Have You Ever Had A Past Life Experience? Do You Believe In Reincarnation? How Much Karma Do You Spread On Your Animal Crackers?

If so, it's time we had a little chat.

And in this one-to-one between just you and me (sorry, no apparitions from times yore allowed), we're going to talk about past life memories, past life regression and how regression is performed in a clinical setting.

The emphasis being on how regression is performed to give people the feeling that they're remembering past lives. And to accomplish all this, we're going to see how the entire notion and the culture surrounding past lives fits into the larger context of our shared psychological needs around the globe.

Oh ... and I'll even tell you about my past life experience too.

**Warning:** Reincarnation Can Make You Fat
A few weeks ago, we talked about *The Surprising Truth About Hypnosis And Memory Improvement* and some of the controversial issues surrounding the topic. For example, hypnosis can produce all kinds of memories, the quality and integrity of which vary. We looked at one of the most consequential ways that hypnotically induced memories play out: in courtroom testimony.

Like memories produced by hypnosis, past life memory is a controversial and highly unlikely topic.

At its worst, the ability to recall past lives is a sham sold in books, live or online courses and supposedly therapeutic past life regression hypnotherapy. Content creators direct these at the gullible.

For example, in *Many Lives, Many Masters*, Brian Weiss makes the claim that exploring past lives can cure all kinds of ailments, phobias and anxieties. He suggests focusing on clinical results and forgetting about whether past lives are real or not. Easy to say when your wallet is bursting with fees from patients seeking relief and willing to try anything.

**Then there's the dark side.** On the opposite end of the scale, people have reported bringing back ugly scars from their regressions, or later becoming obese thanks to things seen in visions of the past.

But we certainly must admit that past life regression and the memories it seems to produce may have some legitimate therapeutic value that goes beyond placebo and hypnosis. I'll
talk about my experience with descending into a previous life a little further on.

Helpful or fraught with danger, to be ethical, the hypnotherapist or "regressionist" must make it clear that the techniques induce dreamlike fantasies, not realities. Past life memories, no matter how clear or intense, are mirages produced by the mind, not HDTV memories based on anything that ever actually happened.

**How To Win A Million Dollars With Just One Of Your Past Lives!**

And if you feel that I stand to be corrected, please let me direct me to the [James Randi Foundation and the Million Dollar Challenge](#). They'll be pleased to receive your evidence and reward you with a handsome sum upon reasonable validation of your material.

In any case, I see no reason to believe that past lives exist. And any value past life regression can probably acquired by other means without questionable sessions with a hypnotist. All the same, let's look at the issue in detail and try to figure out why some people do believe in it. The reasons are fascinating, and we all stand to learn something from them.

The first thing we need to realize is that ...
Past Lives Are Not About The Past!

No, no and a million times no.

Past life regression is all about the future. It's about life after death and the fantasy that we never really die.

As I'm sure you know, your mind has a hard time conceiving of the planet without you. So at its core, past life fantasies drive forward as much as they dive backward to ease the anxiety that when we're gone ...

We're Really, Really Gone!

In case I haven't convinced you that past lives are really about the future, consider Karma.

Karma is an idea tied to notions of immortality and rebirth. Karma supposedly brings to the present attitudes, beliefs and actions from another time that you can "read" or interpret. Interpret these signs in just the right way, you stand to have an easier life the next time around.
Screw up, on the other hand, and continuous living is not going to work in your favor. You will suffer the consequences of being bad in this life in your next one.

Past lives and fantasies of reincarnation also fascinate societies around the world because these beliefs let people hunt for patterns.

People Love Patterns!

And there are certainly many patterns to find.

Look at literature throughout history, for example. Archetypes are everywhere, and for more on that you can check out the research and writings of the delightful Canadian scholar Northrop Frye. Here's a decent rundown of how his theory of archetypes connects different kinds of human character with the seasons.

Patterns can make you feel transcendent because there is the oft cited saying that those who know the past aren't doomed to repeat it.

But is it really true?

After all, haven't all kinds of world leaders (both politicians and
Can Knowledge Of The Past Really Make The Future Better?

Steven Pinker has some good and favorable points to make on the matter, but it's still not at all clear that insight about the past helps anyone evade mishaps in the future. So many of the ongoing failures our leaders bomb us into should be obvious as chaps on a cowboy, but still we're lead into quagmires our best schooled in political history should help us avoid.

Perhaps, as the Oedipus myth would have it, often evading fate causes us to construct it, something we see in memory as well. For example, trying to run away from troubling memories only adds fuel to the fire.

So recognizing past patterns gives us the illusion of choice. It gives us the feeling that if you could just recognize in yourself what you got wrong the last time, due to whatever deeply ingrained archetype, you could escape the wheel of suffering. At least for a little while.

But ...

Does Choice Really Exist?
In *Free Will*, Sam Harris suggests that we can only describe the choices we make, but not explain why we make them. He gives, as an example, having given up martial arts at a certain point in his life, and then for no apparent reason, deciding to practice again. He can describe the transition in and out, but in no way can explain why he made those choices.

At best, we can only speculate about why we do the things we do and draw after-the-fact conclusions with or without pointing to patterns and archetypes. But at the end of the day, the answers we give can never be more than compilations of possibilities based on self-interpretation.

If Harris is right, then pointing to patterns and archetypes from previous lives is a convenient way for some people to give a "why" to the reasons they behave and make choices as they do.

In addition to creating the illusion of choice, belief in past lives also helps people satisfy the need to see the soul as something separate from the body. Even though we now know beyond
doubt that the human mind is the product of the body, people ignore the science. They prefer the idea that the essence of a person can float from one body into the next. Likewise, that soul can eventually float into some version of heaven and finally find a place in eternity. Again, we see that the attempt to access past lives is really all about creating visions of a future that features far greater certainty than the present moment ever can.

**When Philosophy And Religion Should Send You Running For Cover**

Nearly every religion and philosophical tradition has at one point or another featured reincarnation in some shape or form.

Some books you can read include:

- *The Principle Upanishads*
- *Bhagavad Gita*

These Hindu books discuss the need to develop spiritual knowledge and compassion for everyone in the world. Doing so creates illumination, edification and ultimately freedom from reincarnation.

From the Buddhist tradition:

The *Dhammapada*. This book is particularly frustrating because it contains so many parables and much centers on the idea that the truth cannot be known. We only get to have words about the
truth. In this case, it appears that the words point to ten realms in the mind of all people, including Buddhas.

These realms undergo constant change as a person lives and acts in their part of the world. So the game is not so much about avoiding the repetition of wrong actions from the past but doing good things in the present so that more good things can come.

From the Judaic tradition, the Kabbalah talks about how a single soul repeatedly visits different bodies between visits to a different world. A Kabbalist is therefore someone who can sense this other world and in effect, live in both of them at the same time. To get to this stage of actualization apparently takes 6000 years, so if you're happy and you know it... raise your hand.

As for the Greeks, they had metempsychosis, which is the transference or transmigration of the soul into another body at the moment of death. This process was not thought to be exclusive to humans. It could happen to plants and animals too.

In more recent times, the Western world has seen Theosophy and Anthroposophy. In Theosophy, it is said that reincarnation is not immediate, but requires intervals in a place like heaven. This heaven needs to exactly match the person's vision of the afterlife they carried with them throughout life. (Probably not a good thing for many people ...)

According to Anthroposophy, there are bodies walking with no soul. For whatever reason, the bodies did not receive a reincarnated spirit of a deceased person. Instead, they are
occupied by demonlike entities.

In fact, the head of Anthroposophy may well have had a demon inside his body. Reports tell us that he threatened people who did not accept his ideas with violence. This fact, in effect, makes Anthroposophy a cult.

Weird.

**How To Regress Into A Past Life In 3 Easy Stages**

As you know, I studied hypnosis as part of my graduate research. One of the exercises involved past life regression, and the instructors taught us how to use it in a clinical session.

Hypnotic regression comes with strict guidelines. To treat someone using the technique, you need to have a note from the client's doctor approving the procedure. The person must be absent of mental illness and not under the influence of alcohol.

And above all, as a beginner, you should practice under the direct supervision of an experienced hypnotherapist.

To prepare for hypnotic regression, it's important first to create what hypnotists call a "yes set." This technique involves a series of questions for which yes is the only obvious answer.

For example, you might ask in relatively rapid order, "Are you feeling awake? Are those new shoes?" and anything else that
produces a yes based on whatever the hypnotist can perceive.

The idea is that when the hypnotist asks, "Are you ready to go into a deep state of hypnosis and regress into a past life," the client has been primed to say yes. Magicians will sometimes set the stage for compliance using similar sleight-of-mouth tactics as well.

The hypnotist also wants to create rapport with the client to start influencing the client's unconscious mind before the session has even begun. The hypnotist will hold their body as the client does, try to match the client's breathing and speech patterns and essentially mirror them. Then, with rapport established, they will slowly start changing their behaviors. The hypnotist does this to "pull" the client towards them and into a state of relaxation and hypnosis to go along with the verbal techniques of hypnosis.

**Monkey See, Monkey Do**

If this sounds woo woo, it really isn't. We've all yawned after seeing someone else yawn and walked into traffic against a red light simply because the person beside us started walking. You may have even found yourself leaning in during a discussion on autopilot at the same time as your date.

We mirror and influence people in many ways all the time, and it is possible to engineer or at least influence the psychological
states of others through body language. Actors and musicians do it to us all the time.

Next comes the formal induction. By this point, the hypnotist will have determined which style of verbal hypnosis they want to use language patterns to help the client achieve deep states of relaxation.

These methods can include guided visualization, music, aromas and touch. The hypnotist will typically continue to mirror the clients breathing in order to "pace and lead" the progression into deeper and deeper states of relaxation.

The exact language and procedures will vary from hypnotist to hypnotist depending on the suggestibility of the client.

**Lifestyles Of The Young And The Restless**

They may, for example, encourage age regression by asking the client to imagine themselves at younger and younger ages. They may ultimately have clients picture themselves back in the womb and then move into the immediate previous life or even further back.

Or, the hypnotist will simply encourage the client to let images from the past arise, seemingly of their own accord.

In therapeutic hypnosis, the material produced by the client is then integrated with the present, usually to help bring insight to
a current problem or heal an ailment.

The stories that come into memory from the past may be pleasant or terrifying. If the memories have good feelings associated with them, the hypnotist may attempt to transfer those good feelings to a present ailment or concern and anchor them there.

Or if the memory is unpleasant, the hypnotist may use a variety of techniques to help the client be rid of the bad memory. Ideally, this expulsion will take the ailment along with it as the memory flees the mind and body.

In all cases, imprinting is the main feature of regression, past lives, reincarnation and Karma. Therapeutic past life regression, along with the others, is meant to create detachment and distance if not outright banishment of these imprints.

At its most innocent level, the person experiences cathartic transformation. At its most sinister level, forms of this practice show up in cultlike organizations like Scientology, a cult in which they have developed procedures and technology for exorcising imprints from your soul. Scientologists also have developed elaborate terminology to describe what is essentially past life regression performed in an interrogation room with two tin cans in your hands. Operation Clambake has some detailed resources if you'd care to learn more.

The Story Of Automatic Jim
By now, you've probably noticed that I'm more than a touch skeptical about past lives even though it's clear than hypnosis can induce experiences in which you may legitimately feel as though you've made contact with a previous version of yourself.

I've had it happen.

Following the lessons in past life regression, we heard a fantastic testimonial. One of the instructors claimed he had established contact with a Japanese past life. After establishing contact, he instantly became fluent in Japanese without studying a single character.

Mercifully, he didn't demonstrate any of his Japanese, so we took our lunch break and then moved on to curing phobias.

Following this lesson in erasing simple household fears, I hypnotized my student partner first to help him overcome his fear of spiders. As a matter of coincidence, as soon as he opened his eyes, he spotted a spider on the wall. He immediately scooped it up and let it run up and down his arm and all over his hands.

It Was Miraculous!

Well ... not really. It was a small spider, after all. But he did seem genuinely transformed and delighted by his new ability to
connect so deeply with a spider he'd only just met.

When my turn arrived, I elected to deal with my fear of heights. Now, I must admit that I broke the rules naughty naughty because I do have a mental illness and shouldn't have been doing the exercise at all. And my fear of heights, at least at the time, seems to me deeply connected to impulse control.

All the same, what happened next astonished me.

At some point during the induction, I flashed into a vision so real and intense, it has barely diminished in the twelve years since it happened.

As I sat in the chair listening to the sounds of Spiderman's voice, I suddenly found myself in the cockpit of a Vietnam fighter jet. Within seconds, my vessel slammed into another jet or helicopter, and I saw billowing clouds of fire as I fell into the jungle.

And that was it.

Except that wasn't it at all. In addition to breaking out in a sweat and needing the main instructor to break me out of a near panic, I found that I knew all kinds of information about this fighter pilot. A man I had apparently once been.

I knew his first name, his age, the girlfriend he had left behind and what kind of car he drove. I could see his neighborhood, his high school and felt all kinds of physical drives normally foreign to me. I had never been terribly fascinated with legs, for example, preferring buttocks and breasts, but all of a sudden
legs were driving me crazy!

In any case, I lived in Toronto at the time and had the neurotic tendency to avoid walking over the Bloor-Danforth aqueduct (or *Prince Edward Viaduct* as Wikipedia insists on calling it). The bridge near Castle Frank station terrified me as well, even though there are many beautiful trees along that part of Bloor Street to enjoy.

But on that day, all fear tossed aside, I decided to walk home instead of taking the subway. For the first time, I felt no fear. I had seen what death was like and it bemused me that my fear of heights could be connected to the violent military death of some dude named Jim.

So what did I do?

**I Wrote The Dead Dude's Autobiography, Of Course!**

And to do it, I used self-hypnosis to reconnect with Jim. Sat at the keyboard and tranced out from deep breathing and the hypnotic suggestions I gave myself, I allowed my fingers to type. Seemingly of their own accord (or Jim's), my fingers produced page after page of semi-narrative images and situations.

Because I was in essence practicing automatic-writing, I called the piece *Automatic Jim* and eventually published it in an
anthology of my (terrible) poetry called Lex Talionis Schadenfreude.

Of course, it was only a matter of a few days before the terror of those two bridges came back and I started avoiding them again. They've since erected a suicide barrier on the Bloor-Danforth viaduct, so when I'm in Toronto I can enjoy the view of downtown when walking across the bridge, but I often think of the reprieve that Automatic Jim gave me from this irrational fear of heights. Temporary, but powerful and unforgettable.

**Beware The Human Imagination**

In sum, our minds are incredibly malleable. Just as a hypnotist can prime clients by using a "yes set," I had been primed to experience a past life regression.

I have no idea why my mind produced that particular imagery, but as an avid dream journer, I know well just how profoundly my mind produces incredibly complete and often reasonably well-constructed narrative fantasies. Plus, plane crashes have been a recurring theme throughout my life and the imagery often very intense.

And yet ... never have I pulled from a dream so many facts about a figure at once so familiar and foreign to myself.

Thus, this experience demonstrates, not that past lives exist and
can be remembered, but that context and priming can induce incredible psychological experiences.

Although I've since outgrown much though not all of my fear of heights, the therapeutic effects of meeting Automatic Jim were fleeting at best. The writing my experiences with him produced certainly has some interesting imagery and lovely rhythms. But at the end of the day, it's babble and I won't be offered a job as poet laureate anytime soon.

**What Would The World Be Like Without The Irrationality Produced By Human Needs?**

The issue here is that we all have a need for meaning in our lives, particularly when it comes to our problems. We want to know why we suffer and memory is an attractive means of finding explanations. Everyone from Freud to Madame Blavatsky, to the ancient Greeks and Scientologists have used memory as cures for real and perceived ailments.

And in far too many cases, hoodwinking runs awry. For in reality, humans have managed to revolutionize the world with computers that can remember keystrokes you made twenty years ago in a relatively short period.

But the fact that no one has perfected a means of accessing past lives in thousands and thousands of years of civilization suggests that there is no past to access when it comes to the
human psyche. The old recordings we have are distributed throughout the media of sculpture, writing, painting, theatre and now film, video and virtual reality.

Whatever and wherever the past is, whether in humans or our processing machines ...