Dr Roger Woolger is a leading expert in past-life therapy and has developed a very popular and successful technique, worldwide, called Deep Memory Process. The results from several thousand patient studies, he explains, have been astounding: “Many cases of ‘incurable’ depression, phobias, anxieties, and physical illnesses find complete resolution when the cause is healed from beyond the current life.” Dr Woolger describes himself as a sceptic who stumbled into the phenomenon of past lives through his professional work with his patients. He argues that the important point here is not so much the philosophical argument for or against past lives, but to consider and rely on the evidence itself, and the recorded healings that follow from past-life therapy and the enduring effects in the patients.

JL-A: Can you tell us from your professional experience, how is it possible to remember Past Lives and distinguish them from just our imagination?

RW: Working with past life images and allowing them to unfold into scenes and stories is essentially a meditative process. It requires stillness, a certain trust in the creative powers of the deep imagination as well as a readiness to encounter not just appealing but often dark and disturbing images. The abundant evidence from thousands of regression sessions, publications and research shows without doubt that there is a deeper level to what we call our complexes, a layer that has a buried past-life core. However, you may still feel a little sceptical about what exactly these past life memories are, indeed you may find you doubt the very possibility of remembering past lives. The rational mind objects, and rightly so, to ideas that do not fit the generally accepted world-view. So before proceeding it may be useful to examine some of the most common sceptical reactions to “past life” recall.

Many people object to the idea of past life recall by saying, “this is all nonsense. We know scientifically that the mind of an infant at birth is empty. Its neurons haven’t developed yet. How can it possibly remember previous lifetimes?” Others object that “this is all imagination, just fantasy. These clients of yours are making up these stories to please you as a therapist. And in any case it’s quite fashionable to have past lives these days.”

A more sophisticated criticism goes: “these are not personal memories at all, but simply stories from historical movies your clients have seen or heard on television or radio when they were children. Maybe they overheard someone reading a story, or having a conversation about some particular period of history. This last objection wins a special sceptic’s badge in my opinion. In parapsychology this explanation is called cryptamnesia, a term with a long and respectable history. It means roughly: having forgotten important events and stories that you once knew.
Let's look briefly at these objections — cryptamnesia and literary fantasy — because it may help us clarify some basic assumptions we need to make about regression therapy.

Cryptamnesia — in parapsychology, this imposing sounding term maintains that past life “memories” do not belong to the individual at all but are simply forgotten stories that we may have overheard as a child or even as an adult dozing while the television was on in the background. This explanation posits that whole books may have been read and totally forgotten to consciousness.

There are, indeed, actual cases of this. A quite seriously documented case tells of a man who, during a controlled hypnotic regression, remembered in great detail having lived the life of a pioneer in the Rockies. The details of the session were recorded, but later an investigator discovered that there was a novel about the life of a pioneer in the Rockies that corresponded passage for passage, almost word for word to the so-called regression.

Although I've heard hundreds of unusual regression stories in my professional practice, some still sound to me very dubious. For example, I'm always very suspicious of reported lifetimes in the Arthurian courts, because history and literature of the Middle Ages happens to be one of my personal interests. Inspiring as the stories of Sir Lancelot, Sir Gawain and others are, we know for certain that those Arthurian courts never existed the way they are portrayed in literature. The literary imagination of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth century court poets of the high Middle Ages pretty much reinvented the legendary Arthur of Roman times to idealize a courtly life that was in reality far from glamorous. So when a person reports a life in the Arthurian court, it is nearly always the case that they are reproducing a fantasized literary construction or their favourite chivalric story from a childhood movie.

But in general reproducing forgotten stories such as these is fairly unusual. In over twenty years of regressing people, I have found cryptamnesia to be a relatively rare phenomenon. The majority of people who remember a past life through therapy are not reproducing novels and films — not even American television would dare come up with the huge number of mundane and unglamorous stories we hear so often! In fact, if I were to produce a thousand cases from my own files and from those of colleagues, I would be willing to bet that only 2 or 3% of this sample could actually be traced to any known novel, TV show or Hollywood movie.

Another objection that is often made is that what are claimed to be past life “memories” are “simply imagination.” People say, “Your clients are making it all up to please you or because it's fashionable to have past lives.” The trouble with this objection is that it begs a very big question: just what is imagination? Now, everybody knows what it's like to imagine but that alone doesn't explain where our images come from or how they are produced or reproduced. One has only to study one's dreams for a few months to be staggered by the amazing variety and range of imagery they throw out. The psyche seems to have an inexhaustible pool of strange and exotic images, most of which would be almost impossible to account for.

Academic psychology, as it now exists, is hard put to define imagination. It's not even a subject of study in standard textbooks of psychology. If you pick up a basic text for a Psychology 101 course in any American college and look in the index, you
will not find the word “imagination.” You might find the words “image” or “imagery.” If you want to study imagination in college, you have to go to the literature department where it comes under “literary theory.” Literary theorists, however, are very careful to say that they are not writing psychology. Possibly the only place where you’ll find a serious study of imagination is in the psychiatry department of a medical school, where delusions, hallucinations and exotic fantasies are all studied closely as symptoms of mental pathology. Hardly a charitable view of the imagination!

Nevertheless it is the psychiatrists who are closer than anyone to having a respectable and respectful theory of imagination. Early pioneers of psychoanalysis, especially Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, were among the first to study the imagination seriously, dubbing it “the unconscious mind,” following certain German philosophers. Thanks to their researches and perseverance the idea of the unconscious mind was even seen by the American philosopher and psychologist William James, as “the greatest discovery of the twentieth century.” It is a pity he didn’t say this about the imagination, because unfortunately, it still remains a put down to say “it’s just imagination.”

The unbounded potential of the mind to create, recreate, transform and heal is only now barely beginning to be understood. But it is still to the poets that we must turn to fully grasp of the vastness of the creative imagination and its healing potential, its spiritual heights and depths. The masters of the imagination who preceded the psychoanalysts were actually the great poets and visionaries. Dante made his imaginative descent into the visionary realms of Hell and then on upwards-through Purgatory into the Paradiso. Shakespeare’s profound exploration of the human heart in his tragedies and comedies has led critic Harold Bloom to class him along with the great mystical visionaries of Sufism. William Blake struggled with his own inner universe of visionary principalities and powers to produce extraordinary enduring literature. And Goethe dramatized the perennial fight between good and evil in his great work, Faust.

Freud and Jung were the worthy successors of these great explorers of the imagination. For them the imagination revealed its enormous power when they studied the world of dreams and waking visions. They testified to an undying respect for its huge creative energy and the vastness of the soul’s compass.

So the real problem in understanding the imagination lies with the narrow prejudices of academic psychology in its almost fundamentalist insistence on being self-consciously scientific, in the more rigid sense of that word. It is as though the left brain (the rational side) were trying to take over the right brain (the creative side) by failing to recognize that the latter has a way of knowing that is entirely unique unto itself.

If we are to be open to the truly vast power of the imagination, which is surely the very root of all human creativity and spirituality, we need a psychology that honours not just the human mind, the faculties of perception and learning, but also the human soul and the human spirit. Only when we allow these larger and greater dimensions — which have recently been called the transpersonal — into our understanding of mind, are we going to understand where past life memories fit into the spiritual universe and recognize the profound importance of all those journeys that take us into realms beyond earthly reality and between human lifetimes.
There is a huge body of evidence from research with hypnotic regression, which shows incontrovertibly how it is possible for a person under hypnosis to remember exactly what happens at birth, in utero, and even all the way back to conception. It is now widely accepted by experts in this field that there is some degree of proto-consciousness in the foetal being that records and overhears whatever the mother is talking and thinking about.

The trouble with a materialistic theory is that it assumes that memory is somehow stored at the physical level and that there is no other way for it to be stored. I believe this to be a fundamental metaphysical error deriving from the fallacious premise that consciousness is contained in the brain. This philosophical prejudice is closely linked to the philosophical doctrine that goes under the names of “scientific materialism” and “positivism.”

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To speak of memories as located “in the brain,” is actually a rather clumsy mixed metaphor. Yet it is a metaphor we are particularly blind to. If we compare this with a more obvious metaphor, as when we speak of “there’s a lot of love in my heart,” it is fairly apparent that we don’t need to perform surgery to get at that love by opening the chest up. And yet when somebody says that “consciousness is in the brain,” it is considered legitimate to do all kinds of physiological explorations with scalpels and electrodes.

Nevertheless the materialist view of mind is not universally held by the scientific and philosophical communities. Even some eminent neurologists and physiologists challenge this. The mystics have always known this.

If we truly want to understand the mysteries of memory, imagination and visionary experience — and this includes past-life memory — we will have to go beyond conventional scientific thinking, important as this is in understanding the profound mysteries of the material universe.

JL-A: Can anyone remember their past life experiences or is there a specific trigger, faculty or technique one must follow to have access to them?

RW: To access higher realities and also our higher minds we do not need to climb up a ladder or perform brain surgery to get there; instead we need to learn how to alter our state of consciousness. For the simple truth is that it is by sharpening the focus of our consciousness that we are able to encounter these other realities.

Recent developments in transpersonal psychology can be extremely helpful here. Psychologists like Abraham Maslow, Ken Wilbur, Stanislav Grof and Charles Tart have pioneered the study of altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness. They have shown that as human beings we all have available to us multiple states of consciousness, whether we access them through hypnosis, through meditation or mystical practices, through the use of vision-inducing sacred plants, through practicing shamanic trance rituals, or whether through developing artistic
consciousness as a poet, musician, dancer or painter. A great musician, for example, is in a different state of consciousness when he is composing or playing, just as dancing produces profound trance states — witness the whirling dervishes or the Brazilian Umbanda priests, for example.

The most potent way to access consciousness of the higher realities of spirit is through the cultivation of visionary imagination. Carl Jung once made an interesting remark, trying to make a very strong distinction between the two realities: “Do not think carnally or you will become flesh. Think symbolically and you will become spirit.” For Jung, to think symbolically, was to think with the imagination. To take our images seriously and follow them wherever they take us is to let them be the bridges or the access codes to other states of being.

Transpersonal psychology also reminds us that if we’re going to talk about the higher or the transcendent reality through or by which past-life memories and higher consciousness is transmitted to us, we will also have to distinguish between different levels of the personality. In other words, we will need to speak not just of a day-to-day ordinary self, but we will need to speak in addition of a “Higher” self. And there are plenty of precedents for this in sacred tradition and esoteric literature.

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From the perspective of earthly life, it is common in popular psychology to refer to the self that deals with day-to-day reality as the ego or ego personality. This ego develops from infancy to adulthood to become our biographical self. Its thoughts, feelings, memories, perceptions, etc., are of course the subject of conventional psychology, the study of what we call our personality. But when we talk of the larger or the higher dimensions that transcend the physical and the earthly world, encounters with places or states where people experience mystical raptures, shamanic journeys to other worlds, cosmic consciousness and so on, then transpersonal psychology rightly proposes the existence of a self-aware consciousness, a greater or a Higher Self. This is what is often called the soul or in other traditions, the Self, a term that is usually capitalized.

When our consciousness is altered or expanded, through the cultivation of meditative, visionary or trance states we are much more in touch with this greater Self and its more lucid awareness. If we transcend the one-dimensional perceptions of our this-worldly ego personalities we are able to become aware of realities far beyond physical reality. It’s only when we contemplate or see from the perspective of the higher mind or Self, that the mysteries of karma, human suffering, and what I’m calling the evolution of the soul, begin to make sense and to have some kind of coherence.

This faculty is not nearly as difficult to acquire as one might think. Many of us are familiar with it through working with our dreams. In fact, this is the same consciousness that is with us in the dream state, particularly if we have been able to develop it to the degree that is called lucid dreaming.
But the main key to this is learning to work with images, to develop our capacity to imagine vividly and deeply. And imaging doesn’t always mean visualizing. Some of us hear images; we have a more auditory imagination than others. Some of us feel or sense images; we know what it is like to be in a certain place physically, to sense the environment, to feel a different body. Playwrights, filmmakers are often highly intuitive with their physical images. They can set a scene in their imagination with incredible precision when they are creating a film. We can all do this in different degrees. But everyone will imagine in a slightly different way. It doesn’t matter if our visual images are not clear; we may have strong kinaesthetic or physical images instead.

In the imagination, travel is instant. We can go anywhere, be in any place instantly. That’s not to say we’re going there physically but that we’re travelling in that “other” world that is an image or mirror of this one. According to the Sufi Al Ghazzali the higher world is a spiritual mirror of the lower world, so that when we travel in the visionary or imaginal world we are actually moving in another reality.

This is precisely what happens in past life journeying. When we tap into the vast memory store that is both ours and of mankind, we can move anywhere in the history of mankind instantly. It is not a slow laborious thing to remember at all. It is no different than remembering events in this life. If I say to you, “Do you remember last Christmas or the Christmas before?” you can call up images instantly, almost as soon as I suggest them. Our power of recall actually operates a bit like a computer. We can call up these memory programs just by naming them. Every image has a name attached to it and vice versa. If you can name something with words, you can produce an image of it.

To speak of memories as located “in the brain,” is actually a rather clumsy mixed metaphor. If we compare this with a more obvious metaphor, as when we speak of “there’s a lot of love in my heart,” it is fairly apparent that we don’t need to perform surgery to get at that love by opening the chest up.

The imagination is one of the great-unsolved mysteries of our time. I believe that in its higher form (as opposed to fantasy, its lower or ego related form) imagination is the bridge to the transpersonal realities of the soul, that transcendent part of the personality we have called the Self. This other level of reality is sometimes called the subtle world, or the spirit world. Writers like Joseph Campbell call it mythic reality. The Aborigines in Australia call it the “dreamtime.”

This dreamtime or visionary realm remains largely a mystery to us in the modern world because we haven’t, as a culture, taken it very seriously for a long time. We have been too caught up with the material world to notice it except in states of distraction or retreat. And yet it is always there, always waiting to be visited.

JL-A: How is a Past Life normally accessed or triggered to the surface in your therapy through Deep Memory Process? Can you give us some examples?
RW: Very frequently the portal or doorway into a past life memory is a distressing event in our personal life that awakens or triggers an older or deeper memory. What follows is the story of a young woman who walked through a “doorway” into a past life in this way.

Cheryl was a young professional psychotherapist who attended one of our workshops on Deep Memory Process. She was a very able therapist but had always suffered from crippling panic attacks when it came to speaking out in groups. By the third day of the workshop she had successfully avoided such anxiety by carefully burying her nose in her notebook and deliberately saying as little as possible. The topic that morning was fear however, and when the examples turned to terror in-group situations, she found herself having an anxiety attack at the very mention of the subject. Quite unbidden a flashback of herself as a little girl of four popped in to her mind and she found herself quietly weeping and trembling. Someone offered her the Kleenex and she shrank in embarrassment. The group leader, unaware that she had been “triggered” invited her to say what was happening. She felt trapped and even more embarrassed; the spotlight was truly on her and her worst fear. But bravely, when the leader offered she took the opportunity to work.

Cheryl: I saw myself at a Christmas party in this white dress. All the family were in the room. I can’t go in. I’m terrified. They’re all staring at me. And my shoulder is really hurting.

Roger: Close your eyes and be back at four years in your little white dress about to go into the room.

Cheryl: (trembling, tearful) I can’t. I can’t go in. They’re all looking at me. I hate this white dress. Why do they want me to wear it? I’m terrified. Something awful is going to happen. (Sobs deeply)

Roger: (gently helping her focus on the image) Move forward into the room. Go through it, it can’t hurt you today.

Cheryl: I’m totally frozen. I’m in the room and they’re all saying. “What a nice dress. How lovely.” I can’t look at them. I’m so ashamed and terrified.

Roger: What happens?

Cheryl: Nothing. I feel better somehow. It’s not about them. It was that door, the dress.

Roger: Go back again to the most frightening moment, just before you go through the door. That’s right. Stay with the fear. Breathe into it. Let an image of something awful surface on a count of three. One, two, three!

Cheryl: (almost shrieking) Oh, help me, it’s a huge crowd. They’re screaming at me from above. I’m a grown woman in a white dress. It’s Rome. They’re going to kill us. Aah! A lion! My arm! I’m not there anymore. I’m above it all looking down (she has grabbed her arm and is bent over in pain; she sobs, the pain starts to subside and she feels relieved. After many minutes of sobbing she is finally able to speak) I saw myself as an early Christian. They were pushing us into an arena. It was Roman. No wonder I hate white dresses and noisy groups. Thank God that’s over.
This is an example of how layers of “deep memory” images live in the unconscious mind until triggered by certain highly charged situations. It demonstrates too how careful guiding of this kind of inner psychodrama can enable these old frozen scenes come to life and bring catharsis as well as deep somatic releases.

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Guided imagery has a long and respectable history in psychodynamic psychotherapy. As early as 1935, Jung proposed the use of “active imagination” as the cornerstone of his method, and by the 1940s Roberto Assagioli had made elaborate guided imagery meditations the foundation for his method, Psychosynthesis. Practically all psychotherapy and hypnotherapy procedures entail some combination of imagery and suggestion.

The scene that arose from Cheryl’s unconscious of a Roman arena and of herself as an early Christian martyr inevitably makes one think of past lives. In fact “past lives” frequently manifest as “deep memory” images and have been claimed as a class of imagery of their own. Like Jungian archetypes, their exact ontological status has inevitably provoked controversy. Much energy and ingenuity has been spent trying to “prove” and “disprove” the validity of “past lives” as memories. But in fact such polemics are entirely irrelevant to the practice of Deep Memory Process. It is not necessary for a good therapist who works with dreams to prove that we have a scientific theory of the nature of dreams before he or she can proceed. By the same token the fact that some images look like “past lives” in no way requires the therapist to require some belief system about reincarnation. To do so would in any case be counterproductive to good therapy. The first duty of the therapist who wishes to heal the fragmented soul is surely to respect the integrity of the client’s own inner world.

Bringing to life all kinds of dream and archetypal figures as well as “past life” fantasies is in fact one of the most powerful tools we have to facilitate the healing and resolution of psychological conflicts. It allows the patient to displace conflicts and emotions that the ego is unable to face onto a realistic past life/archetypal scenario where they may be worked through to completion.

This technique is particularly effective in working with sexual and incest traumas. “Past life” imagery of rape, prostitution or sexual servitude often surfaces in the dreams or fantasies of sexually abused patients who are otherwise blocked with regard to their actual abuse. The fantasies can be simply treated as if they were real for the purposes of the therapeutic session. In other words, when “past life” contents are treated purely phenomenologically, which is to say simply as images with “realistic” and “historical” features, they can stimulate highly evocative “healing fictions.”

Deep Memory Process is a synthesis I developed after many years of working with Jungian active imagination, psychodrama, hypnotic regression, Reichian body therapy and transpersonal psychology. It is a widely applicable therapy which has been successfully used in treating difficulties in interpersonal relationships and family systems; issues of self-esteem and personal empowerment; residual psychic scars from adult or childhood sexual abuse and all forms of domestic and urban violence. It can accomplish swift and effective treatment for deep emotional blockages, states of
anxiety, phobias, much chronic pain and persistent symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.

Each session begins by focusing on highly charged deep memory images like Cheryl’s that may underlie various complaints, somatic symptoms or dissociative disorders. The therapist then works to free negative residues of trauma, loss or abuse frozen in the body and in the unconscious mind. In a way that is both safe and structured, the process helps sufferers work through patterns of traumatization that inevitably result in dissociative abreactions gently facilitating somato-emotional energy release. The process prepares the way to the reintegration of dissociated and fragmented parts of the psyche.

Probing and awakening these different selves can often be like peeling skins from an onion and it takes considerable skill from the therapist to respect and contain the various layers of memory that may emerge as the protective structure around the original trauma starts to unfreeze. Especially confusing to therapists with a rather one-dimensional or literalistic approach to trauma is the eruption of extraneous fragments of stories, seemingly unconnected with their client’s actual life — Cheryl’s Roman arena vision is an example. It is tempting for the therapist to dismiss such extraneous images as mere “fantasy” or as “unconscious secondary elaboration” especially when they don’t fit a reconstructed case history.

But in fact in these extraneous images we often find very rich material both for healing the psyche and for understanding the original fragmentation. We have learned to call such extraneous imagery, like Cheryl’s visions of the Roman arena, not fantasy, which is dismissive, but instead bleed-throughs from other layers of the psyche; from what Jung called the collective unconscious and William B. Yeats dubbed, the Great Memory. At this level we are looking not just at the fragmentation and defences of the ego but at even deeper splits within the very soul.

An example of the complex eruption of different layers of the psyche following a very real trauma — and one that is open to many interpretations — is that of Angela, a victim of a recent car accident. Angela had been one of a number of victims of an out of control car that had run up onto a crowded pavement. She suffered a broken leg and was briefly hospitalized but had been in therapy for many months with full-blown posttraumatic shock reactions that were slow to subside. The most traumatic thing for her was not so much being physically hit as seeing the woman driver of the car killed and decapitated in front of her.

Despite on-going therapy Angela’s feelings of dissociation and unreality surrounding the event persisted and although she experienced the release of much frozen terror during her sessions the scene of the carnage would not go away. During a Deep Memory Session she was encouraged to relive the accident. This led to further catharsis, including weeping and trembling and a clear reproduction of the moment of dissociation, when the thought came to her “this isn’t really happening”. When taken to this point she once more began to scream and her body seemed to freeze in panic. “There are body parts everywhere” she screamed. “Oh, my God. I’m hit!” And she clutched her leg close to where her hip had been broken. “What are you seeing?” the therapist urged her. It soon became clear she was in a kind of flashback to a battle scenario in the First World War. A bomb had dropped and she saw herself as a soldier whose leg had been shattered, surrounded by the limbs and torsos of comrades who had died. Among the body parts was the severed head of a friend. At
this point a much deeper catharsis consisting of uncontrollable screaming ensued. The therapist allowed it to run its course. This lead to a huge feeling of relief. Later in the session, the “soldier” self himself remembers dying of gangrene in a nearby field hospital. He then sees himself leaving the body and floating up to some peaceful place above the earth with the spirits of many others. He is encouraged to talk to his old companions. He finds many he has known and sees them as cheerful, beyond pain. There are feelings now of peace, of reconciliation. After this session Angela was no longer troubled by recurring memories of the car accident.

What had happened? Had Angela remembered a “past life” or had she displaced her car accident trauma onto an “imagined” war story? Or was this a bleed-through from the collective unconscious memory of the Great War that her psyche had somehow free-associated to? All these theories have some merit and are debatable, but the important point is that by giving Angela’s psyche full permission to follow its own resonances and associations she was able to come to a place of resolution and the remission of her symptoms, whatever their origin. What is at issue is not the truth of the story but the story’s therapeutic power to heal, to become truly a “healing fiction” arising out of the patient’s own creative unconscious.

JL-A: There is no doubt your work is fascinating and its implications open up many windows for contemplation and self-reflection. Is there anything else you would like to add about the benefits of Deep Memory Process that is relevant to our present lives?

RW: Deep Memory Processing approach to trauma therapy differs from simple sensorimotor psychotherapy in that during a strong release of, say, anger or tears, the client is encouraged to follow any images that arise with these emotions. All kinds of fragmentary scenes and stories will emerge some of them appearing like “past life” fragments which function as deep memory reflections of the client’s current problems. As can be seen from the case studies, when it is fully encouraged, physical and emotional release can be accomplished very swiftly. The therapist’s task is simply to encourage the clients to follow the imagined content towards some kind of completion or resolution, to “dream the dream on” in Jung’s words.