Technologies of Transformation: The Power of Spiritual Autobiography

by Lama Liz Monson and Sarah Fleming

In anticipation of the Path program she will be teaching this November, "Writing Liberation," Lama Liz Monson sat down with Sarah Fleming to discuss the liberatory power of narrative. Drawing on her academic training in Tibetan Buddhist narratives, her travels in the footsteps of Drukpa Kunley, and her own personal writing practice, Monson positions spiritual autobiography as a technology of transformation for both writers and readers.

Sarah Fleming: You're about to teach a year-long program at BCBS, "Writing Liberation: The Buddhist Practice of Spiritual Autobiography." How did you first become interested in spiritual autobiography?

Lama Liz Monson: My interest comes largely out of my academic training in Tibetan Buddhist narratives. As I studied different narrative forms, I became curious about the genre of autobiography: What is a spiritual autobiography? Why would a person write such a thing? And what happens to a person when they try to reconfigure their life as a story that describes their trajectory towards some kind of awakening?

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In the Tibetan context, there's a style of writing called the *rang rnam*, or the "self-liberation life story." I've always been fascinated by the idea that you might write as a way to practice being present as an awakened being—what would that look like? And how does that change how you understand yourself to be in the world and how you relate to others?

I wanted to offer a program where we explore that process and take the time to look deeply into our own life experiences as occasions for reflection and liberation. It's not hard to see, if we're truly dedicated to our paths now, how most significant events in our lives have been stepping stones in one way or another along a spiritual path—or have been part of that spiritual path all the way along. The genre of autobiography allows us to look within ourselves and re-relate to our pasts and our paths.

I like the intimacy of the form. I like that it challenges the writer to search within, almost in a parallel way to how meditation asks us to look within. And yet in this case, the writer strives to articulate and communicate their nonconceptual experience with others. This raises another key question of autobiography: how do you transmit your experience of awakening in a way that can help others have a similar kind of awakening themselves?

SF: So, when you say, "Writing Liberation," there are two interlocking components of that process: you can write yourself into your own liberation, but you can also write so as to guide others towards their own experiences of liberation.

LM: Yes, exactly. I'm curious about that double effect, or mirrored effect, that autobiography can have. It's different than writing a fictional narrative, for example, or writing a novel or writing a poem in that the writer is reconfiguring and, in a sense, creating themselves again and again and again, just as we're doing all the time in creating our sense of self over and over and over again, but with spiritual

autobiography, this happens through a much more precise and crafted process. Writing autobiography is a continual expression of renarrativizing one's life story and discovering freedom through that.

From a dharmic perspective, we're always engaged in narrating the story of the self, and we constantly have to renarrate and recreate because our story of the self is always dissolving and breaking down. If we become more intentional about this process that is already occurring, then we can coopt it as a tool for helping us break free of the unconscious grasping that characterizes so much of our lives.

Autobiographical writing can be an effective technology for transforming the writer, then, but also for transforming the reader. If the reader is willing to be open to and transformed by their encounter with the text, then they can enter into a kind of parallel experience of liberation. It won't be the same experience—a spiritual autobiography is not a manual or step-by-step guide for how exactly a reader might have that experience. But it could be evocative, suggestive, and inspiring. Sometimes, literature can change us in ways that nothing else can because we willingly enter into worlds where we can be transformed—if we're open to it.

SF: Right, literature can bring about these small transformations, either through the process of reconstructing our own narrative day by day or through witnessing glimpses of another doing the same.

LM: Yes, there's something powerful about reading and writing as a daily act as well. Michel Foucault writes about the early Greek philosophers and how they used writing as a way to form the ethical self. They would write out everything they did on a given day and then take time to look back, taking stock of who they were in each moment of the day as a way to reflect on whether they were living in alignment with their sense of being a good, ethical human being in the world.

They engaged in these small, daily practices of transformation through the medium of writing, and the records of their writing then set in motion similar processes of reflection for future readers, who may think to themselves, *What about me? How do my actions stack up against my understanding of being a good person?*

Reading spiritual autobiographies invites this process of stepping into the narrative of another. I recently taught a course at BCBS on the life story of the Buddha, and one of the things that we explored was how the Buddha's life story is really our own story. Of course, the details aren't the same, but we can still find ourselves inside the narrative—the trajectory of his emotional, psychological journey is something that can map onto the lives of all spiritual seekers.

SF: So far, you've spoken about the experience of reading others' spiritual autobiographies. But what about your own writing practice? What kinds of liberation have you found in your writing?

LM: When I'm writing for myself, I find that the writing takes on a life of its own. When I can relax and let go into it, just in the same way that I encourage my students to relax and let go into the open spaciousness of their own awareness, the writing builds its own energy and continues on almost without me, or through me. I find that the creative process is something that does *you*. You don't actually have to do it yourself. And the more you try, the less creative it really is.

If I can get into that kind of a flow, which usually takes some time, at a certain point, I can let go and trust that whatever energy comes out will lead me somewhere new. My writing will show me something that I don't know already or bring something new into the world that I hadn't seen before. Sometimes I'll go back and read something that I've written, and I'll think to myself, *Wow, I didn't know that I understood that*, or *I didn't know that I thought about that in that way*, or *I didn't know that I was able to articulate that experience in*

a way that seems like it could be helpful. I feel like my own writing process, at its best, is an experience of encountering these small, but powerful surprises.

Of course, when it's not at its best, writing can be grinding. When I try to craft it too much or when I get in the way of myself, the process is nowhere near as enjoyable. It's still worth doing because we do have to work through those phases, but it's nowhere near as productive or joyous. I think there should be some quality of delight somewhere in the writing process—that one should touch into a feeling of delight in the power of the written word to recreate our reality in different forms. If we really look into the nature of the mind itself and its artistic potential, it's unbelievably creative. And the only reason that we don't experience that potential all the time is that we get so caught up in our thoughts and our ideas and our desire for control. But when we can let go, that's when the delight comes in.

SF: How do you see this delight in relation to the work of liberation?

LM: I think the further we progress on the path, the more delight there is. This doesn't mean that there aren't also a lot of challenges and a lot of encountering the difficult, but the more we become freed up from our fixations and our trappings, the more we look beyond the grasping mind that only thinks about itself, the more delightful our basic experience is. We encounter the vividness of daily life, the vividness of our sense perceptions, the vividness of being human.

At that point, the world takes on much more presence and brilliance and play because we're not so dependent on things turning out the way we thought that they should. When we're caught in the expectations and graspings of our sense of self, it can be such a contracted and effortful—and often suffering—space. But the more we open up and relax out of that, trusting that we're so much more than the *I*, *me*, and

mine, the more delight there is—the more play and willingness to just accept this flow of creative arising, dwelling, and dissolving that is so much the mark of being a human being.

SF: On that note of vividness of experience, you have a book coming out on Drukpa Kunley—a figure notorious for his playfulness! I'd love to hear more about the process of writing that biography. At least from the description, it sounds like a project that might bring a lot of delight.

LM: Well, the subject of that biography is very delightful in and of himself. The book is called *Tales of a Mad Yogi: The Life and Wild Wisdom of Drukpa Kunley*, and it follows the life of a saint, Drukpa Kunley, who was quite playful and joyful—even mischievous. It's the result of many years of study and research, and it's based on Drukpa Kunley's own autobiography. He was Tibetan, but he lived most of his life in Bhutan and is now one of the patron saints of Bhutan. The folktales about him describe him as sleeping with every woman he can find, drinking alcohol, you name it—he had a very scandalous character and was known as a wild, crazy, almost antinomian yogi.

He has a collection of writings, the first—and longest—of which is considered his autobiography. I completed an English translation of his autobiography and published it in Bhutan, but it's not in a form we might typically associate with autobiography. It's a collection of discrete songs, didactic expositions, monologues, and conversations, and there's no narrative arc or trajectory from birth to death.

I had been asked to write a biography of Drukpa Kunley for Shambhala Publications, and I had to figure out what form this biography would take. Traditional Tibetan biographies aren't exactly gripping—for the most part, they offer an account of which teachings a person has received from which lineages in which places and continue on in that

manner for 300 pages. Early on, I realized that I wanted to take a different direction—I wanted to write something that would bring Drukpa Kunley to life for modern readers in a way that might be more compelling and enlivening.

The book is a bit of a hybrid: it's half autobiography and half biography. I tried to imagine a narrative arc for Drukpa Kunley's life based on the hints that I could find in his didactic expositions and records of his travels. From these reconstructions, I wove together a life story, into which I then inserted direct translations of his autobiography, thereby infusing the narrative it with his own, authentic voice. All the places in the book that are written in the first person are direct translations of his own words. But the narrative arc is something that I constructed based on accounts that I could find about the details of his life and his travels.

I hope it will be fun and inspiring for people to read about his life. He's not very well known in the West other than through a handful of folktales that were published in a collection by Keith Dowman called *The Divine Madman*. The fact that those stories were the only representation of Drukpa Kunley in the West disturbed me because he was actually a very erudite practitioner and thinker, and to frame him solely as a crazy, scandalous, drunken lout is just not sufficient.

SF: It sounds like you're providing a much fuller picture of him—something beyond a caricature of wildness and drunkenness. In the process of providing this fuller picture, you spent a fair amount of time traveling around Bhutan and literally following in Drukpa Kunley's footsteps. How does that practice of physically following someone's narrative relate to the navigation of internal landscapes involved in writing autobiography?

LM: The physical process of traveling through the landscapes where Drukpa Kunley lived was transformative for me personally and for those who traveled with me. I was fortunate to live in Bhutan for two years, and I do continue to

go back and lead pilgrimages there. The imprints of Drukpa Kunley's energy are very much alive, both in the landscapes themselves and in the hearts and minds of the people who live there. Often, the people we'd encounter would share stories about him, and I was struck by the way that these stories, as they were told again and again, were continuously bringing back into the present moment the power and energy of the events that had taken place centuries ago.

It was almost a collapse of time. Instead of a clear divide where I was standing there in the 21st century, and this saint lived back in the 15th century, it was as if his stories were still energetically unfolding. And when I visited those places, I felt the vestiges of that, or the echoes of his presence. The writing became like a transmission of those echoes, a way of expressing a more vivid picture of his energy and his time.

I had such an embedded sense of place in relation to writing about Drukpa Kunley. And we all have that, I think, in relation to our lives—an embedded sense of the places we've been and the experiences we've had there and how they have marked and changed us. When we tap back into that sense of embodied presence, it can inform how we express ourselves through language. This manifests in the words and metaphors we might use or the forms our expression might take, and it can often take the pressure off the writer: if we can tap back into the energy of our experiences, it eases the burden we might feel of having to create something, because it's already there. Writing becomes more a matter of opening up enough to let whatever needs to be expressed come out.

This is a similar trajectory to what happens with the songs of spiritual experience that many Tibetan teachers compose, including Drukpa Kunley: at a certain point, your own experience speaks for you. You don't have to do anything; you just get out of the way, and something comes out. And if you're somebody who works with language, a poet or a writer, it comes out in that form, but if you're a

dancer, maybe it comes out as a dance or if you're a painter, it comes in some kind of visual form.

SF: Are there any examples of forms of autobiography you've found that have particularly surprised or inspired you?

LM: Part of my graduate work involved exploring the whole field of spiritual autobiography, not just in the Tibetan world, but more broadly as well. In my research, I discovered that the Puritans were tremendously interested in this form of writing because they saw it as a way to form themselves as good persons in the eyes of God. Many people wrote spiritual autobiographies about their daily habits and deeds. It's similar to the way the Greeks were writing these kinds of catalogs at the end of the day of what they did and how they related to each other and themselves.

But the Puritan narratives contain more angst. The early Puritans really were struggling to find some sense of goodness and to prove to themselves and to God, that they were good enough to enter the pearly gates. And so that form of writing was very popular, and many congregation members would write spiritual autobiographies. We have many records of these texts, some of which were written by the great early Puritan teachers. They're not necessarily fun to read, but this was a powerful form for people to explore their spirituality and to grow and develop and see transformation taking place in their being.

SF: It sounds almost like a mode of prayer—like writing these daily autobiographies was a practice of devotion.

LM: It was a devotional practice, I think. That's something that I hope we'll explore in the Path course as well: how this practice of writing can be a practice of devotion. But what does that mean? Unlike the Puritans, we're not necessarily talking about devotion to a god or an external teacher. Devotion is something that's been part of many spiritual

traditions for a long time, but I feel it's often misunderstood in Western views of Buddhism (and of Tibetan Buddhism in particular). In this program, I hope people will get a chance to explore what the word devotion might mean—or if devotion is even the right word.

I do think devotion plays a role in writing, though, and in writing spiritual autobiography in particular. More generally, a number of the elements of what we think of as spiritual practice can be mapped onto the process of writing a spiritual autobiography. And even the cases where it's not a perfect map can be illuminating in prompting us to explore how this kind of writing can be construed as spiritual practice, as well as how it might fall short.

Can we think about the writing of an autobiography as a devotional or a spiritual practice? And what does that mean? How does that practice work? How does it change us? How does it perform the same function as sitting on the meditation cushion and doing *shamatha* practice, for example? Can we see similarities there, and what are they? And can we see differences, and are they illuminative of something about what it means to be on a spiritual path? Are these ways of talking about human life useful, or are they just more ways that we hit a wall? I'm curious to explore these questions with people through reading and writing together.

SF: All fruitful questions to be living and examining together! Any final hopes for the course you'd like to share?

LM: First of all, I hope that people who encounter the course don't feel like, "Oh well, I'm not a writer, so I can't do this" because it's really not about whether we think of ourselves as writers or not. No matter what, we all are telling the story of "me" all the time. You don't have to consider yourself a writer to take this course. You don't even have to have written anything before! You can just try it, see what happens, and begin to play around. Writing is a practice, and it *requires* practice. Any good writer knows that. Very few

people are naturally excellent writers. You have to start somewhere, and why not start now?

Also, there's no pressure to finish anything. We'll be meeting together for one year—no one is expected to write a complete account of their life or spiritual journey over the course of twelve months! Instead, we'll begin by looking back on some period of our lives and weave this into language. We will start small, perhaps even with a single memory or single image, and let that guide us forward.

As we read and write together, I hope to foster an experience of joy and delight and awakening—not necessarily profound awakening into the nature of the mind, but more coming into fuller and fuller awareness of who we are as human beings and how we relate to the changing phenomena of thoughts, emotions, and sense perceptions that surround us. And I hope that together, we come to see narrative as a tool for evaluating and getting to know both our relative and ultimate manifestations of self. Ultimately, we may even be able to see the practice of writing spiritual autobiography as a liberative practice that frees us up to be of greater benefit in the wider world.