

Reincarnation

Natural life is cyclical. Day fades into night and turns back into day as the sun rises. One season gradually gives way to the next. Over the passage of time, new generations are born and old ones die. The continuous succession of birth, death and rebirth permeates nature even though our own lives seem linear. So it's no surprise that some ancient observers looked at the seeming linearity of human existence and decided that life, like the natural world, might actually be more cyclical than linear. Multiple religions, philosophies and movements adopted this belief in cyclic life, or **reincarnation**.



Reincarnation, also called **transmigration** or **metempsychosis**, is the concept that the soul, or some aspect of the soul, is reborn into new lives. Depending on the religion or philosophy, the soul can appear incarnate in humans, animals or plants as it works its way toward an eventual escape from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Most religions that believe in reincarnation consider it the path to purity and salvation.

Reincarnation is widely accepted by the major Eastern religions -- most prominently Hinduism and Buddhism. It also has a history in ancient Greek philosophy. However, for people more familiar with the major monotheistic religions -- Christianity, Judaism and Islam -- the idea of reincarnation seems foreign and maybe even a little strange. That's because Christianity, Judaism and Islam conceive of time linearly. Life is simply a short step that determines the quality of an afterlife. For those who believe in only one life followed by an eternal afterlife, reincarnation is like an unwieldy marathon run by relay instead of a short, concise sprint.

Reincarnation in Hinduism

The Hindu religion is vast and varied. Its adherents worship an array of gods and celebrate diverse traditions. Yet Hinduism, the world's oldest surviving religion, is unified by its acceptance of **samsara**, a chain of births and deaths linked by reincarnation. Controlling samsara is the law

of **karma**. Hindus believe that all individuals accumulate karma over the course of a lifetime. Good actions create good karma and evil actions create negative karma. Karma is not assigned or regulated by any god; it's simply earned by an individual and passed down through subsequent lives.

But while good karma can eventually earn a person a higher place in the caste system in a future life, the ultimate goal of any Hindu adherent is **moksha**, or salvation from samsara. Moksha is the final of four primary Hindu goals. The first three -- kama, **artha** and **dharma** -- concern earthly pursuits like pleasure, power or well-being and virtue.

Ironically, to achieve moksha, you must make a deliberate effort to not want it. Salvation comes only after a person has abandoned all pursuits and desires and accepts that the individual soul is the same as Brahman, the universal soul or god. By exiting the cycle, an individual no longer endures the pain and suffering of earthly existence performed countless times over.

The belief in reincarnation is also predominant in two prevalent religions from India: Jainism and Sikhism. Jain adherents believe the soul accumulates karma as an actual physical substance, unlike the conceptual Hindu idea of karmic law. As long as the soul is burdened by karmic particles, it must bind with a body, initiating a series of rebirths. Only when a soul is free from all karma can it exit the cycle of reincarnation and join other disembodied souls in a state of perfection. However, because Jain followers believe that deliverance is currently impossible, devoted adherents simply pursue purification.

Sikhism also teaches reincarnation. Like Hinduism, the law of karma influences the quality of Sikh life. For Sikhs to exit the cycle of birth and rebirth, they must achieve complete knowledge and become one with God.

Reincarnation is perhaps best known as an aspect of Buddhism. In the next section, we'll learn about the Buddhist understanding of samsara, karma and the Eightfold Path.

Reincarnation in Science

Although reincarnation seems conventional to the more than 1.25 billion practitioners of Hinduism and Buddhism, it's not widely accepted by those outside of Eastern religion. The Western skepticism of reincarnation is tied to monotheistic religions' focus on a single life, a single soul and an active God who does not rely on karmic law. And with sporadic believers announcing they're Cleopatra or Elvis reincarnate, it's not surprising many people remain extremely skeptical of the soul's ability to return repeatedly.

However, this general skepticism has not prevented researchers from exploring the potential for reincarnation. Dr. Ian Stevenson, an academic psychiatrist, led the study of reincarnation in the United States until his death in 2007. Stevenson founded the Division of Personality Studies under the University of Virginia's department of psychiatry and neurobehavioral sciences. The lab, which later became known as the Division of Perceptual Studies, focuses on examining children who remember former lives, near-death experiences, apparitions and after-death communications, out-of-body experiences and deathbed visions.