

Katerina Shtanko

Giving Up the Ghost

I used to believe in reincarnation,
but that was in a past life.
Paul Krassner

THE CONCEPT OF REINCARNATION is a seductive one, which explains its near universality in nearly every time and place.

Having one's soul reborn in another body offers one a second chance to 'get it right', a ticket to redemption on a potentially endless ride around life's merry-go-round.

Believing that in a past life one was a famous person, a heroic figure, or an elite member of society offers consolation to those who recoil at life's hardships and injustices, or to those who simply find ordinary life wearisome or unsatisfying. (Curiously, for the reincarnated, the past seems to be chock full of rich people and kings and woefully short on paupers, peasants, or just people to wash the dishes.)

Hinduism teaches that human souls are permanent and indestructible, and that they migrate from one body to another after death, but even religions that don't profess belief in reincarnation—notably Christianity and Islam—promote the concept of an individual, immortal soul, teaching that rather than being recycled into a new body with each passing incarnation, one's soul is destined for either a blissful, eternal paradise or an equally everlasting place of torment.

Curiously, all three religions profess that the soul's ultimate destination—whether it is enraptured, rubbished, or recycled—is determined by the quality of one's conduct in the present incarnation. While Hinduism attributes this to the concept of *karma* (meaning action, effect, or fate) and Islam and Christianity to an omniscient, divine scorekeeper, the end result is the same.

(It's tempting, by the way, to attribute this conditionality of one's fate to a desire for control, since belief in reincarnation began in early, rigidly hierarchical societies lacking the idea of individual freedom or free will.)

Caught between the extremes of *eternalism* in Hindu reincarnation or Christian heaven and hell, and the *extinction* of the atheist or nihilist, perhaps there is a Middle Way.

Of all the major religions, only Buddhism (and the Advaita Vedanta tradition in Hinduism) lack the concept of an individual soul. These both teach that our body consists of inexhaustible energy and matter, and that while these can appear in the form of a new body under the right conditions, there is nothing we could objectively call 'ourself' to experience this transformation.

In essence, Buddhism avoids the prospect of an endless cycle or dead end of the self—not by denying the idea of reincarnation or heaven or hell—but by disavowing the concept of an individual self altogether. (After all, *if there is in reality no person, then who is there to be reincarnated*?)

From this perspective, what we call *self* is something that has no absolute existence, only a relative existence that varies from moment to moment, existing only within the confines of a physical brain and body, while our true (or Absolute) Self and the ultimate ground of our being is Awareness itself.

Buddhists would say that we are all dying and being reborn every moment: one manifestation of life simply gives way to another, like a cloud turning to rain—something more akin to rebirth than reincarnation.

Of course, it doesn't take a Buddhist to be skeptical of reincarnation. The scientific or merely spiritually inclined might also recognize that one's individual personality and sense of separateness is only an illusion.

Regardless of one's view on reincarnation, however, one must acknowledge there is a fundamental contradiction in the concept. Even if the soul exists and can in some way be reincarnated in another body, in what sense can we really think of it as being what we define as our human self?

How can an independent entity, with none of your personality, memories, experiences, or any of the other things that in essence make you *you*—possibly *be you* in any meaningful sense? Once the brain and body die, everything stored in it irrevocably vanishes. (When a light bulb is switched off, no one thinks to ask where the light goes!)

For many, the allure of reincarnation may arise simply from the ego's fear of cessation and the recognition of our own mortality. This fear of death is, ironically, a fear of living, the fear that we have not lived our life to the fullest and require more than our allotted time to fulfill our purpose here.

Instead of dreaming about the next life, perhaps we should pay more attention now, while we are still alive, to discovering who we really are, recognizing that what matters is the quality of our life, not how long we live.

And if our belief in reincarnation arises from having lost a loved one and we are grieving, we can look deeply and see all the ways in which they live on within ourselves and others. The fact that that someone has died means that they are no longer *alive*, but it does not mean that they no longer *exist*.

Death is not an *event* in life: There is no one there to experience the moment of our death, and therefore no one who should fear it or put their hope in reincarnation as a way of escaping it. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "If we take eternity to mean timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present." ■