

**WILLIAM
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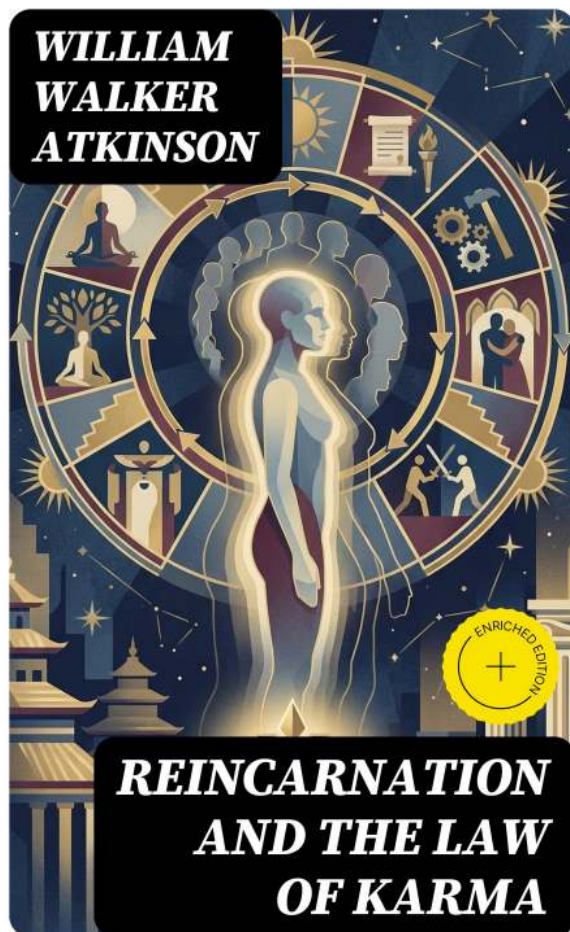
**REINCARNATION
AND THE LAW
OF KARMA**

ENRICHED EDITION



REINCARNATION AND THE LAW OF KARMA

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**REINCARNATION
AND THE LAW
OF KARMA**

William Walker Atkinson

Reincarnation and the Law of Karma

**Enriched edition. A Study of the Old-New World-
Doctrine of Rebirth, and Spiritual Cause and Effect**

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Hannah Mead

EAN 8596547120766

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022



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Introduction

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At the heart of William Walker Atkinson's *Reincarnation and the Law of Karma* lies a rigorous yet consoling question: how the ceaseless flux of human life can be understood as lawful, purposeful continuity rather than accident, and what that means for personal freedom, responsibility, and hope, proposing that causes ripple beyond a single lifetime and that ethical growth is neither blind fate nor arbitrary reward but the steady mathematics of character; it is a vision that balances justice with compassion, invites inquiry rather than credulity, and seeks to reconcile Eastern intuitions of rebirth with Western demands for reasoned evidence and practical conduct.

First appearing in the early twentieth century, the book belongs to the metaphysical and New Thought traditions of American nonfiction, a milieu in which spiritual inquiry, self-help, and comparative reflection on Eastern and Western ideas intersected. Atkinson, a New Thought writer, composes a treatise rather than a story, organizing his reflections as a series of reasoned discussions meant for general readers. The setting is intellectual rather than geographic: lecture halls, parlors, and print culture where terms like karma and reincarnation entered everyday debate. Within that context, the work aims to clarify definitions, separate speculation from argument, and offer a coherent framework.

Readers encounter a patient, explanatory voice that proceeds from first principles to implications, asking what is meant by reincarnation, how moral cause and effect might operate, and why such ideas could matter in daily life. The style is plainspoken and didactic, favoring clear terms and common-sense analogies over esoteric ceremony. The tone remains steady and courteous, often pausing to meet anticipated objections and to distinguish belief from inference. Rather than demanding assent, the book invites provisional acceptance, experiment, and reflection, promising that the concepts become vivid when tested against experience, character, and the recurring patterns of human aspiration.

Central themes gather around lawfulness, continuity, and choice. Karma is presented as an ethical architecture of cause and consequence rather than a cosmic bookkeeping of punishments and prizes, encouraging readers to see habits as seeds and circumstances as fields. Reincarnation functions less as a sensational doctrine and more as a philosophical answer to questions about talent, inequality, and moral development over time. Throughout, the work presses on the tension between determinism and freedom, arguing for a universe where tendencies limit options but do not remove agency, and where character, deliberately shaped, becomes the instrument by which destiny is revised.

Methodologically, Atkinson writes as a synthesizer, drawing together widely known ideas from Eastern philosophies with currents of Western esotericism and the moral pragmatism of New Thought. He prefers the language

of law and principle, signaling orderly relations rather than mystical decree, and repeatedly returns to observation and self-examination as tests. Examples are illustrative rather than authoritative, and historical references appear as orientation points, not as scholarly apparatus. The result is a coherent map for lay readers: definitions, distinctions, and recurring cautions against fatalism or credulousness, assembled to support practice—cultivating intention, moderating desire, and interpreting experience through patterns of cause, effect, and growth.

For contemporary readers, the book persists as both a mirror and a provocation. Its model of karmic causality resonates with modern attention to habits, feedback loops, and long-range consequences, while its treatment of reincarnation opens a cross-cultural space in which identity is understood as evolving process. Without appealing to dogma, it offers a vocabulary for responsibility that scales from personal choices to social systems, asking how patterns persist and how they may be re-educated. In an age of rapid change and diffuse accountability, the insistence on patient formation, ethical intention, and compassionate justice offers a counterpoint to impulsive, short-term thinking.

Approached in this spirit, *Reincarnation and the Law of Karma* reads less like a distant curiosity and more like a working manual for moral imagination. It equips readers to consider continuity without fatalism, justice without vengeance, discipline without rigidity, and hope without naïveté. The book does not ask for unexamined acceptance; it asks for steady attention to the connections between

thought, deed, and unfolding character. Whether one ultimately embraces or questions its conclusions, the inquiry sharpens. To read it closely is to practice a form of accountability, charting how a life is made and remade by the choices it repeats.

Synopsis

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Reincarnation and the Law of Karma is William Walker Atkinson's early twentieth-century exposition of two interconnected ideas: the repeated rebirth of the soul and the moral law of cause and effect governing its progress. Writing for a general audience, he defines terms, outlines the scope of his inquiry, and explains why the topic matters for ethics and personal development. He adopts a didactic, orderly approach, moving from background to argument, with an emphasis on clarity rather than esoteric jargon. The book proposes that these doctrines can be approached rationally, assessed by their explanatory power, and integrated with observations about human character and experience.

The work surveys the lineage of these teachings across cultures. Atkinson summarizes Indian philosophies in which rebirth and karma are central assumptions, and notes related threads in Buddhist and other South Asian thought. He then traces echoes in the Mediterranean world, highlighting Greek philosophers who entertained soul preexistence and return. He remarks on Egyptian and other ancient references, and observes later Western discussions, including modern occult and metaphysical revivals. This historical sketch is not academic cataloging; it serves to show that the ideas have persisted in varied forms, providing a context in which readers can evaluate their plausibility and interpretive reach.

After setting the stage, Atkinson advances the core rationale for reincarnation: it offers a coherent account of human inequality, moral order, and the development of character. Rather than attributing fortune or suffering to chance or single-life judgment, he frames life as a continuing education in which tendencies are carried forward and refined. This perspective, he argues, preserves individual responsibility while offering scope for growth beyond one lifetime. He distinguishes between speculative dogma and what he deems reasonable inference, encouraging readers to weigh how the doctrine illuminates common experiences of aptitude, affinity, conscience, and the gradual shaping of disposition.

The companion doctrine is karma, presented as a universal law of cause and effect operating on mental and moral planes. Atkinson emphasizes that karma is not supernatural punishment, but the orderly unfolding of consequences from actions, intentions, and habits. He explores how choices plant seeds that bear fruit later, sometimes beyond a single incarnation, and how this process interacts with free will. Character is described as accumulated momentum, steering circumstances as much as being shaped by them. The discussion stresses balance rather than fatalism, holding that new actions can redirect trajectories while still acknowledging debts incurred by past conduct.

Anticipating objections, the book addresses common challenges such as the absence of explicit past-life memory, and the roles of heredity, environment, and apparent injustice. Atkinson contends that memory is not identical

with identity, drawing analogies to everyday forgetfulness and subconscious retention, and suggests that traces of prior experience may surface as tendencies or aptitudes. He reviews alternative explanations proposed in the literature for such puzzles without insisting on a single mechanism. He also distinguishes among doctrines of transmigration, clarifying the differences between human rebirth and broader ideas about passage through various forms, and evaluates each with caution.

Beyond theory, Atkinson develops the ethical and practical implications of living under karmic law. He urges readers to cultivate self-control, constructive thought, and compassionate conduct, framing these as investments in future well-being and collective harmony. The doctrine becomes a call to persistent effort rather than resignation, since every choice influences subsequent conditions. Relationships, duties, and setbacks are treated as opportunities to balance accounts and strengthen character. The text promotes a disciplined optimism: progress may be gradual, yet it is cumulative and within one's agency. In this way the metaphysical framework is tied to concrete habits of mind and action.

The book concludes by situating reincarnation and karma as interpretive keys that connect personal destiny with a moral universe, bridging Eastern traditions and Western seekers of the era. Without demanding dogmatic assent, Atkinson invites readers to test the ideas by their ethical fruitfulness and explanatory value. The synthesis helped shape early twentieth-century popular understanding of these doctrines, offering a structured presentation that is

accessible yet ambitious. Its enduring resonance lies in the promise that meaning and justice extend beyond a single lifespan, encouraging a patient, responsible outlook while leaving room for individual reflection and further inquiry.

Historical Context

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Reincarnation and the Law of Karma appeared in the United States in 1908, amid a wave of interest in comparative religion and occult philosophy. Chicago and New York book markets, fed by inexpensive presses and mail-order catalogues, made esoteric topics widely accessible to middle-class readers. The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago had recently introduced large American audiences to Hindu and Buddhist teachings, normalizing terms like karma and rebirth in public discourse. Institutions such as the Theosophical Society, Vedanta Societies, and independent lecture circuits fostered debates on the soul's evolution, causation, and moral order that framed the book's concerns.

William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) was an American writer associated with the New Thought movement, which emphasized mental causation, health, and character development. Before turning to full-time authorship, he worked in business and law, then became a prolific editor and teacher of mind-power and practical metaphysics. Based largely in Chicago in the early 1900s, he issued dozens of concise manuals and treatises through small presses and correspondence courses. He also published a popular series under the name Yogi Ramacharaka through the Yogi Publication Society of Chicago. This background positioned Atkinson to synthesize Eastern doctrines with American self-help themes for a mass readership.

The book emerged from a New Thought milieu that linked mental attitude to outcomes and moral law. New Thought arose in the late nineteenth century from mind-cure currents associated with Phineas Quimby, and overlapped with contemporaries like Christian Science and the Emmanuel Movement. Its periodicals, lecture halls, and study groups promoted self-culture, affirmation, and non-sectarian spirituality. Readers encountered concepts such as vibratory thought, universal law, and ethical cause-and-effect framed in accessible, pragmatic language. Atkinson's treatment of reincarnation and karma addresses these audiences, aligning the ideas with personal improvement and everyday responsibility rather than with sectarian dogma or ritual obligations.

Simultaneously, Theosophy had popularized karma, reincarnation, and cycles of becoming in the Anglophone world. Founded in 1875 by Helena P. Blavatsky and associates, the Theosophical Society circulated works like *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and organized lodges across the United States. These networks, together with translations in Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* (issued 1879–1910), familiarized lay readers with Indic scriptures and cosmologies. Public debates over the soul's origin, postmortem states, and moral recompense were no longer the province of clergy alone. Atkinson writes into this conversation, addressing readers already conversant with comparative doctrines.

Turn-of-the-century interest in scientific study of religion and the paranormal also shaped the book's reception. The Society for Psychical Research (established in London in

1882) and the American Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1885) investigated mediumship, apparitions, and survival hypotheses, while William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) urged pragmatic, experiential evaluation of belief. In this climate, readers expected appeals to evidence, reason, and systematic law rather than to creed. Atkinson accordingly presents reincarnation and karma as coherent principles operating through orderly causation, engaging an audience receptive to law-like accounts of unseen processes.

The early twentieth-century print economy enabled rapid dissemination of esoteric instruction through affordable manuals, lesson series, and correspondence schools. Chicago's role as a rail hub and publishing center supported small firms that specialized in occult, metaphysical, and self-improvement titles, including mail-order catalogs that reached readers nationwide. Public libraries, lyceums, and book clubs expanded access to nontraditional religious literature. Atkinson wrote in a concise, didactic style suitable for serial reading and home study. *Reincarnation and the Law of Karma* fits this format, presenting cumulative instruction intended for autodidacts who assembled personal courses from inexpensive, compact volumes.

Progressive Era culture prized reform, education, and measurable improvement, while new academic psychology and popular science reshaped discussions of mind and habit. The American Psychological Association (founded in 1892) signaled professionalization, yet many readers still looked to hybrid literature that bridged scientific rhetoric and spiritual ethics. Debates on evolution, heredity, and

social responsibility encouraged models of gradual development over absolute judgment. Atkinson's exposition echoes this sensibility by casting moral life as progressive formation under universal law. Without tying itself to any church, the book uses orderly, quasi-scientific language to reconcile spiritual causality with modern ideals of self-mastery.

The volume exemplifies an early twentieth-century American synthesis: Indic concepts reframed through New Thought's ethical optimism and the language of impersonal law. It participates in the cross-cultural exchange catalyzed by lectures, translations, and societies while addressing a broad, nonsectarian audience. By emphasizing universal moral causation and personal development, it implicitly critiques materialism and strict doctrines of one-life judgment common in Protestant orthodoxy, without polemic. Its orderly, instructional tone mirrors Progressive Era faith in education and system. As such, the book both reflects its moment's curiosity about global wisdom and consolidates karma and rebirth within American metaphysical discourse.

REINCARNATION AND THE LAW OF KARMA

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