

One Lifetime

Why the Reincarnation Myth Matters

By

Rev. Todd F. Eklof

September 1, 2019

I'm sometimes asked if I believe in reincarnation. I don't. This doesn't mean I don't think it's possible, but I have no more reason to believe we die and are reborn as somebody new than I have for believing in any kind of afterlife. That the stuff of my body continues on in new forms and is recycled and reused by the Universe seems almost undeniable given what we now understand about physics, that matter and energy are never truly destroyed, but only change form. But this is far from saying my "soul" or "psyche," the essence of who I am now, will someday fully return in a new body to live a new life. Plus, I have difficulty comprehending how I could still be considered myself if I'm born without any of my prior memories, experiences, and relationships, since these, to me, seem a crucial part of who I am. Some may differ with me on this, which is fine with me. I'm just saying what I think is true, and why.

My biggest issue with a literal belief in reincarnation, however, is the difficulty in defining what it is that would be reincarnated to begin with. My naked soul, stripped of all the memories and experiences that shaped it? My mind but not my body, as if my body is not part of who I am? Reincarnation, rather, requires us to resolve philosophy's ongoing mind/body problem by choosing the mind side of the equation. By concluding, that is, that the underlying nature of reality is nonphysical—that it is merely mind or consciousness. The other side would argue that what we experience as a conscious self is but the result of physical chemical processes. I won't delve into the mind/body problem today but will only point out it's not one that anyone has yet satisfactorily resolved. I lean toward a materialistic explanation myself, but, as I said, the jury is still out.

I've also found the idea of reincarnation is a comforting thought for many, perhaps because, like other afterlife beliefs, it helps us cope with what psychology considers one of our primary sources of anxiety, the fear of death. Yet, as I understand it, the original idea of reincarnation is rather hellish, or, at least, more like Christian purgatory. In Buddhism it's part of the *samsara*, the wheel of repetition we get stuck on by repeating the same mistakes over and over again. It's the same idea behind many western ghost stories in which a traumatized soul is trapped between worlds, condemned to endlessly relive its traumas and mistakes. So, in Buddhism, reincarnation, the idea of being stuck in the endless repetition of our errors is a horror we must strive to escape.

But whether it is true or not, I think, as with most religious ideas and stories, arguing they are literally or historically true, turning them into religious doctrines and dogma, causes us to miss their real value. And the same is true if we spend much time arguing against them,

over whether or not reincarnation, or heaven and hell, or any other vision of the afterlife is real. When we do this, as UU minister, Davidson Loehr says, “By thinking that religion is about belief, we tend to take it at the same literal level that fundamentalist do, though we oppose them.”¹ Let’s say reincarnation is completely true. That when we die, we come back to life as a new person without the advantage of our previous memories, but with an opportunity to continue learning and evolving. That’s not what matters. That’s not what reincarnation is about, any more than the literal interpretation of any religious story, myth, or metaphor can tell us what it’s about. Again, as Loehr says;

There is no “eternal life” involving time and space. No deity is going to give us a chance to do it right after we’re dead. These are superstitions that have been used to control and mislead believers forever. Religion isn’t about God or gods, though it is often written to sound that way. Religion is about how to live more wisely and well here and now. It has no end runs around science to offer. Its great myths and insights are about living more authentic lives. Religions that can’t rise to this level of honesty with us cannot be trusted with our minds or our souls.²

So, let’s apply this principle to the idea of reincarnation by considering it but a metaphor that can help us live more authentically during the one life we know we do have, rather than as the literal belief we’re repeatedly being reborn. To do so, I’ve chosen the Tibetan story Jetsun Milarepa. When we think of famous Tibetans here in the west, the Dalai Lama most likely comes to mind, but for many Tibetans, Milarepa would be considered the greatest figure in their history. This is so because the Dalai Lama is believed, like all of us, to have already lived many previous lives, but Milarepa is the only figure in Tibetan history who is said to have obtained *Nirvana*, complete enlightenment, in a single lifetime.

What I appreciate about his story, in particular, is that it doesn’t use the idea of reincarnation as an easy out. If we’re being reincarnated again and again, and every bad thing we do is just an opportunity to learn, or not learn, because it’s going to keep coming around until we do, then maybe we don’t have to work so hard to accomplish what we should while we still can. Reincarnation gives us all the time in the world because there’s always another chance to get it right. At least that’s how some take it. But even Buddha cautioned “those who rely on the doctrine of reincarnation against mistakenly thinking they will soon get a second chance at life.”³ He said there’s a better chance a sea turtle that surfaces only once in a hundred years would accidentally stick its head through the hole of yoke floating on its surface than for an individual with bad habits to be reborn as another human being.⁴ So if we’re not getting it

¹ Loehr, Davidson, *America, Fascism, and God*, Chelsea Green Publishing Company, White River Junction, VT, 2005, p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, A Project of the International Religious Foundation, Paragon House, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1995, 239n.

⁴ *Buddhism*, Samyutta Nikaya v. 455.

right in this life, he taught, we might end coming back as that sea turtle, or some other lower life form, with little chance of ever getting it right.

This literal idea of reincarnation has also led some to be unconcerned about the suffering of and injustice against others because suffering is just an opportunity to learn their lessons. It's all caused by their own karma, their own bad habits, and will only end when they awaken and quit repeating their mistakes. If you suffer in this life, some also think, it's probably because you caused someone else to suffer similarly in a previous life, and now you're learning an important lesson. Since the literal idea of reincarnation is, again, dependent on the *mind* side of the mind/body problem, suffering is further thought to be but the result of one's own thinking. Think differently and all suffering goes away because, since none of it is matter, not of it matters. In this way, we are considered the creators of our own troubles. All our problems are of our own making, so there's no reason to care much about the suffering of others, it's just their eternal souls working things out for themselves. I once knew a man who took this idea to such an extreme that he told me those who died in the 9/11 attacks had probably committed some similar atrocity against others in a previous life. 9/11 was karmic retribution, not by punishing them, but by teaching them to do better in the next life.

But Milarepa's story, so long as we don't take it literally, freeing ourselves to discover some hidden truth within it that can help us live more authentically in the here and now, transforms the notion of reincarnation from a controversial belief about the afterlife into something profound about how to better enjoy the one life we know we have. Rather than seeing life as some hard reality we'd like to escape, our physicality—our very bodies—as prisons binding us to the nonspiritual realm, Milarepa reminds us the one life we have is a precious gift that should be lived to its fullest while we can, for it will all be over for us soon enough.

As the story goes, Milarepa was born into a prosperous family in the late 11th century, but when his wealthy father died unexpectedly, relatives stole their fortune, leaving young Milarepa and mother impoverished for the rest of their lives. While growing up, his mother encouraged her son to study sorcery so he could someday use black magic against their betrayers. That's how Milarepa's life began, in grief, followed poverty, followed by hate, followed, eventually, by revenge. He killed at least 35 people with his dark arts, many of whom were members of his own community and family. In one of his poems, Milarepa himself explains:

My father Mila passed away (too early in this life).
The deceiving goods and belonging of our household
Were plundered by my aunt and uncle,
Whom I and my mother had to serve.
They gave us food fit only for dogs;
The cold wind pierced our ragged clothing;
Our skin froze and our bodies were benumbed.

Often I was beaten by my uncle,
And endured his cruel punishment.
Hard was it to avoid my aunt's ill temper.

I lived as best I could, a lowly servant,
And shrugged my shoulders (in bitter resignation).
Misfortunes descended one after the other;
We suffered so, our hearts despaired.⁵

Hearing this, it's hard to blame Milarepa for seeking revenge. Still, killing 35 people is hard to forgive. If it helps, it may be that Milarepa only thought he was responsible. For, after mastering "the magic arts," he said, "Witnessed by my aunt and uncle, I brought great disaster on their villages and kinsmen, for which, later, I suffered deep remorse."⁶ So, if there's any literal truth to this story, it is more like a natural disaster struck the village, for which Milarepa superstitiously blamed himself.

Regardless, the feelings of revenge he had been taught to nurture his entire life filled his heart with grief when they were finally fulfilled, and he immediately realized the futility of both violence and revenge. He then began living a hermitic life alone in the Mountains, where he achieved *Nirvana*, awakening, and ended up writing what are considered some of Tibet's most cherished poems. To this day Milarepa is remembered as the country's most famous mystic and yogi.

*I renounced all affairs of this life;
And, no longer lazy, devoted myself to Dharma.
Thus I have reached the State of Eternal Bliss.
Such is the story of my life.⁷*

There's even a 1970 foreign film about the story of his life. It's more fantasy than fact, but, just as Davidson Loehr says is the proper way to treat all scripture, letting go of literal history, the movie captures the heart of Milarepa's story. Its preview 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."⁸

⁵ Chang, Garma C.C., trans., *Sixty Songs of Milarepa*, Buddha Dharma Education Association, Inc., University Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1966, p. 9.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸ *mi la ras pa'i rnam thar mdor bsdus*, published by Dehradun: Ngawang Gyaltzen and Ngawang Lungtok, 1970. Reproduced from the manuscript collections of gra sku-zhabs bstan-'dzin-nor-bu. Verses Translated by

I think this is really what makes Milarepa so appealing and so memorable, that despite his personal tragedy and the evils he committed, he didn't give up on becoming a better person and living the one life he had been given to its fullest. He didn't think, "We'll, I really messed up this life, I'll just try to do better next time around." He made terrible mistakes and did unforgivable things that would haunt him the rest of his life, but these didn't condemn him to repeat them. He could do better. And this, again, is what makes his story so unique, that he went from being the worst kind of person, the most unenlightened kind, to becoming a Bodhisattva in just one lifetime. Milarepa was never reincarnated. He got off the wheel of samsara, the endless wheel of repeating bad habits and mistakes, before it ever started spinning.

That's what makes this story so special and so profound, and enough to cause the Dalai Lama to weep every time he hears it. It is a story more akin to the idea of redemption than what we think of as reincarnation, at least here in the West. For it reminds us it's always possible for us to grow and move on, to learn from our mistakes and leave our pasts behind, to step off the wheel of endless repetition, the wheel of compulsive behavior, the wheel of unsound thinking and fear driven ideologies, the wheel of all our false paradigms, in this very life, without having to die and be reborn as another person. We don't have to wish we were someone else. We're going to be okay.

Ultimately, Milarepa is just an ordinary person with lots of tough breaks, bruises, and warts. But, like a Cinderella, he emerges from the cinders like a Phoenix from the ashes, with a fresh start during the one life he had been given. By the end of it, he could comfortably say, "I'm an old man, I've put my past behind me, leave me in peace." I think that's a worthy goal for our lives, to leave it in peace, not without regrets, but to know we did our best despite them.

So that's the meaning of reincarnation to me, that we all get stuck in negative patterns of thinking and living at times. Sometime we stay stuck in them for a very long time, sometimes for many years, but if we continually review our lives, but which I mean, *our own lives and not the lives of others*, which would be rude, then we can reincarnate often during the course of the one life we have, just as Milarepa did.

When I think about the course of my own life, there have been many reincarnations. My childhood and adolescence were difficult. I had to overcome a lot and made lots of mistakes in the process. I consider my life prior to the age of 18 like being in prison, or limbo, waiting to be freed. I was a real-life Cinderella too. Today I look back on it and feel as if I wasn't really born until I left home at 18, as a high school dropout.

I won't explain now how I ended up in college, but I did, and it was the beginning of my first

real awakening. I began as a fundamentalist Christian, thinking I had already found all the answers to life's most important questions. But I was trapped on the wheel of repetitive thinking. Through proper education, which taught me to think critically, to cope with uncertainty, and to thrive on mystery and wonder, I was reincarnated into a philosopher.

Upon graduating from college, being ordained as a Southern Baptist Minister, and going to a Baptist seminary to continue my ministerial training, I soon realized I was no longer a believer and went through another reincarnation. I went from being a Christian with all the answers to a nonbeliever in search of new answers, which eventually landed me in the liberal religion we call Unitarian Universalism.

In the meantime, realizing my career as a Baptist minister was over before it got started, and needing to make a living, I returned to college to earn a second undergraduate degree in communications. That's when I started working for a local TV station, which led to a 16-year career in television news and corporate video production. That was yet another reincarnation, going from ministry into a field I'd never envisioned

About ten years into my second career, I reentered the ministry, this time as a Unitarian Universalist. Eventually my secular career clashed with my ministerial career, causing me to get back into ministry fulltime. That's another reincarnation.

And there have been so many other reincarnations in the midst of all these. I went from being a single person to being a married person, from being an abused child to a loving father, and ideologically have reincarnated into a humanist, an atheist, a mystic, and so many other kinds of thinkers, even as I continue to search the mysteries of the world for new truths that I will also eventually let go in order to move on to the next.

Yet I don't consider any of these events reincarnations simply because they were changes of venue, but because they each mark an evolution in my life, a new way of thinking and being in the world that's free from many of the paradigms I once held, and that once held me. I don't know if I'll ever achieve *nirvana*, though I don't expect I will and hope I won't, because there's far more to learn than I'll ever grasp. Nor can I be sure that I'll become an old man living at peace, as Milarepa did. I don't think I'll ever live without some unrest, until the moment I have complete rest, but that's okay. For I rather enjoy changing my ways often in this life of mine. I like discovering new ideas that change my mindset and lead me to new ways of being in the world.

So that's what the myth of reincarnation means to me, not the hope we will be someday be reborn, but as a reminder we can continue to learn, and grow, and wonder, and be transformed throughout the course of the one lifetime we know is ours.