

## Stepping Into the Unknown

### Into the Demon's Mouth

Like the great Tibetan saint Milarepa, we can learn to face our fears with clarity and kindness.

-Aura GlaserSpring

The spiritual journey involves stepping into unknown territory with a hunger to know what is true. One of the essential elements of such a life is the understanding that everything we encounter—fear, resentment, jealousy, embarrassment—is actually an invitation to see clearly where we are shutting down and holding back. At some point we realize we can't manipulate life to give us only what we want: the rug gets pulled out regularly. So what do we do? Although our deep-seated tendency is to reject the unwanted in an effort to prevent suffering, it turns out that all the ways we resist actually limit our lives, bringing us pain. And yet how do we find the courage to open to, and accept, all of what we are and all of what is arising in our body and mind? How do we tap the confidence to live with that kind of openness and receive what is arising in the moment, just as it is, with clarity and kindness? How do we let life, with all of its disappointments and sorrows soften our heart? In the Tibetan tradition there is a story about the great cave-dwelling yogi Milarepa that illuminates the often bumpy road we travel in the process of releasing resistance and making peace with ourselves.

One day Milarepa left his cave to gather firewood, and when he returned he found that his cave had been taken over by demons. There were demons everywhere! His first thought upon seeing them was, "I have got to get rid of them!" He lunges toward them, chasing after them, trying forcefully to get them out of his cave. But the demons are completely unfazed. In fact, the more he chases them, the more comfortable and settled-in they seem to be. Realizing that his efforts to run them out have failed miserably, Milarepa opts for a new approach and decides to teach them the dharma. If chasing them out won't work, then maybe hearing the teachings will change their minds and get them to go. So he takes his seat and begins teaching about existence and nonexistence, compassion and kindness, the

nature of impermanence. After a while he looks around and realizes all the demons are still there. They simply stare at him with their huge bulging eyes; not a single one is leaving.

At this point Milarepa lets out a deep breath of surrender, knowing now that these demons will not be manipulated into leaving and that maybe he has something to learn from them. He looks deeply into the eyes of each demon and bows, saying, "It looks like we're going to be here together. I open myself to whatever you have to teach me." In that moment all the demons but one disappear. One huge and especially fierce demon, with flaring nostrils and dripping fangs, is still there. So Milarepa lets go even further. Stepping over to the largest demon, he offers himself completely, holding nothing back. "Eat me if you wish." He places his head in the demon's mouth, and at that moment the largest demon bows low and dissolves into space.

One of the things I love about this story is that it doesn't feed our romantic vision of spiritual life. We sometimes imagine that if we just lead our spiritual life the "right" way, we won't encounter life's sharp edges. We will be on a direct path to ever-increasing tranquility and joy. We are not prepared for all of our unfinished business being exposed, all of our unresolved trauma pushing up from the depths like a geyser of black mud. The story of Milarepa feels much closer to the truth. Working with all that has been pushed down is a central part of the spiritual journey. And when those demons appear, it is not so easy to just relax and let go. We usually try a number of different approaches to get these uninvited guests to go back to the dungeon. This story takes us on a journey that includes the well-worn strategies and habitual maneuvers we attempt—and ultimately abandon—in the process of genuinely opening to ourselves and our lives.

**The first stage of this journey is awareness.** We begin to see what is happening. Milarepa comes back to his cave, and finds that it is full of demons—maybe they've been there all along, but now he clearly sees them. We experience this dawning recognition as we begin to see the things we have been running from, hiding from, or trying to push away. Our patterns of avoidance and denial can take so many different guises that often we don't even really see them until our awareness begins to deepen. It may be 20 years before we realize,

“Oh, I became a doctor because I wanted my parents’ approval.” Or “I am always taking care of people because I want others to need me.” Or “I was the life of the party because I felt empty inside.” A lot of times we look at the things that we do without recognizing that what’s really driving us is a need for approval, a need to be needed, or a need to fit in. And sometimes our most obvious destructive behaviors conceal something else that is even more difficult for us to acknowledge. We may, for example, be willing to acknowledge our anger, but unwilling to look at the fear and vulnerability beneath it. So we “work on our anger” without touching the raw place underneath.

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When we don’t acknowledge all of who we are, those unacknowledged parts will land in what Jung called the “shadow” that we then project onto others. This is one way of seeing Milarepa’s encounter with the demons. He was encountering his shadow—all that he had suppressed and rejected in himself—in the demons.

Often when a painful feeling arises, we short-circuit that experience; we don’t listen to it. We’re afraid to touch it. We turn on the television. We spend hours on the computer. We eat a bag of chips. We go to a movie. We shop. We drink too much. We find some way to keep ourselves busy and numb. We have many ways of distracting ourselves so that we don’t feel the full impact of pain. Instead of being accepted into consciousness, the feeling goes underground and enters the cells of our body. It doesn’t go away; it goes in. Anyone who has had deep body work, has done intensive meditation practice, or has engaged in somatic practices on their own has likely experienced how the body reveals our history in surprising—and sometimes unsettling—ways. Things we’ve long forgotten, our body remembers with impeccable accuracy. We may imagine that spiritual awakening is something separate from our physical embodiment, but awakening and embodiment go together. To be embodied isn’t just about feeling comfortable in our own skin—it’s about a complete opening to life.

This is where awareness comes in. With awareness, even if we shut down, we see ourselves shutting down. That in itself begins to illuminate the territory. We may not be able to stop ourselves from doing the habitual thing, but we are watching ourselves do it. Most of us, when we do become aware of something unwanted in ourselves, have a knee-jerk reaction to it, and do just what Milarepa first did when he saw those demons. We ask, “How can I get rid of this thing?” **This second stage**

**on our journey is one of our habitual maneuvers.** We see something, and if we don’t like what we see, we want to expel it. We recoil. We judge. We attack. I can’t begin to count the number of times I’ve sat with someone in therapy who wants me to help them figure out how to get rid of whatever they don’t like about themselves. And sometimes this tendency can be even worse in those with long years, even decades, of dedicated spiritual practice.

As Milarepa’s story unfolds, we find that there is a discovery process at work. When the direct attack fails, as it inevitably does, he tries another approach—indirect manipulation. **He begins this third stage when he decides, “I’m going to teach these demons the dharma.”** There is subtle fix-it energy at work here. The indirect manipulation looks like a greater acceptance and accommodation, but it is still rooted in the rejection of experience. We are still bent on avoiding and getting rid of what we don’t like. We still don’t want to face our most undesirable parts, and we’re secretly hoping that maybe we can pass directly into freedom without doing that. There is a lot of room for self-deception here; this is where we can get caught in spiritual bypassing. We begin to use our spiritual practices and all the things we’ve learned to perpetuate a disconnection from experience and a disembodiment from life. Our idealized image of what it means to be a spiritual person doesn’t allow for self-knowledge that contradicts it.

So the ego moves into a high-rise. It’s possible to live for a long time in a luxurious penthouse in the ego’s high-rise, while all the lower floors are rotting and decaying. If you’re lucky, before you die the whole thing will collapse and you’ll find yourself on the ground. The transcendence experienced at the level of ego’s high-rise is not embodied. It has not penetrated the matter of our lives. The “gone beyond” of prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom, is not this. True transcendence is the deepest form of intimacy because nothing is excluded from its embrace. Transcendence is union. In the union of form and emptiness, our bodies and minds and the whole phenomenal world are not rejected but rather are found to be direct expressions of the sacred. In spiritual bypassing we use spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and basic needs. Avoiding our full humanity actually stunts our spiritual growth and prevents real spiritual maturity.

There was an article a few years ago in The New York Times Magazine called “Enlightenment Therapy,” about a Western Zen master who had his high-rise collapse. After living for decades in what seemed to

be a highly actualized spiritual consciousness, he began experiencing terrible depression, debilitating anxiety, and dark despair. His decades of meditation had not healed his core psychological wounds, and his life was coming apart. In desperation he went to see a therapist, and gradually he was able to open to and heal some of the profoundly fragmenting trauma that he'd experienced in his early life. His depth of meditation had allowed him to "rise above" these wounds until one day the wolves of his undigested pain came howling at his door. He understood, over time, that his "talent" for enlightenment experience was in part an expression of the ability he had developed early in life to dissociate from pain. Through opening to these buried conflicts he was able to move toward a genuine friendship with himself, and a more authentic wholeness.

This capacity to see every situation in our life as our path marks a shift from willfulness to willingness. This is the fourth stage in the story. Milarepa relinquishes his solutions and strategies and surrenders to the presence of the demons, and to whatever they may have to teach him. At this point we begin to see everything that arises as an opportunity to deepen our understanding and to soften our heart. We view our life situations as inherently workable. We are willing to be with our experience, whatever it is, without judgment, without trying to fix it or get rid of it. And somehow this willingness, this gentle allowing, starts to calm things down.

In order to be with ourselves in this complete way, we need to be in contact with our inner resources of self-compassion and lovingkindness. Our capacity to turn toward whatever scares or repels us, and remain present with it, depends on our access to inner goodness. When we are able to connect with this ground of inner goodness, it brings a level of confidence and ease that can embrace our full humanity in all its complexity. Without that, we won't be able to stay with whatever's arising. This connection to our inner goodness is like the rope a rock climber uses to stay in contact with the steep rock face. Without that rope of connection, we can free-fall into self-blame and self-hatred and actually intensify the existing wound. Transitioning into this fourth stage requires a bone-deep commitment to honesty. We really have to be willing to look at ourselves, and this takes guts. We aren't going to run away even if we see a demon staring back at us in the mirror. We are going to stick with ourselves no matter what, because we are more interested in what is true than in what is comfortable. As we begin to really look into our lives we ask, and want to know, "What is this uneasiness I don't want to touch?" "What

is this unhappiness that is always there despite all my accomplishments?" "What is this anxiety that is always humming beneath the surface of my life?" We have the courage and strength to move toward that which we may have spent a lifetime hiding from.

**At this fourth stage, we begin to risk exploring the forsaken landscape of our lives.** This terrain can be highly charged, and sometimes we find we don't have the resources in a given moment to move any closer. We get overwhelmed, and our brain starts melting out our ears, our belly starts to flip, we want to vomit, and our whole system feels like it's crashing. So we are present to that. We reconnect with our inner goodness, deepening our confidence, our well-being, and sense of basic trust. And then we try again. We discover that the journey is a dynamic process, full of alternating successes and failures. And we discover that failures are not dead ends. Every time we're up against the wall, we're also standing at a threshold. The invitation to open to our experience—whatever it is from moment to moment—is always there, no matter how many times we need to rediscover it.

This ultimately brings us to the fifth and final stage of complete letting go, where all resistance is gone. We no longer demand that life be on our terms. Instead, we begin living with the understanding that the source of wisdom is in whatever is in front of us—it is in whatever is arising in this moment. Wisdom is not somewhere else. It's not in someone else. It's right here in our own bottomless heart.