the Universal (The Macrocosmic).

The Individual

The key statements made by Krishna to Arjuna are set out in Chapter 2 of the Gita and read as follows:-

"You (the inner Self) were never born – you will never die. Unborn, Eternal, and Immutable you do not die when the bodily sheaths are discarded".

"The bodies or vehicles which enclose the immortal spiritual self (that which we know as "I") are mortal but he (the Inner Self) who dwells in the bodies is Immortal and Immeasurable".

"As a man abandons worn out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the bodies are worn out new ones are acquired by the Self who lives within."

"There has never been a time when you or I or any of the people here have not existed- nor will there be a time when we shall cease to exist. So the wise grieve not for the living or the dead."

Comment

On reading this for the first time we are prone to think of it as all very fine and encouraging, full of hope and giving meaning and purpose to life. But if we have no direct experience of the statements made we can only accept the idea of past, present and future lives on a basis of blind faith. But for the Westerner of to-day this is exceedingly difficult because we tend to want everything to be proved evidentially to our own satisfaction. And so we look to the scientist and researcher to provide us with such proof.

But can the scientist and researcher provide us with the irrefutable proof we seek? The classical Yoga texts say they cannot. There is a passage in the in the Katha Upanishad where it is stated that:-

"The Self (that which reincarnates) is not known through the study of writings or through the subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning

These books tell us that the proof of the teaching can only come about as a direct result of inner mystical experiences and that to have such experiences calls for the development of a level of conscious awareness which completely transcends our normal every day five-sense consciousness.

This transcendental state of awareness is known in Sanskrit and in the Yoga texts as "Samadhi" and in the West as Cosmic Consciousness. Students will recognise the "Samadhi" state as the end aim of the practice of the 8 limbs of Yoga and that this tends to be brought about by special types of meditational work.

The Universal

Reincarnation as a Universal Law is to be found in Chapter 8 of the Bhagavad Gita. In a few brief sentences it teaches that a Universe comes into manifestation and after millions of year's passes away only to be followed in time by reformation and rebirth at another level.

The key sentences, taken from the translation by Prabhavananda and Isherwood are as follows:-

"There is day, also, and night in the Universe. The wise know this, declaring the day of Brahma a thousand ages in span and the night a thousand ages.

"Day dawns and all those lives that lay hidden asleep come forth and show themselves mortally manifest. Night falls and all are dissolved into the sleeping germ of life.

"Thus they are seen, O Prince, and appear unceasingly, dissolving with the dark and with the day returning back to a new birth, new death. They do what they must.

Comment

These passages are not elaborated to any great extent in the Bhagavad Gita itself. They can, however, be looked upon as a somewhat poetic representation of a vast system of Cosmology known to ancient sages called "the wise". It is also very apparent that they taught that all Life in the Universe is subject to a Universal Law of Cyclic Activity and Rest.

For more detailed information about this tremendous system of Cosmology we have to turn to other Eastern literature or the more modern writings of those who claimed to have had mystical or occult insights – people like Swedenborg, Blavatski, Steiner, Heindel and others.

In this literature we find that the "Day" period mentioned above represents the active outward life period of the universe whilst the "Night" period represents the period of rest, inactivity or death, which ever term is preferred.

Next we are told that the "day" and "night" periods of the Universal Cyclic periods are a thousand ages each. These periods, in Hindu literature, are known as "kalpas" and each "kalpa" is said to have a duration of 4,230 million years. But within this vast cycle there are lesser cycles which govern the coming into existence, passing away and rebirth of the Sun, Moon and Planets etc. Which in their orbits also affect the life of men and nations. For example Rudolph Steiner in his work "An outline of occultism" tells us that our earth has been through three major planetary incarnations and is now in its fourth. It is now virtually halfway through a major septenary period. This is a teaching which is also found in the books written by H. P. Blavatski and Max Heindel.

It is interesting here to note that this huge cycle of Cosmic Days and Nights or periods of birth, death and reincarnation has a remarkable similarity to modern astronomical theory about the expanding and contracting Universe or the Big Bang theory put forward by present day physics and cosmology. Perhaps too the mysterious "Black holes" may have some relevance.

It is also noticeable that this cycle is also a parallel to the genesis story of the creation of the world in seven days and seven nights once we can accept that the Genesis cycle may refer to Cosmic Days and nights rather than the seven days of our calendar week. In the second or third quotations at the top of the preceding page we are told that all those lives that lay hidden and asleep reappear in manifestation in the active (or day) period and then go back into a state of rest again in the next night period. Further this activity goes on unceasingly.

Thus the concept of the reincarnation teaching is that the life of the individual human being is one of those lives which has been in and out of manifestation throughout the whole evolutionary process.

The relationship of the individual and Universal aspects

When the teachings about the cycles of personal incarnations are seen in the context of the grander Universal scheme of the birth, death, and rebirth of the manifest Universe it is possible to see the teaching of Reincarnation against the background of the heart and core teachings of Yoga which is the Holistic concept of the "Fundamental Unity of All Existence".

The teaching is that that we as humans are part of and of the same nature as the Universe itself. We have evolved with it and can be said to have been there at the beginning and will be there at the end of all the unceasing cycles of Cosmic activity.

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