

**How is it possible to remember Past Lives?
A Reply to the Sceptics**

From Roger J. Woolger, *Eternal Return (Unpublished manuscript)*

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There is for every man or woman some one scene,
some one adventure, some one picture, that is
the image of our secret life, for wisdom first speaks
in images and Éthis one image, if we would brood
over it our whole life long, would lead our souls,
distentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb
and flow of the world, into that far household
where the undying gods await all those whose souls
have become simple as flame, whose bodies
have become quiet as an agate lamp.

-- W.B. Yeats

The visible world was made to correspond to
the world invisible and there is nothing in this world
but is a symbol of something in that other world

-- Al Ghazzali

Working with past life images and allowing them to unfold into scenes and stories is essentially a meditative process. It requires a stillness, a certain trust in the creative powers of the deep imagination as well as a readiness to encounter not just appealing but often dark and disturbing images.

In the previous chapter I suggested that there is often a deeper level to what we call our complexes, a layer that has a buried past-life core. However, you may still feel a little sceptical about what exactly these past life memories are, indeed you may find you doubt the very possibility of remembering past lives. The rational mind objects, and rightly so, to ideas that do not fit the generally accepted world view. So before proceeding it may be useful to examine some of the most common sceptical reactions to "past life" recall.

Sceptical Objections to Past Life Recall

Many people object to the idea past life recall by saying, "this is all nonsense. We know scientifically that the mind of an infant at birth is empty. It's neurones haven't developed yet. How can it possibly remember previous life times?" Others object that "this is all imagination, just fantasy. These clients of yours are making up these stories to please you as a therapist. And in any case it's quite fashionable to have past-lives these days."

A more sophisticated criticism goes: "these are not personal memories at all, but simply stories from historical movies your clients have seen or heard on television or radio when they were

children. Maybe they overheard someone reading a story, or having a conversation about some particular period of history. This last objection wins a special skeptic's badge in my opinion. In parapsychology this explanation is called *cryptamnesia*, a term with a long and respectable history. It means roughly: having forgotten important events and stories that you once knew.

Let's look briefly at these objections, because it may help us clarify some basic assumptions we need to make about regression therapy and memory, both on the psychological and the metaphysical level. (Readers who are less sceptical may skip the following sections)

Cryptamnesia and Literary Fantasy

So to start with cryptamnesia. In parapsychology this imposing sounding term maintains that past life "memories" do not belong to the individual at all but are simply forgotten stories that we may have been overheard as a child or even as an adult dozing while the television was on in the background. This explanation posits that whole books may have been read and totally forgotten to consciousness.

Now, there are indeed, actual cases of this. A quite seriously documented case tells of a man who, during a controlled hypnotic regression, remembered in great detail having lived the life of a pioneer in the Rockies. The details of the session were recorded, but later an investigator discovered that there was a novel about the life of a pioneer in the Rockies that corresponded passage for passage, almost word for word to the so-called regression.

Although I've heard hundreds of unusual regression stories in my professional practice, some still sound to me very hokey. For example, I'm always very suspicious of reported lifetimes in the Arthurian courts, because history and literature of the Middle Ages happens to be one of my personal interests. Inspiring as the stories of Sir Launcelot, Sir Gawain and others are, we know for certain that those Arthurian courts never existed the way they are portrayed in literature. The literary imagination of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth century court poets of the high Middle Ages pretty much re-invented the legendary Arthur of Roman times to idealize a courtly life that was in reality far from glamorous. So when a person reports a life in the Arthurian court, it is nearly always the case that they are reproducing a fantasied literary construction or their favorite chivalric story from a childhood movie.

But in general reproducing forgotten stories such as these is fairly unusual. In over twenty years of regressing people, I have found that cryptamnesia to be a relatively rare phenomenon.. The majority of past life remembers are not reproducing novels and films— not even American television would dare come up with the huge number of mundane and unglamorous stories we hear so often! In fact, if I were to produce a thousand cases from my own files and from those of colleagues, I would be willing to bet that only 2 or 3 % of this sample could actually be traced to any known novel, TV show or Hollywood movie.

What is Imagination?

Another objection that is often made is that what are claimed to be past life "memories" are "simply imagination." "Your clients are making it all up to please you or because it's fashionable to have past lives" people say. The trouble with this objection is that it begs a very big question: just what *is* imagination? Now, everybody knows what it's like to imagine but that alone doesn't explain where our images come from or how they are produced or reproduced.. One has only to study one's dreams for a few months to be staggered by the amazing variety and range of imagery they throw

out. The psyche seems to have an inexhaustible pool of strange and exotic images, most of which would be almost impossible to account for.

Academic psychology, as it now exists, is hard put to define imagination. It's not even a subject of study in standard text books of psychology. If you pick up a basic text for a Psychology 101 course in any American college and look in the index, you will not find the word "imagination". You might find the words "image" or "imagery". If you want to study imagination in college, you have to go to the literature department where it comes under "literary theory"ÑColeridge, Wordsworth etc. Literary theorists, however, are very careful to say that they are not writing psychology. Possibly the only place where you'll find a serious study of imagination is in the psychiatry department of a medical school, where delusions, hallucinations and exotic fantasies are all studied closely as symptoms of mental pathology. Hardly a charitable view of the imagination!.

Nevertheless it is the psychiatrists who are closer than anyone to having a respectable and respectful theory of imagination. Early pioneers of psychoanalysis, especially Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, were among the first to study the imagination seriously, dubbing it "the unconscious mind" following certain German philosophers. Thanks to their researches and perseverance the idea the unconscious mind was even seen by the American philosopher and psychologist William James, as "the greatest discovery of the twentieth century" It is a pity he didn't say this about the imagination, because unfortunately, it still remains a put down to say "it's just imagination."

The unbounded potential of the mind to create, recreate, transform and heal is only now barely beginning to be understood thanks to the pioneering work of practitioners and writers like Deepak Chopra and Joan Borysenko. But it is still to the poets that we must turn to fully grasp of the vastness of the creative imagination and its healing potential, its spiritual heights and depths. The English poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins said in one of his poems,

Oh the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall

Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap

May who ne'er hung there

The masters of the imagination who preceded the psychoanalysts were actually the great poets and visionaries. Dante made his imaginative descent into the visionary realms of Hell and then on upwards through Purgatory into the Paradiso. Shakespeare's profound exploration of the human heart in his tragedies and comedies has led critic Harold Bloom to class him along with the great mystical visionaries of Sufism. William Blake struggled with his own inner universe of visionary principalities and powers to produce extraordinary enduring literature. Goethe dramatized the perennial fight between good and evil in his great work, **Faust**.

Freud and Jung were the worthy successors of these great explorers of the imagination. For them the imagination revealed its enormous power when they studied the world of dreams and waking visions. They testified to an undying respect for its huge creative energy and the vastness of the soul's compass.

So the real problem in understanding the imagination lies with the narrow prejudices of academic psychology in its almost fundamentalist insistence on being self-consciously scientific, in the more rigid sense of that word. It is as though the left brain (the rational side) were trying to take over the right brain (the creative side) by failing to recognize that the latter has a way of knowing that is entirely unique unto itself.

If we are to be open to the truly vast power of the imagination, which is surely the very root of all human creativity and spirituality, we need a psychology that honors not just the human mind, the faculties of perception and learning, but also the human soul and the human spirit. Only when we allow these larger and greater dimensions—which have recently been called *the transpersonal*—into our understanding of mind, are we going to understand where past life memories fit into the spiritual universe and recognize the profound importance of all those journeys that take us into realms beyond earthly reality and between human lifetimes.

The Tabula Rasa: a Materialist View of Mind

The third common objection to past life memories is the idea that the mind of the infant has not matured enough physiologically to provide a neuronal basis for memory. The philosophical presupposition here has the impressive Latin name of "the *tabula rasa* theory of the mind". *Tabula rasa* refers to a blank slate to describe the origins of the infant mind because, according to the English philosopher Locke, when a child is born its mind is essentially empty. All its subsequent contents derive from parental input, education and the surrounding culture it grows up in. Freud added to this the physiologists' dogma of his day that claimed that insufficient neuronal pathways were laid down in the brain of the newborn child for memory traces to exist at all before it is several months old.

This has since been shown to be a fallacy since the idea that the infant can not remember has been challenged in recent years. There is a huge body of evidence from research with hypnotic regression collected by Thomas Verney in his classic book **The Secret Life of Unborn Child** which shows incontrovertably how it is possible for a person under hypnosis to remember exactly what happens at birth, in utero, and even all the way back to conception. It is now widely accepted by experts in this field that there is some degree proto-consciousness in the fetal being that records and overhears whatever the mother is talking and thinking about. Fetal conscious is telepathically bound to that of the mother in other words.

The trouble with the *tabula rasa* theory is that it assumes that memory is somehow stored at the physical level and that there is no other way for it to be stored. I believe this to be a fundamental metaphysical error deriving from the fallacious premise that consciousness is contained *in* the brain. This philosophical prejudice is closely linked to the philosophical doctrine that goes under the names of "scientific materialism" and "positivism" It states, crudely summarized, that unless you can measure what you are examining, by weighing or observing it in some experimental and quantifiable fashion, and so on, it isn't real.

To speak of memories as located "in the brain", is actually a rather clumsy mixed metaphor. Yet it is metaphor we are particularly blind to. If we compare this with a more obvious metaphor as when we speak of "there's a lot of love in my heart " it is fairly apparent that we don't need to perform surgery to get at that love by opening the chest up. And yet when somebody says that "consciousness is in the brain", it is considered legitimate to do doing all kinds of physiological explorations with scalpels and electrodes.

Nevertheless the materialist view of mind is not universally held by the scientific and philosophical communities. Even some eminent neurologists and physiologists like the eminent British neurologist Sir John Eccles challenge this. After a lifetime of research into brain physiology and having asked all the questions that could be asked about the body-mind interaction, Sir John Eccles, stated unequivocally his belief that the mind is simply of a different order than the physical world and that you would never find evidence of mind *in the brain*. Mind interacts with the brain but it does not

belong to same reality. It's about as useless to look in the brain for mind as it is to look for music by carving holes in your CD recording. "In" is a spatial metaphor that does not refer to physical space.

The mystics have always known this. Kabir, a celebrated Indian mystic, made fun of the materialists with a very provocative little image. He said, "take a bucket of water. Fill it with water from the river, now put it back in the river. What have you got? Is the water in the bucket, or is the bucket in the water?" and then he went on to say, "don't think about it too hard lest silly people start to talk about the body and the mind." There's also another lovely saying that goes "You'll never find your heart in a temple until you find the temple in your heart". Poetic declarations like these deliberately use metaphors to describe in images that which belongs to the non-material level of reality.

So when we're talking about past life memories we need to be aware that they derive from higher or *subtle realities*, and that they are not simply some emanation of the physical force field. In the poem cited in an earlier chapter Wordsworth says that "we come trailing clouds of glory from God who is our home." Here in striking poetic language is the idea that the consciousness of the newborn child is a luminous consciousness, one that carries the imprints of this higher or subtle reality, the reality of the soul. Such things have always been taught in traditional cultures. Indeed we find the same idea in ancient as well as modern astrology, which claims that when the child is born, (or conceived, in Chinese astrology), the agendas of the soul are already imprinted on it. This has nothing to do with physiology or genetics. This is the imprinting of *psychically* determined factors or patterns coming from a higher level of reality, the non-material vibrational frequency (to borrow a metaphor from science) that belongs to the soul or to Higher Mind.

Metaphysics, Imagination and the Language of the Soul

If we truly want to understand the mysteries of memory, imagination and visionary experience—and this includes past-life memory—we will have to go *beyond* conventional scientific thinking, important as this is in understanding the profound mysteries of the material universe. Interestingly, the Latin word for "beyond" translates as "meta". We are all familiar at least the name of the *Metaphysics* which is the title of the work of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle. This actually was the book he wrote after he wrote the *Physics*; in his *Metaphysics* he goes *beyond* the study of the purely material world.

Aristotle openly acknowledged, following his great mentor Plato that there is another level to be studied, one that is *beyond, above* and *higher* than the physical. Now, notice that all these words—all of which are metaphors—have spatial connotations. They suggest a different kind of space, psychic space, which is to say, spiritual reality. So to access higher realities and also our higher minds we do not need to climb up a ladder or perform brain surgery to get there; instead we need to learn how to alter our state of consciousness. For the simple truth is that it is by sharpening the focus of our consciousness that we are able to encounter these other realities.

Recent developments in transpersonal psychology can be extremely helpful here. Psychologists like Abraham Maslow, Ken Wilbur, Stanislav Grof and Charles Tart have pioneered the study of altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness. They have shown that as human beings we all have available to us multiple states of consciousness, whether we access them through hypnosis, through meditation or mystical practices, through the use of vision-inducing sacred plants, through practicing shamanic trance rituals, or whether through developing artistic consciousness as a poet, musician, dancer or painter. A great musician, for example, is in a different state of consciousness when he is composing or playing, just as dancing produces profound trance states—witness the whirling dervishes or the Brazilian Umbanda priests, for example.

The most potent way to access consciousness of the higher realities of spirit is through the cultivation of higher or visionary imagination. Carl Jung once made an interesting remark, trying to make a very strong distinction between the two realities: "Do not think carnally or you will become flesh. Think symbolically and you will become spirit." For Jung, to think symbolically, was to think with the imagination. To take our images seriously and follow them wherever they take us is to let them be the bridges or the access codes to other states of being.

Transpersonal psychology also reminds us that if we're going to talk about the higher or the transcendent reality through or by which past-life memories and higher consciousness is transmitted to us, we will also have to distinguish between different levels of the personality. In other words, we will need to speak not just of a day-to-day ordinary self, but we will need to speak in addition of a "Higher" self. And there are plenty of precedents for this in sacred tradition and esoteric literature.

From the perspective of earthly life, it is common in popular psychology to refer to the self that deals with day-to-day reality as the ego or ego personality. This ego develops from infancy to adulthood to become our biographical self. Its thoughts, feelings, memories, perceptions etc are of course the subject of conventional psychology, the study of what we call our personality. But when we talk of the larger or the higher dimensions that transcend the physical and the earthly world, of encounters with places or states where people experience mystical raptures, shamanic journeys to other worlds, cosmic consciousness and so on, transpersonal psychology rightly proposes the existence of a self-aware consciousness, a greater or a Higher Self. This is what is often called the soul or in other traditions, the Self, a term that is usually capitalized.

Opening the "Heavenly Eye"

When our consciousness is altered or expanded, through the cultivation of meditative, visionary or trance states we are much more in touch with this greater Self and its higher or more lucid awareness. If we transcend the one dimensional perceptions of our this-worldly ego personalities we are able to become aware of realities far beyond physical reality. So when we move away from a purely material or one-dimensional view of reality into a higher viewpoint we learn to see in a way that the ancients called *sub specie aeternitatis* which in Latin means *from the eye or perspective of eternity*.

A symbol of this is the famous picture of the eye in the triangle, derived from Freemasonry by the Founding Fathers, that we have in the American dollar bill. This is actually an esoteric symbol meaning the eye of God, the Third Eye of the yoga chakras. It's only when we contemplate or see from the perspective of the higher mind or Self, that the mysteries of karma, human suffering, and what I'm calling the evolution of the soul, begin to make sense and to have some kind of coherence.

In the writings of early Buddhism we find a reported sermon by the Buddha in which he said something very similar to this:

With the heavenly eye purified and beyond range of human vision, I saw how beings vanish and come to be again. I saw high and low, brilliant and insignificant, and how each attained, according to his karma, a favorable or a painful birth

Throughout this book you will have opportunities to develop your "heavenly eye" or subtle vision along with the other subtle senses that are available to us in meditative or visionary states of consciousness. This faculty is not as nearly difficult to acquire as one might think. Many of us are familiar with it through working with our dreams. In fact, this is the same consciousness that is with

us in the dream state, particularly if we have been able to develop it to the degree that is called lucid dreaming.

But the main key to this is learning to work with images, to develop our capacity to imagine vividly and deeply. And imaging, doesn't always mean visualizing. Some of us *hear* images; we have a more auditory imagination than others. Some of us *feel* or *sense* images, we know what it is like to be in a certain place physically, to sense the environment, to feel a different body. Playwrights, film-makers are often highly intuitive with their physical images. They can set a scene in their imagination with incredible precision when they are creating a film. We can all do this in different degrees. But everyone will imagine in a slightly different way. It doesn't matter if our visual images are not clear; we may have strong kinesthetic or physical images instead.

Just as a little test of your ability to imagine I reproduce a short poem from an English poet, Robert Graves called "**Warning to Children**". It's obviously addressed to the playful and curious child in all of us whose imagination hasn't been entirely stifled by too much rational education:

Children, if you dare to think
Of the greatness, rareness, muchness,
Fewness of this precious only
Endless world in which you say
You live, you think of things like this
Blocks of slate enclosing dappled
Red and green, enclosing tawny
Yellow nets, enclosing white
And black acres of dominoes,
Where a neat brown paper parcel
Tempts you to untie the string,
In the parcel a small island,
On the island a large tree,
On the tree a husky fruit.
Strip the husk and pare the rind off:
In the kernel you will see
Blocks of slate enclosed by dappled
Red and green, enclosed by tawny
Yellow nets, enclosed by white
And black acres of dominoes,
Where the same brown paper parcel
Children, leave the string alone!
For who dares undo the parcel
Finds himself at once inside it,
On the island, in the fruit,
Blocks of slate about his head,
Finds himself enclosed by dappled
Green and red, enclosed by yellow
Tawny nets, enclosed by black
And white acres of dominoes
With the same brown paper parcel
Still untied upon his knee.

And if he then should dare to think
Of the fewness, muchness, rareness,
Greatness of this endless only
Precious world in which he says
He lives he then unties the string.

Traveling in Visionary Time and Space

Notice how quickly you move through realities in your images, how you move from parcel to island to tree to fruit and back again in a matter of split seconds. In the imagination, travel is instant. We can go anywhere, be in any place instantly in the imagination. That's not to say we're going there physically but that we're travelling in that "other" world that is an image or mirror of this one. According to the Sufi Al Ghazzali the higher world is a spiritual mirror of the lower world, so that when we travel in the visionary or imaginal [1] world we are actually moving in another reality.

This is precisely what happens happens in past life journeying. When we tap into the vast memory store that is both ours and that of mankind, we can move anywhere in the history of mankind instantly. It is not a slow laborious thing to remember at all. It is no different than remembering events in this life. If I say to you, "Do you remember last Christmas or the Christmas before?" you can call up images instantly, almost as soon as I suggest them. If I say, "remember one of your childhood houses, the one you grew up in that you like the most," the image is there instantly. Our power of recall actually operates a bit like a computer. We can call up these memory programs just by naming them. Every image has a name attached to it and vice versa. If you can name something with words, you can produce an image of it. In certain exercises in this book, for example, you are asked to go to a certain country in your imagination. You will find, as many have previously, that you will very quickly have an image of a certain country which is extremely meaningful to you even if you've never visited it.

Another thing that will happen as you develop your imagination and your visionary senses, is that you will find you can imagine having different bodies. Men can imagine having women's bodies in other lifetimes and women can imagine having male bodies. These bodies when recalled and imagined will change and age and go through transformations and sometimes considerable sufferings which specifically belong to the past life memory.

The imagination is one of the great unsolved mysteries of our time. I believe that in its higher form (as opposed to fantasy, its lower or ego related form) imagination is the bridge to the transpersonal realities of the soul, that transcendent part of the personality we have called the Self. This other level of reality is sometimes called the subtle world, or the spirit world. Platonism, Hinduism and Buddhism, all of which subscribe to the idea of the transmigration of the soul, called it *the intermediary world*, a reality midway between this and the world of pure light. In Tibetan Buddhism this "in between" is called a *bardo*, a term we shall be using later in this book. This measureless, infinite, multiple world beyond this material world is the source not only of all memories and all the experiences of humanity—called the *akasha* in Hindu tradition—but is also the source of all dreams and visions. It is thus what writers like Joseph Campbell call *mythic reality*. The Aborigines in Australia call it the "dreamtime". It is vast, encompassing and penetrating the whole of this reality at the subtle level

This dreamtime, or visionary realm remains largely a mystery to us in the modern world because we haven't, as a culture, taken it very seriously for a long time. We have been too caught up with the

material world to notice it except in states of distraction or retreat. And yet it is always there, always waiting to be visited. We can go into it, just as Graves encourages us to open the brown paper parcel and travel there. Or, like Alice in Wonderland we can go through the rabbit hole, or cross the bridge onto the other side. In fact, in visionary geography most journeys into the other realm require a formal induction or crossing or a rite of passage— a tunnel, a doorway, a corridor, a portal, a bridge or a window.

How a Past Life Can Surface: the Story of the Scottish Mother Who was Too Late

Very frequently the portal or doorway into a past life memory is a distressing event in our personal life that awakens or triggers an older or deeper memory. What follows is the story of a young woman who walked through a "doorway" into a past life in this way. This was a woman who was living on the coast of California and she'd been training in massage at the Esalen Institute. She was in her thirties and lived a fairly solitary life, having always been a bit of a loner, with few close relationships. She later admitted that she never wanted to have a family in this lifetime.

This young woman, whom I shall call Sally, had been driving back from a visit to San Francisco to Big Sur when she came upon a terrible car accident. A car had gone off the side of the road and overturned, rolled down the mountain side and had become wedged in some rocks. When she arrived, a state trooper had been sent for and a group of people had stopped their cars and were looking on in horror.

Sally, who had received a degree in nursing and had basic first-aid knowledge, was a practical type, so she scrambled down the cliff and tried to get into the car. She looked inside and there was the body of a woman, clearly dead. Now the interesting thing, is that the sight of the dead body of the woman did not upset her in noticeable any way. She next looked around to see if there was anyone else in the car or beside the car. It was then that she saw something that did affect her. A baby bottle. And it was at that point she lost it, she freaked out, as she reported it.. She started to tremble and weep. She was so overcome she never found the body of the baby, but simply scrambled back up the rocks to get away from the scene. It was too horrible for her. The state trooper had arrived. She said, "there's a dead woman down there and I think a baby, you take over, I can't do anything." She got into her car and drove, trembling, all the way back to where she lived near Esalen.

That memory was still with her three weeks later when Sally came to a workshop. And all I did was have her focus on that moment when she had seen the baby bottle and had "freaked out".

I said to her, "what does that baby bottle make you think of?"

And she said, "I was too late."

I said gently, "Go on!"

She said, "I was too late to save the baby."

And I simply said to her "repeat that phrase a few times and see where it takes you".

She said, "It's too late, it's too late. Oh my God, the baby's dead."

"Where are you?" I asked Sally.

Sally sees herself on a mountain side in Scotland. She immediately feels she has the stocky body of a Scottish peasant woman who is up tending the sheep and she's heard gunfire in the little village

where she lives. It's the 17th century, when there are violent skirmishes between the English and the Scots border people. She comes running down the hill, burst into the little cottage and there is her sister and two babies, hers and her sister's all shot, all dead. "I was too late", she said, " I should have been there for my child. It was all my fault."

Just the thought of a dead baby had taken her through a window into another lifetime. The transition was almost instant when I invited her to focus. When she'd first been triggered, she was too upset to stay with the process, but the images were right there close to the surface. It simply took a stepping through that doorway to find herself in another lifetime. It was a painful one to remember, but it helped her understand why in this lifetime she had chosen not to have children. Eventually, she was able to forgive herself for the failure in the past life and look much more favorably at the possibility maybe of relationships and a family by the time the workshop and our sessions together were over.

[1] The word "imaginal" was coined by the French scholar of Sufism, Henry Corbin, to distinguish visionary imagination from the "imaginary" or that which is not real.