

One Lifetime

The Redemption of Milarepa

By
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When thinking of great figures in Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama most readily comes to mind for many of us here in the west. But most Tibetans would not think it unusual for someone to argue that Jetsun Milarepa (Rje-tsun Mi-la-ras-pa) should be considered the greatest mystic and figure of their history. This is so, in part, because Milarepa is considered the first person ever to have attained complete enlightenment within a single lifetime. But before saying more about his life and legend, it might be best to clarify what such an extraordinary accomplishment means, at least in Buddhism.

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to become Buddha, also pronounced, *Bodhi*, which is translated as, “awakened,” or, “enlightened.” When this happens, one reaches a state of mind called, *Nirvana*, which enables one to live in this world free of all its trappings and illusions, that is, free of its false paradigms. These paradigms are called *samsara* in Buddhism, referring to the wheel of repetition a soul is caught in, not only during the course of a single lifetime, but over many lifetimes through reincarnation. Being stuck on this wheel condemns us, like unwitting ghosts, to repeat the same mistakes and suffering over and over again. So the goal of Buddhism is to discover our true nature, and the true nature of the world, by freeing ourselves from our patterns and negative routines in order to see reality for what it is.

So far this all seems pretty good to me and jives well with my notion that religion is at its best when it helps us get in touch with reality by making us more aware of the present moment and place we occupy—which, to our knowledge is the only moment there ever is. Past and future are illusions we cling to in order to avoid the grit of this life—its harshness, its cold and heat, blood and sweat, fear and anger, pain and sorrow—that must accompany the joy and abundance of being here on Earth. Our defense mechanisms against such suffering are usually dissociative in nature, causing us to avoid pain and danger by withdrawing from the threat of reality and entering into our delusional states of mind—our false paradigms. Keep in mind, the word *paradigm* means, “pattern,” which is very similar to *samsara*. Both refer to a condition of repetition.

But here’s where I begin to depart from Buddhism; Like many cultures around the world, India, from which Buddha came, has long believed in reincarnation, that after we die we are reborn as another person or creature. Although I do agree that we are often condemned to endlessly repeat our mistakes because of the trappings of our own minds, this idea of reincarnation is difficult for me to accept for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, I have difficulty comprehending exactly what it is that is reincarnated. If I am reborn without any of my prior knowledge, memories, experiences, or relationships, am I not reborn as someone else? True, modern physics helps us understand that energy cannot be destroyed and only changes form. And when my body ceases to breath, my energy will be transformed. Yet for me this seems more analogous to returning a drop of water into the ocean. Though the molecules in that drop may eventually evaporate again and condense into clouds and form a new drop, it will not be the same drop.

Secondly, I also have trouble grasping exactly what it is that *I am* outside of my relationships in this moment. *I am* not my body because my body is comprised of 50 trillion individual cells, which are comprised of molecules, which are comprised of energy. My body has no real matter. The bodies we see and feel are an interpretation of energy bound by the descriptive limitations of our senses. But if we could perceive our bodies on a molecular level we would appear as empty as intergalactic space. We are mostly not here. As physicist Frank Tipler has pointed out, “At the subnuclear level, the quarks and gluons which make up the neutrons and protons of the atoms in our bodies are being annihilated and recreated on a timescale of less than 10^{-23} seconds; thus we are actually being annihilated and replicated—resurrected— 10^{23} times a second in the normal course of our lives.”¹

Nor am I my experiences, because my experiences are ever changing. As soon as I shift my position, or twitch my finger, or tilt my head, or take a single breath, or blink, or simply occupy a new point, a fresh moment, in the time/space continuum, my experience of the world shifts, even if ever so slightly. Each moment I experience the world anew, and so my experiences are too transient and fleeting to define who *I am*.

Nor can I consider myself my memories, since I’ve forgotten most of what I’ve ever experienced, and my mind, like all minds, cannot store most of my memories to begin with, but repaints each one anew by building upon a few bits that do remain embedded in our neural net. Likewise, *I am* not my thoughts because my thoughts are always changing too. I’m always changing my mind or shifting my attention or becoming distracted. Heraclitus said, “you cannot step into the same river twice,” because it is constantly flowing. This seems to be true of us to some degree. We are never quite the same person moment by moment.

Finally, the notion of reincarnation seems problematic to me because it continues to promote that illusion of my own individuality. It does seem true that this entity continues to incarnate by constantly repeating a similar pattern, but always by using different subatomic particles—particles that are continually shared, like the ocean waters, by every one of us. As Deepak Chopra has said, “we can show

¹ Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 236.

beyond a shadow of doubt that right this moment you have in your physical body at least a million atoms that were once in the body of Christ, or the Buddha, or Michelangelo, or Leonardo da Vinci, or Saddam Hussein, or Osama bin Laden, or George Bush. You have a million atoms right now that have been in the body of every single being that has existed since the dawn of creation. In just the last three weeks a quadrillion atoms have gone through your body and they have gone through the body of every other living species on this planet.”²

So we are all really flowing in and out of each other all the time, and though the quantum stuff creating my body in this moment is reconjuring the entity called Todd Eklof, there is no way of knowing that we are not moving in and out of each other’s particular awareness as well. In other words, I might become you in the very next moment because we are so intricately linked, but due to the nature of our being, I cannot remember that I was me just a moment ago, and now someone else has become me, forgetting that a few moments ago they were the clerk at the convenient store down the street, or the Queen of England, or Osama bin Laden, or the dog chasing the cat that just a moment ago was the cat that its chasing. The idea that we are separate beings is part of our delusion, part of our false paradigm, and the idea that our individuality is reincarnated adds to the delusion, when, in truth, it now seems, we are a swarm of ever-flowing, ever-changing molecules. Again, as Chopra says, “The swarm is an illusion of shape behind which the reality is pure change.”³

Now all that’s pretty deep stuff, but let me make a couple more points about reincarnation before moving on to Milarepa’s particular story. I don’t like the notion of reincarnation, primarily, because it gives us too much of an out. Despite the fact that Buddhism looks at it as an undesirable trap, we often find the possibility of reincarnation comforting because its gives us the hope, what I believe is a false hope, that if we mess up too badly in this life, we’ll have another chance to make things right in the next. Worse yet, some people use it as an excuse to ignore the suffering of others, that is, to ignore our responsibility toward others, by dismissing it as their karma, as something they’re working out in their own time over many lives (which, if you think about it, is perfect justification for the cast society from which this belief springs). In short, the idea of reincarnation leads some away from the reality of here and now. But if this is the only life we have, the only moment, we can too easily squander it on our fantasies of a better life, another life, or another world. Whatever might lie beyond this life, the one thing we can be most of sure of is that this is the life and the world that we do have! All the rest is speculation! And so this life should be seen as a gift, not a curse. If we strive to delude ourselves in order to avoid its sorrows, we also miss its joy, which may be the only opportunity for joy we’ll ever have.

This is precisely what I find so inspiring about Milarepa’s simple story. This

² www.resurgence.org/2005/chopra231.htm (March 5, 2006)

³ Chopra, Deepak, *Journey into Healing*, Harmony Books, New York, NY 1994, p. 33.

11th and 12th century monk was born into a prosperous family, but when his father unexpectedly died, relatives stole his family fortune, leaving him and his mother impoverished for the rest of their lives. As he grew, so the legend goes, Milarepa's mother encouraged her son to study sorcery in order to use black magic to take revenge upon their betrayers. He did just that, and used his powers to kill at least 35 people, many of whom were members of his own community and family. Afterward, however, his heart was filled with remorse, and he immediately realized the futility of violence and revenge. He retreated to live a hermitic life in the mountains, achieved *Nirvana*, and wrote some of Tibet's most cherished poems, and is remembered to this day as its most famous mystic and yogi.

There's even a recent movie about his life, which, though more of a fantasy film than anything else, does get at the heart of his story. The film's slogan says, "His path to enlightenment began with revenge," and its promotional materials include a quote from the Dalai Lama saying, "I cry, weep and feel a strong sense of faith each time I read or hear the story of Milarepa, the great yogi of Tibet." After much prodding from a student to speak of his life, Milarepa himself is reported to have said, "In my youth my actions were deadly, in the middle I practiced purity, now I have passed beyond both. My karma has been destroyed and in the future it will not affect me. To say more than this may make some people cry, it may make some laugh, but what's the point of that? I'm an old man, leave me in peace."⁴

I think this is really what makes Milarepa so appealing and so memorable, that despite his personal tragedy and his own grave mistakes, he did not give up on this life in the hope he might somehow make up for the past in his next life, or have a chance at contentment in the next world. He was not content to let his life become marred forever with his own original sin, allowing one horrendous act of brutality and stupidity to define him for the rest of his life. He went from being a murderer to an enlightened teacher, a Bodhi, during a single lifetime, which, as far as any of us really knows, is the only real lifetime he ever had. Unlike many other great Bodhisattvas, Milarepa did not evolve toward enlightenment over the course of many lives. His is ultimately a story of redemption that says it is possible to move on, to leave our pasts behind us, to step off the wheel of repetition, the wheel of neurosis and compulsion, to see the world as it really is beyond our paradigms, without having to die and be reborn as another person.

Milarepa is an everyman, and ordinary person with lots of tough breaks, bruises and warts, a genuine Cinderella, who arose from those cinders like a Phoenix, with a fresh start, not in the by and by, but in the here and now. If reincarnation is the metaphor of repetition that takes place within but a single lifetime, the repetition of our neuroses and other negative patterns of thought and

⁴ *mi la ras pa'i rnam thar mdor bsdus*, published by Dehradun: Ngawang Gyaltsen and Ngawang Lungtok, 1970. Reproduced from the manuscript collections of gra sku-zhabs bstan-'dzin-nor-bu. Verses Translated by Neten Chokling Rinpoche and Isaiah Seret.

behavior, then Milarepa is a metaphor of the possibility of changing our lives for the better by simply changing our patterns. It doesn't take a miracle. We need not be born again or reincarnated. It is possible for us to transform our lives for the better in this very moment. It is possible to wake up to our routines, to see our false and negative patterns and change our ways for the better without waiting for a better world or a better life to come along. For this is the only life that we know with any certainty we do possess, and while we're here we should do our utmost to make the best of it, to take advantage of the opportunities for joy, peace, contentment, and abundance that may never come our way again.