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THE RIVER OF FORGETFULNESS

Anyone who has seriously thought about reincarnation has probably wondered about their past lives. *Who was I? What did I do? Where did I live?*

The River Lethe of Greek mythology, one of the five rivers flowing through Hades, is associated with the spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion. This symbol is found in the last section of Plato's *Republic*, where souls are required to drink from the River of Forgetfulness before returning to earthly life; in Virgil's *Aeneid* where drinking the waters is said to "quench man's troubles [with] the deep draught of oblivion"; and in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* in which Lethe is described as a placid stream that has the power to take away our earthly cares.

But what if we could recall our former lives? Wouldn't that prove to be of great value? Wouldn't that knowledge serve to guide us through life's challenges and difficulties? In an article from the February 1961 issue of *The Theosophist*, N. Sri Ram offers this viewpoint:

It is a mercy that we are able to start each time—each incarnation—fresh-bathed in the waters of Lethe, in oblivious innocence. Each time we draw back into ourselves, in order to put ourselves out into the external world to greater advantage. The slate is wiped clean that we may draw upon it a more perfect picture. If we had to draw upon a slate already filled with innumerable and indelible characters, we would be running the certain risk of making confusion worse confounded, until we were hopelessly lost in a morass of memories, bitter and sweet, breeding remorse and re-awakening passions, at best a bewilderment, more likely a nightmare.

The reincarnating Self has been compared to an actor who is called on to play different roles. His or her creative abilities and powers of expression grow with each role. During the actual performance, however, the particulars of all previous performances must be forgotten. The actor's mind is focused solely on the character at hand. And so it is with the higher Self, as it enters each new incarnation with increased powers and capacities born of experience, but without being burdened by memories of the distant past.

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