

HOW IS A MAN REBORN ?

SWAMI SATPRAKASHANANDA

(Heredity and environment are not adequate to account for a man's birth and growth.)

1. THE WORLD-WIDE ACCEPTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF REINCARNATION IS DUE TO ITS REASONABLENESS.

The doctrine of reincarnation is avowed particularly by Hinduism and Buddhism. It affirms the rebirth of a man in a new human body until he gets free from all attachment to the temporal. There are subtle differences between the Hindu and the Buddhist view of reincarnation. I shall dwell on the subject from the Hindu viewpoint, that is to say, from the viewpoint of Vedanta. The belief in the transmigration of the soul has not been confined to Hinduism and Buddhism. Clear evidences of this belief are to be found in Greek thought, in the Zoroastrian scriptures, in the teachings of the Essenes, of the Pharisees, of the early Fathers of the Christian Church, such as Justin Martyr, St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and also of the Sufi mystics and poets. Primitive and tribal races in different regions of the world also hold to this belief. From the very beginning the human race has been confronted with the mysteries of birth as well as of death. Where does man come from? Where does he go? These are the natural enquiries of the human mind.

With the belief in man's future existence there has been belief in his past existence as well. The words of Jesus Christ corroborate the doctrine of rebirth. Referring to John the Baptist he says : 'And if ye will receive *it*, this is Elias, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.'¹ Existence after death presupposes

existence before birth. What is beyond death must be beyond birth. Its origination as well as destruction does not depend on the physical body.

The Scottish philosopher and historian, David Hume (1711-1776), observes,

'The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth; and if the former existence no way concerned us, neither will the latter.... The Metempsychosis is therefore the only system of this kind that philosophy can hearken to.'²

So says Swami Vivekananda :

'If you are going to exist in eternity hereafter, it must be that you have existed through eternity in the past; it cannot be otherwise.'³

Eternal existence with a beginning is absurd. What begins in time must end in time.

The doctrine of reincarnation is a complement to the doctrine of karma. Man is reborn for the fulfilment of his karma. As he sows, so he reaps. The law of karma is the chain that ties man to the wheel of birth and rebirth. It is through karma that man is bound. And it is through karma that he can get free. Karma proves to be the cause of his bondage as long as a man clings to the temporal, but when he turns to the Eternal, karma opens the way to freedom. The twofold doctrine is based on a comprehensive and consistent view of human personality comprising its present, past, and future. It accounts for the settled facts of life. Being a rational interpretation

² *Essays by David Hume*, 'The Immortality of the Soul', George Routledge and Sons Ltd, London, pp. 424-27.

³ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1963 Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta 14, Vol. II, p. 218.

¹ Matt. XI. 14, 15.

of the drama of life and its mysteries, the doctrine has commended itself to the great thinkers of the world from ancient time to the modern age. Indeed, the doctrine of reincarnation, a sequence of the law of karma, has its supporters among the world's theologians, philosophers, mystics, scientists, poets, and psychologists : Writing on *Reincarnation and Karma, a Spiritual Philosophy Applied to the World Today*, L. Stanley Jost, Chief Librarian, Manchester, England, observes :

'The basic testimony to the truth of reincarnation is of a purely intellectual order. It rests on the ability of the conception to give significance and meaning to what would otherwise be without either, and this is the only kind of evidence of any truth, whether in the world of phenomena or the world of thought, which has ultimate value. It can be deduced from rigorous logic from the most elementary assumption of a moral order in the universe, and without *that* assumption there is not even a universe : there is merely a monstrous futility or a colossal nightmare.'⁴

2. THE RECOLLECTION OF ONE'S PAST LIFE AND ITS VERIFICATION.

The fact that we do not remember the previous lives we lived does not disprove the doctrine of reincarnation. It is often argued : if we lived before as human beings why do we not remember our past incarnations ? Since we do not remember them the theory of reincarnation is not acceptable. But the point is, our existence or non-existence does not depend on our memory. We do not have the recollection of our childhood days even. Does it mean we did not exist as children ? We are liable to forget early periods of this very life. No wonder we do not remember our former

life or lives. And it is a great blessing that we do not. Otherwise our present existence would have been complicated to the extreme. There would have been many a pretender, to say the least.

Even though human beings in general are oblivious of their previous lives, yet there have been exceptional cases of individuals in ancient and modern times who had memories of their past incarnation or incarnations. In many instances their recollections of past lives were verified.⁵ According to Patañjali by a special method of meditation a person can awaken the memories of his past life. As stated in his *Yoga-aphorisms* : 'As a result of the perception of

⁵ It may not be out of place to record from personal knowledge an authentic case of intuitive memory of past life. In 1935 when I was in New Delhi I heard from a reliable friend, a teacher of Sanskrit in a high school, that a brahmin girl of nine, Shanti Devi by name, who had been living with her parents in the old city, had memories of her former life since she had been a child. The secretary of the local Y.M.C.A. personally requested me to investigate the matter and ascertain the truth. But because of my preoccupation as the leader of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama in New Delhi I could not take up the investigation. Not long after that I had to leave the city to make arrangements for my journey to the United States.

I gathered from different sources that since the girl had been five years old she would remark from time to time with regard to certain food and dress, 'I have eaten this before', 'I have put on this before.' The mother paid little attention to the child's prattle. But as she grew up she spoke more definitely of her experiences in past life. She often asserted that she had lived in Muthra (a city about 150 miles to the south-east of Delhi), that her husband was a cloth merchant, that she remembered his name but would not give it out (because an orthodox Hindu woman does not as a rule utter the husband's name). A grand uncle elicited from her the name and address of the husband, who was not a brahmin, and who even came to Delhi when the case was related to him. He was accompanied by his son, who was one year older than Shanti Devi. As she saw the son she was deeply moved.

⁴ *Reincarnation, An East-West Anthology*, Compiled and Edited by Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston. The Julian Press, Inc., New York, 1961, p. 161.

subliminal impressions one gains the knowledge of former lives.⁶ The Sanskrit term for such recollection is *jāti-smara*. The Buddha is said to have remembered all his past lives.⁷ Śrī Kṛṣṇa speaks of the past incarnations: 'O Arjuna, many are the lives I have passed through and thou too. But I know them all, whilst thou knowest not, O Scorcher of foes.'⁸

3. A CLEAR KNOWLEDGE OF MAN'S PRESENT EXISTENCE IS THE KEY TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIS PAST AS WELL AS HIS FUTURE EXISTENCE.

It is by knowing what man is and how he lives that we can determine where he comes from and where he goes. Without understanding his real nature we cannot understand what his birth or death really means. It has been well said that man is the central fact in all investigation.

A careful study of a human being and the allied facts points to the truth that man is not just a physical, or a biophysical, or a psychophysical being. The real man is the knowing self, the central principle of consciousness, which is the unchanging witness of the changing conditions of the body, the organs, the mind, and the external world.

It was known upon enquiry that the mother of this boy died in a hospital in Muthra in 1925, shortly after giving birth to the son. Shanti Devi was born in Delhi in 1926. To verify the case a party of about ten noteworthy citizens, including the editor of a local daily paper, a commissioner of Delhi Municipality, and a college professor, went by train to Muthra accompanied by Shanti Devi, who had never been there before in this life. They discovered that Shanti Devi was well acquainted with the place and knew many details of the house where she claimed to have lived in her past life. She also visited her former parents and had no difficulty in finding the house where they lived even then.

⁶ *Yoga-Sūtra*, III, 18.

⁷ Vide *Samannaphala Sutta*.

⁸ *Bhagavad-Gīta*, IV, 5. (In subsequent references the abbreviation BG will be used.)

The indwelling self is the only constant factor in human personality that integrates all the physical and the psychical factors into a coherent whole and co-ordinates the diverse functions of the mind, the organs, and the body. It maintains the identity of man despite all changes, external and internal. Man is essentially immortal spirit ever shining and that is mainly responsible for the livingness of the psychophysical organism. 'He is the life of life', says the Upaniṣad with regard to the real man.⁹

It is because of the real self of the nature of pure consciousness that every individual knows spontaneously that he is. He is aware of his own existence and the existence of all else that comes in his way. It is this self-awareness that distinguishes all sentient creatures from material things. It is self-evident. It requires no proof. Being of contrary nature the changeless luminous self cannot derive from the body, the organs, or the mind, or their functions. It is fundamental. It exists in the psychophysical organism from the very beginning. It is the sole regulatory principle of the changeful heterogeneous factors in an individual. Its presence is the antecedent condition of the purposive behaviour of a living being. Wherever is livingness there is sentiency. Devoid of consciousness, explicit or implicit, any physical organization must be either a mechanical device or a material structure. Herein is the basic difference between the living and the non-living.

Being immutable the self is beyond birth, growth, decay, and death. It is not born with the birth of the body, nor does it die when the body drops. As declared by Śrī Kṛṣṇa :

'This (the self) is never born, nor does it die. It is not that not having been it again comes into being. (Or, it is not that having been it again ceases to be).

⁹ *Kena Upaniṣad*, I, 2.

This is unborn, eternal, changeless, though ancient ever new. It is not killed when the body is killed.'¹⁰

4. NEITHER THE SELF NOR THE MIND IS INHERITABLE.

Now the question arises: Where does the self of a human offspring come from? The unborn self cannot originate either from the male or the female parent. Not the parent's body, nor the mind, nor any of the ten organs, none of which has consciousness inherent in it, can generate the luminous self, which is of contrary nature. It is absurd that the self of the child will emerge from the father's or the mother's self, which is indivisible and immutable. Modern biology recognizes the mind but not the self. But without the recognition of the self, an unvarying spiritual principle in the psychophysical organism, the integration of the ever shifting physical and psychical factors and their processes and also the direction of the whole towards a definite end remain unexplained. As observed by Edmund Sinnott:

'What pulls together the separate parts and processes of a plant or animal and knits them into an organism, and what draws this organism toward a developmental goal prefigured in its living stuff—these are the problems where the confident progress of biology has made but little headway.'¹¹

It is equally impossible for the child to inherit the mind from either parent. An individual's mind is distinct from the self and the body as well, although closely associated with both. These three constituents cannot be identified with one another. Men-

tal states and functions are other than those of the body and organs. None of the organs can function unless the mind joins with it. But the mind can function even when the organs and the body are inoperative. It is through the mind conjoined with the senses that the self perceives physical objects. An individual functions as an organized system because of the co-ordination of these three primal constituents—the self, the mind, and the body. There can be no living organism without their correlation. The three exist as distinct principles from its inception. None of the three derives from the two others. Living processes are invariably psychophysical. A plan for self-development is immanent in the very embryo. With the plan there must be a planner. 'It is as if an immanent principle inspired each cell with knowledge for the carrying out of a design,' says Sir Charles Sherrington, the eminent physiologist.¹² Unlike the physical body the mind is impartible. It is too subtle to be broken into parts. Amputation of the body does not cause the amputation of mind. The receptacle of the mind remains the same while the contents change. It is the identity of the mind that maintains one's individuality beyond death and rebirth. Hence the child's mind cannot be a fragment of the parental mind. Nor can it arise from either parent's body or the self, being different by nature from both. What the offspring actually receives from the parents are the rudiments of its physical body. These can serve as the medium for the transmission of the parents' physical characteristics to the offspring more or less. Can the child's mind and the self as well develop from this physical source? If not, where do they come from?

¹⁰ BG II. 20.

¹¹ Edmund W. Sinnott: *The Bridge of Life* (From Matter to Spirit), Simon and Schuster, New York, 1966, p. 128.

¹² Sherrington: *Man on His Nature*, Gifford Lectures, 1937-38 (C.U.P.). Quoted by Raynor C. Johnson: *The Imprisoned Splendour*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1953, p. 55.

5. THE MEANING OF HEREDITY. THE INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS MUST HAVE A REAL CAUSE. THESE CANNOT BE A MATTER OF CHANCE.

The doctrine of reincarnation recognizes the general biological law that 'like begets like.' Humans are born of human parents, elephants of elephant parents, ants of ant parents. The same is true of plant life. A fig tree originates from another fig tree, an apple tree from another apple tree. Rose plants grow from rose plants. A living thing comes from another living thing of the same species and never from lifeless matter. This property of self-reproduction common to all living things is known as heredity. It differentiates a living thing from non-living matter. It is because of a vital difference between the two that the one cannot derive from the other. I quote below modern biologists' definitions of heredity:

*Heredity, in the last analysis, is self-reproduction, the common property of all life and the property that distinguishes living from non-living matter.'*¹³

'Each new generation of organisms closely resembles its parents; the mating of two cats always produces cats and the mating of two Siamese cats always produces Siamese cats and not a different variety. Certain distinctive characteristics appear frequently in successive generations of a given family tree. Man has been aware for many centuries that "like begets like" and that new types of animals and plants may result when unlike forms are crossed. This tendency of individuals to resemble their progenitors is called *heredity*.'

¹⁴

This resemblance does not exclude individual variations. Heredity in a wide sense,

is inclusive of both similarity and divergence. Every creature despite the resemblance it bears to its progenitors and to other creatures of the same descent, retains its individuality. Indeed, every living being is a distinct individual. What is the cause of this distinctiveness? The basic difference between one individual and another is in their mental constitution, which is not acquired from the parents. Even twin brothers widely differ in their inner nature despite their closest physical resemblance. Every individual brings his own mind and develops in his own way. The root cause of variation is in the inner nature of the living being and not in environmental conditions. Modern genetics has not been able to find a satisfactory solution of the problem of variations.

Vedanta does not contradict modern biologists' delineation of the process of human reproduction so far as the body of the offspring is concerned, but does not consider it an adequate explanation of the origin of the offspring as a whole. Had an individual been primarily a body instinct with life then the transmission of the parents' physical particles through the reproductive cells might account for his origination. But far more important than the body are his mind and the self, neither of which can be attributed to his parents as already explained. Even for his body the parents cannot be held wholly responsible. Its roots are to be traced to his past life. A human being cannot result from chance conjunction of material units, that is to say, the physical ingredients of the reproductive cells of the parents, the sperm and the ovum.

¹³ *Principles of Genetics*, Edmund IV. Sinnott. L. C. Dunn, Theodosius Dobzhansky. Fifth edition, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. New York, 1958, p. 2.

¹⁴ Claude A. Villee: *Biology*, fourth edition, W. B. Saunders Company, Philadelphia, 1962, p. 452.

6. HUMAN REPRODUCTION ACCORDING TO MODERN BIOLOGY.

According to modern biology the human body like other multicellular living things, plants or animals, consists of innumerable minute cells, which are responsible for its

structure and function. Each cell is a miniature organism and is regarded as the fundamental unit of life. 'New cells come into being by the division of previously existing cells.' As noted by Dr. Villee, 'The cell theory includes the concept that the cell is the fundamental unit of both function and structure—the fundamental unit that shows all the characteristics of living things.'¹⁵ Other than the ordinary body cells are the germ cells, which have the property of reproduction. The reproductive cell in the male body is called the *sperm* and the reproductive cell in the female body is called the *ovum* or *egg*. The common name for both is the *gamete*. The sperm is smaller but more active than the egg. Neither is observable by the naked eye. Each gamete is a single cell.

While the acquired traits of parents belong to the body cells, their inherited characteristics belong to the gametes—the egg and the sperm. So the inherited characteristics are transmitted to the offspring but not the acquired traits according to the present-day biologists. This refutes the former Lamarckian view that the acquired characteristics of parents and the hereditary as well are inherited by the offspring. The German zoologist, August Weismann, contended for the first time that 'acquired' characters are never inherited. His view has prevailed since then being supported by evidence.

Inside the reproductive cell there are rod-shaped bodies called the *chromosomes*. In each cell of the human species there are twenty-four pairs of chromosomes.¹⁶ Within the chromosomes lie the hypothetical material units called the *genes*. Each one of the genes controls the inheritance of one or more characteristics. They are generally known as heredity units. As noted by William Beck:

'No one could examine a naked gene, for its properties were assayable only by genetic analysis of the progeny. It itself remained an inferred entity and a thoroughly remarkable one, for its small size and durability suggested that its material construction must be startlingly complex in detail.'¹⁷

That the theory of genetic inheritance is founded on assumption is acknowledged by other biologists:

'It should be clearly understood that we are sure of the existence of genes not because we have seen them or analyzed them chemically (genetics has so far not succeeded in doing either of these things), but because Mendel's laws can be satisfactorily understood only on the assumption that genes exist. For the purpose of studying the inheritance of traits, it is sufficient to define the gene as a unit transmitted from parents to offspring, which is responsible for the development of certain characters in individuals living in certain environments. The gene so defined is a hypothetical unit, and the body of knowledge concerned with these genes has come to be known as *formal genetics*. The theory of formal genetics could have been developed even if chromosomes had been unknown and the microscope did not exist.'¹⁸

Indeed, the only common link between the child and its parents is its genetic constitution. At copulation numerous sperm and ova are let loose. Two of them—one sperm and one ovum—perchance meet and bring about a new germ-cell called the zygote, the fertilized egg, which develops into an individual in due course. It is said that 'only one of the millions of sperm deposited at each ejaculation fertilizes a single egg.'¹⁹ Thus, according to current biology the starting point of an individual's life is the zygote

¹⁷ *Modern Science and the Nature of life*, by William S. Beck. Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1957, p. 214.

¹⁸ *Principles of Genetics*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹ Claude A. Villee: *Biology*, p. 424.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 35.

¹⁶ Since 1956 the number counted is twenty-three pairs.

produced by the fusion of the nuclei of the male and the female reproductive cell. The fertilized egg contains twelve pairs of chromosomes from the male parent and twelve pairs from the female parent. The hereditary units, the genes, of both the parents lie within them. The chromosomes and the genes function as a single unit. To quote contemporary biologists:

'From the very beginning, at fertilization, the body possesses a highly developed structure, or organization. As the development proceeds this organization undergoes an orderly series of changes, leading by stages to the formation of a fetus and then of an adult body.'

'The only material objects that one inherits biologically from one's parents are the genes carried in the egg and sperm cells from which the body originates.'²⁰

'Indeed, the nuclei of egg and sperm, these tiny packets of reproductive substance, into which so much is packed and out of which so much emerges, are the most remarkable bits of living matter in existence.'²¹

In explaining the origin and development of an individual the biologists have had recourse to both assumption and chance. Says Dobzhansky:

'A child receives one-half of the genes of his father and one-half of the maternal ones; which particular maternal and paternal genes are transmitted to a given child is a matter of chance. Which mutations occur, and when and where, is also a matter of chance.'²²

7. MODERN BIOLOGY GIVES NO SATISFACTORY EXPLANATION OF THE BIRTH OF A GENIUS OR A MORON.

According to Julian Huxley it is a matter of chance. Says he:

²⁰ *Principles of Genetics*, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 17.

²² *The Biology of Ultimate Concern*, by Theodosius Dobzhansky. The New American Library, Inc. New York, N.Y., 1967, p. 126.

'Egg and sperm carry the destiny of generations. The egg realizes one chance combination out of an infinity of possibilities, and it is confronted with millions of pairs of sperms, each one actually different in the combination of cards which it holds. Then comes the final moment in the drama—the marriage of egg and sperm to produce the beginning of a large individual.... Here, too, it seems to be entirely a matter of chance which particular union of all the millions of possible unions shall be consummated. One might have produced a genius, another a moron ... and so on ... with a realization of all that this implies, we can banish from human thought a host of fears and superstitions. No basis now remains for any doctrine of metempsychosis.'²³

To hold that the birth of a genius or a moron is the result of a chance union of sperm and egg, as Julian Huxley does, is a plausible explanation of a known fact. It is tantamount to saying, 'I do not know the real cause.' To attribute a universally observable fact to chance in this cosmic order regulated by the law of cause and effect is indicative of one's inability to probe into deeper realms of existence. To have recourse to chance is worse than submission to fatalism. Just as the biologists cannot explain certain observable facts of life without the assumption of something, e.g., gene, which is beyond the range of observation, similarly, there are established facts in the sensible universe composed of the living and the non-living, which cannot be explained without the recognition of subtle realities, such as mind and spirit that are beyond the ken of the senses but are graspable by reason and open to suprasensuous vision.

According to the doctrine of karma, nowhere in the universe is there room for chance, neither in the domain of the animate nor in the domain of the inanimate. Nothing hap-

²³ Julian Huxley: *What dare I think* (1931). Quoted in *Reincarnation: An East and West Anthology*, pp. 292-3.

pens without a cause. As is the cause so is the effect. The effect corresponds to the cause. The law of karma on which the doctrine of reincarnation is based is the cosmic law of cause and effect functioning on the human plane as a moral law. As we sow so we reap. Neither heredity nor environment, not even their interaction, can explain the birth and growth of an individual. Further, geniuses are born of mediocre parents, morons of normal parents, sane children of insane parents, wicked children of saintly parents. Only the law of karma can account for these anomalies. The point is, the child comes to the parents and is not begotten by them. The prime factor in the origination and development of an individual is the individual himself, all else is subsidiary to him. This is particularly evident in the case of young prodigies. The world has witnessed not a few of them in both East and West in all ages. We shall mention only two instances during the historical period.

Śaṅkarācārya, the greatest exponent of Advaita Vedānta, lived only thirty-two years (686-718 A.D.). At the age of seven he mastered the Vedic literature, which is a library in itself. His erudite preceptor was astounded by the pupil's genius. The profound scholarship and wisdom of young Śaṅkara won the admiration of one and all. His fame extended far and wide. The King of Kerala came to pay him respects. At the age of nine he embraced monasticism. And he attained *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the apex of spiritual realization, before he was twelve. Most of his literary works, the masterpieces of Advaita Vedānta, were composed by the time he was sixteen. A versatile genius—a seer, a philosopher, a saint, an indefatigable religious reformer, a poet, a prose-writer *par excellence*, a spiritual teacher of the highest order, young Śaṅkara made the Vedic religion invincible. His great achievements within a short span of thirty-two years are the marvels of the world,

The Scottish philosopher, Sir William Hamilton, who lived from 1788 to 1856 A.D., proved in his youth to be a marvellous prodigy of modern times. It is said that he started to learn Hebrew at the age of three. At the age of seven he was pronounced by one of the Fellows of Trinity College, Dublin, to have shown a greater knowledge of language than many candidates for a fellowship. At thirteen he could speak thirteen languages. Among these, besides the classical and modern European languages, were Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindustani, and Malayan. At fourteen he wrote a complimentary letter to the Persian Ambassador, who happened to visit Dublin, and the latter said that no one in Britain could have written such a document in the Persian language. At six he could look up from toys and answer a difficult mathematical problem, and when he was eighteen the Astronomer Royal of Ireland, Dr. Brinkley, said of him, 'This young man I do not say *will be* the first mathematician of his age, I say he *is* the first mathematician of his age.'²⁴

Evidently, the extraordinary powers of the prodigies are not due to heredity, or environment, or the interaction of the two. These must have been cultivated by the individuals themselves in their former lives. The doctrine of reincarnation maintains the identity of an individual throughout the succession of births and deaths. One and the same individual appears in different physical garbs, but all along retains the same mind, which is separable from the body. His progress is dependent primarily on the development of the mind and secondarily on the development of the body. Modern biology distinguishes the mind from the body but considers it an annex to the body. Conse-

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²⁴ Vide Raynor C. Johnson: *The Imprisoned Splendour*, p. 379. Originally narrated in *North British Review*, September, 1866.

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quently in its view the mind is inseparable from the body ; there is no clear-cut distinction between the two. The same hereditary units, the genes, that bring forth the body also bring forth the mind. Both arise from the same physical particles transmitted by the parents. But the difference in the nature of the mind and the body is so marked that both cannot have the same kind of material components.

(To be continued)

HOW IS A MAN REBORN?

SWAMI SATPRAKASHANANDA

8. HEREDITARY TRANSMISSION OF MENTAL CHARACTERISTICS IS NOT POSSIBLE. NEITHER HEREDITY NOR ENVIRONMENT, BUT THE CHILD'S INNER NATURE, IS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT.

A distinctive characteristic of the mind is that it can transmit consciousness, which is intrinsic in the self. The radiance of consciousness reaches the body through the mind and not *vice versa*. When the mind is diverted from the physical body the body loses sensation, none of the ten bodily organs, either of perception or of action, can function, but the mind continues to operate.

In dream state the body is almost inert, yet the mind intensely functions. The bodily functions and the mental functions are altogether different. One can intensely think, feel, will, imagine, recollect, when the body and the organs are inoperative. Unlike the bodily processes, mental functions give clear evidence of underlying consciousness. The mind cannot be disintegrated in the same way as matter. No chemical analysis of the mind is possible. The mind can go anywhere but not the body.

The body and the mind being characteristically different, the bodily traits belong to *the body and the mental traits to the mind*.

So the hereditary transmission of the mental traits through the particles of the body of either parent is not possible. 'The inheritance of mental ability or intelligence is one of the most important, yet one of the most difficult, problems of human genetics', remarks Claude Villee.²⁵

However, according to modern biology the mental as well as the physical traits of the parents are inherited by the offspring. How? 'The living substance of the sperm and egg nuclei transmits all the characters which the new individual inherits from his parents. The qualities themselves—colour, size, shape, and so forth—are not present in the germ cells, but something representing them and capable of producing them in the new individual is present. In man, the colour of hair, eyes, and skin, the size and shape of the body and its parts, certain structural defects, resistance to various diseases, certain mental traits, capacities and defects are all inherited and therefore must be represented in the gametes. The latter, then, contain factors which interact with each other and with the environment to produce the adult characteristics.'

Biology acknowledges two determining factors in the development of an individual—heredity and environment. Of these two heredity is basic. The functioning of environment is dependent on heredity, that is, the individual's physical and mental constitution acquired from the parents. So says Conklin:

'Unquestionably the factors or causes of development are to be found not merely in the germ but also in the environment, not only in intrinsic but also in extrinsic forces; but it is equally certain that the directing and guiding factors of development are in the main intrinsic, and are present in the organization of the germ cells, while the environmental factors exercise chiefly a stimula-

tion, inhibiting or modifying influence on development.'²⁶

As observed by Claude Villee:

'At one time a bitter argument raged as to whether heredity or environment was more important in determining human traits. It is now abundantly clear that both physical and mental traits are the result of the interplay of both genetic and environmental factors.'²⁷

According to the doctrine of reincarnation an individual acquires from the parents what physical traits are merited by him in consequence of his karma. But he does not owe his mental characteristics to the parents in the same way. He brings his own mind with him. As we have noted, hereditary transmission of mental traits is not possible. Mental characteristics of the parents cannot pass on to the offspring through the physical particles. Whatever similarity there may be between the mental characters of an individual and those of his parents must be due to the fact that like attracts like under the law of karma.

An individual's inborn nature, physical as well as mental, is mainly responsible for his development. The environmental conditions can only stimulate or retard his growth. There is no question that man is deeply influenced by the surroundings in which he lives. Generally, his development is the resultant of the interaction of his inner nature and outer conditions. But his inner nature is the prevailing force. By no means can man be counted as a creature of circumstances. Very often he chooses his environment according to his inner tendencies and capabilities. He can modify the environmental conditions, use them to his best advantage and can even rise above them. He

²⁶ Edwin Grant Conklin: *Heredity and Environment in the Development of Men*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1919, pp. 59-60.

²⁷ Claude A. Villee: *Biology*, p. 506.

²⁵ Claude A. Villee: *Biology*, pp. 503-4.

can even develop the power to create his own environment.

A man of self-knowledge is unperturbed by the changing conditions of life. So says Śrī Kṛṣṇa:

‘He whose mind is unworried in the midst of sufferings, who is free from desire in the midst of pleasures, who is devoid of attachment, fear and anger—such a person of steady wisdom is said to be a sage.’²⁸

9. THE FERTILIZED EGG DEVELOPS INTO A FULL-FLEDGED HUMAN BEING BECAUSE THE SAME IS IN IT. WHERE DOES HE COME FROM? NOT FROM THE PARENTS. IT IS THE PSYCHOPHYSICAL CONSTITUTION THAT EVOLVES AND NOT THE REAL SELF.

According to modern genetics the very first stage of an individual's existence is the fertilized egg or zygote, the single cell formed by the fusion of the nuclei of sperm and ovum. This is what develops into an adult in due course. ‘At fertilization a sperm and an egg come together and unite, the nucleus of one fusing completely with that of the other. The single cell resulting from this union begins to divide, forming a group of cells, which develop into an embryo and finally into an adult organism.’ The single cell that develops into a full-fledged human individual is a minute but potent biophysical unit as conceived by the geneticists. It is too small to be perceived by the unaided eye and is open only to microscopic observation. But its potency is amazing. As observed by the geneticists: ‘Indeed, the nuclei of egg and sperm, these tiny packets of reproductive substance into which so much is packed and out of which so much emerges, are the most remarkable bits of living matter in existence.’²⁹

But the fertilized egg that grows to be an adult person cannot be regarded merely as a material unit endowed with livingness. What develops into a human individual must have the same latent in it. According to Vedānta development means unfoldment of inherent potency. What lies latent in the cause becomes manifest as the effect. A fig seed is a fig tree in the potential state. A fig seed develops into a fig tree and a poppy seed into a poppy plant; it is because the fig tree exists in the fig seed and the poppy plant in the poppy seed as potencies. Only by studying the fig tree can we know the real nature of the fig seed. No chemical analysis of the seed will reveal its true nature to us. No microscopic observation can probe into its potency. Similarly, by studying the poppy plant we can know the poppy seed in the true sense and in no other way. Therefore, in order to know the true nature of the fertilized egg we have to know its developed state as man. Truly speaking, it is a miniature man. All the main factors of human personality—the body, the organs, the vital principle, the mind, and the self—must be there in potential states.

Involution precedes evolution. The evolution of the seed into a tree is due to the fact that the tree is involved in the seed. The evolution is truly speaking the unfoldment of what is infolded. Without the recognition of involution evolution is inexplicable. The differences in the seeds account for the differences in the trees of the same species. As is the cause so is the effect. Something cannot come out of nothing. The cause of the variation of each individual is in its very nature. Neither environmental conditions, nor heredity, far less chance, can account for the new departure of every individual in the course of its development. Each develops according to its own pattern. The secret of its development is its innate creativeness. The fertilized egg develops into a human individual because the same is involved

²⁸ BG II, 56.

²⁹ *Principles of Genetics*, p. 17.

there. Modern evolutionists ignore involution; consequently they have had recourse to 'chance variations' or 'sporadic changes' in accounting for the individual evolutionary process.

To quote Swami Vivekananda:

'No rational man can possibly quarrel with these evolutionists. But we have to learn one thing more. We have to go one step further, and what is that? That every evolution is preceded by an involution. The seed is the father of the tree, but another tree was itself the father of the seed. The seed is the fine form out of which the big tree comes and another big tree was the form which is involved in that seed. The whole of this universe was present in the cosmic fine universe. The little cell, which becomes afterward the man, was simply the involved man, and becomes evolved as a man. If this is clear, we have no quarrel with the evolutionists, for we see that if they admit this step, instead of their destroying religion, they will be the greatest supporters of it.'³⁰

The central principle in human personality is the luminous self, the knower within, whose radiance sustains the psychophysical constitution and becomes manifest through it. There is neither evolution nor involution, neither expansion nor contraction, neither growth nor decay, in the ever-shining changeless self. All these variations characterize the psychophysical constitution alone. Consequent on its varied modifications there is diverse manifestation of the luminous self. Just as the same sunlight appears different through different transmitters—as dim or bright, as yellow or red, as blue or green, similarly according to the development of the psychophysical system, the radiance of consciousness belonging to the self (*ātma-caitanya-jyoti*) becomes manifest variously—as more or less intelligence, as more or less

strength, as more or less joy, and so forth.³¹

In the fertilized egg an individual's psychophysical constitution is in the nascent state. His mind as well as the body, minute though they may be, have just begun to develop with the concomitant manifestation of the self, howsoever faint it may be. Livingness is ever attended with consciousness. Any expression of consciousness or sentience in a living thing must be due to the manifestation of the self through the mind. As we have noted, it is through the mind that the radiance of consciousness reaches the physical level. Where do the mind and self of the individual come from? Neither of the two can be inherited from the parents. Both are impartible. Nor can they derive from the physical elements transmitted by the parents, as we have explained. From this it follows that the real source of the human offspring is not the fertilized egg, that is to say, he does not originate from the male parent or from the female parent or from both. He must come from elsewhere.

10. HOW IS AN INDIVIDUAL BORN?

Truly speaking, it is the case of rebirth of one of the many individuals who died somewhere sometime back. Death is not the end of an individual nor is birth the beginning of him. There is no place for accidentalism in human life, which is meaningful. In order to find how a man is reborn we have to find how he dies. At death, the self, the real man, leaves the physical body, but retains the subtle and the causal body. The mind with all its contents belongs to the subtle body. According to those impressions of karma (i.e., volitional actions, experiences, and thoughts) that become prevalent in the mind of the dying man, a very fine physical ves-

³⁰ Op. cit pp. 207-8.

³¹ Vide *Brahma-Sūtra*, Śaṅkara's Commentary, I. iii, 30.

ture for the subtle and the causal body is formed at the time of his departure from the gross body. This fine garb carries the potencies of the next gross body he assumes. He may go to a higher or a lower region impelled by the impressions of karma. But when these are exhausted the residual karma will lead him eventually to this human plane, where alone he has a chance for liberation. It is to be noted that unredeemed or unliberated souls are subject to rebirth and not the liberated.

When a bound soul is ready for rebirth on the human plane the impressions of his karma lead him to the parents from whom he can secure the materials for his gross body. The fine physical vesture that he wears has the potency to acquire the necessary material elements. Being associated with food he enters the body of the male parent suitable for his purpose. There he gets into the requisite sperm, which turns into a potent seed for his development as an individual. This is the seed that being united with the appropriate ovum in the female parent turns into the zygote and becomes ready for germination. These are the two specialized male and female reproductive cells that are responsible for the birth of the offspring out of countless sperm and ova that are brought into play in sexual reproduction, as already noted.

A tree may bear any number of fruits, yet they differ from one another in spite of their similarity due to common origin. Similarly, despite their resemblance every sperm differs from every other sperm in a male body. In the same way every ovum differs from every other ovum in a female body. Led by its karma the transmigrating soul gets into the requisite sperm and the ovum out of countless reproductive cells. The fusion of the sperm and the ovum required for its physical body is by no means a matter of chance. Nor is this brought about by blind natural force. Behind it is the universal law of

cause and effect in the form of the law of karma. Just as the livingness of each fruit on a tree is dependent on the livingness of the tree, so is the livingness of the sperm dependent on the livingness of the male body, and the livingness of the ovum dependent on the livingness of the female body. Neither the sperm nor the ovum can be counted as an individual in the sense in which the fertilized egg is.

According to the Upaniṣads, it is the male parent that sows the seed of the offspring in the soil of the female parent. It is said in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*:

‘Woman indeed is the fire, O Gautama. Into this fire the gods (presiding deities of the organs) offer the libation of semen. Out of this offering arises the foetus.’³² So says the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

‘Reaching the earth [while coming down from the celestial sphere] they [the souls of those who perform sacrificial rites and righteous deeds in order to go to higher regions for sense-fulfilment]³³ become food [being associated with rice, barley, etc.]. Then they are again offered in the fire of man, thence in the fire of woman, whence they are born (and perform rites) with a view to going to other worlds. Thus do they rotate [until they gain the saving knowledge, which frees them from the cycle of repeated birth and rebirth].’³⁴

Here the father is said to be the procreator. In this respect the Vedantic view is akin to that of the modern ‘spermists’. The ‘ovists’ hold a contrary view with regard to fertilization. As observed by Dr. Sturtevant:

‘With the development of clearer ideas about fertilization two schools emerged: the “ovists” who thought the preformed parts were contained in the unfertilized egg and were merely activated by the sperm, and the “spermists” who thought

³² V. viii. 2.

³³ They are reborn on the human plane when the merits of their deeds are exhausted.

³⁴ VI. ii. 16.

of the sperm as a complete animalcule that was merely nourished by the egg.'³⁵

In the words of the *Aitareya Upaniṣad*:

'What exists in the male body as semen the transmigrating soul is at first conceived as that. This is the extract of vigour from all the limbs of the body and this the man holds within himself as the self. When he deposits this in his wife he procreates it. That is its first birth.

'It becomes one with the wife as her own limb is. Therefore it does not hurt her. She nourishes this self of his that has entered into her. The father is regarded as reborn as the son.

'Being the nourisher she has to be nourished. The wife bears the embryo. Right after its birth the father protects the child [by natal rites] at first. Protecting the child from its birth onward he thus protects himself for the continuation of the worlds. For thus alone are these worlds perpetuated. This [the coming out from the mother's womb] is one's second birth.

'He (the son) who is like the self of his (the father) is made his substitute for the performance of righteous deeds. Then the other self of his [that is, the father] having accomplished his duties and having reached his age departs. So departing hence he is reborn. That is his third birth.'

Śaṅkara comments on this:

'Is it not a fact that for the transmigrating soul the first birth is in the form of semen from the father? And his second birth has been stated to be as a son from the mother. The turn now being for stating the third birth of that very soul [which is born as the son] why is the birth of the dead father mentioned as the third?... That son, too, just like his father, entrusts his responsibility to his son (in his own turn) and

then departing from here takes birth immediately after... What is stated with regard to the father is implied here with regard to the son.'³⁶

The doctrine of reincarnation makes life meaningful. It explains man's present existence with reference to its past and future. If birth be the beginning of life then death must be its end. Rationally we cannot accept future life without acknowledging our existence in the past. The assumption of future life is based on the recognition of the present life as its preexistence.

Every child is born with a particular psychophysical constitution. What makes the difference? Heredity cannot logically explain the difference in the inborn aptitudes of the individuals. The doctrine of reincarnation provides the only satisfactory explanation of the inequalities of life. An individual's weal and woe, weaknesses and excellences, knowledge and ignorance, rise and fall, depend primarily on his own past thoughts and deeds. No external agency, parentage or Divine dispensation, chance or fate, is responsible for them. The doctrine rejects both heredity and predestination as the source of human life. It makes man self-reliant.

It distinguishes the real man, the changeless self, from the everchanging psychophysical adjunct and points out the cause of his bondage and the way to freedom. A clear knowledge of the interrelation of the body, the mind, and the self in human personality is the key to self-mastery. These three factors are distinct from one another, although closely associated. One does not originate from, nor can one be identified with, any of the two others.

According to biology heredity and environment are the two principal factors in the origin and development of an individual. Of

³⁵ Prof. A. H. Sturtevant, California Institute of Technology; *A History of Genetics*, Harper and Row, 1965, p. 121.

³⁶ *Aitareya Upaniṣad and Commentary*, II. i. 1-4.

these two heredity is basic. It views the fertilized egg, the zygote, as a material unit composed of the physical particles derived from both the parents. To maintain the origin and development of man from this very source is to advocate the fundamental reality of matter. It is tantamount to saying that man's spiritual self as well as the mind originate from gross matter. Such a position is untenable. Physical processes can produce physical light but not the light of consciousness marked by self-awareness, which distinguishes spirit from matter. Man's spiritual self is not actually born nor does it die, but transmigrates for the time being under the law of karma.
