

Children's Memories of Previous Lives

by Jim B. Tucker, MD

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Ed. Note: In the following dialogue, excerpted and edited from the Institute of Noetic Sciences' teleseminar series "Essentials of Noetic Science," IONS Senior Scientist Dean Radin talks with Jim Tucker, associate professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioral sciences at the University of Virginia who also works in the Department of Perceptual Studies, started by Ian Stevenson in 1967. Stevenson was a psychiatrist best known for his studies on reincarnation with children; Tucker has been continuing the work that Stevenson began. His most recent book is *Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives*. In it he challenges the notion that consciousness is only the result of a functioning brain and suggests that consciousness can be considered separately from the brain, which provides a basis for claims of reincarnation.

Radin: Jim, would you begin by telling us how you became involved in this unusual and compelling area of research?

Tucker: You mentioned that Ian started the vision in 1967, but he actually started this work in 1961, when he took his first trip to study these cases. Ian was a psychiatrist with a successful academic career; he was chairman of the Department of Psychiatry here at the University of Virginia while still in his late thirties. But Ian had always had an interest in parapsychology and the question about survival after death. Over the years, he collected forty-four cases of people reporting memories of previous lives, from various sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and journals. When he pulled them all together, he found many similarities, including the fact that many of them were young children reporting these memories. Ian wondered if

current cases of such children could still be found and wrote about all of this in an article.

Soon after, Ian heard about some cases in India and took his first trip there in 1961. He heard about five cases, but once he got to India, he found twenty-five cases. Ian discovered that memories of past lives were much more common than anyone had ever known before. He became more and more interested and eventually stepped down as chairman of the Department of Psychiatry to form the Department of Perceptual Studies and to work on these cases full time. Ian did this for several decades and published numerous academic books and articles about it.

When I trained here at the University of Virginia in psychiatry in the late '80s and early '90s, I heard about Ian's work, but at the time I wasn't intrigued by it. After my training, I went into private practice and remarried. My wife was *very* intrigued by reincarnation, psychics, and things that I had never really given much thought to, and because of her interest, I began doing a lot of reading. I happened to be reading one of Ian's books when I learned that his division had received a new grant to study the effects of near-death experiences on the lives of those who had them. Looking for sort of a hobby in addition to my practice, I called him up, and for a couple of years, I helped with interviewing patients. Eventually, Ian asked me if I would be interested in taking a trip to Asia with one of our colleagues to study some of these cases. I was very interested, and after that, I joined the department half time and in 2000 came on full time. I've been doing it ever since.

Radin: Given your involvement for so many years now, I'm guessing that you continue to find something compelling in the stories you hear. What can you say about either your first trip to Asia or subsequent trips that gave you the sense while studying these cases that there is something real going on?

Tucker: Well, the phenomena certainly have been very impressive. These children make statements about somebody who died before

they were born that turn out to be remarkably accurate. Some kids talk about being deceased family members. Others describe being strangers in other locations and share details that people who go there find match – somebody had lived and died there just as the child described.

I've also been impressed by the emotional component: it is clear that for many of these kids this is not a game of make-believe but very important and meaningful for them. They talk about the people they miss. Some of the children cry daily to be taken to someone they say is their real family. I recently studied an interesting American case in which the mother had heard about these phenomena years before she had her child; she thought then that it would be "neat" to have a child with past life memories. But when she had a child who actually remembered his past life, she discovered it wasn't neat at all, because it is traumatic for the child to talk about the people and the places he misses. Her son cries every night about the life he used to have. This case has actually been filmed for a documentary.

Radin: Say more about this case.

Tucker: There are other American cases that are just as strong. In one, the child talked about a life in Hollywood, which of course might sound like a fantasy. The boy was four-years-old at the time. He gave a lot of details about his previous life: dancing on stage, then becoming an actor, then an agent, having a big swimming pool, traveling around the world on a big boat, and on and on. His mother tried to get more specific memories, so she got some old Hollywood movie books for the boy to look through to see if any more memories would be stirred. When they came across a picture from an old George Raft movie, the boy looked at it and said, "Oh, that's the movie I made with George." He then pointed to the man in the picture and said, "That was me, mom. That's who I was." It turned out that the guy he pointed to was an extra who had no lines in the movie. It was quite a process to identify who that person was, but he turned out to be a guy who had been a dancer on stage before going to Hollywood to become an actor. He did eventually have a big house

and a swimming pool, he did become an agent, and he did travel the world on a big boat, the *Queen Elizabeth* – we've got pictures of him on that boat. Not all of the details panned out in this case, but a lot of them did. The critics say it's just coincidence.

Radin: What do you do with or how do you interpret the things a child says that do not match? Or was it that those details could not be confirmed?

Tucker: There were a lot of things that couldn't be confirmed in this case because not a lot of people are still around who knew this guy. We were able to talk to his daughter, who was quite young when he died but still knew the essentials of his life. Many details remain that may or may not be true, and, as with most of the cases, the child shared some things that were simply incorrect. But then, when any of us talks about our early, early childhood from this life, we may well come up with things that are incorrect. So maybe we shouldn't expect 100 percent accuracy with past-life details.

This boy in particular also seems to have some psychic ability. He has come out with some specific predictions about people, such as when he told his grandmother she was going to get chicken pox, and then a couple of weeks later she had an outbreak of shingles. So it may be that he can access material from a variety of places beyond just this one person's past life. He certainly connected emotionally to that one life.

Radin: It's unfortunate that psychic abilities and reincarnation memories overlap because it makes it more difficult to know or to interpret the information that's coming out.

Tucker: That's right. There are some arguments against it being purely psychic material. For one thing, it's certainly not the children's present experience; they are reporting not just information but previous experiences from one person's point of view. Beyond that, most of the children don't show any psychic abilities other than all these details about one specific person. This doesn't disprove that it could be psychic, super-psi, or whatever you want to call that stuff,

but I think it does, on the face of it, make more questionable the cases that appear to be a child remembering a past life.

Radin: So, if you, a child psychiatrist, were to ask young children to make up the best story they could about being reincarnated, is it possible to tell by their emotional response or something else whether a child is making the story up?

Tucker: The parents often say they can tell the difference – that it's not the same as the sort of sing-songy, make-believe-type stories that kids tell. The stories are much more serious, matter-of-fact, and, at times, emotional. As with near-death experiences, you have to look at the effect the story has on someone, and certainly these apparent memories can have quite an emotional effect on the child having them.

Radin: Originally, these cases were reported in India because of the cultural support for reincarnation, but there are cases in every country in the world.

Tucker: Yes, in every country where cases have been sought, they have been found – all the continents except Antarctica, where no one has looked. They're certainly easiest to find in cultures that believe in reincarnation, so there are many cases from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and places like that. But cases are also found in cultures without a popular belief in reincarnation, such as the United States, and now with the Internet, people can easily find us at the university. We hear from parents all the time whose kids are reporting these things. Some of the cases are a lot stronger than others, more detailed than others, but certainly these phenomena go beyond places with a belief in reincarnation. Most of the families in the United States say they did not believe in reincarnation before the children started reporting these things.

Radin: What has been learned about the demographics of where the reincarnation came from? I'm thinking specifically of the geographic location; for example, I don't know of any cases from India where someone reported a previous life in another country.

Tucker: Well, there are some, but they usually have a connection with that country. For instance, in India there were what Ian called “the blonde bomber cases,” in which kids talked about having been, say, a British pilot who was killed during WWII or something like that. Ian also found a couple of dozen cases in Burma; Burmese children said they had been Japanese soldiers who had been killed in Burma during WWII. The Japanese were despised in Burma, so it’s hard to imagine that the parents would be egging the kids on to say what they were saying. Also, the children exhibited Japanese inclinations: for instance, complaining about a spicy Burmese food and asking to eat raw fish instead. Burmese men wear a particular outfit that is essentially a skirt, but these kids refused and wanted to wear pants instead. It’s somewhat easier to see the behavioral features of these cases when there is an international distinction.

But you’re right: it’s unusual for a child to talk about life in another country – and often we don’t pursue those cases. Say we’re studying a child in Thailand who says, “I used to live in Africa.” There’s not a whole lot we can do to research that claim unless the case provides very specific details. We do get some reports like that from American children, but again there’s little we can do.

The other thing to keep in mind is that our cases tend to involve *recent* previous lives. The median interval between the death of the previous person and the birth of the child is only sixteen months. In these are cases of reincarnation, the person comes back quickly and fairly close by. Yes, there are exceptions, such as the boy I talked about earlier; there were fifty years between the lives in that case. But it’s much more common for them to be more recent. “Unfinished business” is a subjective term; nonetheless, a lot of these cases do seem to involve unfinished business. About 70 percent of them will involve a death by unnatural means, usually a violent death. A lot of them involve young people, children or very young adults. There may have been a strong impetus to return – which gets into how reincarnation might work. So, for whatever reason, they seem to come back quickly, and they come back with intact memories. But

these cases may not generalize to the rest of the population. That the vast majority of children talk about a life in the same country does not mean that other people necessarily would have the same constraints.

Radin: It does imply that if it's true for a couple of kids, it's probably true for everyone whether we remember or not.

Tucker: I go back and forth on that, to tell you the truth. These cases provide evidence that there can be survival after death, but I don't think these cases necessarily require, maybe do not even imply, that survival after death has to be in this same world that we're in now. It shows that it can happen, but if our world is essentially created out of consciousness – which I believe – then I don't see any reason why other worlds couldn't be created out of consciousness as well. So, the consciousness that each of us has would continue in some fashion but not necessarily back in this world.

Radin: You believe that the world is made of consciousness?

Tucker: Not necessarily made out of, but it grows out of consciousness.

Radin: Describe that in a little more detail.

Tucker: Well, this gets into quantum physics, which I confess I don't fully understand.

Radin: Nobody does.

Tucker: I don't know how much detail to go into, but there's the idea that observation is necessary for wave function collapse – basically, events don't occur until they are observed. And this is true on the quantum level not just for current events but for past events, too. The past has to be observed before it comes into reality. They say that there are as many interpretations of quantum theory as there are quantum physicists. My interpretation is if observation is necessary for physical events to exist, then something has to be doing the observing. I think the case can be made – and people such as physicist Henry Stapp have more or less made it – that

consciousness is necessary for wave function collapse, or essentially for events to occur. The idea that events from the past don't exist until they're observed is similar to the dream world, where people don't exist in that world until we observe them. It's more or less the same in our physical universe: things don't really exist until they are observed. I think a pretty strong argument can be made that the physical world may well be a creation of the mind as well.

Radin: Not necessarily of the personal mind but of something larger than that?

Tucker: Well, that's a question. The William James idea is that consciousness flows through our individual minds, that our brains don't create the consciousness that flows through them. So it is as beings of consciousness that each of us serves as a portal. And do we all come from one source? There's no way of knowing that for sure. Here is another: Underneath the surface, are we all connected even though we appear to be separate? Getting involved in this work has made me curious about a lot of things. Ten years ago, I knew almost nothing about quantum physics; now I know enough to have an opinion. Also, the more you look at the various aspects of parapsychology – near-death experiences, reincarnation cases, mediums, mystics, apparitions – it sure looks as though consciousness can survive without a physical container, that is, the body and the brain.

Radin: When did past-life cases with marks on a body corresponding to a previous life come about, and do those occur in children as well?

Tucker: They do occur in children as birthmarks or birth defects which match wounds, usually the fatal wound, on the body of the previous person. As a medical man with a particular interest in psychosomatic medicine, Ian was quite intrigued by this connection between the mental and the physical. So when he started hearing about these cases back in the sixties, he became very interested in them. It took him about twenty years to finally write them up, but he eventually published a 2000-page magnum opus covering incarnation

biology for more than two hundred of these cases. Many of them are not the usual blemish or birthmark that a lot of people have but fairly horrific cases of missing limbs, gnarled fingers, and things like that. There are also distinctive cases, for example, where the previous person was shot and killed and then the child is born with both a small round entrance wound in the right place and a larger irregularly shaped exit wound in the right place. Such distinctive birthmarks or birth defects match the statements a child makes about the previous person. When he could, Ian would get autopsy reports to confirm a match, and when those weren't available, as they often weren't, he would get eye-witness reports to determine just how well the marks matched the wounds the previous person suffered.

Radin: If we take those cases at face value, how do we even begin to interpret what body-mind connection means? It makes the body extremely fluid in terms of how it's going to be constructed.

Tucker: When I first got involved in this work, I had trouble swallowing this idea. But the way that I think of it now is we know from other work that mental images can have specific effects on the body – for instance, in stigmata or in some hypnosis cases. There is a famous case you're probably aware of in which a guy relived a traumatic event where his arms had been tied up, and in reliving the event, he developed what looked like rope marks on his arms. So there are times when you get these very specific effects on the body from mental images. Well, if a consciousness that experiences being shot survives, it may carry that mental image with it to a developing fetus, and the developing fetus may be a particularly susceptible physical body that can be affected by the mental image. So when the child is born, the birthmarks come with it.

Radin: Is it also the case that children who report previous lives retain a talent that the previous person had – some identifiable skill in music or dance, for example?

Tucker: That tends to be a more subjective matter. There is the question, of course, of where child prodigies get their abilities. But I'm

not aware of any cases of Mozart-like prodigies who also have past-life memories. In our cases, the children are not prodigies, though they tend to learn things more quickly than their peers, such as a musical instrument or another language. There are a few cases where kids seem to speak a language they haven't learned. Unfortunately, sometimes there's no one around who would know if it is an actual language – in Burma, for example, there would be no one who could speak Japanese who would know that a child is really speaking it. But there have been a few well-documented cases of children speaking in an unknown language. Anyway, these skills can come, but not in full force. It's like if you don't play basketball for forty years and you take it up again; you shoot better than if you'd never shot, but it's going to take a lot of practice to get good at it again.

Radin: So given that we're coming up next year on fifty years since Ian started his research, what's on the horizon other than continuing to collect more compelling cases?

Tucker: One thing I've been trying to do, and recently have had more success with, is to collect American cases, because I think it's too easy for people to dismiss the Asian ones as cultural phenomena. I think that American cases can be harder to ignore.

The other thing that we're working on is a computer database. For each of our cases, we code them on 200 variables and then put them into a database. Unfortunately, 200 variables take a lot of time to code. So, this is a multiyear study, and we've got about 1,800 of them in the database out of a total of 2,500 that have been studied. With this sort of database, you can identify patterns that you can't really see in an individual case. For instance, one thing that we've looked at is the criticism that overenthusiastic parents create cases. We've examined the coding for parents' initial reaction to a case to see how well it corresponds to how strong the case is, and we've seen that it doesn't correspond at all. Once we get the whole collection in, we can run stats on basically any area of these cases that intrigues us.