second to eternity so that I can love you more than anyone has ever loved. That's all I ask."

Yama had never been offered any kind of love, certainly not by a young woman who had every reason to fear him. So he granted Savitri a single second more—and thus he was defeated.

How?

A second to the gods is a hundred years to mortals. In that extra second Satyavan returned home and embraced Savitri. They went inside their hut and lived as before. They had children and grew old together. In time Savitri's father, the king, relented and welcomed them both back to his palace. And in her old age Savitri wondered if she had asked for too much time, because she survived long after Satyavan left this world. She spent her final years in meditation and became enlightened, so when the extra second was up, Yama was amazed to find that Savitri hadn't tricked him after all. She actually did love him as one loves the wholeness of life rather than one aspect alone.

This ending is beautiful and consoling. I would like it to be read when I have no more days left. In the spirit of Savitri I've already written this note, which I will leave for my family to read. No matter what, don't cry for me. I'm all right, and I'll go on loving you no matter what happens. This is my road to travel.

Every once in a while I look at the words for a moment. Somehow, like Savitri, I've won nothing more than an extra second of existence. It will be enough.

Reincarnation

Making an angel isn't the ultimate accomplishment of consciousness. Making a new life out of nothing is. This ability is known as reincarnation. The popular notion of reincarnation is simple: we die and come back as somebody else. But how does the soul clothe itself in a new personality in order to be reborn? In a culture like India, where reincarnation has a strong foundation, people want to know why they are born with certain karmic tendencies, and whole groups in society—astrologers, priests, philosophers, gurus—exist to explain the process whereby Karma attaches itself to a soul and gives rise to a new lifetime of experience.

Most people are aware that Tibetans expect their religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama, to reincarnate as a baby who will give signs of his identity. These babies are almost always born in Tibet, but there are cases where they can appear in Europe; for example, about a decade ago the search for a great lama led Tibetan investigators to a family in Spain. In India noted religious figures are often matched to illustrious predecessors; Mahatma Gandhi has been linked by his followers to great gurus in the past. Who is to say which match is valid? The subject becomes very complicated.

There are Native American tribes in which five or six children may be born who have vivid recollections of having the same mother in a prior lifetime. There are similar instances in Japan of children who remember identical experiences in a past life in World War II, as if a single soldier's soul fragmented into pieces, each of which was reborn separately. Experts in "soul regression," which takes a person back one lifetime after another, claim that memories blend and become absorbed. Thus a great personage like Cleopatra or Napoleon affects the recollections of an entire society, and people in later lifetimes remember being Napoleon when in fact their lives were simply touched by him in some powerful way.

People can become fascinated by the game of "Who was I in a prior lifetime?" or even "Didn't I meet you in a former life?" But I've known others who cover their ears when they hear the word "reincarnation," distressed by the notion that they might be reborn as a pig or a dog. Reincarnation offends Christian theology, which doesn't permit a second chance for redemption after this lifetime. Reincarnation is
more forgiving. Mistakes can be corrected; whole lifetimes can be redeemed, not in heaven but by trying on a new body and repeating the same events that produced failure, sin, or lack of fulfillment the first time around.

Without reincarnation we might have the mistaken idea that the universe is ruled by death. Within a few milliseconds of the Big Bang 96% of the matter and energy that emerged from the void collapsed back into it. The remaining fraction still winks in and out of existence, but so rapidly that matter looks solid and permanent. In fact everything solid is transitory; every particle in existence is oscillating in and out of the void, giving the illusion of solidity because our senses aren’t quick enough to catch the vibration. The new particle that emerges is never exactly the same as the one that vanished, which is how nature manages time, location, electrical charge, spin, and other basic properties that require stability and change simultaneously.

The same is true for you and me. We exist as a fluid product of change and stability. Our brains look the same from moment to moment, but the activity of neurons is never exactly the same—a brain is like a river where one cannot step into the same place twice. DNA reincarnates when the genes of one parent split in half in an act of creative suicide to join with the genes of the other parent. The very fact that DNA can replicate itself doesn’t involve the death of the mother cell, but produces new genetic material that leads to new flesh, and the root word of incarnation means flesh, from the Latin carnes.

Humans have ambiguous feelings about the fact that we are made of flesh. It befits us as mammals but becomes more complicated when we consider the dimension of spirit. Seeing how the flesh ages and decays, how it betrays us with illness, one may not be happy to get a new body after death—for some of us one body may have been enough. Certainly Christianity takes that position, its rationale being that the flesh is innately corrupted by sin, and therefore it is far better to be clothed in the soul after death than to go through recycling.

The East has managed to live comfortably with reincarnation for several reasons. If the universe is constantly re-creating itself, we would be the only aspect that isn’t involved, which doesn’t make sense. And psychologically, if I can come back again into a new body, I may be able to fulfill desires and ambitions that were thwarted in this lifetime, which is consoling. Even more consoling is the possibility of meeting loved ones I’ve lost (or never gained, if my love wasn’t returned). Reincarnation offers hope for social advancement: a slave in this lifetime might come back as a noble in the next. Finally, the cosmic system of birth and rebirth has an evolutionary impulse behind it: step-by-step, each soul rises higher in the soul’s progress to God.

Perhaps it is not a question of belief, East versus West. Reincarnation may be a question of choice. Consciousness is useful. We shape it according to our desires. Rather than being the final word, the denial of reincarnation by Christianity could be simply a collective choice. Having considered all the relevant factors, a large sector of humanity says, “I don’t want to come back to this place,” while another says, “I do.” All we can say for certain is that Nature depends on the mechanism of rebirth.

Ancient Sages Choosing to Come Back

The rishis made every aspect of the afterlife a choice. What you choose becomes real, what you don’t choose becomes unreal. But this sounds baffling. Does reincarnation take place, or doesn’t it? Child psychologists are aware that there’s a critical period, usually between infancy and eight to ten years old, when some children seem to remember prior lives. In a recent, highly publicized example, a boy became obsessed with fighter planes from World War II. He wanted
to visit airfields to see them, he cut out pictures of them, and when he ran across a book about the fierce air battle off Iwo Jima in the waning days of the war in the Pacific, he announced to his parents that he had died then.

Startled as his parents were by the boy’s absolute conviction, they assumed that he was exercising his imagination, until their son crossed a shadowy line and began to name people and dates. He remembered his former name and the moment when a Japanese machine gun shot his plane down. The parents tracked down the incident and discovered that indeed an American pilot by that name had been shot down in the manner described; survivors in the Air Force attested to the details recalled by their son.

Such recollections are more common in India, where a general belief in reincarnation removes the initial shock and disbelief that might lead people to keep such stories to themselves. One reads in the news of children who demand to be taken to a nearby village, which they recall vividly as their last home. Once they return, it’s not unknown for the child to be reunited with relatives or even former parents. Psychologists inform us that this intense interest in former incarnations is temporary; beyond age ten the old memories fade and lose their obsessive quality. It’s as if some souls take a while to get adjusted to their new place in time and space.

The most detailed study of such children comes from psychiatrist Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia, work now being continued there by psychiatrist Jim Tucker. Working from more than 2,500 case studies of children who vividly remember past lives—the number is increasing all the time—Stevenson discovered that the most startling are those who carry physical characteristics from one lifetime to another. There are 14 examples of children who remember being shot to death in a previous life and whose bodies show a scar as if a bullet had entered the body, with an opposing exit scar. One child born in Turkey had vivid recollections, almost from the moment of being able to speak, of a notorious criminal who had been cornered by the police and committed suicide rather than be captured. The criminal had shot himself under the chin, and this child had a round red scar in exactly the same place. Stevenson was curious about an exit scar, and when he parted the child’s hair he found a round, hairless scar on the scalp at the top of the head.

Children who remember past lives show a marked similarity in behavior, according to Carol Bowman, another researcher in the field. They speak of their past life very early on, sometimes from the age of two, and typically they stop around age seven. The children speak matter-of-factly about dying. They may be frightened of certain things associated with violent death, but usually their affect isn’t emotional. They often sound like small adults and have quite detailed memories. They can make startling comments, such as the following reported to Dr. Stevenson by various children:

"You're not my mommy/daddy."
"I have another mommy/daddy."
"When I was big, I . . . [used to have blue eyes/had a car, etc.]."
"That happened before I was in Mommy's tummy."
"I have a [wife/husband/children]."
"I used to . . . [drive a truck/live in another town, etc.]"
"I died . . . [in a car accident/after I fell, etc.]
"Remember when I . . . [lived in that other house/ was your daddy, etc.]"

Such children talk just as matter-of-factly about the afterlife. About half of the 220 studied by Stevenson said that they didn't go directly to heaven but had to wait in another place first, which corresponds to the "crossing over" phase. They report making decisions about their next lifetime once they got to heaven, choosing a new family and new challenges. As one girl put it, "Heaven isn't easy. You have to work there."
Because they are often so young, children who report past lives are the strongest evidence that reincarnation isn’t just a cultural artifact. There is also the convincing matter of convergence: all three categories of witnesses—children who remember past lives, people who have had an NDE, and people who have experienced being out of their bodies generally—agree on how the afterlife works.

Out-of-body experiences are much more common than we suppose, and a few people have mastered them to the point that they become “astral tourists.” F. Holmes Atwater of the Monroe Institute is one of several researchers in the field, and his subjects often report experiences that take them into the Akashic field, including those domains we associate with dying. What they see is completely consistent with NDEs and children who remember a past life. One child told her parents that God doesn’t speak in words or in a language like English or Spanish. This is consistent with the esoteric belief that communication takes place on the astral planes by telepathy. People returning from near-death also say that what they heard or learned came to them without speech, often through instantaneous insight or revelation.

Are these children exceptional because they remember a past life, or are the rest of us abnormal in not remembering who we once were? I think neither answer is right, exactly. The function of memory is closely attached to strong emotions. Few people can remember what they had for dinner on a Tuesday last month, but if that dinner was the occasion for proposing marriage to someone you loved, it can be recalled for years. Similarly, these children seem to remember being wrenched from their old life, and this powerfully negative memory carries over beyond the boundary of death. Dr. Stevenson records one instance where a child was born with a pattern of red dots on his chest and had memories of pain from a fatal shotgun blast.

On the other side, however, it would be emotionally barren if we remembered everything that ever happened to us. The pioneering Soviet neurologist Alexander Luria had one such patient, a journalist he called S., who had total recall. He could sit in a crowded press conference and afterward remember every word spoken by each person in the room. But S. was an emotional blank and lacked the ability to understand poetry, symbols, and metaphors—for him, every event was a literal fact recorded on a mental tape. (When Luria asked him if sorrow ever sat heavy on his mind, S. replied matter-of-factly that sorrow doesn’t weigh anything.)

Memory is erased in many ways, one of the most typical being retrograde amnesia. We see this phenomenon in victims of automobile accidents and war. A person who loses consciousness after being hit by a car or struck down by a bullet can remember everything up to the moment of impact, but not beyond. After waking up in the hospital wondering What happened to me? the patient or soldier tries to fill in a gap in time based on guesswork. If I am in a hospital and my arm is broken, I must have been hit by a car.

Reincarnation creates a similar gap in memory, except for those few who carry recollections over from one life to the next. In the space between lifetimes identity is reshaped; somehow we change completely, and at the same time we continue as who we are. The afterlife, then, is a kind of transformation chamber. On a cool fall day, if you stroll outside, you might find a chrysalis hanging from a twig. The pupa inside was once a caterpillar and in time it will reincarnate as a butterfly. To do so, every cell in the caterpillar must be transformed. In its pupal stage the insect is shapeless organic goo. That caterpillar melts and reshapes itself at the same time. Its old physical identity is erased entirely. All insects that move from larvae to fully grown adults do something similar, and just as caterpillars bear almost no resemblance to a butterfly, a dragonfly nymph stalking the bottom of a pond for minnows bears no resemblance to its final stage, nor a maggot to a housefly.

For insects, reincarnation is a creative leap that doesn’t involve
Am I "unique"? What is a "person"?

conscious choices, since the information encoded in the insect's genes produces the same transformation generation after generation without variance. Countless monarch butterflies are clones of the original butterfly millions of years ago. Human DNA, however, manufactures new people, each of whom feels unique. Uniqueness in physical structure is only the beginning. We emerge from the transformation chamber not just a bit unique, the way one chimpanzee or dachshund might differ from another, but totally free to create ourselves from the inside, using desires, hopes, dreams, beliefs, and aspirations, all the tools available in consciousness.

The Vedic rishis would argue that consciousness governs this whole machinery—reincarnation is just a variation on the theme of time and place, producing new talents and interests. As the rishis saw it, reincarnation is a creative leap that recombines old karma, good and bad, in a unique combination. The new lifetime and the old are joined inexorably by millions of karmic links, yet for the most part the person being reborn feels that he is something totally new.

This is where a creative leap comes in, according to the rishis. Think of it like money in the bank: you may have only $500, but you are free to spend it any way you choose. In karmic terms cause leads to effect, and as long as that chain holds, event A is forged to event B. A universe without cause and effect would be chaotic. If you drop a ball, gravity makes it fall downward toward the earth, and this result is so reliable that it can be reduced nearly to a certainty. If Karma were just as certain, there would be no need for reincarnation, because the karmic balance at the end of a lifetime would be as reliable as the cocoon that produces monarch butterflies from a larva, not monarchs one spring and swallowtails the next.

Karma isn't predictable, however. People perform all kinds of actions and reap completely different results from the seeds they sow. It's disillusioning that evil deeds go unpunished and virtue is overlooked.

that bad things happen to good people all the time. The Vedic rishis did not mark this down to the vagaries of a whimsical Providence. Karma is unpredictable, they said, for the same reasons that consciousness is unpredictable:

Creativity is innate.
Uncertainty allows new forms to emerge.
The unknown contains infinite possibilities, of which only a fraction appear in the known world.
Nature is change and stability at the same time.

These are the basic tenets of Karma, and what's most fascinating is that we are held together not by inexorable mechanics but by a deep commitment to uncertainty and the creative leaps that result from that.

Reincarnation is how consciousness becomes new even as it uses materials that can never be created or destroyed. That is the wonder of it. Infinite change and infinite stability coexist—this is also the mystery we have to solve before reincarnation can be fully understood.

Karma on the Brain

Karma may turn out to be the key to understanding the brain itself. Neurologists are puzzled over what they call "the binding effect," a mysterious force that pulls different areas of the brain together. Recent advances in brain imaging show that it takes several regions of the brain to cooperate in any thought, feeling, or sensation. Say you walk into a room, recognize your mother, and ask her if she remembers the recipe for the birthday cake she made for your tenth birthday. Your brain isn't jumping from one area that recognizes who she is to
you build good karma by being good and bad karma by being bad. This matches the Christian concept of choosing between good and evil actions, and being rewarded or punished accordingly. Millions of people, East and West, live by that belief. But Karma never ends; it's part of the soul's continuous journey, not just a single lifetime that leads once and for all to heaven or hell.

The catch is that no amount of good karma can win a person's freedom. The Vedic version of hell is never finding a way out of bondage, which makes it strangely congruent to Christian hell. Perfect goodness isn't achievable, and bit by bit the effect of karma will turn the saint's life into the sinner's, and vice versa. That's why "glue" might be a better translation of Karma than "action."

You can compare Karma to a cosmic clock with every gear perfectly meshed. You can compare it to a super-computer keeping track of every action in creation. You can compare it to an eternal judge weighing the good and bad results of every thought and deed. In truth the whole system—universe, brain, lower self, higher self, Atman, God—is bound together by Karma's invisible force. The law of Karma, which underlies every Eastern belief system, holds that none of us can escape paying our debts, and since we accumulate debts every day, we have no choice but to keep paying them off lifetime after lifetime.

According to the rishis, punishment in the afterlife is the result of unpaid karmic debts. If I commit a crime and don't pay for it here on earth, I will pay by suffering later. What is a karmic debt? Basically any cause that hasn't yet found its effect. There's a saying in India, "Karma waits on the doorstep," meaning that a person may try to walk away from past actions, but like a dog sleeping by the door until its master returns, Karma can be endlessly patient. Eventually the universe will insist on redressing the balance of wrong with right.

Hell is the condition of karmic suffering. The vast majority of near-death experiences turn out to be positive, but some are not. Instead of moving toward a benign and welcoming light, a few people experience the features of hell. They see demons or even Satan himself; they hear sinners crying out in torment; a heavy blackness looms over everything. NDE investigators have even found a category of people whom they call "earthbound souls," haunted by evil actions and frustrated desires. Prime witness to this was offered by a man named George Ritchie, who was given a firsthand look at them:

In Ritchie's near-death experience, Jesus took him to a large city on earth where he observed earthbound souls stalking the living for one reason or another. One earthbound soul begged in vain for a cigarette. A young man who had committed suicide begged his parents in vain for forgiveness. In a house, Ritchie was shown the soul of a boy following a living teenage girl and begging for forgiveness despite the fact that the girl was completely unaware of the boy's presence. Jesus told Ritchie that the boy had committed suicide and was chained to every consequence of his act.

These are the ghosts of unpaid karma. It's worth remembering that hellish experiences don't depend upon dying. People have seen Satan in dreams, visions, imagination, and even in the flesh (or inside the flesh, if you believe in demonic possession and Satan's ability to take up his abode in a person's body until he is somehow exorcised).

NDE investigators are among the few in our society whose job is to think about the afterlife, and when they consider any experience of hell or tormented souls, certain factors create these visions of torment. Our minds put us in hell, and they can take us out again. Whether suffering is created here on earth through physical pain or in the afterlife through psychological torment, the causes remain the same, since
they can be traced back to the workings of Karma. Every culture believes that bad deeds are inescapable in the afterlife, but the rishis opened the picture to describe how torment can be escaped in general.

On the material level it’s not self-evident that “as you sow, so shall you reap.” Wrongdoing escapes notice, much less punishment, all the time. We all harbor a fantasy of a life where we can get away with anything. It’s strong enough to turn bank robbers into heroes, for example, at least in movies.

By saying that bad karma will one day catch up with wrongdoers, are we guilty of wish fulfillment? Skeptics would certainly say yes, because if a karmic debt is paid outside the material world, it isn’t being paid at all. The matter can’t be easily settled, but in spiritual terms we can observe the difference between someone who is mature—and by implication has paid off some debts—and someone who is immature, loaded down with unpaid debts. The spiritually mature person pursues a meaningful life through the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Self-worth:} & \quad \text{I matter in the divine plan, I am unique in the universe.} \\
\text{Love:} & \quad \text{I am deeply cared for and care for others deeply.} \\
\text{Truth:} & \quad \text{I can see past illusions and distractions.} \\
\text{Appreciation and gratitude:} & \quad \text{I cherish the fits of creation.} \\
\text{Reverence:} & \quad \text{I can feel and see the sacred.} \\
\text{Nonviolence:} & \quad \text{I respect life in all its forms.}
\end{align*}
\]

To live outside these values is painful, and if intense enough, perhaps the pain puts a person in hell. So the value of a meaningful life demonstrates the hidden side of karmic debts: when you are free of them, your life becomes fulfilled and deeply worth living.

\text{What About Satan?}

Religious Christians will object that I have painted a psychological picture of hell that leaves out Satan. To leave Satan out is to ignore biblical text, which tells us of the angel Lucifer, closest to God among all the angels, who disobeyed God and fell through the sin of pride until he reached the farthest place in creation, hell. That millions of people believe literally in this myth says a great deal about our refusal to take responsibility for the afterlife. We prefer to objectify a Prince of Darkness, an all-powerful opposite of God, who then becomes the agent of all evil.

Taking responsibility for hell sounds awful, but not taking responsibility is the same as giving up on ourselves. Hell is farthest from God because it represents the low ebb of consciousness. The causes of hellish experiences here on earth aren’t merely psychological. They don’t just involve being depressed or guilty. When we become disconnected from ourselves, a sense of deserving to suffer begins. Hell is the suffering you think you deserve. When connections are repaired, we no longer believe we deserve punishment: we are back in the flow of life with all its healing properties.

Everything Satan stands for is included in our own self-judgment. Indeed, he is a massive reflection of self-judgment. Satan is a creation of consciousness, and as such he waxes and wanes, he evolves, and he changes in significance.

\text{Satan is real} under the following conditions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{\quad} & \quad \text{• People feel they deserve punishment instead of healing.} \\
\text{\quad} & \quad \text{• A culture believes in the Satan myth.} \\
\text{\quad} & \quad \text{• Believers pay attention to that myth and give it value.} \\
\text{\quad} & \quad \text{• Guilt is projected outward onto demons instead of healed inside.}
\end{align*}
\]
Wrongdoing accumulates without a means for finding forgiveness, atonement, or purification.

Children are put in fear of demons and told that they have supernatural power.

_Satan is unreal_ under the following conditions:

- People feel they deserve healing instead of punishment.
- A culture is aware of how myths are made.
- People are self-aware and take responsibility for their own emotions.
- There is a belief in forgiveness, healing, and atonement.
- Outlets for negative energies are found (through therapy, sports, open dialogue, healthy family dynamics, education, etc.).
- Children are not conditioned to believe in demons and other supernatural enemies.
- Society promotes the evolution of consciousness.

Our culture has largely moved beyond Satan, because despite religious literalists, we have a century of secularism behind us. Whatever its faults, which can be glaring, secular culture has promoted therapy, discouraged superstition, given people responsibility over their own destinies, and encouraged open-minded dialogue in every area once considered taboo. These are considerable achievements; they bespeak tremendous growth in consciousness. Evil, however you define it, remains even after Satan is gone, but removing our attention from Satan has diminished him greatly, just as the ancient gods of Mount Olympus, once so powerful that they served to explain every natural phenomenon, are now relegated to history.

Like the Greek gods, Satan has outlived his usefulness. When people find a better explanation for any phenomenon, the old explanation withers away—meteorology replaces Aeolus the god of wind, and thermodynamics replaces Promethean fire. We have the power to make Satan grow or diminish. In fact, we have the power to make him real and unreal, which is far more crucial.

As consciousness evolves, Satan will become more unreal. Already I believe there are millions of people who are ready to stop talking about demons, sin, and cosmic evil as the root cause of suffering. They are ready to talk in terms of consciousness. They are ready to talk about being disconnected from themselves. We have spent centuries calling upon God to rescue us and fearing Satan as the supreme enemy. Perhaps this was necessary to our evolution, but now we can turn to the deeper, more humane wisdom of the rishis, which speaks of one reality, not a fractured universe with heaven and hell at opposite poles.

Good and evil, the rishis tell us, is a direct function of being connected to the soul. The soul is the most real aspect of the self. When we break our connection with the soul, we lose touch with reality.

**THE SOUL IS DISGUISED WHEN...**

- You are too tired or stressed.
- You are pulled outside yourself.
- Your attention is dominated by externals.
- You let others think for you.
- You act out of compulsion.
- You are influenced by fear and anxiety.
- You struggle and suffer.

These conditions have to change before the soul connection can be reestablished. Death provides access to the domain of the soul, but Vedanta declares that the soul has a great deal to offer before death. Life is conducted under the gaze of the soul. Your portion of pure consciousness has certain universal qualities:
• It is constant.
• It never loses sight of you.
• It is connected to every other soul.
• It shares God’s omniscience.
• It is untouched by change.
• It lives beyond time and space.

So it isn’t only tender, loving, quiet moments that reveal the soul. Rather, it’s those moments when the soul’s own qualities come to the surface that are most important. Such moments occur too rarely in modern lives, but the soul never stops revealing itself.

THE SOUL IS REVEALED WHEN . . .

• You feel centered.
• Your mind is clear.
• You have the sensation that time has stopped.
• You suddenly feel free of boundaries.
• You are keenly self-aware.
• You feel merged with another person, either in love or silent communion.
• You feel untouched by aging and change.
• You feel blissful or ecstatic.
• You have an intuitive flash that turns out to be true.
• You somehow know what is going to happen.
• You sense the truth.
• You feel supremely loved or absolutely safe.

If there is only one reality, as the rishis declare, then life is not a struggle between good and evil, but a tangled web where all actions, good and bad, move us closer to reality or deeper into illusion. Karma spins the web. Karma isn’t a prison, it’s a field of choice. Karma keeps our choices honest. We sow what we reap, but this is far from saying that we are trapped by the forces of cosmic good and evil. Hell, like every other location in consciousness, ultimately reflects the state of our own awareness, and freedom from hell is won, like every other achievement, by coming closer to the reality of the soul.
“Don’t!” Ramana warned, anticipating that Savitri would want to run and hold the baby.

The baby looked around blankly, then it crossed the path and disappeared into the woods again.

“Did you recognize her?” Ramana asked.

“No, how could I? Is she lost?” Savitri felt confused and disturbed by what she’d witnessed. Instead of answering her directly, Ramana said, “There are more. You’re attracting them.” At that moment a second ghost appeared, this time a girl of four. Savitri was dumbfounded. “Do you know that one?” he asked.

“It’s me!”

At that, the ghost peered her way for a moment before wandering away. “And the baby was also me?”

Ramana nodded. “Every former self you have left behind is a ghost. Your body is no longer the body of a child. Your thoughts, desires, fears, and hopes have changed. It would be terrible to walk around with all your dead selves holding on. Let them go.”

Savitri could say nothing. One by one apparitions of herself appeared. She witnessed the girl of ten who sat by her mother’s side in the kitchen, the girl of twelve blushing to talk to a boy, the ardent young woman obsessed with Satyavan, her first love. The last ghost was the most startling, because it was like a mirror image, exactly her age and wearing the same shawl that Savitri had thrown on when she fled her hut.

“You see, even the self you had today is a ghost,” said Ramana.

When this last apparition had faded back into the forest, Savitri said, “What do they have to teach me?”

“That death has been with you every moment of your life,” Ramana replied. “You have survived thousands of deaths every day as your old thoughts, your old cells, your old emotions, and even your old identity passed away. Everyone is living in the afterlife right now. What is there to fear or doubt?”

“But they seemed so real,” Savitri said.

“Yes, as real as dreams,” said Ramana. “But you are in the here and now, not in the past.”

Savitri had never seen herself in this way, and the sight gave her new courage. “I am still determined to defeat death, for I want Satyavan in my arms again. But if Yama is victorious, I won’t cling to ghosts. At least I have won that much wisdom.”

Ghosts

THE FIELD OF DREAMS

When people wonder if the personality survives death, the answer is that the personality doesn’t even survive while we are alive. We are not the same person we were five, ten, or fifteen years ago and it would be a sorry state if we were. Our personalities are constantly evolving, transforming, growing. If the question becomes, Does the individual survive death?, the answer is, What’s an individual? In reality what we call “me” is different from day to day, week to week, year to year. Which individual are you talking about, the young person who was in love and full of romance and desire, or the child who was full of innocence and wonder? Perhaps we must wait for the one who is senescent and dying. Which one would you survive as?

Perhaps none. Vedanta tells us that the afterlife brings the opportunity for a creative leap. As our choices continue to expand, we will experience a new reality that is far richer than the conventional notion of heaven. Heaven is an end point, whereby definitions, all transformation, stops. Souls lounge around in a blessed state that sounds, frankly, like eternal assisted living. Why should consciousness become inert? In the afterlife survival would be meaningless unless we continued to respond.

The biggest difference is that in the afterlife the input of the five senses no longer stimulates us. The furniture of the mind has been
cleared away, leaving a space that is both inside and outside ourselves. This is why Jesus wasn’t being paradoxical when he sometimes talked about heaven “within you” and heaven “with the Father.” When you empty a room of furniture, the space left behind is empty, but the Vedic rishis say that mental space is different. It is full of possibilities. Anything can be born there. They called this pregnant space Akasha. The closest equivalent in English would be “dream space,” or at least that’s a good place to begin.

A dream is like a blank screen on which anything can be projected: any event, place, or person. Akasha is the same. When Vedanta says that every world is a projection of the mind, it is describing an Akashic dream. “Worlds come and go like specks of dust in a beam of sunlight,” declares a famous Vedic saying. In Akasha we realize the transience of all things and the immensity of the unknown. The Akashic dream is cosmic, unlike the personal dreams we have at night.

NDEs tell us that the stage of “crossing over”—the temporary realm preceding the full experience of the afterlife—still feels personal. People report seeing their deceased friends and relations, for example. The dying person continues to see the room in which his body lies, and memories and associations keep tying him back to physical existence. The possibility of taking a creative leap has yet to be realized. As long as you continue to feel like the person you were, you can’t experience the unknown. Let me give you an example.

On a speaking engagement a few years ago I met Gerald, a man who told me that he had become fascinated by the healing powers of shamans in the Southwest. What kind of healing did he need? I asked.

“I don’t want to give you any background just yet,” Gerald said. “I flew down to New Mexico and found myself in a group outside Santa Fe, about twenty of us. I’d never met a shaman before. Ours was Hopi, but he didn’t wear any religious symbols. He was just a very pleasant older man with shoulder-length hair. He greeted each of us as we entered the meeting room in a motel.”

The shaman began by asking everyone to pick a partner. “We were asked to pair off with the person in the room whom we felt most comfortable with. I picked a guy about my age who was standing next to me. I was as comfortable with him as anyone else, considering how bad I felt anyway.”

Gerald now revealed that he had been through a debilitating course of treatment for prostate cancer, including surgery and chemotherapy. He had been cancer free for two years but was haunted by fears that the doctors hadn’t gotten everything. His anxiety kept on growing even though he kept being reassured that he was in the clear. Finally, on the advice of a friend, Gerald reluctantly sought out a shaman.

“One we’d picked our partners we formed a circle. The shaman walked into the middle and began to chant. He didn’t ask us to do anything but observe. After fifteen minutes he turned to the first pair, a man and a woman. The shaman looked into the man’s eyes and muttered something. Immediately the man’s body began to tremble, then he fell down in a kind of mild seizure.

“In an insistent voice the shaman said, *Speak to me!* The man’s eyes had gone blank. He began to mumble about being freezing cold, lying on the ground in winter. He’d passed out from alcohol and was dying.

“The shaman nodded. He turned to the woman, who looked pretty shaken. ‘Are you an alcoholic?’ he asked. ‘Is that why you’ve come here?’ Turning red, the woman nodded. ‘Well, you have a spirit in your family line, someone who died of alcohol. We need to free him.’ He helped the woman’s partner to his feet and told him he’d done a good job. And that’s how it went, one pair at a time going around the circle.”

Gerald watched as each partner was used to invoke a departed spirit. In each case the spirit would talk about a problem—depression,
cancer, addiction—which turned out to be a perfect match for the problem that the other person in the pair had come about. No one had talked to the shaman before meeting in the motel. Gerald was astonished when his partner brought in the spirit of Gerald’s grandfather, who had died of lung cancer when Gerald was a small child.

“Not everybody recognized their spirit, and it wasn’t always a close relative. In my case I had heard a lot about my grandfather, who had been a prominent citizen. It was spooky hearing him beg to be released from his pain, very spooky.”

For some of the people in the room clearing the departed spirit, which the shaman proceeded to do, marked the end of treatment. Gerald stayed in the Southwest and underwent a series of medicinal sweat lodges, accompanied by rituals and chanting. After several weeks the shaman told him that his grandfather’s spirit was now at peace.

“When I got back home I almost went back for a medical checkup, but I had stopped feeling anxious. I quit having nightmares or waking up in a sweat. It was over, just like the shaman said.”

I’m recounting this story to open our perspective. Being raised in a Christian culture doesn’t automatically mean that a dying person will see himself arriving at the pearly gates greeted by Saint Peter. (This isn’t one of the common scenarios reported by near-death patients, either.) One might find oneself in the spirit world of Native Americans instead. The soul’s passage follows links that we don’t foresee.

Gerald’s story has a curious addendum. A month after returning home he went with his wife on vacation to the upper Midwest where his family originally came from. “We checked into a renovated Victorian hotel. Our room was done up in flowery wallpaper and a four-poster bed. But what caught my eye was a framed newspaper hanging on the wall. It was from the turn of the century and showed a picture of a volunteer fire brigade. Right in the middle staring out at me was my grandfather as a young man.”

“Did that shake you?” I asked.

“No, to me it was a sign that the shaman was right. I’m glad my grandfather was set free, wherever he’s gone.”

Akasha

In all the tales of ghosts who want to be set free, what holds them back is memory. They continue to remember what physical life was like, and the unfinished business of those memories has a grip. The unsettled spirit can’t escape into the next stage of existence. What this means, strangely enough, is that when the afterlife has become real, the physical world has become the dream. It’s just a matter of perspective. When you are in a physical body your perspective makes physically real. When you are dreaming at night, the dream state is real. When you are “crossing over,” both waking and dreaming are unreal, and Akasha—the field of consciousness—is real. What causes this change of reality? Vedanta holds that consciousness is convinced by its own creations. Therefore, nothing we can see, hear, and touch, whether in waking, dreaming, or beyond both, is ultimately real. They represent shifting perspectives.

To be completely free means waking up from all dreamlike states, and reclaiming who you are: the maker of reality. One cannot say that all dying people will achieve this kind of absolute freedom. They may glimpse it only for a fleeting second; they may sense the possibility of breaking away from one dream and yet be seduced into the next one that comes to mind.

I knew a woman who as a child had come home from school, and as she entered the door she saw her young cousin from Chicago standing in the corner waiting for her. Both were about eight at the time. The cousin didn’t speak, and the girl ran to tell her mother that they had a visitor.
When she entered the kitchen her mother was crying. The little girl asked why, and her mother said that there had been a sudden death in the family. It was the cousin from Chicago, who had died that morning. Did the girl see her cousin as a vision, a premonition, or merely as a coincidental act of imagination? As she tells the story, she saw her cousin “for real.” Yet what do we mean by “for real” except that something is convincing? This encounter with a departed relative can be judged as either hallucinatory or deeply spiritual, depending not on the event itself but on who is looking at it.

In the afterlife a person wakes up from one extremely convincing perspective—physical existence—and faces the possibility of freedom. Akasha isn’t any particular perspective; it’s a wide open playing field waiting for players to enter it. Who will the players be?

- They could be the same players we are already used to.
- They could be players we have imagined and are eager to see.
- They could be otherworldly beings.
- They could be emanations of ourselves.
- They could be embodiments of abstract ideas.

In world culture all these variations have been reported. Christian heaven is a specific Akashic play, a drama of redemption with otherworldly beings in it, along with familiar people from the past and an abstraction that we call God. To the extent that all these images materialize in the mind, a dying Christian accepts that she has arrived in heaven. Vedanta says that the deeper truth is that the dying person has arrived in a creative space, Akasha, which produces whatever is wanted.

But how does a person know what he wants? The answer gets complicated. Let’s take it back down to earth and ask the same question. How do you know what you want right now? Until your next desire appears, you won’t know. It’s certain that you will want something, because the mind is a continuous stream of desires. However, this doesn’t make the mind predictable. You may be a creature of habit who always wants two scrambled eggs for breakfast, while I may be restless and want a different breakfast every day. Both of us could be thrown out of our accustomed pattern by a sudden stress, such as having a death in the family, losing our jobs, being diagnosed with heart trouble. Suddenly we aren’t hungry; our minds want to grieve, not eat. The unpredictable tug-of-war between old patterns and new situations makes it impossible to pin down desire.

In the same way, Akasha is elusive because it’s so open-ended; it’s as unpredictable as a dream and just as convincing. Even so, the Akashic field can be navigated. In fact, it must be navigated if we are to take advantage of the creative leap that the afterlife opens up.

Navigating the Field

We have a chance to open up the possibilities beyond what our culture has conditioned us to believe. One experience can’t fit everyone. Our eyes continue to see what they expect, even when we use the eyes of the soul, but the Akashic field isn’t a swirl of random images. It is more structured than a dream; it has a kind of invisible landscape. The structure of Akasha cannot be described in physical terms, yet if we look inside ourselves, the seemingly random flow of our minds also obeys a kind of invisible structure.

Let’s say someone walks up to you and greets you by name. The person is smiling; there’s an expectant look on her face. How do you come up with a response? Your mind does several things at once. It consults its stored picture files for familiar faces. It looks for a name to attach to the right face. If neither can be found immediately, the mind doesn’t feel stymied yet—it has backup resources. It rummages through faces that could fit this person but are younger or fuzzily recorded. It tosses up sample names that might jog your memory. It
runs, through recent events that this apparent stranger may have played a part in. If all this doesn't work, the mind starts thinking of what to say to cover up your memory lapse.

We're all familiar with such situations, and we are so accustomed to matching names and faces that we don't marvel at how astonishing the whole process is. Not only can the mind Google itself for information with incredible swiftness, it performs multiple operations with backup plans if they fail. This implies an amazingly complex but invisible structure.

In the afterlife the same structure continues to exist. In near-death experiences the dying person, suddenly confronted with an unknown situation, searches inside for familiar landmarks: deceased relatives, recognizable voices, a divine light, the presence of a fatherly (or motherly) God. In other words, we all have a built-in map that we consult. This map prepares us to convert any unknown experience into something meaningful. (As I was writing this chapter a TV special about heaven came on, and one woman being interviewed was certain that she had been to heaven. Her near-death experience occurred when she was giving birth, had a crisis, and fell briefly into a coma. Describe heaven, the interviewer said. The woman's face grew rapturous at the memory. She described an endless stairway going up to the sky, and along the stairway happy animals pranced around. She added that the blue of the sky was like no color that could be found on earth. To me, she chose to interpret her experience by drawing from a scrapbook of childhood images.)

Psychologists have conducted experiments that illustrate how we automatically create meaning. In one, a group of subjects sits in a room before a tape recorder. They are told to listen to a tape of someone talking and to take notes on what's being said as best they can. They are also told that the voice on the tape will be very soft, since the experiment is testing how well the brain can register the faintest spoken words.

The tape is turned on and is barely audible. The subjects crane forward and take their notes, which are then collected. What they haven't been told is that the voice is speaking nonsense. Only random words are coming out of the machine. Yet each subject will take notes that make sense, because an expectation of hearing meaningful words leads to the creation of meaning.

In the afterlife the creative possibilities are enormously expanded. Instead of asking one question—**What is the voice on the tape saying?**—the mind has a host of questions to ask: **Where am I? What's happening to me? Who have I become? What lies ahead?**

In the afterlife the mind is multidimensional. Akasha takes us out of all time-space limitations. In truth we always were multi-dimensional, only we were so convinced by inhabiting the material world that we conformed to its rules. Now we need to adapt ourselves to Akasha, where there is structure without rigid rules and creative possibility without cultural dogma.