



Detail from a thangka in the Tibet House Repatriation Collection.

To some a saint, to others a poet of 100,000 songs, the great yogi Milarepa (1040 – 1123) is one of the most revered figures in Tibetan history. Among all sects of Tibetan Buddhism, all unite in holding Milarepa in the highest esteem. His life has grown into legend, possessing all the elements that make a great story: the death of a young boy's father, betrayal by his uncle, the boy's vow of revenge, his training in black magic, his remorse and atonement for mass murder, his education at the feet of a great teacher, and finally, his stunning achievement: enlightenment in the course of a single lifetime.

Milarepa's biography has been told many times. In 1928, W. Y. Evans-Wentz's *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa* was published, bringing this story to English-language readers for the first time. Lobsang Lhalungpa's 1984 translation of *The Life of Milarepa* is an oft-cited classic. Milarepa's life story is arguably the most beloved of all stories in Tibetan literature and is augmented by his own collection of poetry: *The Hundred Thousand*

The Story of Milarepa

Lord! Gracious Marpa! I bow down at Thy Feet!
 Enable me to give up worldly aims.
 - Milarepa

Songs of Milarepa, many of which the average Tibetan knows by heart.

Revered as an exemplar of the religious life, Milarepa nevertheless avoided the monastic institutions of his time and their systems of scholastic training. After extensive retreat, he chose instead to wander from village to village, teaching the path to Buddhahood through his songs, installing himself as a saint of the people, a folk hero both real and legendary.

Milarepa's path to sainthood was not an easy one. After Milarepa experienced deep remorse for his murderous actions as a magician of the black arts, he sought out a teacher to show him the way to atonement. The guru he found was none other than the famous translator, Marpa (1012–1097), himself the main disciple of Naropa (1016–1100). John Powers, in his book *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, writes that although Marpa was a householder with a wife and family, he is considered by the Kagyu tradition to have been “completely unattached to worldly things, and his perception was like that of a buddha who can live and act in the world while still perceiving the non-difference of nirvana and samsara.”¹

Marpa received him with a host of seemingly futile tasks. One famous story records that Milarepa was instructed to build a large tower out of nearby boulders. Once the tower was complete, he was asked to tear it down and rebuild it in another location. Once this task was complete, he again was instructed to tear it down and rebuild. Other stories record Marpa's seeming cruelty to Milarepa and have been studied by practitioners attempting to understand the boundaries of guru devotion. Nevertheless, Milarepa's devotion to his guru enabled him to persevere. The many physical hardships and mental challenges he endured were designed specifically so that he could purify his negative karma and emotions.

After some time under Marpa's tutelage, Milarepa left to live as a hermit. He persevered with great asceticism, living on nettles and meditating ceaselessly, determined to purify the negative karma he had accumulated before the unpredictable ax of death fell upon him. Powers writes, “His concern with death was so great that when he was meditating in a cave his

tattered clothes fell apart, but he decided not to mend them, saying, ‘If I were to die this evening, it would be wiser to meditate than to do this useless sewing.’”²

Milarepa studied practices such as Mahamudra and the Six Yogas of Naropa which culminated in his achieving profound realization. After a series of these strict cave retreats, it is said that Milarepa attained spiritual enlightenment, a remarkable feat for a man who began his adulthood as a murderer. Milarepa had completed his transformation from sinner to saint, from student to teacher.

A large number of students were attracted to this unconventional teacher renowned for his unusual methods and asceticism, who regarded family life, society, and monasticism as a danger to the mind, ill-suited to the purpose of achieving enlightenment.³ One of Milarepa's disciples, Rechung Dorje Drakpa (1088–1158), became an important translator. Another, the disciple Gampopa (1079–1153), founded an important lineage in Tibetan Buddhism that successfully blended the “esoteric tantric teachings of Marpa and Milarepa with a monastic structure that is well-suited to the preservation of the words of previous masters.”⁴

The Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism that began with Naropa's guru, Tilopa (988–1069), was furthered in Tibet by Marpa and Milarepa. Powers explains, “The transmission of this lineage continues today, and its vibrancy is attested by the number of widely acclaimed lamas it has produced, including the Gyelwa Karmapas and the late Kalu Rinpoche, who was a major figure in the dissemination of this lineage to the West.”⁵

One folktale records that a disciple of Milarepa, suspecting that his teacher was indeed a fully-enlightened buddha, asked him if this was so. Milarepa responded that to suggest that he was a buddha was a great insult. What was important was to remember the suffering he underwent in purifying his karma, the extraordinary effort that must be made in order to achieve enlightenment. Milarepa stands as proof that even the darkest heart can be transformed, if only one trusts in the guru, and works very, very hard. ☸

¹ Powers, John. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 348, Snow Lion Publications: 1995.

² Powers, p. 284

³ Powers, p. 352

⁴ Powers, p. 352

⁵ Powers, p. 349