



REINCARNATION AND SILENCE

Every man's soul has by the law of his birth been a spectator of eternal truth, or it would never have passed into this our mortal frame, yet still it is no easy matter for all to be reminded of their past by their present existence.

PLATO

While we may know about the long and complex history of the doctrine of reincarnation, the crisis of our time is such that the response of thinking men and women is and should be, "How does it help me? What difference could it make to my life?" In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna, speaking as the Logos in the cosmos, but also as the hidden god in every man, makes a supreme, unqualified affirmation. Like similar utterances in the great scriptures of the world, the words of Krishna have a ring of self-certification. He simply affirms for all men that there is an inexhaustible, inconsumable, incorruptible, indestructible, beginningless and endless spirit that is the sovereign ruler within the temple of the human body. Yet the same Krishna, having made this affirmation, ends his speech by asking Arjuna to recognize the honest position of the finite mind of the ordinary man by saying, "The antenatal state of beings is unknown; the middle state is evident; and their state after death is not to be discovered."

Any human being must recognize that, insofar as his mind is a bundle of borrowed conceptions — because he has grown up conditioned and circumscribed by the limiting factors of heredity, family, education and the social environment — he cannot do any more at first than come with pain to the point of declaring with profound honesty, "I really do not know. I do not know about evil. I have no idea of many things that happened to me earlier in this life. I have no idea of what will happen to me tomorrow, next year, let alone after the moment of death." This could give integrity to the quest. At the same time, when a human being begins at the level of categories and concepts, he also knows that there is something unspoken about his particular life — his tears, his thoughts, his deepest feelings, his loves and longings, his failures and frustrations, his invisible, hidden determination to

hold fast in times of trial, to triumph over obstacles that seem forbidding. Beyond all of these there is that secret of his own soul which he cannot share with anyone else or even bring to the level of human speech. He knows that there is a depth and dimension to his own experience as a conscious sentient being which can participate in the transcendental wonder of the world, which can be aroused to depths and to heights and to a tremendous breadth of cosmic vision when looking at awesome vistas in nature or when surveying the great epochs of human history. But at the same time this secret cannot be conveyed. It cannot be demonstrated or fitted into the workaday categories and concepts needed to survive in a world of psychological limitation and scarcity.

The problem is one of translation. Seen philosophically, if we assume that there is something prior to be translated into something else that is sharable, it is a problem of self-discovery. It involves integrating the potential, intermittently intimated in our consciousness, with the actual which is a story that could be streamlined and which any Hollywood scriptwriter could convert into a celluloid version, a banal sequence of scenes. There must be something between our inchoate intuition of the inexhaustible and our painful recognition of the factuality of the temporally finite sequence that seems to string these events together. Memories clutter the mind. We look back with regrets or look forward with hopes, with longings that may be vain and ineffectual or may be impossible to share with anyone else.

What is self-validating for a Krishna or for the immortal spirit of man can only become a supreme and total fact for a human being when he has begun to strip away the layers and vestures of consciousness through which he is bound. In a Wordsworthian sense, every child is crowned by the aura of the divine, and has in his eyes some recognition of having lived before, some glint of an ancient wisdom distilled into the very essence of his response to the furniture of the world. Yet every human being, growing out of the child-state, loses those intimations. How are we to recover them compatibly with the integrity and self-consciousness that we must bring to every level and aspect of our human experience? This necessitates further work upon the whole of one's nature. Where we do not know, we may discard the dogmas that claim to know. There are those which insist that man is merely a fortuitous

concurrence of atoms – in the name of a science which would be disowned by the greatest, most agnostic and creative scientific thinkers. There is the dogma derived from religion that man is a soul created by an anthropomorphic being at a certain point of time and consigned to eternal hell or heaven, and there are other corruptions of thought such as transmigration into animal form.

When a person discards dogmas and starts with the standpoint of genuine unknowingness, combined with a willingness to learn, he has taken a stand that is truly individual, yet within the context of all mankind. Then, as he works upon himself, he must find out what is unique and gives continuity to himself. At the same time, further growth in this quest will only be possible when he can truly dissolve the sense of separateness between himself and other beings. When the barriers fall away, his love can become almost limitless in scope. He can feel the pain in every human heart and enjoy the world through the eyes of every human being. Clearly, this cannot be done by a person except at some specific level and cannot be done totally within any short-term curve of growth. We would need a number of births to attain that degree of universalization wherein we could merge the universal and the individual and also maintain stasis throughout the different levels on which we have to communicate with widening or narrowing circles of human beings. In that sense, what is self-validating at one level could only become wholly valid and be a fully embodied truth when one's whole life revolves around it.

Many an unlettered man, in the words of the poet, is a mute, inglorious Milton, unknown, unnoticed by other men, and, like Markham's man with a hoe, conveys through his eyes the sad awareness that this is an old story that includes all beings and will persist far into the future. For the pseudo-sophisticated intellectual classes to see as much would be extremely difficult. People for whom there is very little else can sustain the awareness of some fundamental truth. To be able to do this self-consciously within a process of growth is extraordinarily elusive for a man burdened with the mental complexities of contemporary civilization, because he cannot ascend to universal brotherhood except very partially, intermittently and, alas, defensively.

To make reincarnation a vital truth in one's personal life is to treat each day as an incarnation, to greet every person as an

immortal soul, inwardly and in silence, and to empathize with every human failure as a limitation — an effect with causes — comparable to all other limitations. It is the ability to see, even in the longing of the person who is almost totally lost, that spark of the Divine which could eventually be fanned into the flame of the cosmic and compassionate fire of wisdom of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. It is an old tradition in the East that those who truly know of the immortality of the soul can only say, “Thus have I heard.”

Why is there no immortality for what we call the ‘personality,’ the particular mask that we wear, through which we appear to other people to be someone with a name and a form, a recognizable identity? However glorious the aggrandizement of personal selfhood may seem in a Nietzschean sense, it is still something that limits and is limited, and hence must participate in finitude and mortality. To wish immortality for that which is visibly mortal, for a mind which is like a cobweb of confusing conceptions, is at best a compensatory illusion. Ultimately, it is a sign of weakness. But the Great Teachers did not come to tell man what he already knows — that there are limitations. They came to tell him that beyond these limitations he could be free. The Buddha declared: “Ye who suffer! Know ye suffer from yourselves. None else compels, none other holds you that ye live and die, and whirl upon the wheel.” When Jesus spoke of the weakness of the flesh, he also intimated that the spirit is free, that it is the source of will, and that when it is truly willing, it is immortally free.

It is only by reinforcing a weaker side of our own nature that we could project from a limited view of ourselves a confused picture of personal immortality. Despite all the self-advertisements of the age, hardly any man can do full justice to himself. A man who is loudly making the case for himself is all too often belittling himself. Even the finest self-images have some illusion built into them, and to extrapolate them into the future and into the past is to limit oneself unduly. The notion of personal immortality becomes extremely degrading in a universe of law, where everything experienced by consciousness is connected, in the course of time, with everything that follows it. If a person, early or late in life, uses the doctrine of rebirth, or some notion of personal immortality, as a crutch to cling to, physical death may well be succeeded by a dreamy state of illusory happiness

after a period of purgatorial separation from all the excrescences of the life just lived. Then he will have to come back, and alas, in so doing, as Plato suggests in the Myth of Er, he may choose the very opposite of what he seeks. A person who mistakes the external tokens of the good, the true and the beautiful for the transcendental *Agathon* may well find himself drawn, even propelled, into an environment where he is punished by getting what he wants.

What we need is *metanoia*, a fundamental breakthrough in consciousness. Otherwise the notion of immortality avails us naught. Many Theosophists of every sort hold to reincarnation as a dogma rather than as a basis for meditation. It cannot help unless a man can really come to see that it is a fact in nature — a law of life in a universe of cyclic processes — and can live by that law increasingly. He can recognize mistakes, and through repeated self-correction, open new vistas. He may make existential affirmations of perfectibility — which must be on behalf of all if they are to be authentic — and give everyone he meets something of the taste of true optimism in regard to the future. Unless a person can do these things, even if he speaks the language of *impersonal* immortality, still it would be nothing but a projection of a personal conception of immortality.

The teaching of the Mahatmas is utterly uncompromising on such matters. For the personal consciousness there can be no immortality, while for the indwelling soul, for the individual ray of the overbrooding Atman, immortality is a fact. For the mediating mind of the middle, immortality has to be won, to be earned, and is neither a gift nor a fact. The mind must progressively detach itself from its external vestures, like a musician who goes beyond worship of his instrument or of his fingers moving on the instrument or of his own self-image, and is merged into something beyond all recorded music, into a reverence for the inaudible music of the spheres. Until a man can do this self-consciously as a soul (and he cannot do it without pain and thoroughness if he is to be honest with himself), immortality for him will be merely a compensatory myth. It will not carry that conviction with which alone he could lighten the loads of others and, through eyes of love, make many lives more meaningful.

If we trace the English term 'soul' to its Greek antecedents and equivalents, we soon find a wide variety of meanings. Even before

the time of Socrates, many accretions and materializations had already gathered around the concept. It was compared to the wind. It was also supposed to mean 'that which breathes,' 'that which is alive.' And it was given many other meanings and often couched in metaphorical terms through analogy with sparks and a central fire. It became crucially significant for Plato to enrich the notion of 'soul' and to give it an existentially human meaning to do with the very act of search, the very desire to know the good, the hunger to make distinctions – not only between the good and the bad but between the good and the attractive, not only between the true and the false but between the true and the plausible. The desire to make noetic discriminations becomes the basis for a functional definition of the soul. Plato taught that, metaphysically, the soul may be seen either as perpetual motion or as a self-moving agent. In one passage he refers to a particular kind of motion which is not visible in the material realm but may be properly ascribed to the hidden Logos, the invisible deity. Elsewhere, what he identifies as the soul is connected with volition. What would it avail a man who uses the word in a Socratic sense but does not come to terms with his own will-problem, or worse still, becomes identified intellectually with his weak-willed self?

Language is very important here. The prolonged abuse of the term 'soul' in the Middle Ages resulted from a decisive shift in meaning. An active agent was replaced by something passive, something created. In a corruption of the Socratic-Platonic meaning, the 'soul' became merely something acted upon, a passive agent receiving reward or punishment. The term 'soul' almost became unusable, so that in the Renaissance humanists had to assert the dignity and divinity of man in ways that did not involve them once again in the debased coinage of the terminology of the past. In the twentieth century the term 'self' is coming into wide circulation, recovering some of the dignity of the classical conception of the soul.

A person brought up in a corrupt language system could receive tremendous help by borrowing a term from Sanskrit and trying to recognize its open texture. The compassionate Teachers of the Theosophical Movement chose to introduce from that sacred language terms like *manas* – the root of the word 'man,' from *man*, 'to think' – into the languages of the West. When Emerson

eulogizes “man thinking” he is using two English words in a manner that confirms exactly the full glory of the idea of *manas*. Yet we also know that both the words ‘man’ and ‘thinking’ can be so degraded in everyday usage that they do not convey the glory of manhood implied by *manas*. The term *manas* in Sanskrit means not only ‘to think,’ but also ‘to ideate,’ ‘to contemplate.’ To contemplate in this classical sense is to create, to sustain a continuous and controlled act of creative imagination enveloping more and more of the whole, while retaining that core of individuality which signifies responsibility for the consequences of all thoughts, all feelings, all words, and all acts. This is a kingly conception.

It is often advantageous for a person to go outside his particular prison-house of debased language and explore classical concepts. As we grow in our awareness, we may make the beautiful discovery that even in the accents of common speech there are echoes of those pristine meanings. The literal meaning of words is less important than the tone of voice in which we use them. It is possible for a man in the street to say to another, “Hi, man” with unconscious contempt, and for a traveller in the Sierras to say, “Hi, man,” in a manner that expresses genuine fellow-feeling. Miranda in *The Tempest*, seeing human beings for the first time, exclaims:

O, wonder!
 How many goodly creatures are there here!
 How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
 That has such people in't!

Every word has a depth and beauty of feeling that makes ordinary English words rise like wingèd skylarks into the universal empyrean – generous, cosmic and free. Beyond all languages and concepts, the very act of articulation is of immense importance.

Perhaps the most beautiful passage on the subject of reincarnation is to be found in *The Human Situation* by Macneile Dixon. This great lover of the literatures of the world, of Plato and Shakespeare, dared to suggest:

What a handful of dust is man to think such thoughts! Or is he, perchance, a prince in misfortune, whose speech at times betrays his birth? I like to think that, if men are machines, they are machines of a celestial pattern, which

can rise above themselves, and, to the amazement of the watching gods, acquit themselves as men. I like to think that this singular race of indomitable, philosophising, poetical beings, resolute to carry the banner of Becoming to unimaginable heights, may be as interesting to the gods as they to us, and that they will stoop to admit these creatures of promise into their divine society.

By speech a man can betray his divine birth, and just as this is true of speech in its most sacred and profound sense, it is also true of human gestures. The simple mode of salutation in the immemorial land of Aryavarta is filled with this beauty. When the two hands come together, they greet another human being in the name of that which is above both, which brings the two together, and includes all others. There is something cosmic, something that has built into it a calculation of the infinite in the expedient, even in this gesture.

But what is true of gestures could be even more true of human utterance. The surest proof of the divinity and immortality of man is that through the power of sound he can create something that is truly magical. He can release vibrations that either bless or curse, heal or hinder other beings. This is determined by motivation, intensity of inmost feeling, and the degree of individual and universal self-consciousness, nurtured and strengthened through constant meditation and self-study.

Suppose one were to ask of the gods, "Give me one of two gifts for all men. Give me first that gift which will suddenly enable all men to say that they know about reincarnation and the soul, and that they believe in immortality. Second, give me that gift which enables all men to help babies to grow with a feeling of dignity, deliberation, beauty and sanctity in regard to human speech." The wise would know that the latter gift is much more valuable than the former, because mere beliefs will not save human beings even though truly philosophical reflection upon alternatives is part of the prerogative of a manasic being, a man in Emerson's sense. These beliefs can only be made to come alive through the exercise of conscious and deliberate speech, with a delicate sensitivity for the existence of other beings, and an immense inner compassion for all that is alive. If human speech were not constantly wasted and made into something so excessive and destructive, so mean and

niggardly, we would not find so much of the self-hatred, mutual distrust, pessimism and despair that characterize our lot. We would not find ourselves in a society which is free but where, alas, the loudest voice is the most feared and tends to have the widest impact.

Anyone who can existentially restore the alchemical and healing qualities of sound, speech and silence, to some limited extent, in the smallest contexts – in relations with little children, with all he encounters even in the most trivial situations – does a great deal for the Bodhisattvas. Those Illuminated Men, by their very power of thought and ceaseless ideation, continually benefit humanity by quickening any spark of authentic aspiration in every human soul into the fire which could help others to see. The truth of reincarnation requires much more than a casual scrutiny of our external lives and our spoken language. It must be pondered upon in the very silence of our souls. It is a theme for daily meditation. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that true wisdom is a meditation upon birth, death, decay, sickness, and error. To meditate upon each of these and all of these together is to begin to know more about the cosmic and the human significance of the truth of reincarnation.

Hermes, September 1976



It is impossible for us to remember that we had existence prior to the body, since the body can have no vestige of it, and eternity cannot be defined in terms of time or have any relation to time. But, nevertheless, we have in our experience a perception that we are eternal. For the mind is sensible no less of what it understands than of what it remembers. . . . Although, therefore, we do not remember that we existed before the body, yet we perceive that our mind is eternal, in so far as it involves the body's essence under the category of eternity, and that this its existence cannot be defined by time or interpreted by duration.