*The Razor’s Edge* (1984)

Somerset Maugham’s 1944 novel had been once before made into a film, in 1946, starring Tyrone Power, but Bill Murray very much wanted to make a version of it starring himself in the central role of Larry Darrell. By 1984, Murray was already a famous comedian obtaining starring roles in films, but he longed to perform more serious content. He was able to convince Columbia Pictures to make the film, but only if he agreed to also star in the comedy *Ghostbusters* (1984). The latter was, of course, a tremendous hit, but *The Razor’s Edge* was a box office failure.

The plot of the film, like the novel, concerns a veteran of the First World War who was traumatized by his experiences as an ambulance driver. After seeing so much death, he finds himself unable to return to the privileged life from which he came, and goes to Paris to live simply and obtain work as a common laborer. As he undertakes a quest to find meaning in life, his former fiancée Isabel waits for him, until she realizes that he will never return to America to marry her and work as a businessman. Her desire for a life of wealth causes her to marry their friend Gray Maturin, even though she does not love him.

The film cuts back and forth between Larry’s search for truth, and the lives of his friends, who experience death and suffering—apparently without any spiritual or religious resources to deal with pain or loss. Whether they are addicted to status, wealth, alcohol, or drugs, they can find no happiness—and when the stock market crashes in 1929, this highlights the emptiness and futility of their lives. Meanwhile, Larry journeys to India and studies Hinduism and Buddhism, finding peace as he increasingly detaches himself from the world he has left behind. His teacher tells him that he is close to salvation, and that the path to it is “as difficult and narrow as a razor’s edge”—but he nonetheless chooses to return to Europe, as he believes it is too easy to seek peace outside of human society. He reconnects with Isabel, Gray, and with his friend Sophie, who lost her husband and child in a car crash that has reduced her to self-destruction and addiction. Larry is able to turn Sophie’s life around through his loving kindness, suggesting that he can become a force for good in the world, and he operates almost like the Buddhist exemplar of a *bodhisattva*, a “Buddha in the making” who chooses to remain in the world to help others rather than leave the world to find Nirvana.

The fact that Murray wanted to play this character is interesting in light of the fact that, a few years later, he starred in *Groundhog Day* (1993), directed by Harold Ramis, with whom he had worked in a number of films. In that film, Murray’s character experiences the same day over and over again, and in the process is transformed from a selfish and self-destructive person to one who lives unselfishly in the service of others. It is in many ways a Buddhist parable, and Murray took it very seriously, but Ramis’s insistence that the comedic tone be maintained ultimately ended their friendship. Murray has clearly struggled to find support for his efforts to depict spiritual journeys on film, but this is something that remains important to him.

In *Groundhog Day*, Murray’s character Phil Connors is finally redeemed from endless repetition, just at the point where he has let go of the desire for release; this is exactly the path of Hinduism and Buddhism, as only the truly unselfish one can find peace and escape from rebirth and suffering. But Phil also realizes along the way that he cannot save everyone, as much as he would like to—and Larry comes to the same realization in *The Razor’s Edge,* albeit in a different way*.* Humans have a self-destructive streak that is hard to erase, as the path to doing so is indeed narrow and difficult; most people are unwilling to give up their worldly addictions to seek purpose and meaning, even when those addictions give them pain and suffering. Larry is still on the path, but he has found something that none of his old friends have. He has let go of the desire for worldly reward, in pursuit of something of higher value.