

*Life As It Is*

Episode #7 with Quan Barry

“Searching for Tulkus with Quan Barry”

February 23, 2022



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**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Today, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I are joined by poet and novelist Quan Barry. Born in Saigon, Barry grew up in Danvers, Massachusetts and currently teaches creative writing at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Her latest novel, *When I’m Gone, Look For Me in the East*, follows the story of two telepathic twins as they journey across the vast Mongolian landscape in search of a tulku, or reincarnate lama. Along the way, the twins grapple with questions of desire, doubt, and the place of faith in a changing world.

In this episode of *Life As It Is*, Sharon and I sit down with Barry to discuss the joys and responsibilities of writing fiction, the tensions between monasticism and modernity, and her travels across the Mongolian steppe.

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**James Shaheen:** I’m here with writer and poet Quan Barry and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Quan. Hi, Sharon. It’s nice to be with you both.

**Quan Barry:** Hi. Thanks for having me.

**James Shaheen:** It’s a pleasure. So we’re here to talk about your new novel, *When I’m Gone, Look for Me in the East*. It’s a poetic story of telepathic twins, one a renegade reincarnate lama, one a monk traveling across Mongolia. Together, they’re in search of the reincarnation of a Buddhist master. Can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

**Quan Barry:** Yeah, absolutely. So I’ve been very fortunate to travel pretty extensively in the world, and usually when I go somewhere, I’m not sure how it’s going to actually show up in my writing. I go first just to see the landscape, and then oftentimes, the story won’t come to me for

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quite a long time. So I was actually in Mongolia in 2008, and then I think it was about two or three years after that, I actually heard a story, probably on NPR, where all of my stories come from, about the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama at that time was saying that because he fears the idea that after he passes, that the Chinese will politicize his passing and name the new Dalai Lama, he was considering taking the unprecedented step of reincarnating while he was still alive. Doing that would give him the opportunity, obviously, to choose who would follow him and then not have to worry about the politicization of his passing. Since then, again, I think he said this in roughly maybe 2013, he has since changed his mind, and he no longer talks about reincarnating while he's still alive. But when I first heard that story, I have to admit, my mind just went [explosion sound]. Like wow, what would that mean to reincarnate while you're alive? And then I just sort of went down a rabbit hole of thinking about reincarnation in general, doing a lot of research and finding out more about that. It's a fascinating process, the different signs that are looked for and the ways in which the mystical element enters into the whole thing. And so I began to realize like, wait, I was in Mongolia, I have this interest, I've been studying Buddhism for the last 10–15 years, and I began to think about ways in which I might tell the story of a reincarnation and also simultaneously tell the history of Mongolia at the same time.

**James Shaheen:** I have to say, I was impressed with your detailed description of Mongolia, its cultures, its landscape, the grasslands, the desert, the mountains, even the weather, the sandstorm, even bits about the languages you hear there. Tricycle had organized a trip to Mongolia, but we canceled it because of COVID. Now, I at least feel that I've sort of been there, although we will go there. So how did you come up with such a detailed and magnificent depiction of this vast country?

**Quan Barry:** It was easy because it is. It's a magnificent landscape, the hospitality that comes out of the tradition of living in a very sparsely populated land, the kind of welcoming that people give because of that. There's like one person for every I'm not sure how many square miles. It's

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a really fascinating culture and, again, landscape, so in some ways, really, Mongolia did the work for me. I just had to be observant about it. I was very fortunate to be able to travel there in the summer. I have to admit, I haven't been to Mongolia in the winter, and my understanding is it's a different place then. It's tremendous in the sense that it's the same landmass as Texas, and yet it contains just vastly different landscapes. So you're absolutely right. In the west, you have mountains that border Kazakhstan, or they're close to Kazakhstan and Russia, and so you have people there that have more in common with Russians and the Cossacks across the border. In the south, you have the Gobi Desert and people who are living there. In the central parts and eastern parts, again, it's very different. It's more the grasslands and things like that. So I just found myself just fascinated with the landscape itself and then also with the culture. Oftentimes, we don't remember that Mongolia was the center of the world about 1000 years ago. I do believe that Time Magazine actually named Chinggis Khan, who we sometimes call Genghis Khan, you know, named him their man of the millennium. Obviously, it's one of those situations where people who were conquered by him have told us various stories of him over time that we've come to accept, but maybe the truth of who he was, and the things that he accomplished is much more complicated. The landscape, the culture, all those things gave me a lot to work with in putting the story together.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I was rapt. It was wonderful.

**Sharon Salzberg:** My mind is still grappling with what does it mean to be reincarnated when you're still alive? I can't quite figure it out. Maybe you can share some background about the actual tradition of searching for tulkus. Who's typically included in a search party, and what are some of the rituals associated with the search?

**Quan Barry:** So reincarnations are only found predominantly in the Tibetan tradition. So obviously, in thinking about the Tibetan school of Buddhism, you know, there are four schools

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there. Sometimes people associate them with colors, but again, they each have a particular name. Again, that's the only real tradition that really looks for reincarnations in the way that we think of, for these people who are called tulku. And so generally speaking, what happens is depending on how a reincarnation passes away, if it's sudden it's different, but if it's a slower process of their dying, then oftentimes they themselves write themselves letters or give clues as to where they might be found or things like that. So again, it depends on how they actually pass away. Then usually what happens is after they've passed, a committee is actually put together. My understanding is that most of this happens in Dharamsala in India. The committee might consist of someone who's called the heart disciple of the person who's passed away. And so that particular monk is usually somebody who was younger and was sort of mentored by the person who was passed, and they then will formally be charged by the Dalai Lama and I think his counsel to go forth and to find the clues, some clues which may occur when the body is cremated. Sometimes there are clues looked for in the body. Sometimes monks will go to particular places in a landscape and look to a particular lake or things like that for signs of where this person may be reincarnated. But it's a process, and my understanding is that oftentimes it takes years to find people, generally speaking about two to three years. So usually these children are found before the age of four, generally speaking, although obviously there are exceptions to that, so you do hear about people being found at much older ages.

**James Shaheen:** So there are cases also in which there are multiple incarnations. Is that right?

**Quan Barry:** Yes, it's thought that a person, a reincarnation, a tulku can reincarnate different aspects of themselves into different bodies. And so currently, my understanding is that in Sikkim, there might be a situation where somebody has reincarnated and there are two people. Again, I'm not an expert on this, so I don't want to pretend that I am. But my understanding is that there might be one person perhaps who embodies the compassion of the original person, and then there might be somebody else who perhaps embodies their wisdom, things like that. So it is possible.

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**James Shaheen:** So throughout the book, we see Buddhism interacting with indigenous religious traditions of Mongolia, particularly shamanistic rituals and festivals. So can you tell us more about how Buddhism fits into this diverse religious landscape?

**Quan Barry:** Mongolia is a really interesting story because in the early 1900s, it became a communist country. When the communists rolled in, it's true that a lot of the traditions, and the Buddhist tradition specifically, were destroyed. A lot of the monasteries were destroyed, a lot of the monks were actually killed or driven out into freezing weather and died that way. Buddhism was not allowed to be openly practiced in the way that we think of it for many, many years in Mongolia. And so my understanding, though, is in that time the various shamanistic traditions were allowed to continue. And so the early god that many people again, still for many Mongolians, my understanding is that if you're still thinking in terms of Tengri, the blue sky god, the eternal sky god, that it wouldn't be unusual to think in terms of Tengri being there and for there to be relics of the way in which people still practice that kind of shamanism. So for example, there were these cairns that are constructed all over the country where people pile rocks in high places. High places are seen as being the spots that are closest to the sky god Tengri. And so it wouldn't be unusual for people to go to these shamanistic places where rocks are piled and yet to use Buddhist prayer flags and Buddhist scarves and intertwine them in these rock formations. So there are ways—I think in some ways that's a great metaphor for the ways in which the two, again, the shamanistic traditions of old and Buddhism have been woven together, and so people oftentimes don't necessarily make the kinds of distinctions of this practice is specifically shamanistic and this practice is specifically Buddhist. But yes, in many ways, the two things are very much intertwined.

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**James Shaheen:** Right, what struck me is that the religious tension that we see in other countries doesn't seem to exist in Mongolia. In fact, the tulkus, the candidates that they are interviewing, none of them comes from a Buddhist tradition.

**Quan Barry:** That's definitely something that I drew on in thinking about this as a work of fiction. In the long period when Buddhism was not allowed to be openly practiced in Mongolia, you traditionally did not have that many reincarnations that were found there. There was actually the case where one of the last incarnations, the Jebtsundamba, I believe he's called, actually fled Mongolia and lived in secret and only returned there in the late 1990s. So for a long time, because of the Soviet influence in the region, there was not a tradition of reincarnations. So it's true that in my work, it is a work of fiction, and because I wanted to show the broadness of the landscape and the different kinds of cultures and things like that, I did choose to use some poetic license in that sense in thinking about who might be a reincarnation, particularly in a country in which the tradition is coming back. So I looked at it a little bit more broadly in that sense.

**James Shaheen:** You mentioned the Soviet destruction of Buddhism in Mongolia, and it's a shadow of the past that sort of hangs over the present. I'm wondering if you had any insights into why this tradition, this Buddhist tradition, this Mongolian Buddhist tradition, managed to survive. We see similar destruction in Tibet under Chinese rule. What is it that allowed it to survive? How did it survive? Because it was pretty brutal destruction and intentional erasure.

**Quan Barry:** This is just my personal guess if I had to say why that is, but a part of it I do think is the landscape and the vastness of how much space people have and things like that. So for example, you could be doing your thing out on the steppe, and your closest neighbor might not be for 10–20 miles. So I think that that definitely helped people to continue to live their lives. There is a saying, which I can't remember right now. It's a Mongolian saying about the idea that the mouse moves a different life out on the steppe than the mouse does in the city. And so it's the

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idea that basically things can happen in the city that really don't affect people living out on the steppe in the same kind of way. And so if I had to guess I would say that the landscape in certain ways really helped certain traditions to carry on in a way in which people perhaps didn't feel the same kind of repressive forces that they would have in the city. So that would be my guess as to why that is.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You know, something you said made me realize how in awe I feel of fiction writers because you create an entire world, and that's both a heavy responsibility in terms of the integrity of that world, and it seems like it would be also its own kind of fun. When you said, “I use poetic license, and I did this, I did that,” I thought, wow. It's quite something, I think, to have everything you want to say woven together into a story. It's fantastic because of course, that's real life. That's how we live.

**Quan Barry:** You're absolutely right, though, about the responsibility aspect of it and thinking about who do I see my readership as being? Is this book for people who already know a lot about Buddhism? Is it not for people who know a lot about Buddhism? The Vietnamese writer Viet Thanh Nguyen often talks about as a Vietnamese writer, he wants to write books that use Vietnamese characters but that don't feel like they have to explain things that actual Vietnamese people would know. And so I felt myself constantly sort of treading that line, like, OK, these are things that Mongolian people would know. Obviously, my speaker in my book is a Mongolian character, but how do I still convey these things and make this voice sound authentic but at the same time recognize that my primary readership is not Mongolian and will not be familiar with various things? So you're absolutely right, it's a lot of fun to create these worlds, but at the same time, there is a lot of responsibility.

**Sharon Salzberg:** One of the features in your book is that we see Buddhism coming into contact with an increasingly commercialized world, so it's not just Buddhism, it's Buddhism today,

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particularly in the relationship between the two twins, Chuluun and Mun. Can you speak a bit about the tensions they represent between monastic life and modernization?

**Quan Barry:** Great question. So I have two twins as the main characters of my book, and one is Chuluun. He’s a novitiate in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and will be taking his final vows in a few months after the book opens, and he is the twin. He has an identical brother named Mun, and Mun as a child was actually discovered himself to be a reincarnation, but Mun has since decided to leave, to renounce his vows, and is now living a secular life in the capital of Mongolia. So you have one twin who remains a monk and will soon take his vows, and you have the other twin who’s chosen to leave. When I traveled both in Mongolia and in other places as well, like Bhutan and India and places like Dharamsala and Sikkim, the first thing that I was really struck by, I think many of us in the West have these preconceived notions that monks, particularly Tibetan monks, are all living in caves somewhere and are deep in meditation and not engaged with the modern world. I very quickly saw that that idea is not true. You see monks in Dharamsala, they have cell phones. There are ways in which they’re very modern. I learned in Bhutan that there were actually quite a few monks who are on Facebook, you know, and they very much enjoy talking to other monks in other countries and all kinds of things. There’s a detail in the book about a monk who really enjoys walking around the particular grounds of this one monastery singing the theme song to Titanic. Again, that’s true. It’s based on something I observed. So I have these two twins, who in very many ways really do embody this idea of a more traditional path and then a more modern, 21st-century path. I was trying to show that hopefully by story’s end, they have both gone on a spiritual journey, and they’ve both arrived at different places, so maybe, perhaps, they’re two sides of the same coin in the sense that they’re both maintaining their spiritual inner journeys but doing it in different kinds of ways.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, Chuluun in particular seems to struggle with doubts. He says, “What do I know of life? Am I ready to give up the pleasures of living when I know so little of

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experience?” And it reminded me actually of in contemporary times, Mingyur Rinpoche, who is a Tibetan teacher, went on a walking retreat, you know, where he just disappeared. And one of the things he said when he came back, referring to his life as a monk before he left was, “I was like a prince. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know how to make a fire.” He ended up not being able to discern some kind of food. He got very sick with food poisoning. It was sort of like a very contemporary depiction of I think what you’re talking about there.

**Quan Barry:** I’ve actually read his memoir, which is just super fascinating, and in thinking about it, I spent not very long at all, but I did get an opportunity to spend some days in a monastery in Bhutan. There, there was a young reincarnation. My guess is he might have been younger than 11 or so. Very sweet boy, very shy. When I was there, people wanted to practice their English with me. But I could also see the way in which his life was different from the other young monastics who were around him. He had special quarters, there were certain things that were expected of him during puja, things like that. So it was interesting for me to be able to observe an actual young reincarnation.

**Sharon Salzberg:** In a way, it points to the ability to question within that path and the role of doubt—is that OK?

**Quan Barry:** Yeah, I actually met in Bhutan a very distinguished monk—well, maybe I shouldn’t say who it is exactly—who told me a little bit about what his research had uncovered about even the tradition of reincarnation in the Tibetan tradition and the idea that perhaps it came from the idea that these very successful monks would have followers who would gift the monk in life lands or what have you, and that after that person had passed away, because they hadn’t had children or family, the question then became, what do we do with these gifts that were given to this monk by his followers. Perhaps this tradition of finding reincarnations was a way to keep these kinds of properties and monies, etc., etc., within the domain of a particular monastery. That

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was sort of his take on it. Having said that, though, he also at the same time believed in the idea that there are things that we can't explain. There are individuals who have memories and have experiences, etc. While he had this one way of thinking about how perhaps this tradition started, he also acknowledged that yes, the world is a mysterious place, and who can say?

**Sharon Salzberg:** It was also really interesting to see the twins have such different approaches to desire and the idea of temptations, and I wonder if you could say something about that.

**Quan Barry:** Yeah, that was a tough one. I had to think about what their personal journeys would be, their inner journeys and things like that. For myself, in trying to imagine someone who is about to take these vows and think about the kinds of things that they will be giving up, which is oftentimes how we think about it in the West, as opposed to what they'll be gaining, I saw that as being his predominant journey. Kind of a spoiler alert, but in thinking about his twin brother who's also on a path too, it was important to me that in some ways, they are the yin and yang, and yet they have more in common than they both realize. In the end, it turns out that maybe they're actually more similar than they are different. So I was definitely thinking in terms of them in binaries and yet despite binaries, the ways in which things are one.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Can you share a bit about your own religious background? Do you mind?

**Quan Barry:** Yeah, not at all. Many people have complicated backgrounds when it comes to how they landed on various paths. I was baptized Catholic but raised predominantly Unitarian. Even to this day, I still consider myself to be a Unitarian, although I don't go to Unitarian service anymore. That's still the deepest imprinting—Unitarian. And then about 10 years ago or so, I began pretty seriously studying Buddhism and all kinds of other things, particularly in the Thai Forest Tradition of people who follow Ajahn Chah. I belonged to a sangha for a long time. It was very important to me. Unfortunately, the smaller sangha that I belonged to, with COVID, we

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tried our best to be online, but it's only in the past few months that we're splintering a little bit, but hopefully, that will come back at some point. But in a broader sense, I really consider myself to be a student of just wisdom traditions in general. So I have an interest in Christian mysticism, I have an interest in Sufism, I have an interest in Hindu philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedanta, those kinds of things. I have a broad interest in all kinds of things like that.

**Sharon Salzberg:** As you say Ajahn Chah, I think immediately of his visit here to the Insight Meditation Society. He was such a funny character. I'm also thinking now of how that fits into the characters you've created, that sense of reformation. The Thai Forest tradition was a tradition that grew up in contrast to some of the excesses and maybe confusions that have arisen historically as Buddhism got to be more like the state religion, and all of a sudden, these people go off into the forest again. But Ajahn Chah was just hysterical. Many of my teachers were from Burmese lineages where you might do very, very, very slow walking meditation, and the whole nature, as you know, of that tradition of the Thai Forest lineage is more like be at ease, be natural, and so these people were doing this excruciating was slow walking here on the lawn, and Ajahn Chah would come up to them and say in Thai, so it'd be translated, "I'm so sorry, may your convalescence go well, feel better soon, you're so sick, obviously you can't walk at a regular pace." He was really very funny.

**Quan Barry:** I'm not saying that he was a model in any way, but in thinking about the character of Uncle, there is this mischievousness in him, and I think that wanting to get that across that monks can be funny.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I'm curious if writing the novel changed your own relationship to ritual or if there's anything that you incorporated into your life as a process of your own creation of this world.

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**Quan Barry:** Interesting, interesting. So friends of mine are really into their altars. I tend to have a much sparer altar, but in my travels, I've picked things up, just physical objects. My relationship to my altar hasn't necessarily changed. I would have to think about it a little bit more. I think, if anything, writing this book has really just broadened, because I do think, unfortunately, as we all know, that sometimes when you first come to the tradition or a tradition, you can kind of become, I don't want to say dogmatic about it. But I think this, if anything, has me really thinking about it. I didn't know as much about the Tibetan tradition and having to do that kind of research. Sometimes it sounds bad when people refer to things, there's talk in the United States about referring to cafeteria Catholics, you know, people who pick and choose, but I do think that that's what the practice is. That's what the Buddha taught us. Find out for yourself if it works. I think writing this book has helped me feel more comfortable about being able to decide what things I want to take on.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Yeah, I think that's great. My first teacher was SN Goenka. This was January 1971 in India. He taught in the form of intensive 10-day retreats, and the very first night of my first retreat, he said, "The Buddha did not teach Buddhism, the Buddha taught a way of life, so this is something that's available to anyone that is interested in it." You don't have to call yourself a Buddhist. You don't have to just take this. Let go of what or relinquish what seems wrong to you. But there needs to be a real process of investigation and not just say, "That's unappealing, that'll make me get up too early in the morning" or something like that. And so in a way, that's what your characters are doing.

**James Shaheen:** Your previous novels took place closer to home, in Vietnam, where you were born, and then in Danvers, Massachusetts, where you grew up. How was your research process for this book different? I mean, I'm just really curious about this massive research project you must have undertaken.

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**Quan Barry:** And I have to admit that research is not my strong suit in many ways. But what maybe is my strong suit and what I maybe have been fortunate to do is to travel. So I'm the kind of person when I'm in a landscape, I hopefully absorb a lot. I see things. I had this book read by some folks in Mongolia, and one of them asked me, "How did you figure out this thing?" And I said, "Well, I was there. I saw that that's what people do." Thinking about my first book, which is set in Vietnam and basically follows a child who is born who can hear the voices of the dead. And so my book follows her as she comes of age in Vietnam after the American war there. To write that particular book, it really was a matter of traveling around Vietnam, I've been there about four times, and just seeing things and talking to people. The things that I had to research for that particular book, there was a section I needed to research about boat people and the ways in which people tried to escape Vietnam, and then I also had to research the reeducation camps that happened there, as well as the French rubber plantations back in the 1930s. So those were things, I read memoirs, that's how I did my research for that. Thinking about this particular text, the ways in which I had to research, again, it was through travel. So like I said, I was fortunate to be in Mongolia. I was fortunate to be in Bhutan and India and to have access to amazing people who shared their knowledge with me and to be able to talk to them and find things out and to read books. So it probably wasn't as extensive research. I mean, I read a lot of books. Obviously, there's a bibliography. But like I said, I think the most important aspect for me is just the idea of just being there and being in a space. In contrast to that is my second book, which is called *We Ride Upon Sticks*, which you mentioned, which is set in Danvers, Massachusetts, which is an actual place and the place where I grew up. I actually did very little research for that book. Because I grew up there, I really did absorb the history of the Salem witch trials and all those kinds of fun things. And so fortunately, that was a book that was a lot of fun to write, and it's true that I didn't have to do a lot of research because I really knew that material really well. But in thinking about this book, I think one of the harder parts for me actually was because my background was more in, for example, the Thai Forest Tradition, and just making sure and talking to people, like would you know, a Tibetan Buddhist monk be familiar with this particular

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text or with this particular mantra or what have you? So that was definitely something that I needed other eyes on for folks to point out to me like, that’s probably not what would happen in this particular tradition.

**James Shaheen:** So you’re at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and there are plenty of sources there for you to draw upon. I think Richard Davidson is there, John Donne, certainly people Sharon also knows. It seems like you had a search party of your own.

**Quan Barry:** I really did. I was really fortunate to have access to those people who could then help me then get in touch with other people. As you know, obviously, the Dalai Lama has a very special relationship with Madison going back, I think, to the 1970s. My understanding is that Madison was the first place that he ever delivered in North America the Kalachakra teaching, which he did in Deer Park, which is about 20 minutes outside of Madison. So there’s a rich community of obviously Tibetan Buddhists but then Buddhism in general. When I first began going to sanghas and things like that, I had a friend, and we sort of had this joke that we were making the Buddhist world tour because just in Madison, you could go to Zen things, you could go to Thich Nhat Hanh’s sangha. Everything was available in many ways within this pretty tiny place. I feel very fortunate to have been able to tap into a lot of the resources that were available to me in Madison.

**James Shaheen:** Sounds like a great place to do that research. So often, we hear stories of tulkus or the search for tulkus. And rarely do we get a full account from the tulkus themselves or from their family, for that matter. Did the process of writing this book and Mun’s story in particular raise any questions about the ethics of identifying tulkus at such a young age?

**Quan Barry:** You have the galley of the book. In the hardcopy, I’ve actually extended the bibliography to include films. So right now, there are no films included in the bibliography. I

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watched quite a few documentaries about these kinds of things, one called *Mistaken Child*, another called *My Reincarnation*. I myself don't feel that I can decide whether or not this is simply a rich tradition that helps support a community, particularly a community that's an exile right now, and it's a way for this community to remain intact and to keep its traditions going. I wanted to present the ways in which Mun comes up against and finds himself at odds with the tradition. I just wanted to be as true to that particular story as possible. My understanding is that it's not uncommon sometimes for reincarnations to temporarily leave the tradition and that oftentimes, they do come back. I lived in Japan many years ago, just for a year as an undergraduate, and I actually knew somebody there whose father had been somebody who had been found as a reincarnation, had left as an adult and had lived this life, and then had gone back to the tradition. So I do think that when things are decided for you, and I tried to present this in the book in a conversation between Mun and Uncle, who is the older reincarnation, I tried to present the different ways that for Uncle, because he was found as a very young child, he didn't necessarily have the same kinds of issues that Mun had, who was found a little bit older, and that for him, it was simply a way of life, but that he did believe that after a period, the tulkus who are most successful are the ones who, even though it's chosen for them, do ultimately feel like they made the choice themselves at some point in their lives. So I did try and present another side to it as well.

**James Shaheen:** Right, we recently ran a piece on Konchok Peldron, a mother who refused to surrender two of her children after they were identified as tulkus. Eventually she's surrounded and forced to give them over, but not without a good fight. In that case, as with Mun, the tulku in your book, there's an almost violent uprooting of a child from his family. I understand that as Westerners looking in, it's really not for us to say or think we fully understand what's happening here in its cultural context. Yet I have spoken with plenty of Tibetans who themselves are conflicted about this, so from their perspective, there's a discussion going on all the time about how it's overly politicized or the needs of the child in this contemporary or modern society may

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be different. So the Tibetan discussion itself is actually more interesting than us looking in and making judgments. Did you hear much about those sorts of discussions?

**Quan Barry:** I haven't heard much about those particular discussions. But again, as I mentioned, when people would talk to me, there would be a kind of skepticism but tempered with a kind of hope, I think because it's complicated—people realizing and wanting to carry on traditions, at the same time realizing that traditions also do need to change. If traditions stagnate, in a way, then that also can be a kind of death of a culture if things aren't reimagined for the next generation. Definitely, everywhere I went, though, I definitely heard in people's voices—I think in some ways, people wanted to share the best with me in certain kinds of ways, but I definitely could hear the complication there in the kinds of things that they would tell me.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I'm going to indulge my fascination with a fiction writer. This ties in my mind to this last point. Did your characters start speaking to you? Did they come to life and disclose their dilemmas or their next step to you?

**Quan Barry:** I wish they had.

**Sharon Salzberg:** That's my dream of being a fiction writer. They come to life and take over.

**Quan Barry:** That happens for many people. It has happened for me but with other characters. I think for me, like, for example, thinking about the book that I wrote that's set in my hometown, in that book, those kinds of moments happened for me because those characters were much closer to who I actually am. It's different for other writers. It's just how I work. For me, for this, I really had to work on it because I wanted these people to speak a certain way, but I also didn't want them to sound like Yoda. Obviously, they're speaking English in the book, but we're supposed to understand that they're speaking Mongolian or Tibetan, and yet, like I said, at the

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same time, I didn't want it to sound antiquated. So it was something that I had to think long and hard about. So I think that because of all those different filters I was working with, I think that's probably one of the reasons why I didn't necessarily feel like I was just channeling them if I had had fewer filters.

**Sharon Salzberg:** That makes total sense. One of the very interesting things you do in the novel is you play with our notions of time—every sentence is written in the present tense. I wonder if you could tell us more about that decision.

**Quan Barry:** Yeah, that was tough. I did begin my writing career as a poet. But even when I write fiction, although it's not always true, I like to have not necessarily a constraint, but something that's a little bit artistic. So for example, in my book that's set in Massachusetts, that book is written in first person plural in the “we” voice. I'm not saying that it's harder or easier to do, but it's a little harder, and so by giving myself a challenge like that, it keeps me on my toes. And so I always try to bake in some kind of challenge. So in this book, it only made sense to me that it would be written in present tense. It was challenging, especially because the book is not linear with respect to time. If your book was linear, it would still be hard, but it wouldn't be that hard. But because we see them as children and we see them in different stages of growing up, that was a real challenge for me to keep the book in present tense and yet to write it in a way that wouldn't be overly taxing on the reader, so hopefully, fingers crossed, I managed to do that.

**James Shaheen:** Well, Quan Barry, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, you can pick up a copy of Quan's new novel, *When I'm Gone, Look for Me in the East*. I highly recommend it. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. Sharon leads that. I'm not qualified. So I'm going to hand it over to you, Sharon.

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**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you, thank you so much. Am I qualified? I don't know. I guess in my previous life, I must have done this.

**James Shaheen:** You must have done something right.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I must have done something right. It's true. Let's just sit together for a few minutes. It's a wonderful way just to integrate everything we've heard and talked about and felt in this last time. So if you want to sit comfortably, you can close your eyes or not. Let your attention settle on something like the feeling of the breath, the sensations of the breath. This is the normal natural breath, and if the breath doesn't work for you, that's fine. Something else that's happening that you don't have to strain for, the sound of my voice or the feeling of your hands touching. It's a resting place for the mind. And so the operative word is rest. So choose an object like that that's already happening. We rest our attention. The instruction is to rest lightly like a butterfly resting on a flower. This object of our awareness is already happening. We don't have to make it happen. We just rest. If your attention wanders to the past or the future, judgment, speculation, or you fall asleep, truly don't worry about it. You can realize you've been gone and as much as possible without judgment, see if you can let go and simply return to that original object. We let go, and we begin again. So thank you.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you Sharon. Thank you, Quan.

**Quan Barry:** Thank you so much.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Quan Barry. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!