

Interview with Jim Tucker

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Karma & Rebirth



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Skype interview with Dr. Jim Tucker, 2nd September 2014

Transcript of video recording*

Ed.: Jim B. Tucker, M.D., is the medical director of the Child & Family Psychiatry Clinic, and Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia. His main research interests are children who claim to remember previous lives, and natal and prenatal memories. He is the author of *Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives*, and *Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives*. He is continuing the work of Dr. Ian Stevenson at the UVA Division of Perceptual Studies. (from jimbtucker.com & Wikipedia)

Dr. Jim Tucker (J); Ajahn Brahmalī (B); Ajahn Sujato (S)

B: Jim, first of all, would you please give a little bit of history and background on the work you and Ian Stevenson have been doing?

J: This is work with young children who report memories of past lives, and it's been going on here for over 50 years. It was started by Ian Stevenson who was Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and had a perfectly successful mainstream career. He heard about these cases of young children who talked about past lives, and he wrote up a sort of summary or review of cases he had collected over the years. He had studied many himself. He published a paper on it.

He then started hearing about new cases. Someone offered him a small grant to go to India to see if he could study some of them, and so he went and he heard about a handful. But then he was there for a month and there were 25. He quickly realised that this thing was much more common than at least anyone in the West had known.

He was still busy as the Chairman, but became more and more intrigued by these cases and focused on them for the last 40 years of his career. What it involved was trying to verify what exactly the child had said, how well it matched with the past life of one particular deceased individual, and finding out whether the child could have learnt this information through some sort of ordinary channel. He was meticulous in his investigations, and he wrote very long case summaries. His first book was called *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* [Ed.: University Press of Virginia, 1966]. And then he wrote a lot more. Over the years we've now studied over 2500 cases.

I got involved full time in the year 2000. He was still working here, and he focused mostly on where he could find cases. It was easiest to find cases where there was a belief in reincarnation. He went to India a lot, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and some other places. In recent times I've decided to focus more on cases in the West, even though they are harder to find here and many of them are fairly weak. But there are some strong ones too, and my hope is that it will be harder for people just to dismiss these cases as cultural phenomena if they hear about it happening in the family living next door, basically. We do know that they are a lot more common in the States than people might guess; it's just that families here don't talk about them. I get emails all the time from American parents who are reporting exactly the kind of thing that Ian studied in Thailand, India, etc.

S: You mentioned the cultural differences. When I hear people say it's just Asian cases, that's just so racist. Do we then apply the same standard and say we therefore can't trust any work in the physical sciences that's done in the West, because they have a materialist bias? Therefore we should dismiss western physics and chemistry and all the ... anyway, whatever.

One thing I've done, because I teach quite regularly to both groups of people—traditional Buddhist and non-traditional Buddhists—is to ask: does anybody have any of these experiences in their life? Has anyone had this or knows somebody who has? And if you have a group of 20-30 people, you usually find that more than one person will say, yes, I've had an experience or I know somebody who's had an experience. One time I did this someone had a connection to one of Dr. Ian Stevenson's cases as it happened. A friend of the family by some weird coincidence.

J: Yeah, well I get the same thing here. When I'm speaking to an audience, it's quite common during question-answer for people to say, "Oh my grandson said this, or some family member did that." Of course, it may be a sort of self-selected audience, but it's certainly something that's happening. There's no question about that.

I mean, I agree, just because it happens in a place with a general belief in reincarnation, it's silly to say that automatically means it [should be disregarded]. That's not scientific either. Now having said that, there are certainly some cases where the family wished to see a deceased family member return; those are factors that do need to be considered. But these cases go way beyond that. The classic case, the best case, is where a child talks about somebody who lived and died some distance away that no one around has ever heard of. And then the details all check out.

But we don't have a precise number [of children who claim to remember past lives]. There was a study, a survey done in one section of India, that found a prevalence of one out of every 450 people. But it was back in the days when surveys were very challenging to do, especially in that area, so the researchers acknowledged they may well have missed cases.

Now we recently did a survey here [in the US]—and we got to delve into the statistics and explore a little more—and when people were asked if one of their own children had talked about a past life, the parents said yes in 6 % of households, which is way above the study in India and way above what we would have predicted. We tried to ask these people what their child had actually said, because it may be that some of these were not what we would consider to be our kind of case. This was in a number of counties in Virginia, not a hotbed of reincarnation by any measure. But it certainly suggests that it's more common even here than we had known. I should add that this was 6% of households, not 6% of children, and so with families with multiple kids at least one of them would have had one. Still, that would be a lot of people. And you're right it would be more common than people know. And we've had cases where the parents haven't even told the grandparents about it because they thought the grandparents wouldn't be open to it. And certainly they haven't told their neighbours.

S: This was the case with the situation I mentioned previously: the person who had been one of the Dr. Stevenson's cases. He was Sri Lankan, born to a Sri Lankan family, and the case had gone on for a number of years. The kid was growing up and was living in the States. One of the people who was at that meeting with me was a childhood friend of that family. They'd grown up together, played together, known him their whole lives. They were now in their forties or something. They drove me home that night. I'd known these people my whole life and they'd never said anything; that was the first time. And this was with a Sri Lankan family. The reason they hadn't said anything was that they weren't very comfortable with it. They felt weird about the fact their kids thought they had another parent or something. It was something they didn't really like to talk about.

J: Well, that's right. Some of the fellows I've trained are from India. One of them was saying that where she grew up such things are considered uneducated folk-tales. So even though she had grown up in an area with a belief in reincarnation, people tended to dismiss those sorts of things. It's just like here. Most people profess to be Christians in the US, to one degree or another, but if someone's talking about seeing Jesus in their kitchen or something, people are not going to be accepting of that. Even in these families in India, many of the parents tried to get their kids to stop talking about past lives. And once the kids start school, they almost always stop talking about it, and some of them will start denying that there was anything to it. Wherever they are growing up, it's considered to be weird. Kids don't want to be seen as weird to their peers and be made fun of. So there can be pressures to deny these cases everywhere.

B: One of the things I'd been hoping you would do as well, Jim, is to tell us one of the stories, one of the good cases. The story you tell in your book *Return to Life* [Ed.: St. Martin's Press, 2013] about James Leininger is very good and powerful. Would you be able to share that story?

J: Sure, it's quite a remarkable case. It was one that unfortunately, despite my best efforts, I got to fairly late, but fortunately the parents had kept records. It concerns a little boy James Leininger growing up in Louisiana with Christian parents. Around the time of his second birthday he started having terrible nightmares of a plane crash, and he would be kicking his legs up in the air and screaming, "Air-plane crash on fire, little man can't get out." These were going on multiple times a week, and it was quite traumatic for the parents to see their little toddler go through this. Then during the day he would take his toy airplanes and say, "Air-plane crash on fire," and just slam them into the coffee table, over and over again. It looked like a child who had been traumatised, really. Then he started talking about these dreams while he was awake, saying they were from a past life and that he had been a pilot who had been shot down by the Japanese during World War II. He named the kind of plane that he had flown, a kind of plane called a Corsair. Eventually he said he had flown off a boat. His parents asked for the name, and he said Natoma, which is quite strange. For most Americans, if we were asked the name of US aircraft carrier, it would be a long time before we would say Natoma. It doesn't even seem like an English word. But that's what he said.

They always asked him what his name was and he would always say me or James. They didn't make anything of it at the time. But one time they asked him who else was there, and he said Jack, Jack Larsen. Then when he was 2½, his dad got a book about Iwo Jima, which was quite a famous battle during World War II. He had got it to give it to his own father first of all. As he was looking through it one Saturday morning, James came and got into his lap, and they got to a picture of Iwo Jima island, which has a very specific volcano. James pointed at it and said that's where his plane was shot down. This really floored his father. Before that point, his father had basically been trying to write this off as fantasising. But having his 2½ year old telling him where his plane was shot down was quite something.

So he started to investigate, initially just to show that there was nothing to this. But the more he got into it, the more he learnt that what James had said matched very closely to a particular pilot. It turned out there was an aircraft carrier called the USS Natoma Bay, and it was in the Pacific during World War II, and in fact it did take part in the Iwo Jima operation, where it lost one pilot. It meant that if James was really recalling a past life there was only one pilot whose life he could be remembering: a young man from Pennsylvania, which is over a thousand miles away from where James was growing up, a young man named James Houston.

When James Leininger became old enough to draw he would draw these battle scenes with planes and he always signed them James III, and he said he was the third James. Well, it turned out that James Houston was James Houston Junior, which would make James Leininger the third James. James Houston had in fact flown a Corsair like James Leininger mentioned. He was indeed shot down by the Japanese, and the way he had been shot down matched precisely the details that James Leininger gave. He had said the plane had been shot in the engine, it crashed into the water, it sank, and he couldn't get out, and that's exactly how Houston was killed. On the day he was killed, the pilot of the plane next to his was named Jack Larsen.

So this was a case where the man had died over 50 years before and he was from another part of the country and his life and death matched exactly what this little boy had said.

B: That's an amazing story. When you hear that kind of story, straight-away you wonder what the possible explanations for this might be. There are so many facts there, facts that go back to a real life events, something that has actually happened in the past. And if you start to work out the probability that somebody would just guess this, it is very hard to think this could happen by accident. How do you see this?

J: Well, that's right. One thing that makes this case particularly strong is that all the details I've given you are ones that we have documentation for that pre-dates the identification of the pilot. In some of the cases, the families talk about these amazing facts that the child knew, but no one thought to write them down before they went looking for a match. They weren't interested in scientific documentation; they were just trying to find out who the child was talking about. In this case, just to say the words Natoma and Jack Larsen and all the other

details that fit, I think coincidence, frankly, is sort of like grasping at straws. This case has to some extent been like a tipping point for me. There are a lot of other strong cases, and I've been impressed with the work, but after this one I have had to acknowledge that it looks like there are times when children, some children, do have memories of a life in the past.

B: Would you go so far as to say that it has been proven that there is reincarnation in this kind of case? How would you phrase this?

J: No, proof is a pretty strong word. Ian Stevenson used to say the word proof should only be used in mathematics. In science it's all about evidence, not proof. So what is the evidence? And what is the best explanation that the evidence provides? It's not the same as proof. And sometimes what appears to be the correct explanation is ultimately shown not to be.

But, regardless, this is certainly evidence that some children have memories from a life that occurred in the past. Now the most obvious explanation on the face of it would be that it's reincarnation, that the child's memories came from a life they've experienced before. But in parapsychology that's not the only explanation that people would consider. There is this idea that the children, through some mechanism we don't know, may have had access to this knowledge through what people might call ESP—also called psi or super-psi—meaning that they had access to these memories, this information, through clairvoyance or telepathy or some ability of the living. In other words, they interpret it as being memories from a past life, but it's really access to memories that somebody else had. Now I'm not saying this is the most straightforward and logical explanation, but it is one that people take seriously for a variety of phenomena, and therefore these cases may not be as clear cut as they appear.

So this is a long way to answer your question. No, we wouldn't say this is proof of reincarnation, but I would say it's strong evidence of something that looks like it.

S: Is there something you would consider to be a—for the lack of a better word—proof? Is there a magic bullet? Is there something you're looking for that, "If only we get this, then finally the sceptics will be convinced"?

J: I don't think the sceptics will ever be convinced.

S: Next lifetime they will be!

J: But the open-minded sceptics, or the curious ... If we continue to collect cases as strong as James Leininger's—you know there's strength in numbers. When we get a bunch of American kids or Western kids—where people can't write it off as cultural factors—who have memories like that, then I think people will have to pay attention. This is often how science works: you get more and more evidence that points more and more towards one explanation. You don't want to base too much on one or two events obviously, because there can be certain confounding things that you don't recognise. But again we've studied 2500 cases, and although they're not all as strong as James Leininger's, there are a number that are quite strong, that do for instance have written records that were made of the child's statements.

I think ultimately, in order to convince the open-minded and intelligent, we would need to incorporate these cases into an overall understanding of reality, because they obviously fly in the face of scientific materialism. The general public believes all kinds of things actually, but as far as the reigning intellectual paradigm is concerned, it's scientific materialism. If it's gonna happen, I think it's probably gonna come through physics. If consciousness is to be considered a separate entity from physical matter, a new theory would need to incorporate most of what we already know to be true. But I'll probably have to wait until my next lifetime, or the one after that, to see that. But I do think it's possible that ultimately it could come about.

B: One of the things that's fascinating about your research is that as the critics have been coming out with arguments why reincarnation was not the best explanation for the observed data, Ian Stevenson and yourself have been able to meet them in various ways, to show that surely this wasn't wishful thinking, fraud, or any of those kinds of other things. Does that have an impact on people, when you're able to actually counter those arguments? Or do they throw out arguments because they don't want to believe in the first place?

J: I think you can have an impact on people that are reading the discussions, not necessarily on the critics themselves. For instance, there's a philosopher called Paul Edwards who wrote a book—a whole book!—criticising the concept of reincarnation [Ed.: Reincarnation: A Critical Examination, Prometheus Books, 2001], and he devoted a chapter to Ian's work. He had criticisms like Ian was the only one finding these cases, which is now no longer the case. He was also sort of making fun of Ian, saying why aren't there any cases in the West: you say they should be here, but nobody has ever heard of them. We've now documented a lot of cases in the West, and more and more every day. It doesn't mean one day Paul Edwards is going to say, "Well, it looks like I got it wrong, you're right," but other people may take notice.

S: There's a fascinating sutta in the Buddhist canon called the Pāyāsi Sutta (DN 23), translated as a Debate with a Sceptic. It's about a prince in the time of the Buddha who's having a discussion with a monk. The prince doesn't believe in karma and rebirth, but he's a great prototypical scientist. He's doing all these experiments to see if these things happen, including doing things like putting a condemned criminal in a clay jar and sealing the mouth of the jar and weighing it to see whether there is any weight difference after death compared to before death. In this way he hoped to see whether the soul had left, because he reasoned that obviously the soul must weight something. That's a very interesting scientific experiment. But I'm not sure if it'll get past an ethics committee in a modern university!

J: No, I don't think it will. People have tried to do that kind of work, not with humans but with animals, but it gets tricky with the last breath, with exhale versus inhale, and all of that.

But the idea of trying to look at it scientifically is obviously something very important to Ian and me. Sceptics or critics can certainly raise legitimate issues about the work. We would never say that it's beyond reproach. Any time you're getting something that involves the real world and not a controlled laboratory experiment, there are potential things that can legitimately be raised as concerns. But over time I think a lot of the cases have dealt with that.

S: It seems to me that in this case, from a scientific point of view, we have a fairly robust body of evidence that at least calls for some kind of explanation. And then we have some tentative words that we throw around to try to make sense of it, like reincarnation, or we say it was the same person as before. Of course, these are all issues that are central in Buddhist philosophy: what does it mean to say that somebody is the

same person that they were in a past life. They are obviously not exactly the same in every way as in a past life, but there is some connection in some meaningful way. So there has to be some stronger explanatory framework that can make sense of it, bringing it into some kind of way of thinking about things that's going to be more meaningful. And I know that in your book you suggested that quantum theory can provide one entry point into that.

B: Before we get into quantum theory, can we just look at another area first of all? In Buddhism there are a lot of suttas, discourses by the Buddha, about rebirth and karma; there is a lot of theory about these things. One of the things I want to ask you about is to what extent you have found any evidence for these theories in your work. For instance, according to Buddhism, you can be reborn sometimes in a happy destination, sometimes in an unhappy destination. Have you any kind of evidence that this is the case from the recollection of past lives, that there are recollections of different states, so to speak?

J: That's a complicated area, and I should say first of all that these kids with seemingly intact memories of past lives may not be representative of the usual process. They are the ones that tend to come back very quickly and with intact memories. They may just be one tip of the bell curve. And so it may be difficult to generalise from these cases to the usual process, because our cases all tend to be quite similar. [For example] the average interval from the death of the previous person to the birth of the child is only 4 ½ years, but the median interval—meaning half are less and half are more—is almost 16 months. So 16 months is the median from the death of the previous person to the birth of the child.

To get more to your question, the main drive of our work has not really been to address issues like this, but more just trying to see if there is evidence of a connection with a past life. So it's a little hard to answer. Certainly we've had people who did not seem to have led very exemplary lives in a past life—they were mobsters or whatever. But we don't see any correlation between people who seem to have been bad people and then were born in horrible conditions.

Obviously people can be born into a poor but loving families, but we don't really assess that. We do try to assess socio-economic factors in families, but not how good or bad their life is. So we don't really know, and we're not really looking to try to determine this.

S: That's actually something that is explicit in the early Buddhist texts. The Mahākammavibhanga Sutta (MN 136) essentially says you shouldn't rush to any conclusions about past lives and karma based on insufficient evidence, because it's very complicated. There's different kinds of situations.

B: In one of your books you talk a little bit about people having recollections of having been animals in a past life. I think there was a case of a snake. What do you think of that? Is that evidence believable?

J: First of all, the animal cases are few and far between. But again, it may be that it would be hard to have memories from an animal life that you would carry over with you. We don't have any great animal cases as far as strong verification is concerned. There was the snake case, which I must say was rather intriguing. The boy not only said he had the life of a snake, but gave specific details of where and how he had been killed. But the evidence wasn't as solid as we might like. It seemed beyond a snake to even know those things. But again, our cases may well just be the tip of an iceberg. I wouldn't say one way or the other whether it may be possible. And I don't see why it couldn't be possible. On the other hand, it is not something I would necessarily look forward to for myself. But I know people who would love to be a bird in their next life, and soar or whatever. So I guess we all have our interests.

It is certainly not something that we get a lot of reports about, even in places where people consider it possible. So whether that's just because those memories don't come through as much, or whether it's something that's really rare ...

B: Sometimes—especially with near death experiences—you hear about very bad experiences, experiences that appear to be similar to hell realms, for example. On the other hand, there are people who've experienced things that are more like heavenly kind of states. Has anything like that come up in your research?

J: It has in the sense that some of the children talk about a time between lives. Most of them don't, but about 20% do. And they describe different kinds of experiences. I don't know that any of them have literally described a hellish experience, but some of them have certainly described uncomfortable experiences, being hungry or things like that. So it does seem to vary. With the near death experiences, there is the question of whether it's a creation of the dying brain. So it's hard to say. But I don't see why we would all have the same kind of afterlife. It does seem to me there could be a wide variety of differences just like life here.

B: One more thing on this topic, which was intriguing in one of your books. In *Life Before Life* [Ed.: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008] you seem to be saying that there is a possible connection between meditation and the kind of experience people have in the following life. Do you have anything to add to that?

J: Well, it's based on rather small numbers, because we don't often ask that question. But with the numbers we had we did get statistically significant results which showed that if somebody meditated in their past life, when they come back in their next life, they're more likely to report experiences of another realm in between lives.

There are different ways to interpret that. One would be that people who are meditating a lot and are more mindful and spiritual and so forth improve their ability to go to other realms and have other experiences. But the other possibility is that it makes one better able to remember these experiences, to register them in the mind and help them carry over into the next life.

S: That's actually what it says in the early Buddhist texts. If you meditate, you will die more mindfully and will be reborn more mindfully.

B: When you use the word meditation, you are presumably referring to mindfulness, which is commonly used in that way these days. The Sanskrit or the Pali word behind that, *sati*, means both memory and mindfulness. So from Buddhist point of view, they are in fact very closely connected to each other.

One of the things we were hoping to discuss a little bit is the scientific establishment and the dissent you are getting. What is your feeling

about that? How strong is the dissent and how much acceptance is there in the scientific community?

J: Most of the scientific community has never heard of our work, but for the people who have, you never know who's going to be open to it, really. For instance, Ian's books were at times reviewed in places like JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association, which is one of the top medical journals in the world, and it got very favourable reviews. This was a long time ago, but the book review editor said it was hard to explain these cases on any other ground besides reincarnation.

Obviously we haven't really moved the needle much as far as the general scientific community consensus is concerned. You know, people just sort of dismiss the work. But I hear from scientists frequently, where they're impressed by it. That doesn't mean they're going out and saying take a look at this. But there are a lot of people who sort of compartmentalise it: they may be doing very rigorous scientific work on neuro-chemicals or whatever, but either they've sort of got a religious side, or they're just open to things like this, even though it is very difficult.

To get back to your question, the scientific community is largely unmoved, but there may be plenty of individuals in the community who are impressed by it.

B: What do you think is the main reason for the resistance to this idea? What would you pinpoint as the main cause?

J: I think it appears to conflict so much with peoples' world-view and, again, the reigning paradigm of scientific materialism. There is no way of really accepting the cases and incorporating them into a view of scientific materialism. So you're talking about a fairly revolutionary kind of change if people are to accept these cases. So the easiest thing to do is not to accept them. I understand that.

I was recently approached by someone who'd written a book about UFOs, which frankly I've always dismissed. But when I read her book, it was pretty darn impressive, but you know, you can only be open to believe in so many weird things. It's easier for me to just not pay any attention to that than it is to accept it. That's in some ways how we all are. If people found, somehow, some strong evidence that Muhammad was really the Christ of the world, people here would not be open to accepting that. It's just that when things are a big challenge to us we only accept it if we absolute have to. With Einstein and the theory of relativity, once there was firm evidence gathered by other people, then people accepted it because they had to.

S: Perhaps it's something that might be accepted if people saw some benefit for themselves. If people see there's actually some use to it—what impact does it have on my life—similar to what we've seen with meditation. Buddhists have been talking about meditation for thousands of years, and finally we can do studies and people can see that it actually does help to reduce stress, it does help you to be more peaceful, and so on. I don't know what that would be, but perhaps that's what it's going to take: people have to be motivated, they have to get something out of it.

J: Yeah, of course one potential benefit is reducing the fear of death. The question is whether it really can be reduced that much. There are a lot of people here who are fairly religious, which would include a belief in life after death, and yet they still have this fear.

But cases like this, or other kinds of cases, that offer evidence of a carry-on after life, may be able to comfort people. In a sense they see, and then kind of feel better. They don't have to worry so much about dying. And I do get emails from people who have found it beneficial to read my book and found it comforting. So it may well be that there's that benefit there.

B: Sometimes I wonder whether the scientific community is scared to speak out. They are afraid that their peers might say, "What's wrong with you? You are a scientists and you believe in this kind of paranormal stuff?" I wonder whether more people are open to it than it seems like.

J: There's not going to be a lot of people who will stick their neck out for this work if they're involved in another field where they're trying to maintain their respect with their peers. I don't think we can do much about that. When you're doing work that's outside of the mainstream, then it sort of comes with the territory: even if people are open to it, they may not be saying a lot about it. That's just the way it goes.

B: We have this idea in science of paradigms: certain paradigms being in ascendancy and holding science back because people have a fixed view of how the world looks. The question is often asked: will there be a paradigm shift within the scientific community about the issue of materialism? Do you see that coming? Do you see any kind of movement towards a greater acceptance of paranormal phenomena and rebirth specifically?

J: I don't know. Not necessarily. I think scientists have been fairly successful over the last hundred years at ignoring the findings of quantum theory because they do fundamentally challenge how the world seems to work—frankly, they fundamentally challenge materialism in the most obvious way. There are things that happen at the quantum level that are really quite bizarre. We've known that for a long time, and yet people like biologists, for example, have completely ignored that because it's hard to incorporate into their world-view.

If rebirth and paranormal ideas gain more acceptance, it will be because the reigning paradigm has been brought down by quantum physics. I was about to say there are more and more quantum physicists that are talking about consciousness. But I'm not sure that's true, because they always have, even the founders like Max Plank. It's just that other people have ignored it. There may continue to be findings in that realm that may be impossible to ignore and that may make people open to accepting other phenomena.

S: I was discussing with the monks today ... I read an article a couple of days ago that discussed the findings from the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in the last few years. It seems that, apart from the obviously significant finding of the Higgs boson, the most significant finding was the lack of discovery of any of the particles predicted by super symmetry. They had expected to find these, and it was one of the reasons they built the LHC. And they haven't found anything, nothing.

Obviously they are going to keep looking, and they are going to start it up again soon. But at the moment it seems like super symmetry is in big trouble, which means the standard model is in big trouble, which means the multi-verse is in big trouble, and it means potentially that we may be looking to that kind of paradigm shift in physics in the next few decades, I guess.

J: Yeah, who knows. Of course with negative results you can always say we just need to do the experiments better, and then we'll find what

we're looking for. But with the whole multi-verse idea ... if you're having to postulate this endless number of universes that we can't see or have any awareness of, it does show how difficult it really is to hold on to this idea of scientific materialism.

B: It is often problematic for scientists to move into the religious field, talking about reincarnation and these kinds of things. This is probably more of a problem in the United States than it is in other western countries because it's more of a Christian country in many ways. But I'm wondering whether sometimes this kind of dichotomy between science and religion really is all that justified.

Of course, religion is many things. You have the dogmatic side of religion, and then you have more the experiential side. And it seems to me that there shouldn't necessarily be any conflict between science and religion as experience. It should be possible for them to form an integrated whole, as far as I can see. Is it possible to bring religion and science together in this way? Any comments on that?

J: Science and religion have often agreed to a peaceful coexistence, each having their own territory. In a way that has served everyone well. And they often do approach things from very different angles. I mean, if you're accepting things on faith, as Christians are often asked to do, that's very different from looking at evidence for something. But it may actually be different with many areas of Buddhism, which may be more evidence based.

I don't think science is ever going to accept the "Spiritual," but if there is a naturalistic understanding of some of these areas, for example using consciousness as a term rather than spirit, there may be more possibility of incorporating findings together. Again, it may well need to wait until our next lifetime. But hopefully we can all contribute our part.

S: Many of these things are a kind of secularisation of religious language, and this is what the Buddha did in many ways. Here, for example, you mentioned the word consciousness. In the early Buddhist texts we use the word *viññāna*, which typically translates as consciousness, and this is often said to be the process which is reborn. They talk about a stream of consciousness which is born in one life and then in the next life, or something like that.

To me this marks a fundamental shift—talking about consciousness rather than a soul—because when you talk about consciousness, you're talking about something you can investigate. You're talking about something that is every day, what you and I are experiencing right now, and you're saying that the process of rebirth that we're investigating is kind of similar to that. It's not exactly the same, but we can investigate it in the same kinds of terms with which we experience what's happening right now.

J: Well I agree. The stream of consciousness is also obviously a different kind of entity from a soul, or at least the way that most of us think of it. It raises the question of where that stream of consciousness itself is coming from. But I don't know that the concept of a soul that we have, at least here, lends itself to science very easily. You are right that stream of consciousness may. But again most scientists just ignore the whole thing, because it implies that consciousness involves more than just a brain. And so it's a hard problem.

S: On not quite a related note: in Buddhism, the way we talk about past lives is a little bit different in the sense that it's usually talked about in the context of someone doing meditation, advanced meditation, with a very clear, powerful, bright consciousness. And with that mind one is able, as a deliberate practice, to recollect past lives in a very clear, conscious way as an adult.

This is very different from the idea of spontaneous recollection as a child, where it often seems quite erratic. Something comes up for the kid and they say something, but then another time they might not remember it—things come in bits and pieces. So I wonder whether you've done any studies, or are aware of any studies, on adults or meditators.

J: With meditation, cases have been reported, but I'm not aware of any that have really been investigated. I don't know how often those would: (1) relate to recent lives and, (2) include things like names and places.

But you raise a good point which is that the fact that these young children have memories doesn't necessarily mean that they are [spiritually] evolved beings. It does seem to be, more or less, something that just happens. And it may well be because of the nature of the death in the previous life, where 70% were by unnatural means [which is much more than in the general population], and even the natural death were often with young people [which again is unrepresentative]. So in our cases the previous life often ended prematurely and suddenly. That may have changed the process in a way where the individual came back quickly. And that will be very different from somebody who has done years of meditation, where he's been able to see more.

S: From our understanding of meditation, the kind of depth of meditation that enables that experience to be done very well and with mastery is very, very rare, even among monks and experienced meditators. I do think there are people who have that very profound meditation, but it's certainly not something that would be easy to find. In the descriptions of that in suttas it always says *evaṃ namo, evaṃ gotto ...*, "that was my name, that was my family, that was my food, this was my experience of pleasure and pain," and so this is specifically remembering concrete details. If you could find somebody and you could get them to do the test, then at least potentially it might be possible. But it wouldn't be simple.

J: With those sorts of details, they would be interesting cases to study. Now again there would be the question: have they developed abilities where they are accessing memories from somebody else's life, or is it from their own past life? That question would still be there. But with cases like that we could at least document that, yes, what they recalled or what they said was in fact accurate or something that happened. There's been more work with hypnotic regression. Most of those case would appear to be just fantasies, and so we don't put much stock in those. But with deep serious meditators that would be an altogether different thing.

S: I guess one of the advantages of children, though, would be that they are less likely to sort of make up lies. I mean they tell stories, maybe not coherent and factual ones, but they are less likely to be things they've just known about, as with adults.

J: That's right, there's certainly that. That can be a real issue, like with hypnotic regression—where does the memory come from. It may turn out there was a book they read ten years before which they've completely forgotten about. So, yeah, there are some real issues with adults. They may have had ordinary access to the information, which they then forgot about, whereas with a three-year-olds you're much less concerned about that.

B: One of the things you mentioned before was the necessity of having a theory which explains how these things can happen. Do you communicate with other scientists doing research in other areas which can help you create this theory? In your last book you talked about consciousness being primary, being the main creator, so to speak, in the world. To bring such theories forward, do you emphasise communication with scientists in different areas?

J: Well, there was an annual conference for 14 or 15 years where we would bring together people from different areas, including quantum theorists, as well as people studying near death experiences and past life cases and all that. And that certainly produced some fertile connections. In any area of study people tend to be a little bit inside their own silo and focus on their area, and so it's certainly something we need to continue to do, to have this communication with other fields, and hopefully it will be productive.

S: Just briefly, since we're teaching this course on karma and rebirth in early Buddhism, and we've kind of skirted around this a little bit, but maybe I can express it succinctly. It seems to me that if we compare what your research has uncovered with the traditional Buddhist understanding of rebirth and karma and so on, then there are certain aspects of the traditional beliefs which are fairly strongly supported by your research, the most obvious one being the simple fact that something like reincarnation actually happens and that there are these connections of memories and personality and so on.

But there also seems to be a wide variety of aspects of the Buddhist understanding which is lacking confirmation, such as different realms being pleasant and painful, although they are not necessarily disproved either. And probably the most important aspect is the aspect of karma, where you have a strong connection between behaviour, the ethical choices, how a person lives their life, and what kind of rebirth is going to happen next. Does it seem to be correct that these kind of things don't find any support, at least not so far in your research?

J: Well not a great deal of support, but then again we're not exactly looking for that kind of support. There is support in the sense that there is this emotional carry over. It's not just a memory. A lot of them come back, or seem to come back, into the same families. So then you would certainly postulate that there is this connection: the emotional factor of connection in a past life has been affected in the next one. So I think those fairly subtle things presumably are there. I suspect that there is a connection there.

S: Do you find that exploring and talking about these cases with the children who've had them ... we talked about James Leininger earlier who was obviously suffering from traumatic dreams and so on, and in that case he was obviously suffering a lot. Is there a tendency that talking about these things, and dealing with the person and perhaps the family, actually helps them? Does talking about it make them feel better?

J: Often it does. These are very young children: they usually start [having these memories] around the age of two or three, and their understanding of reality is incomplete. It can be helpful to make clear to them that these memories are indeed from the past and that they are now safe in this life with their parents. Some of them don't understand that it is in the past, and they think that their real parents are still there waiting for them to come home or whatever.

Often with the Asian cases, where the family has taken the child to the previous place, it's been helpful. You might think it would stir up more emotions, but usually seeing the previous family helps to resolve things a little bit. First of all, their memories are validated: yes, there were in fact these people. But they also see that life has kind of moved on, and the past life is in fact past, and they are now experiencing this life with the family they have now. Things will often simmer down after a visit like that. Talking with the kids and again reminding them that it's all behind them, it helps them move on.

B: Perhaps this is one of the problems here: incorporating all these things into ordinary science is not just a paradigm shift, it's a massive paradigm shift. It changes the goalposts enormously. We talk about paradigm shifts as if they're all the same, but actually there's all kinds of different degrees of shifts.

What you're talking about now, the traumatic side of remembering one's past lives, straight away you see that it has tremendous implications for psychology, for example. How do you deal with people's personality, how do you deal with their problems, if you incorporate the idea of past lives? Suddenly that changes the whole way you would deal with people's problems, basically. So you would see an enormous shift across the board in all areas of science if you accept these kinds of ideas.

S: And religion as well.

J: Yeah, it would be the paradigm shift of all paradigm shifts. And I think one reason that science would resist it so much is that there would be this fear of sort of going back to the dark ages with all the superstitious beliefs, the various things that people associate with religion back in those ages, at least in the West. But we now know that we don't have to think there's a chariot carrying the sun across the sky, for we know how it works. There are a lot of things that people would never accept, such as having to go back to those sorts of things.

Again, I think if there is this huge paradigm shift it will have to be on terms people can understand. It will have to be a fairly naturalistic kind of understanding: it would have to extend what we know about how the world works, rather than refuting it all. There is the idea that consciousness is not just created by the brain, but more that the brain helps transmit it, but at the same time much of the world does in fact work in the way we think it does. [We need to bring these ideas together into a coherent whole.] Then perhaps one day people can be accepting of that.

B: Thank you very much Dr Jim Tucker. It's been very kind of you to spend this time with us.

J: I appreciate your interest in our work.

B: We have your books here, your two books. We've been reading them beforehand.

J: I recommend to people that they start with Return to Life. One, I think I did a better job of writing it, but I also think it's a better introduction to this phenomenon.


S: Yes, it's nice and accessible.

B: We started off reading Ian Stevenson’s work. It was more heavy going than your books.

J: His book Children Who Remember Previous Lives is quite accessible, I think. Reading Twenty Cases or the other books or case reports—they’re really valuable, but they do take a certain commitment.

B: Thanks very much again, Jim, for taking part in this.

** Unfortunately we suffered technical problems during the recording of this interview, and for this reason not everything recorded was comprehensible. In a number of places we have had to rely on memory and educated guesswork to reconstruct the interview. Still, this affects no more than 5% of the total. In most places where we were unable to fully understand Dr. Tucker’s replies, we have added our best estimate in square brackets, [].*

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