

Pseudopodal Theory of Reincarnation

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

January 4, 1970

I thought this morning I'd speak a bit on the subject of reincarnation, first of all. I have evolved a figure, or a theory, that I have called the pseudopodal theory of reincarnation. The conception that most people have is not really correct. In fact, there is a question whether the word 'reincarnation' is the best word to express what happens. First of all, think of the entity behind the scenes—the entity which each of us ultimately is. In the list of principles of the *Taraka* yoga, there is the *Karanopadhi*, which may be identified with the durable entity which each of us is; but the *Karanopadhi* is identical with *Buddhi*, and *Buddhi* combined with the *Atman* is identified as the "Monad" in *The Theosophical Glossary*. So, that which we are durably is this Monad, and from that level we can speak of "I" in a higher sense. Now, think of this entity as sending forth rays from itself which take embodiment in a physical organism upon this plane, and this ray entity also says "I." We have then, two senses of identity—the higher sense and the outer sense. The "I" in the outer sense is not permanent; in fact, Buddha, in speaking of this, likened it to an entity that rode upon the back of the aggregates—something like an epiphenomenon. The inner "I" ordinarily may be thought of as permanent; actually on the basis of certain states or development in the Realization called the "High Indifference," it too is not absolutely permanent, but is in a deep sense a function or manifestation out of pure Consciousness. Now, from the level of that which we will, for the moment at least, call the Monad, this may be said, "I am Divine"; and then from the level of the outer self we say, "I recognize my Divinity"; from that divine Self, which I am, I say to my personal self, "Reflect thou Me." We have, thus, two senses of self-identity—the outer most, which is transitory, persists for an incarnation, and, it is said, persists also through the intermediate states called the *bardo* and through deeper states ordinarily called *Devachan*, and lasts until there is a further incarnation, and then that "I" is no more.

Now, if we look at this critically, we'll first have to say that the Monad does not ever incarnate, but sends forth a ray that incarnates. The ray that is sent forth at one time is not the ray that is sent forth at a later time, but stands in *karmic* relationship one to the other. One is the *karmic* result of that—or of all those rays that have been sent before. In all of this, there is something that is persistent; but the ray that is sent forth now is not the ray that is sent forth in some future day, or the ray that was sent forth in the past. So, it's questionable whether you can say that I am a reincarnation of that entity which was another ray in the past; and remembering that the innermost entity which I am, is not incarnated, it becomes quite questionable whether the word 'reincarnation' . . . ¹

The thought came to me some time ago that certain facts concerning the organism known as an amoeba suggests the meaning that we have here. An amoeba is a one-celled organism—fairly large, for some of them I understand can be seen with the unaided

¹ Tape recorder malfunction.

eye—and in its travel it sends a projection from itself which it uses for crawling. It draws that projection back in the process of crawling and sends for another projection. You cannot call the second projection the same as the first, but we can say they are related to the inner entity, so that this is what we mean by the pseudopodal theory of reincarnation. As a matter of common practice, or common thinking, we speak as though a given outer personal entity was the ancestor of the present entity or is the progenitor of a future entity. This is not, in the light of this theory, which now approaches very close to the meaning conveyed by Buddha in a discussion of this subject—it is not really true. It is one ray, and then another ray, sent forth, and so on indefinitely, from an inner entity which never incarnates outwardly.

Jung tells of an interesting dream experience he had in the book called *Memories, Dreams, [and] Reflections*, where he came upon a little temple, and beside the temple there was a human-like entity sitting in the lotus posture, and he knew that this entity was himself, but he also knew that as a personality he would cease to exist out here when that entity came out of its meditative state.²

Now, there's another incident that . . . , it is in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. There was a time when he thought he needed help, someone who had mastery of the . . . , and he rose in inner consciousness to a level where he found three beings, also sitting in the lotus posture, and he asked for help; and one of the beings responded by sending down a ray to earth—a ray from himself. Many years later there was a group of college students, Indian college students, who were on a walking trip in India and they came near to the place where Ramakrishna lived. He had a reputation, and they were curious. But they were quite agnostic, free-thinkers, and so they were interested in seeing this queer personality. When these young men walked into the habitation of Ramakrishna, he recognized one of them as that ray that had been sent down to earth. He tested him. It is said he just touched him with his foot and the student then began to dissolve—his consciousness began to dissolve. He didn't know what was going on with him, and he said, "Are you killing me?" No, no. Ramakrishna laughed and stopped the process. He had gotten what he wanted from his test and pulled him back into his normal state. That one, it is said, later became his chief disciple, the one known as Vivekananda, who supplied what Ramakrishna himself lacked.³

Now, I draw upon these two illustrations as a partial verification of the concept of incarnation as being a ray sent forth from an inner entity which in its own nature does not incarnate. Nonetheless, between the series of rays that come forth from one inner entity or Monad, there is a *karmic* connection. There is a sense, then, in which something that was appears again; and when we speak of identification in past lives, we mean identification, essentially, of a preceding, or some preceding, ray in that time.

Now, this has an application in connection with certain important identifications, namely, some connected with the one who was known on earth as Gautama, Shakyamuni, Siddhartha, or the Great Buddha, who lived about six centuries before Christ. There is a

² Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 323.

³ Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969), 93-96.

certain body of literature, not easily found today, that was written by HPB based upon material to which she had access while in Tibet, and it is called *The Mystery of the Buddha*.⁴ It is said in that material that the incarnation as Siddhartha was the last in which the Great Buddha had this body as belonging to him, that since then, he has been present many times, but always through an instrument that really belonged to someone else. This kind of incarnation is called *tulku*. It's a conception that at this time is becoming important. Very little was said about it when HPB was here in the last quarter of the last century, but today there is a ray from the same source that is now in incarnation and has been identified by some; and this time *tulku* has become especially important. These entities that are high in evolution cannot afford the time involved in the bringing to physical birth of a body and the education of it, perhaps over a period of 25 years or so before it becomes reasonably competent to function. They use instruments prepared by others. The technique of this involves a replacement, for brief or for protracted intervals, of certain of the principles of the incarnated entity. An outstanding instance in the literature is the incarnation of Shankaracharya. It is said that this *Brahmin* child belonged to an entity that is not specifically identified as to who he was before that and so on, but he brought to the combination the natural psychological capacities of the *Brahmin*, which was not the case in Buddha's own incarnation, he being a *Kshatriya*, and not really a master of logical thought; that the intermediate principles that belonged to this *Brahmin* baby were moved aside and replaced by the intermediate principles of the Buddha—the intermediate principles consist of higher and lower mind and the principle of *kama*, the latter being in its pure state, not in its deeply corrupted state as we know it in this humanity commonly, and in its pure state carries the principle of compassion; that for a period of 32 years this entity functioned as perhaps one of the most brilliant incarnations we have ever known. At the end of 32 years, the Buddha withdrew—the Buddha principle, the intermediate principles of the Buddha withdrew; and the principles indigenous to the *Brahmin* baby were drawn back into that entity.

The question has arisen, where do these principles that have been set aside abide? We are told that it happened in the case of HPB when she was sent forth from Tibet to be the agent of the elder Brothers in the Western world, and owing to the fact she was not fully trained and could therefore make certain serious mistakes, that one-seventh of each principle was withdrawn from her, and as a result she was spoken of as a psychological cripple. Now, where are those principles stored? The information that I got recently is, they are stored only—can only be stored with other living entities; that, however, the entities which perform this function are not terrestrial entities—non-terrestrial entities which keep the principles functioning, and alive, and participating in experience, but in a non-terrestrial experience. When they are returned to their native holder, they, therefore, bring in something that is confusing with respect to the consciousness here.

Now, in the case of Shankara, when his own principles were returned to him the records indicate it was quite a shock. He had been moving on the level of a most exalted consciousness. He communicated almost wholly with the *Brahmin* community, which being more prepared than any others, were able to receive knowledge on a higher level than was the case with Buddha's own incarnation. He spent a great deal of his

⁴ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 3 (Adyar: The Theosophy Co., 1928), 359.

time going up and down India discoursing on the true interpretation of the Vedas and the Upanishads, opposing erroneous interpretations, usually convincing his adversary so that the adversary might become his own disciple; but, in some cases, not convincing but arousing hostility. It's one of the most brilliant incarnations known. When the principles of the Buddha were withdrawn, it was quite a slump. The literature says that in effect he committed suicide—he withdrew into a cave and was never seen since—not suicide by physical violence, but by act of will. In so doing, he violated the law; he invoked *karma*, painful *karma*. In these Tibetan sources, it is said the penalty of taking one's own life is that in a subsequent incarnation he loses his life by violence against his will at the same age.

These sources go on to say that the next *tulku* incarnation of the Buddha was that of the Christ. Now, here's something that becomes particularly interesting to us. The picture of the Christ that traditional theology has produced is false. He is not the sole unique son of God. He is the son of God in the sense that all creatures are, in the last analysis, part of the Divine, to be sure. We may rightly call him an *avatar*, but it is wrong to say he is the only possible *avatar*. The *avataral* function is a universal principle, and occurs again and again. From the Vedantist point of view, we would call Krishna, and Buddha, and Christ all *avatars*. But there is a certain implication, and that is that Christ's message was really a continuation of Buddhism. He enunciated the same Golden Rule that Buddha had, only in positive terms. Where Buddha said, *do not* unto others that which you would *not* have others do unto you; Christ said, *do* unto others that which you would have others *do* unto you. It denied the earlier Hebraic doctrine of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. He announced the dispensation of forgiveness and loving thy neighbor as thyself. In fact, he formulated in the Sermon on the Mount, and elsewhere, a *dharma* that has an obvious kinship with the *dharma* enunciated by the Buddha. The crucifixion at the age of thirty-three, the very age at which Shankara committed suicide, may be viewed as the *karmic* effect, consequence of that earlier suicide, a paying of a painful *karmic* debt—a death by violence, in fact torture, against his will, to clear the account. Traditional Christianity has built heavily upon the crucifixion and the subsequent resurrection. I do not view the resurrection as a physical resurrection, but rather the resurrection of a subtle vehicle, perhaps the *Nirmanakaya*, which became visible under some certain favorable conditions, and so tangible that it seemed to be physical. But traditional Christianity has built most of its structure around the passion and the resurrection, and I regard that as an error—that the structure should have been much more around the teachings, such as those of the Sermon on the Mount. Christ, nonetheless, was a redeemer, as the Buddha was a redeemer. The supreme presence there was the same presence as in the Buddha, as in Shankara.

There are other incarnations of the *tulku* type listed, such as Apollonius of Tyana, Tsong-Kha-pa, and a certain continuation in the incarnations known as the Tashi Lama, and other overshadowings of the Blessed One to this day—that is the prime entity involved. There is however, of course, in all of these cases a secondary entity, the one who provided the instruments—or the ones who provided the instruments, to be more correct. There are a number of interesting questions that arise in connection with these who provide the instrument. To make for discoursing on this line, I have suggested that we speak of this combination as consisting of a *senior* and *junior* partner. The junior partner is the one who supplies the vehicle, the senior partner the one who applies the

wisdom and the transcendental compassion. But what can happen to the junior partner in such a development is an interesting question. From one point of view it is a sacrifice, in the sense of giving up the full experience of the incarnation; but in another sense, it's a privilege, because to have in such intimate relationship with the consciousness that I believe is the highest associated at the present time with this humanity, outweighs everything that could be called a sacrifice in such a relationship. No doubt it would advance the evolution of the junior partner over what that could be if he were moving exclusively on the basis of his normal resources.

One consequence of all this is the following: the acceptance of the Christ does not mean an acceptance of a theological conception that had been superimposed upon you by the theologians since his day. I am very critical of what these theologians have added; but there are reasons why I could not help but accept the Christ. Those are partly esoteric. I reject thoroughly the statement of Tertullian, one of the Church Fathers, which runs this way: and God died, which is inconceivable and therefore believable; and God rose from the dead, which is impossible and therefore certain.⁵ The most radical irrationalism I've ever heard of; and the Tertullian influence upon traditional Christian thinking with its radical irrationalism, I early found to be quite dominant in the Christian milieu. I was brought up as the son of a clergyman, and I might say I drew in traditional Christianity with my mother's milk, who lived virtually in the church as a baby. In the end, I could not swallow what was there taught. I remember as a teenager—I was in high school at the time—and our Methodist minister proclaimed the doctrine of the literal, physical resurrection, supposed to be possible because Christ, as they said, had risen physically from the dead—something I don't believe so far as the physical body is concerned.

Now, there's another thing that comes into the doctrine that I'm about to speak of, it's the influence of Aristotle as developed in very large degree in the theological writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. It's one of the points where Aristotle takes departure from his teacher Plato. Plato taught the doctrine, or the philosophical conception, that this organism is a habitation, and that the inhabitant is what I really am, and this inhabitant, the psyche, can depart from the habitation or can enter another habitation. In contrast, Aristotle, in his *De Anima*, taught the conception that is known as the psychosomatic hypothesis, which has been formulated this way: mind and body are not separate and not separable, or psyche and body, and soma, are not separate and not separable. This leads to very discouraging consequences with respect to the idea of survival of death, for we see the body fall in death, and if mind and body are not separable, or if psyche and body are not separable, then when the body falls, it would seem to follow that the psyche also falls and ceases. That point of view seems to be strongly implanted in traditional Christianity—by traditional Christianity I mean the body of conceptions that were developed in the Church Council about 500 AD. It would not seem, therefore, that there was very much prospect of a survival of consciousness beyond death. The Christian handling of it was this: that because of the pattern established by the Christ, if you accepted the Christ, you could participate in the same

⁵ Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*:

And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again; the fact is certain because it is impossible.

event, namely, the resurrection of the supposed physical body. Hence, you have the picture of corpses coming out of the ground, the grave. At the time of the judgment, there'd be skeletons coming out of the ground, and in so far as they had accepted the Christ, they could participate in consciousness again. It was a pretty macabre conception. I developed this somewhat in a talk on reincarnation before two classes at the University of Northern Arizona,⁶ and I remarked that our forefathers must have been pretty rank materialists. It seems that a number of those students got quite a shock, and I've heard repercussions coming from it since.

Well, I got to thinking about this conception back in the days when I was a high school student, and I knew this: that physical bodies disintegrate in the earth; that the matter of which they are composed can be taken up by vegetable organisms, so that you'd have molecules, or atoms rather, that belonged to that body that would be in plants; that these plants might be eaten by animals, and certain of these atoms would be in the body of the animal; and that the animal might be eaten by a future man, so that some of those atoms would be in the future man's body at the time when he dies. So we would have two men that were claiming the same atoms. So I took it to my clergyman and said, "To which entity do these atoms belong at the day of the resurrection?" And the clergyman, had to suppress a grin, said, "Leave it to the Lord, my son." Well, the Christian church lost me then.

Incidentally, I have a fundamental prejudice, if you please, a conviction, that Ultimate Being is of a nature that is essentially reasonable, that you can put questions to nature and to Ultimate Being, and ultimately secure reasonable answers—not necessarily within the limits of Aristotelian logic, it may be a deeper kind of logic, but it would be essentially reasonable—and that the spiritual path does not require intellectual suicide. That has been my persistent prejudice, if you please to call it that, or conviction if you prefer that term. And on the ground of that conviction, I've thrown overboard long ago traditional Christianity—the Christianity of the theologians; but I accept the Christ as being a manifestation, first of all, of the Blessed One—and so my *guru-parampara* line descends from Buddha, through Shankara, and Christ to the present. I recognize that there are other *guru-parampara* lines that are perfectly valid, such as the line from Krishna through Aurobindo. They are different patterns and they are part of the whole. If truly formulated, and they seem to be incompatible, I refer you to that figure that I developed last night of the right circular cylinder of unit diameter and unit length, which could appear, as you may remember, both as a square and as a circle; and to flatland consciousness, these two conceptions of the Divine, as a circle or a square, seemed incompatible, but from the standpoint of the consciousness of a three-dimensional entity, they could be reconciled by the conception of the right circular cylinder. So if there are differences between, for instance Aurobindo and Shankara, the problem is not to say Shankara is right and Aurobindo wrong, or vice versa, which would lead to a religious conflict, but to seek rather that which reconciles these apparently incompatible conceptions. As a matter of fact, I faced this very problem over a period of years and found that I already had the reconciling symbol. I did develop it before the students at the University of Northern Arizona, before a certain select group,

⁶ See audio recording "Lectures to University Students," part 3.

in 1968, but we won't go into that now.⁷ In fact, I've probably covered enough time in developing these conceptions.

I wish to emphasize this point: that one can accept Christ—among others—as redeemers without accepting the traditional Christianity of the theologians. They are two very different facts.

And that I think is enough. Turn it off.

⁷ See the audio recording “Lectures to University Students,” part 6; this talk was actually given in February 1969.