

History Research Center

reincarnation rebirth

The Indian belief in the "cycle of lives" has ancient origin. Souls are believed to cycle through human or animal lives until they are liberated and merge with a higher reality. On rare occasions the tradition refers to reincarnation into a plant or stationary object.

The concept appears to have emerged in late Vedic times. Some argue that the idea was present in the Vedic tradition from the beginning, but little evidence can be found in any of the Vedic collections of mantras, and only very occasional references are found in the Brahmanas, the explanatory portions of the Vedic collections. By the time of the Upanishads the notion of reincarnation seems to have become centrally important.

Some sects in ancient times appear to have believed that every soul must travel through a fixed number of births; one text puts the number at 8,400,000. The Ajivika sect believed that these births were all inevitable and could not be escaped; one could reach liberation only after they were all completed.

Many early sects adopted extreme ascetic practices, avoiding any taint of worldly passion, in order not to add to the accumulation of karma that had occurred from previous lives. Later Hinduism, as well as Buddhism and Jainism, made the notion of reincarnation central to spiritual and religious practice, enshrining the notions of karma and *samsara* (the round of birth and rebirth) in Indian culture and practice.

In these traditions, reincarnation results from one's actions in one's previous life, one's karma. In the process of time one might endure a huge number of highly undesirable births; *samsara*, or worldly existence, was thus a trap one tried to escape.

Such escape of rebirth has been the primary obsession of all practice in nearly all Indian traditions (except Islam) up to the present day. *Moksha* or nirvana, the liberation or release from this cycle, became the highest goal in all the major traditions. Release could occur in several ways. One path was severe, world-denying asceticism; even today there are such practitioners hidden away in mountain caves. Meditative yoga was seen as another way, which allowed one's mind or consciousness to remove itself from attachment to worldly life and thereby pave the way to liberation. Alternatively, a focus upon God could earn the grace of the divinity and God could help break the bonds of karma. Traditionally it has been said in Hinduism, too, that a true guru can literally strip away one's karma, and thus devotion to gurus has become a strong feature of Hinduism.

Further Information

C. F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983)

Wendy O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

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