

Rebirth
as Doctrine and
Experience

Essays and Case Studies

Collected Writings
Volume II

Francis Story
(Anagārika Sugatānanda)

Introduction by
Ian Stevenson, M.D.

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

Introduction

Before his untimely death in April, 1971, Francis Story had projected a book on rebirth. He never completed it—indeed he never really began it—and thus gave his friends and readers one more reason to regret his passing. For he could have written an excellent work on the subject, one that would have combined his deep knowledge of Buddhist texts and literature with his extensive acquaintance with cases of the rebirth type in South Asia and of the peoples among whom these cases occur. And he would have illuminated the whole with his rigorous logic and lucid style of writing. I am sure the book he wanted to write would have greatly surpassed the one the reader now has before him. It is even possible that Francis Story will look down disapprovingly from the *deva* realms on the collection of his papers on rebirth which the Ven. Nyanaponika has so skillfully edited. For a number of the chapters included in this volume derive from mere drafts or field notes, which the author would certainly have developed further and revised if he had lived and had wished to publish them. I make this comment in an explanatory rather than an apologetic spirit. The friends of Francis Story have agreed that the importance of his contributions to the study of rebirth cases justify making them available to a wider circle of readers despite imperfections which he would have removed if he had lived longer. The reader should attribute any defects to those of us who wanted to see this work published rather than to the author, who had no chance to correct them himself.

Francis Story began to investigate cases of the rebirth type when he was living in Burma in the 1950s. At that period he started, at first almost casually, to jot down notes of cases he encountered. Gradually he became more systematic in his recording of the data he collected. In 1961 he accompanied me during my first trip of investigations in Sri Lanka, to which he had moved in 1957. Thereafter he joined me during every field trip I made in Sri Lanka until 1970. In addition, he helped me during two field trips in India and Thailand and he made trips of investigation by himself in India, Burma, and Thailand in the 1960s. At the time of his death he had some personal experience with most of the cases in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma of which we then had any information. Many of them he had investigated entirely by himself.

Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience

His strong conviction about the truth of Buddhism gave him a certain advantage in the study of the cases in which respect I have felt myself at times deficient. He had become convinced of the essential truth of the Buddha's teaching when only sixteen years old. His acceptance of Buddhism then and later had nothing to do with evidence from case studies. This happened because first, there was little of such evidence available until we began our investigations, and secondly, because Buddhism's appeal to him in no way depended on evidence. He accepted Buddhism on rational rather than on empirical grounds. For me, on the other hand, the truth of Buddhism, and hence my acceptance of it, depended at least to some extent on whatever evidence of rebirth the investigation of the cases could generate. This attitude led me to treat the cases sometimes as if they were fragile and as if the loss of a case would lessen, if only by a little, my own wavering convictions about Buddhism. Not so Francis Story. For him all the evidence from the cases could have collapsed into nothing and he would have remained unshaken in his belief in the truth of the Buddha's teachings. With this background he approached the cases as a neutral and sometimes stern critic of informants. Discrepancies about details such as occur commonly enough in human testimony of the kind obtained in these cases vexed and occasionally angered him. He sometimes cross-examined witnesses in a manner that made the targets of his penetrating questions uncomfortable and observers wonder why he had not taken up the law as a profession. He had an unusual gift for pursuing small details, although he rarely allowed the lesser aspects of a case to decide his assessment of it as a whole.

Some persons may nevertheless think that his bias toward Buddhism could have influenced his interviews and his analysis of the data that emerged from them. From the observations that I could make of him during the many months we spent together I do not think this occurred. And this was so not only because, as I have said above, he was rather indifferent to the outcome of the investigation of any single case—although not to the research as a whole—but also because he had the detachment of the true scientist. (This is a virtue in Buddhism also and his Buddhism made him a better scientist.) He always gave facts primacy over theory and when some element of a case conflicted with what Buddhist teachings had led him to expect he unhesitatingly questioned the teaching rather than the data, provided that he had satisfied himself of their authenticity. I need hardly add to the probable readers of this book that the Buddha himself taught us to learn by our own experiences rather than accept on faith anyone else's statements—including his own. And Francis Story found nothing incompatible between Buddhism

Introduction

and true science, although he could be scathing about scientism—the tendency to think that current beliefs held by scientists have value for all time.

He sometimes expressed a keen disappointment that the cases had not brought out more evidence of retributive karma. He had hoped that they would yield some evidence not only for rebirth—which they do—but also for the operation of processes such as karma. He admitted that his convictions about Buddhism had led him to expect more support for the teaching of karma than the cases provided, which was in fact very little. (This is not to say that karma does not occur, only that if it does, its workings must be vastly more complicated and more subtle than most students have suspected.) And yet he never attempted to twist the interrogations of the informants or the interpretation of their testimony in a way that would have made the evidence for karma—or anything else—appear stronger than it was.

Despite the fact that he did not think the evidence from cases would alter his own beliefs one way or the other, he was widely read in the general literature of modern science and he knew that carefully studied cases might eventually have some influence in changing opinions about the nature of human personality and of man's destiny. And therefore he entered tirelessly into the work of investigating them.

Although he never had an opportunity to investigate cases in cultures outside those of South Asia, one could never satisfy his curiosity about them. As I remember our conversations, it seems to me that when we were not talking about the immediate case under study then, almost all the time Francis was either expounding Buddhism to me or pumping me about the details of cases I had studied elsewhere.

I hope the readers of this book enjoy physical comforts far superior to those usually encountered in the field investigations of cases of the reincarnation type in Asia. The average Western reader holding a finished case report and seated in his own deep armchair cannot easily conceive the practical difficulties and sometimes physical hardships which the investigator has had to endure in order to provide him with this material. Francis Story took all these travails in good spirit. Once he went to study a case in India after we had separated there in 1964. He later wrote me about how he had to wade through a river to reach the village of the case, but had managed to keep his notes dry by holding them over his head. He added characteristically that he found these incidental hazards of the work added to its overall interest for him. On another occasion, when we were together in Thailand, a jeep became flooded crossing a river in a particularly remote rural area. We had to wait many hours for some new vehicle, but such a

mishap and detention merely gave Francis Story another opportunity to discuss Buddhism. Even his rare complaints about the conditions of our work always had humour in them. Once when we were rushing hectically to catch a train at a crowded railway station in a South Asian country he remarked: "This is an impossible country. You cannot even count on the trains departing late!" On another trip, when we had almost exhausted our informants and ourselves and had partaken of nothing since breakfast but chopped open coconuts, he allowed himself to say, toward 5:00 PM, "I have quite stopped thinking about lunch. My only concern now as regards food is whether I shall have any supper!"

In view of his willingness to undergo deprivations of this kind, it is not surprising that the first symptoms of his fatal illness came on when he had to stand for hours during a long train journey taken to investigate a case in eastern Sri Lanka. He spent much of this time with his chest against a rather sharp ledge. Afterwards he had persistent pain in the area of his chest where the ledge had pressed him. Examination showed that he had developed at that place a pathological fracture of a rib. That was early in 1970. By the autumn he was severely weakened, in much pain, and using a cane. But he accompanied me just as usual throughout most of my investigations in Sri Lanka during November of that year.

His cheerful tolerance of the austerities of field investigations represented the least important contribution he made to the study of the cases. He and I both regarded these as merely incidental features in the gathering of the data. Far more important was his participation as an analyst of the evidence and an assessor of its value. Almost always on our field trips we worked until late at night in going over the notes of the day's interviews. Francis Story's agile mind constantly thought of new questions for the next day's work or new ways of understanding the testimony we had already obtained.

The discussion of cases with him gave me not only pleasure, but an assistance whose true worth I did not appreciate until much later. As I think now about my ignorance of South Asian peoples in the early 1960s I realize that if I had allowed myself to become aware of it then I would never have made my first journey for investigations. I should have lost my nerve before departure. I only realized much later the good fortune I had in that, from the very beginning of my field work, Francis Story made his rich experience of South Asian peoples available to me. Many times his extraordinarily wide knowledge of the cultures of the area clarified some discrepancy or obscure item in the informants' statements or the behaviour of the subject. One of his other friends told me quite credibly that in at least some

matters Francis Story knew much more about the peoples of South Asia than they knew themselves. This was not said as a shallow repetition of the cliché according to which we never see ourselves as others see us. Francis Story had a lively interest in all sorts of subtle differences of custom which made him an unrivalled expert on the peoples among whom he lived. I sometimes wondered why, during all the years he lived in Asia, he had never learned a modern Asian language; but perhaps if he had done so the time and effort would have left him with less to devote to the study of other aspects of the cultures of the region.

He was not, however, satisfied with the mere collection of data. He wanted to learn—and even to anticipate—the patterns which began to emerge from the cases. He constantly thought and talked about their similarities and differences and their relationship to the Dhamma. It is altogether appropriate therefore that about half of the present volume consists of writings on what we might call the theoretical aspects of rebirth. But the essays of Francis Story on the theory of rebirth, in my opinion, stand far above those of most theorists of the subject. For although most of them have never been near a case, Francis Story from personal experience could see the relevance of Buddhist texts to cases and of cases to texts. His report and subsequent comments about the case of the Karen houseboy with appalling deformities (reprinted in Chapter XXII of this volume) provide only one example of his unusual powers of integration.

He was particularly interested in “international cases,” those in which a subject claims to have lived a previous life in another country. The case of Ranjith Makalanda (reported in Chapter XXI of this volume) provides an excellent example of the type. The subject, a Sinhalese boy of Sri Lanka, claimed that he had been an Englishman in his previous life and he had certain English habits that harmonized with his (unfortunately unverified) statements about the previous life he claimed to remember. Francis Story liked to muse over how such an event as a Christian Englishman being reborn a Sinhalese Buddhist could happen. Occasionally he talked about his own particular fondness for Chinese and Indo-Chinese peoples and a few odd likings and other traits he had which made him speculate that he himself might have had a previous life as a Chinese.

The reasons why a person might be reborn in one particular family (of the same culture) rather than in another also fascinated him. The fact that the subject’s birth often occurred near the place of death—verified or conjectured—of the previous personality drew his attention. Some of us finally developed “Story’s Law” which says: “Other things being equal, a

Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience

person will be reborn where (or near where) he dies.” Francis Story needed no reminding that other things are rarely equal. Nevertheless he sensed that regular processes govern rebirth and that further investigations might allow us to develop at least provisional concepts of their “laws.”

If a reader of the present volume should happen to come to it with no knowledge of what Francis Story called “the case for rebirth” he will not put it down without being cured of that ignorance. And although the essays and case reports of this book may not convince anyone of the truth of rebirth—their author never intended that they should—they will at least leave no doubt in his mind that the cases provide some evidence—however future generations may weigh it—which justifies a belief in rebirth. Belief can precede proof and often does.

During the past three or more centuries, since the beginning of European colonialism in South Asia, hundreds of thousands of Europeans have lived in the area as administrators, diplomats, soldiers, traders, or missionaries, and in other capacities. These persons were surrounded by abundant cases of the rebirth type. And yet of all these thousands of Europeans only a handful paid any attention to the cases. One thinks of Fielding Hall and W.F. Yeats-Brown (both of whom gave short summaries of some cases in their books) and—who else? The list is pitifully short. But Francis Story is on it and in my opinion is its most outstanding member to date. The modern anthropologists have been no more attentive to the cases since nearly all have gone to Asia as captives of Western ideas on human personality. On furlough from their doctrinal prisons in Europe or America they could not see in Asia what they knew to be impossible. Francis Story was a different type. Here was a man who did his own thinking and who lived among South Asians not with the idea of teaching them something—although he could—but with that of learning from them. He penetrated farther than any of his predecessors into what I call the empirical basis of South Asian religions. I predict that his contributions to the scientific investigations of rebirth will make his name better known and remembered with gratitude by future generations.

IAN STEVENSON, M.D.

Division of Parapsychology
Department of Psychiatry
School of Medicine
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22901