

Scientific Proof of Reincarnation

Dr. Ian Stevenson's Life Work

"Either he [Dr. Stevenson] is making a colossal mistake. Or he will be known as the Galileo of the 20th century." Dr Harold Lief in the Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease



Probably the best known, if not most respected, collection of scientific data that appears to provide scientific proof that reincarnation is real, is the life's work of Dr. Ian Stevenson. Instead of relying on hypnosis to verify that an individual has had a previous life, he instead chose to collect thousands of cases of children who spontaneously (without hypnosis) remember a past life. Dr. Ian Stevenson uses this approach because spontaneous past life memories in a child can be investigated using strict scientific protocols. Hypnosis, while useful in researching into past lives, is less reliable from a purely scientific perspective. In order to collect his data, Dr. Stevenson methodically documents the child's statements of a previous life. Then he identifies the deceased person the child remembers being, and verifies the facts of the deceased person's life that match the child's memory. He even matches birthmarks and birth defects to wounds and scars on the deceased, verified by medical records. His strict methods systematically rule out all possible "normal" explanations for the child's memories.

Dr. Stevenson has devoted the last forty years to the scientific documentation of past life memories of children from all over the world. He has over 3000 cases in his files. Many people, including skeptics and scholars, agree that these cases offer the best evidence yet for reincarnation.

Dr. Stevenson's credentials are impeccable. He is a medical doctor and had many scholarly papers to his credit before he began paranormal research. He is the former head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, and now is Director of the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia.

In order to help the reader become familiar with Dr. Stevenson's work, a 1988 Omni Magazine Interview is reprinted below. Following the interview is a summary of one of Dr. Stevenson's most famous cases.

Omni Magazine Interview with Dr. Ian Stevenson.

By Meryle Secrest

This interview was published in 1988. It shows yet more of the many fascinating ideas and views that Dr. Ian Stevenson holds, as he draws from his fifty years of education and research into the foundations of human personality.

The idea that some children of ages three to five not only remember a previous existence, but can identify loved ones from it, strikes most Westerners as so bizarre that it compels disbelief. Perhaps this is why the world's foremost investigator of the phenomenon, Dr. Ian Stevenson, has attracted so little attention.

Since the late Sixties Dr. Ian Stevenson, Carlson Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia, has documented cases in India, Africa, the Near and Far East, Britain, the United States, and elsewhere in which young children have astonished their parents with precise details about the people they claim to have been. Some of these children have recognized former homes and neighborhoods as well as still-living friends and relatives. They have recalled events in their purported previous lives, including their often violent deaths. Sometimes their birthmarks resemble scars that correspond to wounds that led, they claim, to their deaths.

All this is the stuff of lurid fiction and pulp journalism, presumably unworthy of serious investigation. In this context Stevenson is considered unique: His studies are scrupulously objective and methodologically impeccable. The late Herbert S. Ripley, former chairman of the psychiatry department at the University of Washington in Seattle, noted, "We are lucky to have someone of his ability and high integrity investigating this controversial area. Wrote Dr. Harold Lief in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*: "Either he is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known as the Galileo of the twentieth century."

Born in Montreal on October 31, 1918, Ian Stevenson was the son of a Scottish lawyer, John Stevenson. A writer at heart, the elder Stevenson became chief correspondent in Ottawa for *Times of London*. His wife, Ruth Preston Stevenson, had an extensive library on psychic phenomena. But Stevenson cannot recall any incidents that triggered his interest in psychic matters. "Virtually nothing has happened to me of that nature," he says. "I wish it would; I sometimes wonder what my trouble is." Stevenson studied medicine at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and then transferred to McGill University in Montreal after the outbreak of World War II. His studies in internal medicine led to an interest in psychosomatic illness and then in psychiatry. Although he trained as a Freudian psychoanalyst, he now says, "I feel sure that Freud will one day be considered a figure of fun. After his first book, which was clinically based, he became involved in theoretical musings and practically lost interest in investigation. He ended up inventing an inverted cone of theory supported by a tiny base of data."

In 1957 Stevenson was appointed chief psychiatrist at the hospital of the University of Virginia, and today he heads the Division of Personality Studies. The author of many papers in professional

psychiatric journals, Stevenson has written two standard texts on psychiatric interviewing and diagnosis. In 1964 he abandoned psychiatry to devote himself entirely to research into psychic phenomena and reincarnation. Buying time for his work took money. Luckily, Stevenson's first essay on past lives, "The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations," published in 1960, caught the eye of Chester Carlson, inventor of the Xerox machine. Carlson promptly took the first major step toward funding the studies that Stevenson has been conducting ever since. Such studies are exhaustive as well as expensive. Between 1966 and 1971, for instance, Stevenson logged an average of 55,000 miles a year, often making return visits and interviewing as many as 25 witnesses for a single case. He now has 2,500 such cases on file from all over the world, most still unexamined for lack of money and researchers. Carlson, who died in 1968, endowed a chair at the University of Virginia, along with bequeathing the funds that still support Stevenson's research.

Even decades ago, as he was finishing his first paper on memories of persons claiming previous lives, Stevenson saw the shortcomings of most evidence from adult cases. Focusing on the memories of very young children, he concluded that one might distinguish between "imaged" and "behavioral" memories. Although a child might have no conscious memories (imaged memories) from a former life, his interests, aptitudes, and phobias (behavioral memories) might have been formed by experiences he or she had forgotten. Perhaps reincarnation could explain features of the human personality that other theories have failed to elucidate.

Lately Stevenson has scrutinized evidence based on physical characteristics such as birthmarks and birth defects. This latest body of work, which will be published in several volumes over the next few years, Stevenson says, may tip the scales between evidence supporting reincarnation and evidence making any other conclusion difficult to sustain. All of Stevenson's books have been published by the University Press of Virginia, and all are in print. They include [Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation](#); Cases of the Reincarnation Type (four volumes). Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy, and Telepathic Impressions. A Review and Report of Thirty-five New Cases.

For several years Stevenson declined my request to interview him, explaining that his reluctance stemmed from previous experiences in which he had been tricked by the press and badly misrepresented. Finally, in the fall of 1987, he relented, just before leaving Virginia for Cambridge, England, and then India. Stevenson and his staff work in an old house on a Charlottesville street that long ago lost its residential status and is now filled with parking lots and apartment buildings. The interior is comfortable and modern without being in any way memorable, except for the souvenirs of Stevenson's travels, which line the walls: Indian and African masks, drums, fans, and swords. Now sixty-nine, Stevenson is a courtly and attentive listener with a reputation for being diffident. He is rather an intensely private person and, as might be gathered from the set of his jaw, secretly tenacious. Stevenson, it would appear, is much more concerned with painstakingly accumulating, clarifying, and classifying evidence than with drawing resounding conclusions.

Omni: Your newest book [in 1988], [Children Who Remember Previous Lives](#), is a rare discussion of the evidence presented, it seems, after much questioning. How does this book differ from your previously published books, which were predominantly case histories?

Stevenson: It occurred to me that my case histories were not being widely read--to understate the matter--although [Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation](#) has now become a best seller as far as scientific books go, it has gone into seven languages and has probably sold fifty thousand copies, but that's over a twenty-year period. Judging from the mail, the readership was not among scientists but rather from the public at large. My paper "The Explanatory Value of the Idea of Reincarnation," published ten years ago, suggested that the study of these cases might illuminate problems in psychology and medicine.

I had become dissatisfied, you see, with the methods that had been developed in psychiatry for helping people. Orthodox theory conceives human personality as the product of a person's genetic material inherited from his ancestors through his parents, and the modifying influences of his prenatal and postnatal environment. But I found that some cases cannot be satisfactorily explained by genetics, environmental influences, or a combination of these. I am speaking of such things as early childhood phobias, about uncanny abilities that seem to develop spontaneously, of children convinced that they are the wrong sex, congenital deformities, differences between one-egg twins, and even such matters as irrational food preferences.

Omni: Is this work the only study of its kind in the United States?

Stevenson: Yes, and it's unique for the rest of the world. In India, however, scientists who have worked with me are now beginning to do independent research.

Omni: Do you wait for people to get in touch, or do you pursue cases?

Stevenson: It's sort of mixed now. I've got so much data I've been trying to withdraw from fieldwork myself. I want to write more so that not too many of my books will be posthumous.

Omni: When did you hit on the idea of dealing just with children?

Stevenson: It evolved in the late Sixties, probably after I went to India. Adults would write to me, and I eventually began to see that most of their cases were worthless. You can't really control the subconscious influences to which most adults are exposed. It's so much easier to be confident about the amount of information a small child might have learned, especially one living in an Asian village. I saw how fascinating and valuable these cases were.

Obviously children are too young to have absorbed a great deal of information, especially about deceased people in some distant town. In the better cases, they couldn't have known about them. In many of our cases in northwest North America and Burma, people in the same family or village are involved. So there's a likelihood that some adult or older child has talked about a deceased person and the child has absorbed the information, as our questioning makes clear. This is not, however, an issue in most cases I cite in India, many of which involve long distances, twenty-five to

fifty kilometers or more, with no contact between the villages. Often the child has quite precise details.

Omni: You've found children with intense interests in subjects having no relation to anything in their family background or up-bringing. And you've directly linked the phobias and addictions of children to traumas that transpired in the lives of people these children claim to have been. Are you talking about aspects of their personalities that heredity does not explain?

Stevenson: That's right. It's easy to see environmental influences, say, with such composers as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, all of whose fathers were fine musicians. But what about George Frederic Handel? His family had no discernible interest in music; his father even sternly discouraged it. Or take the cases of Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer, and Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. Both had to fight for their chosen callings from childhood onward. One can find endless examples that are difficult to explain given our current theories. But if one accepts the possibility of reincarnation, one can entertain the idea that these children are demonstrating strong likes, dislikes, skills, and even genius that are the logical results of previous experiences. I have found some children with skills that seem to be carried over from a previous life.

Omni: What about cases of childhood mental illness?

Stevenson: There again you will find cases of children acting as if they did not belong in their families. They treat parents and siblings with indifference, even hostility. This phenomenon is usually thought to have been caused by infantile trauma. Some theorists even try to explain it as the result of parents rejecting the child-before it has been born. Researchers look to the parents for the first cause. Comparatively little attention is given to the child, even though there is evidence that some children reject their parents before the parents have a chance to reject them. I suggest that such behavior could result from unhappy experiences in a previous life.

Omni: What about one's own child? Are there ways to introduce the subject?

Stevenson: I see no harm in asking a child if he remembers a previous life. I would be particularly interested if a child has a large birthmark or a congenital malformation. I've reported on a case of a child who claimed to have been his own paternal grandfather and had two pigmented moles in the same spots on his body that his grandfather did. It's said in such instances that genetics is responsible. But one wonders why the one grandchild in ten who had the moles claimed to remember his grandfather's life. Or take congenital malformations: Children born with deformed limbs-or even without fingers, toes, and hands-have claimed to remember being murdered and state that the murderer had removed these fingers, toes, or hands during the killing. In such situations the approach would be to ask the child to explain the birth defect. But I don't approve of pumping children if they don't want to talk.

Omni: Do the child's parents often "ruin" a case before you arrive?

Stevenson: All too often we reach the scene after the subject and his family have met the family about whom he's been talking. We sometimes have to pare away a great deal of extraneous information. I always prefer to record the child's account, but sometimes the boy or girl is too shy to talk, and I have to fall back on what parents say about his or her statements. My colleagues and I try to separate what the child said before meeting the other family from what he said later. Obviously the latter has much less value.

I cannot emphasize too strongly that a child who is going to remember a previous life has only about three years in which he will talk about it. Before the age of two or three he lacks the ability. After five, too much else will be happening in his life, and he will begin to forget.

Omni: How frequently do children claim to have memories of a past life?

Stevenson: We don't yet know the incidence of cases. All we know are those that come to us. One survey of a township in northern India found one case for every five hundred persons. This would almost certainly understate the matter, as many cases never go beyond the immediate family. Even in cultures where reincarnation is accepted, parents sometimes think such memories are harmful. They are often upset by what the child remembers. Parents would not be particularly pleased to have a murdered child, not to mention a murderer, reincarnate in their family.

Omni: What would predispose someone to remember a previous life?

Stevenson: Violent death is a factor in our cases. In more than seven hundred cases in six different cultures, sixty-one percent remembered having died violently. But are these cases actually representative? Those involving accidents, murders, and suicides are bound to get more attention than others in which the child remembers a quiet life. Children also tend to remember the final years or a previous life. Almost seventy five percent of our children appear to recall the way they died, and if death was violent, they remember it in vivid detail

Omni: You've stated that boys remember more often than girls.

Stevenson: Yes, but boys are presented to us more often than girls. A girl may not be marriageable if she is the notorious subject of a case, so she may be kept in the background. In a series of one thousand ninety-five cases from around the world, sixty-two percent were male. I can't explain this, unless men are more likely to die violent deaths

Omni: Why do most Westerners ridicule the idea of reincarnation?

Stevenson: It's hard to find any single explanation. Some southern European Christians believed in reincarnation until the Council of Nice banned such beliefs in 553 A.D. In *The Republic*, Plato described souls about to be reborn as choosing their future lives. Schopenhauer took it seriously, and Voltaire's observation that it is no more surprising to be born twice than once is wellknown. Yet most scientists nowadays do not believe in survival after death. I suppose Darwinian ideas contributed to a sort of dethroning of the soul. Reincarnation may be particularly uncongenial

because it's so much identified—mistakenly I think—with the Hindu and Buddhist ideas of being reborn as an animal.

Omni: What has it been like to swim against the tide?

Stevenson: Invigorating! (Laughs)

Omni: What criticism is most frequently leveled at your work?

Stevenson: That the cases occur most where people already believe in reincarnation. If a child seems to refer to a previous life, it's argued that his parents encourage him and may unwittingly feed the child information about a deceased person. I call this the sociopsychological interpretation of the cases. It is said that despite all my efforts, I have not eliminated the possibility that the subject of a case learned everything he knew through normal channels. Once a child comes to believe he or she was a particular person in a previous life, the argument goes, the other elements follow naturally. If you believe you had been stabbed to death in a previous life, you might have a phobia, for example, of knives.

While this is a valid argument for a small number of cases, especially those occurring in the same family or village, it's inapplicable for long-distance cases where a child shows a detailed knowledge about a family his parents have never heard of, let alone met. But my critics say I must have overlooked something, that the child must have learned about the deceased.

Omni: Why do all the cases seem to be in Asia? Couldn't critics find any in the West?

Stevenson: Oh, absolutely. I am convinced that if child psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as pediatricians, family doctors, and parents, would listen to children and observe them with reincarnation in mind, they would make valuable discoveries. Children often seem to express memories of previous lives in their play and sometimes in their drawings.

Omni: Scientists usually dismiss reincarnation as some sort of wishful thinking. Yet William James noted that our desire to believe in survival after death does not automatically negate its possibility. We do want to believe in it, don't we?

Stevenson: No, in fact we don't. That's a misunderstanding concerning Hindus and Buddhists. They believe in it, but they don't particularly want to. Hindus see life in terms of a constant cycle of births in which we are doomed to struggle and suffer until we have reached perfection and can escape. Fear of death is almost universal; and some two thousand years ago Patanjali, an Indian sage, said it was due to our fear of having to undergo a postmortem review of our lives, to be judged and presumably be found wanting.

Omni: Your new book discusses some misconceptions about the idea of reincarnation. What is the most common?

Stevenson: The idea that reincarnation must include what Hindus call Karma, especially retributive Karma.

Omni: Retributive Karma being the idea that whatever bad you do in this life is paid for in the next by having the same amount of evil done to you?

Stevenson: Something like that. It can be more specific, so that if you put out someone's eyes, you will be blinded. There is no evidence for the idea of retributive Karma. The notion of a succession of lives with improvement in each, on the other hand, is precisely the view of the Druze, a Muslim sect of Lebanon, a people I've worked with a lot. They believe God sends us into different sorts of lives, perhaps as a fisherman, then a banker, then maybe a pirate. But in each life we should do the best we can, if a banker, one should be thoroughly honest—and rich! Whether pirate or peasant, it's all summed up at the day of judgment. But one life has nothing to do with the next. Your conduct could be vicious in one life, and in the next, you might be reborn into elegant circumstances.

Omni: In your new book you speak reprovingly of people easily persuaded by your evidence. Is your position that reincarnation can never really be demonstrated?

Stevenson: I don't think I rebuke anybody for being convinced by the evidence. All I say is that maybe they shouldn't believe on the basis of what's in that particular book, because the detailed case reports are in my other books. Essentially I say that the idea of reincarnation permits but doesn't compel belief. All the cases I've investigated so far have shortcomings. Even taken together, they do not offer anything like proof. But as the body of evidence accumulates, it's more likely that more and more people will see its relevance.

I'm not much of a missionary. Most of that was drained out of me on my first trip to India. I did have a certain zeal when I first went there. When I talked to Ramakrishna Swami in Chandigarh, he asked me what I was doing, and I replied with a certain enthusiasm. After a long silence he finally said, "We know that reincarnation is true, but it doesn't make any difference because here in India we have just as many rogues and villains as you have in the West" End of interview.

Omni: Many claims are made for the authenticity of previous lives based on memories supposedly recovered under hypnosis. You have pointed out why these are likely to be fraudulent.

Stevenson: In my experience, nearly all so-called previous personalities evoked through hypnotism are entirely imaginary and a result of the patient's eagerness to obey the hypnotist's suggestion. It is no secret that we are all highly suggestible under hypnosis. This kind of investigation can actually be dangerous. Some people have been terribly frightened by their supposed memories, and in other cases the previous personality evoked has refused to go away for a long time.

Omni: Yet there are some cases that might argue in its favor. You seem persuaded by the evidence for Bridey Murphy. [In 1952 a Colorado housewife claimed that under hypnosis she relived memories of a previous life as an Irish girl, Bridey Murphy, living in 1806.]

Stevenson: Yes, I think it is one of the few. We've discussed cases of children and adults who have been able to speak a tongue they could not possibly have learned; the term for this is xenoglossy. Although rare, they do occur. One that I published concerns the wife of a Methodist minister who, after having been hypnotized by her husband, began to speak German—not very well, but German nonetheless—and described the life of a teenage girl who may have lived in Germany in the late nineteenth century. So I'm not saying that hypnosis is never a useful tool, but I do deplore the commercial exploitation and misleading claims that are often made. A large part of what emerges under hypnosis is pure fantasy. Some of these "previous lives" have been traced back to historical novels.

There is another English case going back to the turn of the century that was studied by a Cambridge don, in which a young woman seemed to be describing the life of one Blanche Poynings, a person around the court of Richard II in the fourteenth century. She gave a lot of detail about the people concerned, including proper names and the sort of life she lived. The investigators kept on probing, and a little later they began asking her about sources of information. In her trancelike state the girl herself came out with a reference to a book, *Countess Maud*, published in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a classic Victorian novel all about a countess at the court of Richard II. The subject had modified it a little bit, but basically it was all in the novel, and it turned out that her aunt had a copy of the book. She didn't remember reading it, but she remembered turning the pages. So you have that kind of case.

Omni: Have you found evidence of conscious hoax?

Stevenson: There are a few. In a recent paper on seven cases of deception and self-deception, my colleagues and I describe hoaxes or informants who had deceived themselves about the strength of evidence. I may have been hoaxed in other cases without knowing it, but I think not often. The average villager in Asia and Africa doesn't have time to devise a hoax. He or she often begrudges us the time it takes to conduct an interview. There is no money to be made and no particular local renown to be had. Successful fraud takes the cooperation of numerous witnesses and a child drilled to perfection. It's not a serious problem for us, although gross self-deception can happen. For instance, I was shown two Alevi children in Turkey who were said to be the reincarnation of President Kennedy: These kinds of cases are uncommon and relatively easy to detect.

Cryptomnesia, or source amnesia, is another matter. A child could obtain some information normally and then forget it. It's a possibility I consider in every case, but it's not a satisfactory explanation for most long-distance cases, since too much information is needed to put together a believable set of previous-life memories. Sometimes, though, there may be paramnesia—a mixing up of memories. The Druze, who often have such a strong desire to trace a deceased person that they may be too anxious to find the child they're looking for, jump to conclusions on the basis of very slender evidence. You might call it unconscious wish fulfillment.

Omni: Do you see in reincarnation a glimpse of a larger purpose?

Stevenson: Well, yes, I do. My idea of God is that He is evolving. I don't believe in the watchmaker God, the original creator who built the watch and then lets it tick. I believe in a "Self-maker God"

who is evolving and experimenting; so are we as parts of Him. Bodies wear out; souls may need periods for rest and reflection. Afterward one may start again with a new body.

Omni: Do you disagree with most bioscientists, who hold that what we call mind or soul is actually a part of brain activity?

Stevenson: The assumption that our minds are nothing but our brains appears to receive support when you consider the effect of injury, surgery, a high fever, or one or two drinks of whiskey on our mental processes. Some neuroscientists acknowledge that they have only just begun to show how brain processes account for mental ones. But they claim to know that they or their successors will work it all out. They are sure there can be no other explanation, therefore they consider no other. We are not pledged to follow all the received opinions of neuroscientists, however. Recently, a small number of psychologists and philosophers have begun to ask whether mind can ever be fully explained in terms of brain functioning.

Omni: You've said that more girls remember boys' lives than the reverse.

Stevenson: That's right. The overall ratio is two to one. Of one hundred sex-change cases [cases in which the child recollects having been a different sex in a previous life], sixty-six will be females remembering previous lives as boys. I've discussed this in some Burmese cases. It may be culturally more acceptable in Burma to say that you, as a girl, were once a boy than the reverse. A boy would be teased mercilessly. It is easier to come up with statistics than to interpret them. In a culture in which to change one's sex is not acceptable, perhaps such cases are never reported even when they do occur.

Omni: The possibility of sex change puts the question of homosexuality and gender confusion in a new light, doesn't it?

Stevenson: Yes. When it was fashionable to ascribe all emotional disorders to the ineptitude of one's parents, cases of gender-identity confusion were blamed on parents. A biological explanation, such as Klinefelter's syndrome [a genetic condition in which a male is born with an extra X, or female, chromosome] can explain some but not all cases. Western psychiatrists and psychologists do not have a satisfactory explanation for this, whereas in Southeast Asian cultures, gender-identity confusion is considered one result of reincarnation and taken calmly. Reincarnation ought to be considered as a possible explanation at least some of the time.

Omni: Do you have a research staff?

Stevenson: Yes, we have two full-time assistants. So far most overseas cases have been investigated first by people on the spot. Obviously they have the immediate advantage over me in that they need no interpreters. On the other hand, not many Asians have been trained in science. Those who are trained have usually come to think of reincarnation as a superstition of their childhoods and one they'd rather forget. But a few Asian scientists have been extremely helpful. In contrast, I remember a Harvard-trained psychologist in Burma who could barely be polite to me. There he was, sitting up in Mandalay, surrounded by cases, and he had no interest in them.

Omni: What's next for you?

Stevenson: I'm mainly working now on a massive study of birthmarks and birth defects. I published a few of them in *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* without much special mention or photographs. I now have about two hundred cases. I hope the first volume of thirty will be published this year. This first group contains cases from India, Burma, Turkey, Lebanon, and northwest North America. They'll all have photographs, and I've been able to match up about fifteen of them with postmortem reports. It's my most important book, and I've been writing it for about ten years. [Note: Stevenson's truly massive study, *Reincarnation and Biology*, was finally published in 1997. Find more information in Carol's Bookstore.]

Omni: Do birthmarks occur very often?

Stevenson: Some birthmarks are common. But it depends on what you call a birthmark. The average American has about fifteen. I'm talking about a raised, darkened mole, or what we call an elevated nevus. Some marks are simply areas of increased pigmentation; in other cases, the birthmark is three-dimensional, the area being partly or wholly elevated, depressed, or puckered. I have examined at least two hundred of this kind, and many of them cannot be distinguished, at least by me, from the scars of healed wounds.

In many cases I've had to rely on memories of surviving relatives and friends for information about the exact location of wounds or other marks on the previous personality in question. This has led to the sensible objection that relatives might have tailored their memories to fit the circumstances for a variety of reasons. I have been able to overcome this objection in about thirty cases by obtaining autopsy or other medical records. Such records provide the strongest evidence we have so far in favor of reincarnation.

Omni: You are also interested in the phenomena of precognition and telepathy, aren't you?

Stevenson: Precognition is just a clearer idea of a possible future. Imagine a person in a canoe paddling down a river. Around the corner are rapids he doesn't see. Someone on the cliff above, seeing the whole river, can see what's likely to happen to that person. At any point, of course, the canoeist might pull over to the bank. He doesn't have to go over the rapids.

What is interesting about precognition, telepathy, or any other form of paranormal communication is the number of people who believe they've had at least one experience: between ten and seventeen percent in the United States and Great Britain, according to some surveys. Most can be put down to coincidence, suppressed memories, or any number of plausible explanations. You can discount ninety-five percent of these cases; but for an impressive number there is no natural explanation. Present understanding of our brains leaves no room for these phenomena.

Omni: What prevented Hamlet from committing suicide was the suspicion that death might not be the end of things. Haven't you cited cases of children who have committed suicide?

Stevenson: That's rather rare. We haven't followed them, of course. Children who remember a previous life that ended in suicide sometimes still have the suicide habit. If things go wrong, they'll threaten to commit suicide. That we've had. We've had twenty-three cases involving fear of retribution for suicide in the previous life; and several had phobias about the instrument of suicide—that is, guns in some cases, poison in others. One person told me that her memories of suicide had deterred her from killing herself. The thought that nothing would be over or solved so one might as well face one's troubles is, in my view, a very effective deterrent.

Omni: In *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, Carl Jung wrote that as a boy he remembered in great detail being a very old man in the eighteenth century.

Stevenson: Children we have studied often act as if they had been transferred without warning from an adult's body into a baby's. When one of our Turkish children began to speak, almost the first thing he said was, "What am I doing here? I was at the port." Later on he described details in the life of a dockworker who had fallen asleep in the hold of a ship. A heavy oil drum had fallen on him and killed him instantly. Cases like this remind me of a woman who had a stroke while playing bridge. When she came around several days later, her first words were, "What's trumps?"

Omni: You briefly mentioned your new studies in chronological discrepancies. Are you talking about personalities that are reborn into new children before the end or the previous life?

Stevenson: There are a few of those. In [Twenty Cases](#) there's the case of Jasbir, also a different kind of discrepancy story. He was about two and a half when he appeared to die of smallpox. When he revived he claimed that he was somebody totally different, a man who had just died and stumbled into the body. In his new personality Jasbir said that after death he had met a mahatma, or a sage, who had told him to take over this body.

There was also a case in Thailand in which a monk, Chaokhun Rajsuthajarn, claimed to have been born a day before the death of Nai Leng, the personality he remembered. These cases are extremely rare in Buddhist countries; Buddhists tend to regard them as suspect and even bogus because they do not harmonize with the Buddhist concept of rebirth. I studied this case with much care but couldn't find an explanation for the discrepancy.

Omni: Why do American children have so many less concrete and verifiable memories than Asian children do?

Stevenson: I have speculations and conjectures. First, Americans are nomadic. A fifth of all Americans move from one community to another each year, and a quarter move within the community, changing their neighborhood and environment. Some of the Asian children's memories are stimulated by their noticing slight environmental differences. If the difference is great, that stimulus may be missing.

Turning the question the other way around, why do certain Asian cultures have so many cases? To begin with, these cultures remember their dead more than we do and see them as still being actively involved in life; they also have stronger family ties. To them there is no such thing as

random fate. Everything happens for a reason, and that reason often has to do with someone who wishes them well or ill. They also believe, much more than we do in the West, in telepathy, the paranormal, and that dreams foretell the future. They are not clock-watchers as we are; they have time to reflect on their lives. All these factors may have some bearing on this question and perhaps put them in closer touch with their past lives.

Omni: When you're dealing with Asian children, couldn't you be involved with people whose past lives did not get completed?

Stevenson: That's right. In dealing with people who died naturally rather than violently, we can distinguish several broad groups. In the first we might place people who were well one moment and dead the next, before they or anyone else had a chance to adjust to the idea. In the second category one might place those who died before the age of twelve of whatever natural causes; in the third there are those who died with unfinished business—mothers who left infants or young children, for instance. One would also have to include people who had not been particularly young when they died but left life in the middle of some absorbing project. Any one of these people might have felt entitled to a longer life than they turned out to have.

Omni: Is the average space between death of one personality and that personality's rebirth in a new child about fifteen months?

Stevenson: Yes, but I think our figure comes mainly from Asian cases because, of our roughly one hundred Western cases, only fifteen to twenty have been verified, or, as we say, "solved." In my paper *American Children who Claim to Remember Previous Lives* I analyzed seventy-nine cases. They are nowhere near as rich in detail as, say, the Indian cases. American children named few names, for instance, and we could match them up with a deceased person in only sixteen cases; and the person nearly always turned out to be a family member, thus making the case not significant for our purposes. Not a single child claimed to have been famous in a previous lifetime. The majority seemed to be ordinary, undistinguished people, just like the majority of our Asian children.

Omni: Even so, if the interval is fifteen months for each of us, doesn't that argue for a staggering number of lives relived?

Stevenson: Well, these cases of children who remember may be exceptional. They may become cases because they do remember, not because they are reborn. How many others may be reborn without remembering, or not reborn? The fifteen month average is perhaps true only for people who are murdered in India.

Omni: One of your American cases involved a person who remembered a life in which she had been scalped, which would argue for an enormous interval.

Stevenson: Yes, since the eighteenth century in that case. Our analyses have not shown that longer intervals between lives mean fewer memories. We do have to be prepared for the possibility that memories can fade in a world or discarnate minds, just as they can in our own. So we would rarely

expect to be able to verify cases in which the interval was greater than twenty-five years. For most people it's possible the interval between death and rebirth is much longer than the cases we've studied so far. With only two thousand cases to go on, I'd hardly dare speculate about the billions of human beings since the beginning of the human race who have disappeared without a trace.

Omni: Would you speculate on why certain children show up in certain families?

Stevenson: If they are Muslims, they will say God did it. If they're Hindu or Buddhist, they'll attribute it to Karma. It might be that the purpose is to live and learn together. Someone who wants to evolve morally, for instance, should try to be reborn in a saint's family if he can. The most serious punishment I could imagine for a Mafia murderer would be to be reborn in a Mafia family, with their limited outlook on life. Why a person appears to be reborn in one family rather than another interests me passionately. It's a question for the next century.

Omni: Do you have children or your own?

Stevenson: Unfortunately not.

Omni: Isn't it often a disadvantage to remember a previous life?

Stevenson: Oh. I think so. These children become embroiled in divided loyalties. In many cases children have rejected their parents, saying they are not their real parents and have often started down the road toward their so-called real homes. In other cases, they insist on being reunited with their former husbands, wives, or children. One Indian boy was passionately attached to the woman he said had been his former mistress and was trying to get her back, causing himself and her real distress.

Omni: Might someone consider where and how one would like to be reborn?

Stevenson: I think an even more important question is. Who would want me as a baby?

Omni: Can I ask where and as whom you would like to be reborn?

Stevenson: No. I think that's too personal.

Omni: You must have been somewhat curious about what previous lives you might have led, because you consulted eight sensitives, or mediums.

Stevenson: Consulted is too strong a word. Some gave me these "readings" spontaneously. It just sort of happened along the way. When I was visiting an Indian swami, I didn't ask him, he just blurted something out. I've forgotten what it was. I think he said something about a previous life in India. You could say they were picking up different lives; some had me in different places at the same time. I had two talk about eighteenth-century lives in the same period, and they were completely different. They're all totally unverifiable. There are people who charge money for this, and it's a ridiculous waste of everybody's time.

Omni: What advice do you have for those who have no memories of a previous life?

Stevenson: Some persons have said it is unfair to be reborn unless you can remember details of a previous life and profitably remember your mistakes. They forget that forgetting is essential to successful living in the present. If every time we walked, we were to remember how we stumbled, we would fall again. I've also had people envy children who remember previous lives, as if these children had special wisdom. In fact, it makes more sense to look upon them as suffering from an abnormality, almost a defect. The memories they have are often more of a handicap than a blessing; and they nearly all become happier as they grow older and forget their previous lives. To paraphrase Jesus Christ, sufficient unto one life is the evil thereof.

Omni: Has your work influenced your own attitudes toward life and death?

Stevenson: I think so. I wouldn't claim to be free of the fear of death, but it is probably less in me than other people. These children sometimes provide reassurances to adults. We've had two or three incidents of children going to, let's say, a woman who has lost her husband and is inconsolable and saying, "You shouldn't be crying. Death isn't the end. Look at me. I died and I'm here again."

Sweet Swarnlata

A Case from Dr. Ian Stevenson

This case is extracted from charts and commentary on pages 67 to 91 in Dr. Ian Stevenson's classic book, [Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation](#). This is the original long version written for the book by Carol Bowman called "[Children's Past Lives](#)", but due to space constraints a shorter, edited version appeared in the book. This is the original extract in its entirety.

Sweet Swarnlata's Story

The story of Swarnlata is characteristic of Stevenson's cases: the young girl's memories began when she was 3, she gave enough information to enable Stevenson to locate the family of the deceased person she remembered (the case was "solved"), and she gave more than 50 specific facts that were verified. But Swarnlata's case was also different from most because her memories did not fade. And this is a sweet case, characterized by love and happy memories rather than by violent death and struggles between castes and families, like in so many other cases.

Swarnlata Mishra was born to an intellectual and prosperous family in Pradesh in India in 1948. When she was just three years old and traveling with her father past the town of Katni more than 100 miles from her home, she suddenly pointed and asked the driver to turn down a road to "my house", and suggested they could get a better cup of tea there than they could on the road.

Soon after, she related more details of her life in Katni, all of which were written down by her father. She said her name was Biya Pathak, and that she had two sons. She gave details of the house: it was white with black doors fitted with iron bars; four rooms were stuccoed, but other

parts were less finished; the front floor was of stone slabs. She located the house in Zhurkutia, a district of Katni; behind the house was a girl's school, in front was a railway line, and lime furnaces were visible from the house. She added that the family had a motor car (a very rare item in India in the 1950's, and especially before Swarnlata was born). Swarnlata said Biya died of a "pain in her throat", and was treated by Dr. S. C. Bhabrat in Jabalpur. She also remembered an incident at a wedding when she and a friend had difficulty finding a latrine.

In the spring of 1959, when Swarnlata was 10 years old, news of the case reached Professor Sri H. N. Banerjee, an Indian researcher of paranormal phenomenon and colleague of Stevenson. Banerjee took the notes her father made and traveled to Katni to determine if Swarnlata's memories could be verified.

Using nothing more than the description that Swarnlata had given, he found the house~despite the house having been enlarged and improved since 1939 when Biya died. It belonged to the Pathak's (a common name in India), a wealthy, prominent family, with extensive business interests. The lime furnaces were on land adjoining the property; the girls school was 100 yards behind the Pathak's property, but not visible from the front.

He interviewed the family and verified everything Swarnlata had said. Biya Pathak had died in 1939 leaving behind a grieving husband, two young sons, and many younger brothers. These Pathaks had never heard of the Mishra family, who lived a hundred miles away; the Mishra's had no knowledge of the Pathak family.

The next scene in this story sounds like a plot from Agatha Christie, but is all true, extracted from the Stevenson's tabulations in Swarnlata's published case. In the summer of 1959, Biya's husband, son, and eldest brother journeyed to the town of Chhatarpur, the town where Swarnlata now lived, to test Swarnlata's memory. They did not reveal their identities or purpose to others in the town, but enlisted nine townsmen to accompany them to the Mishar home, where they arrived unannounced.

Swarnlata immediately recognized her brother and called him "Babu", Biya's pet name for him. Stevenson gives only the barest facts, but I can imagine the emotions ran high at this point. Imagine how Babu felt to be recognized immediately by his dead sister reborn.

Ten-year-old Swarnlata went around the room looking at each man in turn; some she identified as men she knew from her town, some were strangers to her. Then she came to Sri Chintamini Pandey, Biya's husband. Swarnlata lowered her eyes, looked bashful-as Hindu wives do in the presence of their husbands~and spoke his name. Stevenson says nothing of Sri Pandey's reaction at finding his wife after twenty years

Swarnlata also correctly identified her son from her past life, Murli, who was 13 years old when Biya died. But Murli schemed to mislead her, and "for almost twenty-four hours insisted against her objections that he was not Murli, but someone else." Murli had also brought along a friend and tried to mislead Swarnlata once again by insisting he was Naresh, Biya's other son, who was about the same age as this friend. Swarnlata insisted just as strongly that he was a stranger.

Finally, Swarnlata reminded Sri Pandey that he had purloined 1200 rupees Biya kept in a box. Sri Pandey admitted to the truth of this private fact that only he and his wife had known.

Gold Fillings

A few weeks later, Swarnlata's father took her to Katni to visit the home and town where Biya lived and died.

Upon arriving she immediately noticed and remarked about the changes to the house. She asked about the parapet at the back of the house, a verandah, and the neem tree that used to grow in the compound; all had been removed since Biya's death. She identified Biya's room and the room in which she had died. She recognized one of Biya's brothers and correctly identified him as her second brother. She did the same for her third and fourth brother, the wife of the younger brother, the son of the second brother (calling him by his pet name "Baboo"), a close friend of the family's (correctly commenting that he was now wearing spectacles, which he in fact had acquired since Biya had died) and his wife (calling her by her pet name "Bhoujai"), Biya's sister-in-law-all with appropriate emotions of weeping and nervous laughter. She also correctly identified a former servant, an old betelnut seller, and the family cowherd (despite her youngest brother's attempt to test Swarnlata by insisting that the cowherd had died).

Later, Swarnlata was presented to a room full of strangers and asked whom she recognized. She correctly picked out her husband's cousin, the wife of Biya's brother-in-law, and a midwife-whom she identified not by her current name, but by a name she had used when Biya was alive. Biya's son Murli, in another test, introduced Swarnlata to a man he called a new friend, Bhola. Swarnlata insisted correctly that this man was actually Biya's second son, Naresh. In another test, Biya's youngest brother tried to trap Swarnlata by saying that Biya had lost her teeth; Swarnlata did not fall for this, and went on to say that Biya had gold fillings in her front teeth-a fact that the brothers had forgotten and were forced to confirm by consulting with their wives, who reminded them that what Swarnlata said was true.

This must have been a spectacle. Here was a ten-year-old stranger from far away-so far, in terms of Indian culture, that her dialect was distinctly different than that of the Pathaks-who acted confidently like an older sister of the household, was familiar with intimate names and family secrets, and remembered even marriage relationships, old servants, and friends. Just as amazing, her memory was frozen at the time of Biya's death; Swarnlata knew nothing about the Pathak family that had happened since 1939.

In the following years, Swarnlata visited the Pathak family at regular intervals. Stevenson investigated the case in 1961, witnessing one of these visits. He observed the loving relationship between Swarnlata and the other members of the family. They all accepted her as Biya reborn.

Swarnlata behaved appropriately reserved towards Biya's elders, but when alone with Biya's sons, she was relaxed and playful as a mother would be-behavior that would otherwise be totally inappropriate in India for a 10-year-old girl in the company of unrelated men in their mid-thirties.

The Pathak brothers and Swarnlata observed the Hindu custom of Rakhi, in which brothers and sisters annually renew their devotion to each other by exchanging gifts. In fact the Pathak brothers were distressed and angry one year when Swarnlata missed the ceremony; they felt that because she had lived with them for 40 years and with the Mishras for only 10 years that they had a greater claim on her. As evidence of how strongly the Pathaks believed that Swarnlata was their Biya, they admitted that they had changed their views of reincarnation upon meeting Swarnlata and accepting her as Biya reborn (the Pathaks, because of their status and wealth, emulated Western ideas and had not believed in reincarnation before this happened). Swarnlata's father, Sri Mishra, also accepted the truth of Swarnlata's past identity: years later, when it came time for Swarnlata to marry he consulted with the Pathaks about the choice of a husband for her.

How did Swarnlata feel about all of this? Was it confusing for her to remember so completely the life of a grown woman? Stevenson visited her in later years and corresponded with her for ten years after this case was investigated. He reports that she grew up normally, received an advanced degree in botany, and got married. She said that sometimes, when she reminisced about her happy life in Katni, her eyes brimmed with tears and, for a moment, she wished she could return to the wealth and life of Biya. But her loyalty to the Mishra family was undivided and, except for the regular visits to Katni, she went about the business of growing into a beautiful young woman, accepting fully her station in this life.

In some ways Swarnlata is typical of Stevenson's cases: the amazing number of facts and people she remembered; the positive identification of the previous personality, the exchange of visits between the families, and the age at which she first had her memories. What is not typical, however, is the persistence of clear memories into her adulthood, the lack of a traumatic death, and the support and cooperation between the families (in most cases one or both of the families are reluctant to encourage the child or to bring the case to the outside world). This is a sweet case that illustrates what profoundly enriching human experience a past life memory can bring about.

But many of the cases in Stevenson's books are stories where love and miraculous reunions mix with conflict, violent death, and hostile emotions. The cases of Ravi Shankar [Chapter 6 in [Children's Past Lives](#)] and Titu Singh illustrate the darker side of life that is often brought to the light when a child has a forceful past life memory.

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