

Sources of Tibetan Tradition

Edited by

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enlightenment. I shall bring *the harvest in on time*, the spontaneously perfect ten strengths, four braveries, eighteen unique qualities, and unceasing enlightened activity.

Through the virtue of sketching this with conventional words on the unchanging ultimate meaning in the year of spontaneous magnificent pleasure, at the waxing moon of ineffable simplicity, on the day of the full moon of self-arising illusion, may I quickly behold the natural countenance of reality, magnificent pleasure. Mapam Gawé Shenyen composed this at Serdokchen retreat, the center point of Tsang Yeru. The scribe was Chökyi Gyeltsen.

[*The Complete Works (Gsun 'bum)* of *Gser-mdog paṇ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan* (Thimphu: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), vol. 17, 97.4–99.4. Trans. KRS.]

THE LIFE AND SONGS OF MILAREPA

Milarepa (ca. 1040–1123) was an acclaimed yogin and poet active in southern Tibet during a period of renewed Buddhist expansion throughout the region. He is most commonly identified as an early founder of the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism, a tradition traced back to the great tantric adepts of India. Respect for Milarepa, however, transcends sectarian lines; individuals from diverse Buddhist lineages in Tibet revere him as an accomplished master and regard his life story as a model of religious dedication and practice. “Mi la” was his clan name; *repa* refers to the single cotton robe (*ré*) traditionally worn by Tibetan hermits. Milarepa is thus an epithet, literally “The Cotton-Clad Mila,” attesting to his ascetic lifestyle.

Milarepa was born into a family of considerable wealth, but lost his home and possessions to his paternal aunt and uncle following the death of his father. At the behest of his mother, Nyangtse Kargyen, he trained in black magic in order to exact revenge upon his greedy relatives. He is said to have used this sorcery to murder thirty-five people in his village. He later felt contrition for these crimes, and set out to study the Buddhist teachings with his principal teacher, Marpa the Translator (ca. 1012–97), in southern Tibet. During this period, Milarepa was subjected to a series of grueling trials, famously including the construction of immense stone towers, in order to purify the negative karma accrued in his youth. Milarepa then spent the rest of his life practicing meditation in seclusion and teaching through spontaneous songs of realization.

The most famous version of Milarepa’s life story was crafted in the late fifteenth century by Tsangnyön Heruka (1452–1504). He developed an interest in promoting the tradition of Milarepa early in life. In his young adulthood Tsangnyön traveled to Ngatsa, the birthplace of Milarepa in southern Gungtang. He saw a small red temple, and Mila’s uncle’s house in ruins, and at a renovated temple containing a statue of Milarepa he met a steward who asked him to compose verses in praise of Milarepa’s life. Tsangnyön therefore composed an encomium to Milarepa modeled on the form of the twelve acts of the Buddha, which, according to canonical sources,

are: 1. Descent into the world from Tuṣita Heaven; 2. Entry into the womb; 3. Birth; 4. Miracles; 5. Pleasures of marriage; 6. Departure; 7. Ascetic practice; 8. Going to the point of enlightenment; 9. Becoming Buddha; 10. Turning the wheel of Dharma; 11. Magical apparitions; 12. Death. There are some variations on this list, but the point is that to praise a Buddhist holy person in this manner makes an explicit comparison between that person and the Buddha—to say, in effect, that the person is not simply like the Buddha but is a buddha living in the present day. In the conclusion to his *Life of Milarepa*, Tsangnyön states that Milarepa's story is also composed of twelve acts.

In the first passage here Tsangnyön's principal biographer, Götsang Repa (fifteenth–sixteenth century), writes of the benefits of publishing Milarepa's life story by attributing these considerations to Tsangnyön himself. Tsangnyön's *Life of Milarepa* takes the form of an autobiography in which the yogin narrates an account of his deeds to a group of disciples assembled before him. The next passage is an excerpt from chapter 2 of Tsangnyön's work. It begins with Milarepa's chief disciple, Rechungpa, requesting the master to describe his years of hardship as a child. The passage corresponds to the early acts of the Buddha prior to the renunciation, though in Milarepa's case his family life was truly dystopian. AQ

THE CREATION OF THE LIFE

There are currently many life stories and song collections of Milarepa. Still, since this extraordinary life story has not been a continuous tradition, it should be clarified and taught for the benefit of my disciples, for teaching its profound and vast Dharma and spiritual instructions will surely lead to liberation. They will collect merit. There are kings, ministers, nobles who think that they are great people, and commoners, none of whom has time to practice in accordance with the Dharma. Then there are those who do have the time and conceitedly think they are practicing the Dharma, but have not taken the spiritual instructions into their experience: they are stirring up bubbles with words. There are those who are conceited into thinking that they are masters who have found the means to achieve the status of a buddha in a single lifetime: in them all virtue is destroyed.

If this *Life of Milarepa* were to be well known, sense pleasures and things desired in this life would become supports for undertaking ascetic practice, while entertainments in which one wanders would become supports for practicing single-pointedness. Milarepa's life would become a perfect example for those who doubt that buddhahood can be attained in a single lifetime, or that they are meditating at the wrong time. They will have faith in the holy Dharma of certain meaning, and will be liberated in this life or in the intermediate state. Even those of mediocre capacity can have faith in those who are experienced and provide material support for them. With a pure vow they can go into retreat,

gain meditative experience in the next life, and based on that, they may gain liberation. Even extremists will give up backward views and develop extraordinary faith, and they will certainly come to the end of saṃsāra. Thus, printing Milarepa's life will be of benefit to all beings.

[Rgod tshang ras pa Sna tshogs rang grol, *Gtsang smyon he ru ka phyogs thams cad las nam par rgyal ba'i nam thar rdo rje theb pa'i gsal byed nyi ma'i snying po*, in *The Life of the Saint of Gtsaṅ* (New Delhi: Sharada Rani, 1969), 137.7–138.7. Trans. KRS.]

SELECTIONS FROM THE LIFE OF MILAREPA

Then Rechungpa said, “O lama, with the death of your father long ago you encountered much hardship. Please tell us what that was like.”

Milarepa continued:

When I was about seven years old, my father, Mila Sherap Gyeltsen, was stricken with a terrible illness. Doctors and diviners foretold that he would not recover and they abandoned him. Friends and relatives likewise knew he would not live. Even my father himself was resolved that he would not survive. Our relatives, including my paternal uncle and aunt, our friends, countrymen, and neighbors all gathered. My father intended to place his wife and children together with all his wealth in the care of a trustee. At last he prepared an extensive testament ensuring that his son would reclaim his patrimony. Then he read it aloud for all to hear:

“To summarize out loud, I shall not recover from my present illness. Consequently, as my son is still young, these are the arrangements through which I entrust him to the care of all his relatives, especially his paternal uncle and aunt. My wealth includes all the following: in the highlands, yaks, horses, and sheep; in the lowlands, various tracts of land, Orma Triangle foremost among them, of which the poor are envious; on the ground floor of the house, cattle, goats, and donkeys; in the upper rooms, utensils of gold, silver, and iron; turquoise, silk fabrics, and a granary. In short, my possessions are such that I need not aspire to any other man's wealth.

“Spend a portion of these for expenses after I am gone. The rest I entrust to all of you gathered here until my son is able to support his own household. In particular, I entrust him to the care of both his paternal uncle and aunt. When my son is able to support his own family, he will marry Dzesé, as they were betrothed in childhood. You will then return to him my wealth in its entirety and ensure that my son thus takes charge of his patrimony. Until then may all their relatives, led by their uncle and aunt, know the joys and sorrows of my wife and children. Do not lead them into misery. I shall watch you from my grave when I die.”

With this, my father died. Our relatives performed the rites for the deceased. In agreement they said, “Nyangtsa Kargyen herself should take care of the

remaining wealth, while we all should provide whatever assistance she needs as best we can from the side.”

The uncle and aunt said, “Although some people are family, we are sincere family. We shall not lead them, mother and children, into misery. In accordance with the testament, we shall assume control of the wealth.”

Without listening to the arguments of my mother’s brother or Dzesé’s father and brothers, my uncle took the men’s goods and my aunt took the women’s; the rest they divided in half. Having done so, they said, “You, mother and children, shall serve us each in turn.” Thus, my mother and we children no longer had control of our possessions.

In summer, the time for working the fields, we were our uncle’s servants. In winter, the time for spinning and weaving wool, we were our aunt’s servants. Our food was food for dogs, our work, work for donkeys. We wore strips of tattered robe over our shoulders, tied with a jute belt. Forced to toil without rest, our limbs became cracked and raw. With only poor food and clothing, we became pale and emaciated. Our hair, once dangling in locks of gold and turquoise, turned ashen and thin and became infested with lice. Sensitive folks who saw or heard us all broke down in tears. Gossip quietly circulated about my aunt and uncle, but they acted without restraint. As we, mother and children, were beset with misery, my mother said to the aunt, “You are not Khyungtsa Peldren (Glorious Leader of the Khyung tsa), you are Dūmo Takdren (Demoness Leader of Tigers).” My aunt thus became known as Dūmo Takdren.

In those days there was a proverb: “When the false master aims to be master, the true master is put out like a dog.” Such is what we, mother and children, had become. Previously, when my father, Mila Sherap Gyeltsen, was alive, everyone, both high and low, looked to see if we smiled or frowned. Later, when my uncle and aunt became rich as kings, it was their faces, smiling or frowning, upon which everyone gazed. About my mother the people whispered, “How true the saying, ‘Rich husband, clever wife. Soft wool, fine woolens.’ Now that no capable man is around, it is just as the proverb says. At first, while Nyangtsa Kargyen was sustained by a fine husband, it is said she was courageous and wise, and an excellent cook. Now her wisdom has dimmed and she is completely miserable.” Our inferiors all ridiculed us behind our backs just as the proverb says: “When one is beset by misery, gossip will follow in turn.” Dzesé’s parents gave me new clothing and boots and said, “When riches have vanished, you needn’t think yourself poor, since they are like dewdrops in a meadow. In the past, your ancestors did not acquire wealth until later on. For you too, a time of prosperity will come.” Saying this, they consoled us over and over.

In adulthood, having achieved vengeance through sorcery, and after years of training with his teacher Marpa and decades meditating in hermitages along the Himalayan borderlands, Milarepa had little tolerance for intellectual pretension or religious trap-

pings. Instead, he emphasized the need for a simple life dedicated to yogic practice. As recounted in chapter 12 of his biography, toward the end of his life a group of disciples inquired how they should prepare his physical remains, conduct memorial services, and continue their religious activities in his absence. In response, Milarepa gave the following words of advice, which he then summarized in the form of a song. Here, as throughout much of the life story, he is referred to by the term Jetsün, an honorific title frequently translated as “Venerable Lord.”

The Jetsün said, “Through the kindness of gracious Marpa I exhausted all deeds of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. It is uncertain that a yogin whose three gates of body, speech, and mind have been liberated in the very nature of things will leave a corpse. There is no need to make clay *tsatsa* figurines or to build a stūpa.¹ I have no monastery of my own, so there is no need to establish a religious seat. Keeping to uninhabited and isolated places, such as rocky and snow-covered mountains, you all should lovingly protect disciples, the six types of sentient beings. Do not slack in producing *tsatsa* figurines, and the four-session yoga.² Atop the stūpa of all phenomena, erect a victory banner of accomplishment in the training of sacred outlook. For a memorial, pray sincerely in word and thought from the depths of your heart. For a system of practice, reject that which increases ego clinging and afflictions, and harms sentient beings even if it appears to be virtuous. Practice that which serves as an antidote for the five poisons and benefits sentient beings, even if it appears to be sinful, because it is in essence authentic Dharma.

“If, after hearing this, you disregard it and fail to practice, then your learning, however great it may be, is an obstruction that will cast you into the depths of the lower realms. Therefore, since life is short and the time of death is uncertain, devote yourself to meditation. Practice virtue and reject sinful deeds as best you know how, even at the cost of your own life. The meaning of this can be summed up as follows: act in such a way that you will not be ashamed of yourself. Do this and even if your actions contradict the letter of some texts, they will not contradict the intentions of the previous Victors. Collected here is their understanding of all aspects of study and contemplation, and through them, the intentions of this old man will be fulfilled. If my intentions are fulfilled, all your actions of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa will come to an end. On the other hand, any means for fulfilling worldly intentions are of no use at all. This is the way things are.” Then he sang this song of “what use.”

¹In Tibetan Buddhist funerary custom, the cremated ashes of the deceased are often mixed with clay to mould *tsatsa*, miniature stūpas or images of buddhas or divinities. In the case of respected religious persons, in particular, the remains may be interred within a memorial stūpa.

²The four sessions are the four divisions of the day into which periods of practice are divided.

I bow at the feet of the Translator Marpa.

Disciples gathered in faith and assembled here,
Listen to this testament song, last words
Of me, your old father Milarepa.

Through the kindness of Lhodrak Marpa
I, Milarepa the yogin,
Have finished the whole of my works.

You followers, disciples, and sons,
If you listen, do then as I've done before.

My intentions and those of
The previous Victors will be fulfilled.
The great aims of yourself and others are thus gained in this life.

All actions contrary to this
Do no good for oneself or for others,
And thus my intentions remain unfulfilled.

Without training under lamas who have lineage,
What use is there requesting initiation?

Without mixing your mind stream with the Dharma,
What use is there memorizing tantras?

Without casting off worldly activity,
What use is there meditating on instructions?

Without the three gates aligned with the Dharma,
What use is there performing rituals?

Without accepting insults with remedies,
What use is there cultivating patience?

Without shunning attachment and aversion,
What use is there presenting offerings?

Without weeding the root of self-centeredness,
What use is there practicing charity?

Without seeing all beings as your parents,
What use is there keeping religious seats?

Without sacred outlook rising in your mind,
What use is there constructing stūpas?

Without ability in the four-session yoga,
What use is there molding figurines?

Without offering prayers from your heart,
What use is there offering memorials?

Without heeding the oral instructions,
What use is there practicing mourning?

Without faith and devotion while I'm alive,
What use is there viewing my corpse?

Without world weariness and renunciation,
What use is there giving things up?

Without cherishing self less than others,
What use is there in kind words of pity?

Without giving up afflictions and desire,
What use is there offering service?

Without holding what's taught as authentic,
What use is there in many disciples?

Doing deeds that are of no use
Will harm you, so set yourself straight.

The yogin whose works are all done
Has no need for a pile of busywork.

The *Life of Milarepa* concludes with a prayer revealing the author's intention to attract a wide and varied audience, including scholars, monks, mendicants, and laypeople. Following a tradition found in many examples of Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, the verses also describe the benefits not only of reading the story but also of worshipping the text.

This *Life* of Jetsün Mila, best of men,
Shines light of gemlike perfect deeds,
Brightening the teachings of all buddhas and
Fulfilling needs and hopes of all who live.
May it form the best of service, pleasing Victors of the past.

The *Life* is graced with embellishments, poetry beginning and end.
May it serve a feast for scholars fond of grandiloquence.

The *Life*'s words arouse goose bumps of faith and devotion.
May it serve a feast for monks who renounce the world.

The *Life*'s meaning reveals the two truths indivisible.
May it serve a feast for fine masters endowed with experience.

Seeing the *Life*, one is unshackled from the eight worldly distractions.³
May it serve a feast for renunciates who've relinquished attachments.

Hearing the *Life*, faith arises all on its own.
May it serve a feast for the fortunate endowed with good karma.

Recollecting the *Life*, entanglements are forcefully severed.
May it serve a feast for the omniscient, accomplished in this life.

Touching the *Life*, the two aims are spontaneously achieved.
May it serve a feast for doctrine holders who benefit beings.

Preserving the *Life*, the intent of the lineage is realized.
May it serve a feast for lineage holders who practice their master's commands.

Sympathizing with the *Life* protects against suffering like nothing else.
May it serve a feast for all beings throughout the three realms.

The source of this feast is the life of Zhepé Dorjé that crowns the victory banner of the Sage's teachings, a lapis lazuli gem endowed with the splendor and luster of the four immeasurables,⁴ which thus lays out for all beings an abundance of delights throughout existence and peace.

When one presents it with offerings of completely pure intention and prays that it bestow what is needed and desired, the supreme medicine of the five wisdoms rains down, serving as a panacea for those lying in the sickbed of life's round, tormented by the ailments of the five poisons.

May the supreme virtue of laying out such a feast, with delicacies like the seven riches of the Noble Ones,⁵ for sentient beings deprived of such an unsullied gem and then caught up in great suffering, dispel privation for all beings throughout existence and peace.

³Acquisition and loss, repute and disrepute, praise and blame, happiness and unhappiness.

⁴Compassion, love, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

⁵Faith, moral discipline, learning, renunciation, conscience, a sense of shame, discernment.

Then in order that, by even hearing Milarepa's name, they gain in this life the state of Lord Vajradhara and then attain the power and ability to establish through innumerable incarnations all beings vast as space in the splendor of the four bodies,⁶ I dedicate such virtue—may it come to pass in just this way.

[J. W. De Jong, ed., *Mi la ras pa'i rnam thar: Texte Tibétain de la Vie de Milarépa* ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1959). Trans. AQ.

The translation has now been published in: Tsangnyön Heruka, *The Life of Milarepa*, trans. Andrew Quintman (New York: Penguin, 2010).]

⁶According to later Indian Buddhist scholastic literature, the four bodies of an enlightened being are: the manifestation body (*nirmāṇakāya*), the enjoyment body (*sambhogakāya*), the body of reality (*dharmakāya*), and the essential body (*svābhāvikakāya*), which is the unification of the first three bodies.