

# Karma & Rebirth 4: **Evidence**



# Why evidence?

- Rebirth matters
- Research and Dhamma should support each other
- Empirical research is the basic method of the Suttas

# Anthropology: Obeyesekere

- Obeyesekere's research shows that belief in rebirth is widespread among cultures all over the world.
- However, understanding of rebirth varies widely.
- Belief in kamma is not as widespread.

# Stats

- Overall, 22% of respondents in Western Europe believe in reincarnation. According to a 2005 Gallup poll 20 percent of U.S. adults believe in reincarnation.
- Recent surveys by the Barna Group, a Christian research nonprofit organization, have found that a quarter of U.S. Christians, including 10 percent of all born-again Christians, embrace the idea.

# Kinds of evidence

- Authorities and anecdotes
- Savants
- Near Death Experiences (NDEs)
- Memories  
(spontaneous/regression/meditation)
- Biology
- Ordinary learning of language, etc.

# Authority: the Buddha

- *Jātipi dukkhā...*  
Birth is suffering
- *Yāyaṃ taṇhā ponobhavikā...*  
The craving that leads to future rebirth
- *Pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu...*  
Regarding principles not learnt from another...
- *Cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi...*  
Vision arose, knowledge arose...

# Authority: the Buddha

- The personal experience of rebirth is the three knowledges
- When my mind was thus stilled, pure and bright, unblemished, free from defects, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed and inclined it to the knowledge of recollecting past lives.

# Socrates, Meno

- “And if there have been always true thoughts in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which only need to be awakened into knowledge by putting questions to him, his soul must have always possessed this knowledge, for he always either was or was not a man?”

# Modern philosophers and scientists

- Towards the end of her own storied life, the physicist Doris Kuhlmann-Wilsdorf—whose groundbreaking theories on surface physics earned her the prestigious Heyn Medal from the German Society for Material Sciences, surmised that Stevenson’s work had established that “the statistical probability that reincarnation does in fact occur is so overwhelming ... that cumulatively the evidence is not inferior to that for most if not all branches of science.”

# Modern philosophers and scientists

- “Either he [Ian Stevenson] is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known ... as the 'Galileo of the twentieth century.' ” (Dr. Harold Lief, Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders)

# Modern philosophers and scientists

- “He [Ian Stevenson] has placed on record a large amount of data that cannot be ignored.” (Lester S. King, Book Review Editor of The Journal of the American Medical Association)

# Modern philosophers and scientists

“At the time of writing there are three claims in the [parapsychology] field which, in my opinion, deserve serious study ... [the third being] that young children sometimes report details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation.” (Carl Sagan, astronomer and founding member of the debunking organisation the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal)

# Irreducible Mind

- Paul Marshall. Book Review: Irreducible Mind Journal of Consciousness Studies, Vol. 14, No. 11, 2007, pp. 125-128.
- Only a very resistant observer will remain unpersuaded that a proportion, at least, of all this carefully evaluated data presents a significant challenge to conventional views.
- a reliable, level-headed guide, critical and scholarly in its approach to the contestable data, and incisive in its observations on the current state of cognitive neuroscience.

# Savants

- Young children, or sometimes adults, who display extraordinary knowledge or abilities that cannot be explained by their experiences in this life.

# Near Death Experiences

- NDEs are widely reported and generally agree with the accounts of rebirth in Buddhist texts.
- Difficult to establish independently
- Verified claims are rare, but they do exist.

# Sam Parnia: Awareness during Resuscitation

## **Fear**

“I was terrified. I was told I was going to die and the quickest way was to say the last short word I could remember”

“Being dragged through deep water with a big ring and I hate swimming—it was horrid”.

“I felt scared”

## **Animals and plants**

“All plants, no flowers”.

“Saw lions and tigers”.

## **Bright light**

“The sun was shining”

“Recalled seeing a golden flash of light”

# Sam Parnia

## **Family**

“Family talking 10 or so. Not being able to talk to them”

“My family (son, daughter, son-in-law and wife) came”

## **Being persecuted or experiencing violence**

“Being dragged through deep water”

“This whole event seemed full of violence and I am not a violent man, it was out of character”.

“I had to go through a ceremony and ... the ceremony was to get burned. There were 4 men with me, whichever lied would die.... I saw men in coffins being buried upright.

## **Deja vu experiences**

“...experienced a sense of De-ja vu and felt like knew what people were going to do before they did it after the arrest. This lasted about 3 days”

## **Events occurring after initial recovery from cardiac arrest**

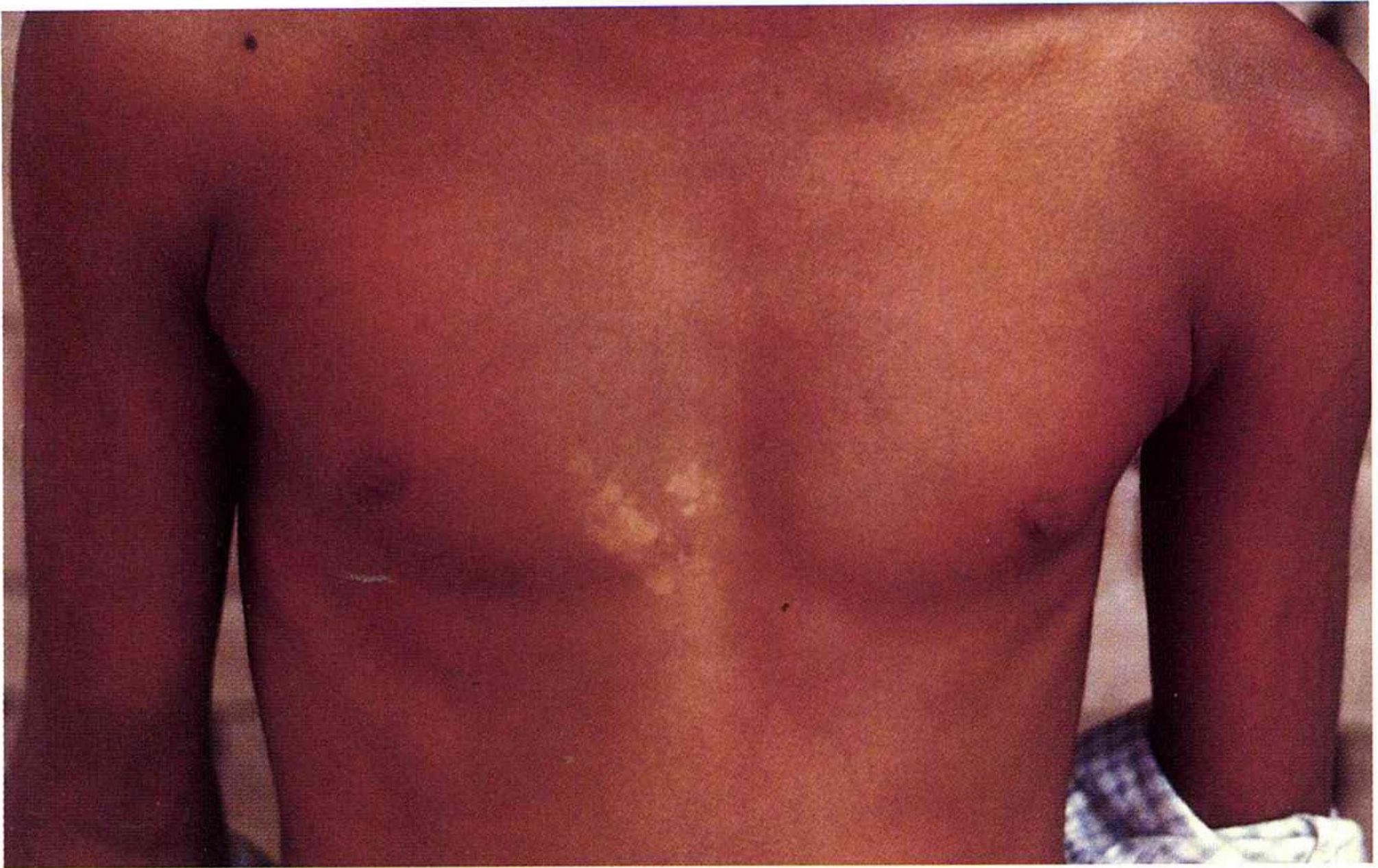
Experienced ...“a tooth coming out when tube was removed from my mouth”

# Memories

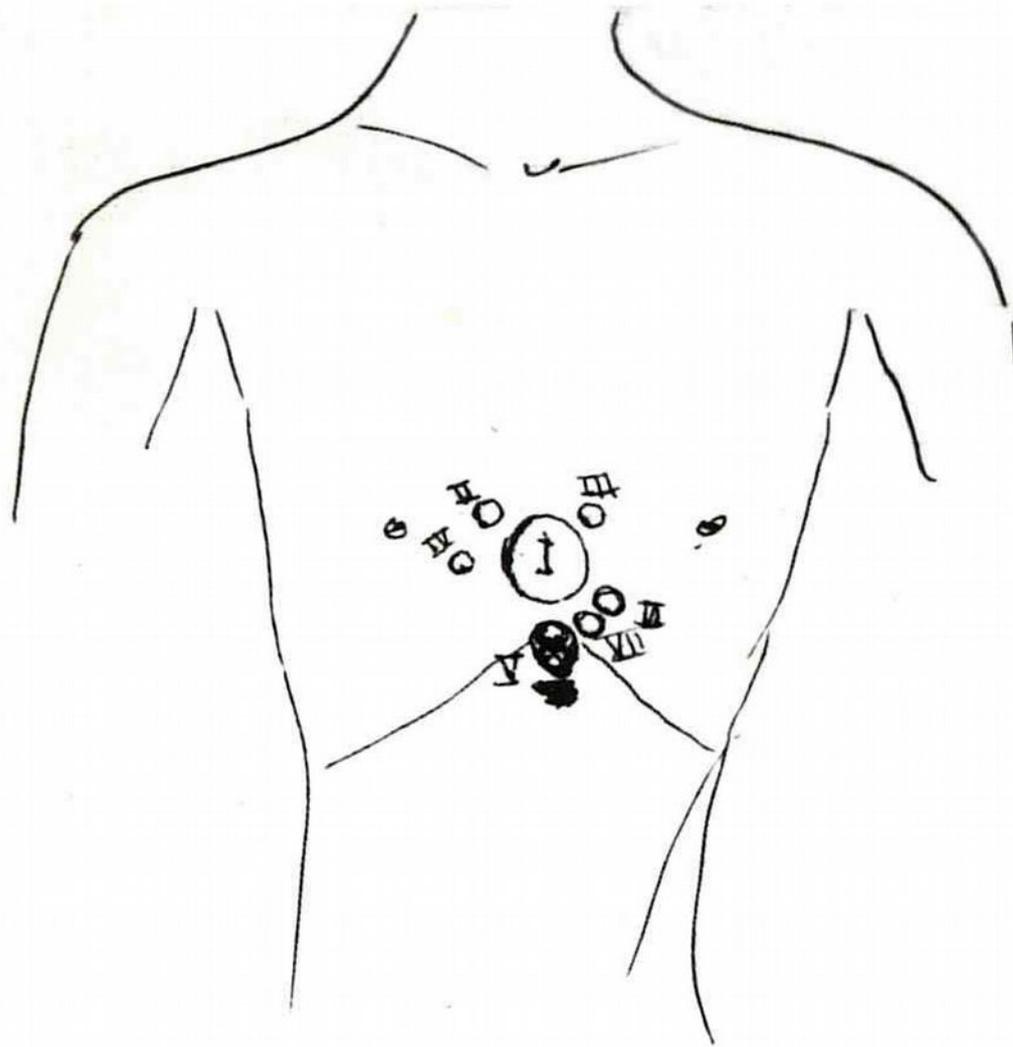
- Memories that appear to be of past lives can appear spontaneously, through hypnotic regression, or meditation.
- The Buddha's standard for reliable memories was that they should be based on 4<sup>th</sup> jhana.
- Best studies cases are with children, typically under 7, studied by Ian Stevenson.

# Memory and Biology

- Children who remember past lives sometimes have biological markers, such as a birthmark that corresponds with the bullet wound that killed them in the previous life.
- Such marks can sometimes be verified against the body of the previous life.



**Figure 6** Birthmark on Hanumant Saxena's chest as it appeared in 1971, when he was 16 years old. The birthmark was an area of lessened pigmentation.



**Figure 7** Sketch showing location of fatal wounds on Maha Ram Singh. Dr. S. C. Pandeya (Civil Surgeon, Fatehgarh, U.P., India) drew the circles on the lower chest and upper abdomen. The Roman numerals correspond to the different wounds described in the autopsy report. Number I was the largest wound. Note the characteristic smaller wounds on the periphery of the large, central wound. This is due to the scattering of the shot after they leave the barrel of the gun.

S. C. Pandeya  
22/11/71



**Figure 23** Lekh Pal's hands in February 1980, when he was just over 8 years old. The fingers of the right hand, including the thumb are mere stubs, without any trace of bones. Rudimentary fingernails on three fingers of the right hand cannot be seen in this photograph.

# Ordinary learning

- QUESTION: So we're faced with a mystery. How could anyone possibly learn enough about the English language to possess the rich and exotic grammatical knowledge that we all seem to possess by the time we are five or six years old?
- CHOMSKY: There's an obvious answer to that: the knowledge is built in. You and I can learn English, as well as any other language, with all its richness because we are designed to learn languages based upon a common set of principles, which we may call universal grammar.

*Things No Amount of Learning Can Teach*, Noam Chomsky interviewed by John Gliedman, Omni, 6:11, November 1983

# Sceptics

- DN23 Pāyāsi Sutta depicts a sceptic in the time of the Buddha.
- “...throw this man alive into a jar; close the mouth of it and cover it over with wet leather, put over that a thick cement of moist clay, put it on to a furnace and kindle a fire.” .... When we knew that the man was dead, we should take down the jar, unbind and open the mouth, and quickly observe it, with the idea—“Perhaps we may see the soul of him coming out!” We don’t see the soul of him coming out! This, master Kassapa, is for me evidence that there neither is another world, nor rebirth other than by parentage, nor fruit or result of deeds well or ill-done.’

# Sceptics

- Cogan, Robert. (1998). Critical Thinking: Step by Step, commenting on Edwards, Paul. (1996, reprinted in 2001). Reincarnation: A Critical Examination.
- 1) How does a soul exist between bodies?
- 2) Tertullian's objection: If there is reincarnation, why are not babies born with the mental abilities of adults?
- 3) Reincarnation claims an infinite series of prior incarnations. Evolution teaches that there was a time when humans did not yet exist. So reincarnation is inconsistent with modern science.
- 4) If there is reincarnation, then what is happening when the population increases?
- 5) If there is reincarnation, then why do so few, if any people, remember past lives?...
- To answer these objections believers in reincarnation must accept additional assumptions... Acceptance of these silly assumptions, Edwards says, amounts to a crucifixion of one's intellect.

# Sceptics

- The Case Against Immortality, Keith Augustine, [http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith\\_augustine/immortality.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith_augustine/immortality.html)
- From the fact that all of the mental states we have a good understanding of depend on the brain we can reasonably extrapolate (as neuroscientists do) that all mental states depend on the brain.

# Against emergence

- Bernardo Kastrup on strong emergence of consciousness from the brain:  
I think it's an appeal to magic, it's a label for something that we don't know or that we can't even conceive to give it a label and it sounds like we know because we give it a name.