



The Social Relevance of Reincarnation

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At the beginning of my documentary project on reincarnation, in the search for funding, my researcher sent me a book with addresses of celebrities. I hadn't had any luck with foundations, so I thought, "what the heck." I fired off letters to some 25 or 30 of the most likely ones, and I got exactly one personal letter back — a very sweet, hand-written note from Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary. It said, "Dear Steve, Sorry, but this is not an area of our active interest or commitment — human rights is more like it. Good luck anyway, all the best." Signed, Peter Yarrow.

Now, I knew that most foundations prioritized projects which addressed social issues, projects which were socially relevant. All had turned down my requests to fund a documentary on reincarnation as being outside the scope of their interests. But I think this note from Mr. Yarrow was the turning-point where I decided to give up trying to obtain outside funding. I produced my documentary on a shoestring. It took me five years, and it's not quite what it could have been with funding, but I did get it broadcast by one PBS station so far.

Now, as I approach other PBS entities, I'm revisiting the whole issue of whether reincarnation is socially relevant. Why should anyone think of reincarnation as more than a curiosity, or at most a matter of individual concern?

Reincarnationists are pretty much unanimous in agreeing that over the course of many incarnations, a person will experience life in a variety of situations. They will be both sexes, various races, wealthy and poor, thin and overweight,

beautiful and plain, powerful and powerless, in this political group and in that one, in this culture and in that one. In short, they will experience both sides of every political and social dichotomy you can name. Now, isn't it true that the best method for healing social rifts is to help someone vicariously walk a mile in the other person's shoes? If reincarnation were properly understood, people would realize that they had in fact been their counterpart, or will yet be.

The next way that reincarnation is socially relevant is a little more difficult to describe. I can say it gives a broader perspective, but that's not quite right. It transcends the materialistic paradigm, and thus it transcends the conventional conception of history. From the reincarnationalist viewpoint, history is not a record of the world's power struggles; it is the record of learning and awakening. Society moves into a higher mode of living when enough individuals have the feeling, "been there, done that, got the shirt." And they have that intuitive feeling precisely because they have learned the lesson in past lives.

A careful study of how these lessons get learned from lifetime to lifetime would shed a great deal of light on how societies as a whole progress. It is generally accepted, for example, that people incarnate into situations where they can learn certain life-lessons most readily. So when you see a society as a whole struggling with a particular issue, you can understand the social situation best by first understanding the laws that govern individual karma and reincarnation.

To bring it closer to home, let's look at trends in modern American society. American

society holds freedom to be one of its most cherished ideals. However, this idea of freedom is evolving, as individuals continue to reincarnate and learn what freedom means. Less experienced souls confuse freedom with license. A little more experience teaches the difference, and then these somewhat more experienced souls confuse freedom with material wealth. More incarnations, and more life-lessons, teach that it's not quite so simple — or selfish. The person incarnates again, and this time his interest broadens to the freedoms of others, political freedom and human rights — first within a narrow group, and then, in subsequent incarnations, within broader groups. And the lesson goes on, moving toward spiritual freedom, toward the astounding intellectual conviction that the soul is already free. Once that is realized experientially, it is said that we stop reincarnating.

This learning process goes on with every ideal — power, happiness, success, creative expression, love. Take, for example, the ideal of love. At its lowest levels, love is confused with lust and physical sensation, and love of one's immediate group. Then it moves into emotional obsession and possession of a person, and loyalty to a somewhat larger group, and then to higher expressions. Eventually, like the ideal of freedom, it deepens into a self-sacrificing love for one's beloved, and broadens into love for all mankind, and then for all living beings. Ultimately it comes to a love for the One Being in everyone, and finally reincarnating comes to an end. Again, as the percentage of people learning these lessons is at different levels, so is the society as a whole.

So, the question of changing society is, in a sense, the wrong question. Life is a school - or as

Swami Vivekananda put it, a "moral gymnasium." The point is not to force the first-grade class to suddenly transform into the sixth-grade class. The point is not to prevent any of the children from making mistakes. Obviously, children must make mistakes in order to learn, and so must the people learning these lessons over many incarnations. The point is to understand and facilitate the process — to make it the best first-grade class possible, and to participate to the best of your ability according to your given role. If you are a student, then your role is to learn your lessons. If you are a teacher's aide, then your role is to assist the teacher. If the teacher assigns you a task, like handing out paper and pencils, then your task is to do that to the best of your ability.

Incidentally, I have seen Peter, Paul and Mary in concert. They are magnificent, and they are heroes of mine. But they are doing something far beyond advocating human rights. They may think that's what they're doing. But what they are doing is spreading and manifesting love of a high order, a love for one's fellow man. And the only way they could have gotten to that point is through quite a number of incarnations! As people who have learned the same lessons, or are in the process of learning those lessons, respond to them and to people like them, society will have to change as part of the natural progression of things.

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