

The Spiritual Path

The main theme of this website is that we may rediscover the importance of the spiritual in seeking knowledge (science), but here I want to look at a more personal path. Our species seems to be wired with a need for meaning, and undoubtedly everyone at some point in their lives, especially at times of personal loss, will search the wider canvas for a source of comfort and meaning. It was inevitable that, in the despair of the Haitian earthquake disaster or the Japanese tsunami, the predominant question was 'Where was God?', because most people, encouraged by the Church, seem to believe in an anthropomorphic, personal God.

We have a crisis of confidence in western society. Institutionalised religion fails to tell us in a meaningful way where we came from or what is the purpose of life; and the current scientific model is stuck in a materialist cul-de-sac, unwilling to accept experiential challenges about individual meaning and consciousness. Both these extremes would benefit from considering that the great cataclysms that punctuate Earth's history in the last billion years may be seen as the experience of Gaia raising her consciousness in a process of evolution.

While this concept of consciousness emerging from chaos has no place for a personal, caring father figure sitting on a throne in heaven, it does allow for the existence of universal laws at the very heart of creation, which have been recognised by a substantial part of humanity for thousands of years and which holistic science is acknowledging.

In this secular age, it is fashionable to be an atheist. The mainstream media don't treat spiritual concerns with any respect. There is an irrational confusion between religion and spirituality, which is encouraged by trendy neo-Darwinist doctrines (e.g. Richard Dawkins). I think it is helpful to regard religion as being concerned with codified and institutionalised beliefs. There are many today, very often from a scientific background, who regard the spiritual aspect of life to be important, but who are not religious in the conventional sense, and may well regard the obsessive pursuit of religious ideals and fundamentalism as one of the most destructive forces in history. Agnosticism, on the other hand, can value spiritual experiences.

What of our own journey? The anonymity of church membership, with its familiar religious doctrines and rituals and the support of a spiritual community can be very comforting. Others see their spiritual journey as something more personal. There are many paths, and in our individual seeking there are countless pitfalls and traps. Perhaps the greatest of these is spiritual pride and egotism.

I love this classic teaching tale from Buddhism: The pupil who has, through years of struggle and self-doubt at last achieved enlightenment, asks his teacher for help in living his new calling. The teacher replied: "Before enlightenment you chopped wood and carried water. After enlightenment you chop wood and carry water".

If this life is the only one we can have, what happens to those whose lives are cut short by cancer, war or starvation? And if Jesus can simply wipe away all our past mistakes, is there any point in what we do on earth? I believe that his teaching and his example were much more profound than we are told today. Popular polls have shown that belief in the immortality of the soul is widely accepted. Perhaps a majority of people believe that some part of us is eternal and may survive death; or that we have more than one life experience.

If we have lived before, what experiences did we have? Many are curious about their identity in possible previous incarnations. One of the criticisms of past life inquiry is that

people want to discover a life when they were famous. This can only distract from what should be the main focus — what lessons did we face before and what lessons are we now facing?

The most common lessons seem to concern how we relate to others. The family is often where the tests are presented, for the evidence in past life research is that we continually meet the same personalities in successive incarnations, perhaps once as a child, another time as a father, and so on.

For some, the lessons may involve control; it is common in our society for parents to wish to mould their children to their own values or wishes, whether for the choice of school, of profession, or day to day behaviour, regardless of what the child needs. Or it may be one partner wanting to control the other. For others it may be to learn patience, to trust that one's life has its own timing; a certain action may be appropriate at one time, but not at another.

The idea that the human soul is eternal and returns time after time in a different body is found in many Eastern religions. Today in the West the Christian establishment regards this as heretical and fanciful, except for a few more liberal clerics and philosophers. However, many people who suffer from irrational fears and unexplained maladies have been able to find relief through recalling a trauma possibly experienced in a previous lifetime. Past life therapy is a new approach in psychiatry (see *Many Lifetimes*, below) which can be very beneficial in resolving 'unfinished business'.

The principle of reincarnation was supported by Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle whose beliefs complemented those of the Early Christian Fathers. Origen, (AD 185–254) an early leader of the Christian Church, taught the doctrines of reincarnation and karma (the responsibility to account for one's actions in a past life). St. Gregory (257-332) and St. Jerome (340-400) also espoused them. Our present Bible does not contradict this teaching.

The point at which the teaching of reincarnation was declared heretical is usually noted as the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), but it was the 'anathemas' of the Fifth General Council of the Church in 553 that confirmed the final rejection of reincarnation from Christian doctrine. One wonders if this stemmed from a hierarchical male need for control.

There's a wealth of good books about reincarnation (a few are listed below). There are experiential workshops on learning about what is often called 'far memory' and past life recall. Finding a reliable medium for an in-depth session could be a good place to start. In the West, contemporary interest in reincarnation was kindled by the teachings of Edgar Cayce (1877-1945). Known as 'the Sleeping Prophet', he would be put into a trance state through hypnosis in order to contact his sources.

Over his lifetime, while in trance, Cayce gave channellings or 'readings' (*in absentia*) to some 22,000 people, most of whom were concerned about their health problems. He would, however, often give his client unsolicited information about karmic details affecting their present health. He was a Christian, and his sources claimed that much of Jesus' teaching about the individual's relationship with the Divine was censored for political ends by Church leaders in the first half of the first millennium AD.

The information Cayce gave is similar to Theosophical teaching, though he was not familiar with Eastern philosophical traditions. His education had not gone beyond ninth grade. He had no theological training and was not interested in discussing the profound metaphysical topics that came from his trances. His readings can be studied at the Association for

Research and Enlightenment (ARE) in Virginia. A number of distinguished American scientists (eg William Tiller) were inspired by Cayce's revelations. There are tens of thousands of Cayce students in ARE groups in some 35 countries.

There is good research and anecdotal material on reincarnation studies, some of which I published in the Turnstone Press in the 1970s. I mentioned it here because I think many people would find this approach to the spiritual path rewarding.

An interest in past lives may seem irrelevant to many seekers. There are countless paths for innumerable preferences, each of which may represent one facet of the many sided jewel of the ultimate truth of Being. I believe that no particular religion or person has a monopoly of the truth, yet we continue to search for it.

Books on Reincarnation:

Gina Cerminara: *Many Mansions* (310pp) 1950 (based on Edgar Cayce's research)

Elizabeth Clare Prophet: *Reincarnation: The missing link in Christianity* (412pp) 1997 – authoritative

Noel Langley: *Edgar Cayce on Reincarnation* (285pp) 1967

Joan Grant & Denys Kelsey: *Many Lifetimes* (276pp) 1968 (reincarnation & mental illness)