



**The Story of**

# Milarepa



Re-told by Edward Horner



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# **The Story of Milarepa**

The life of Milarepa is one of Tibet's most beloved stories. Preserved orally for centuries, we cannot truly know how much of the story is historically accurate. Even so, through the ages Milarepa's story has continued to teach and inspire.

## **The Early Years**

Milarepa was presumed to be born in western Tibet in 1052, although some sources say 1040. His original name was Mila Thopaga, which means "delightful to hear." He is said to have had a beautiful singing voice.

Thopaga/Milarepa's family was wealthy and aristocratic, and Thopaga and his little sister were the darlings of their village. However, one day his father, Mila-Dorje-Senge, grew very ill, and he realized he was dying. Calling his extended family to his deathbed, Mila-Dorje-Senge asked that his estate be cared for by his brother and sister until Mila-Dorje's son, Milarepa, came of age and married.

But Milarepa's aunt and uncle betrayed their brother's trust. They divided the property between themselves and dispossessed Thopaga and his mother and sister of their rightful inheritance. Now outcasts, the little family lived in servant's quarters. They were given little food or clothing and made to work in the fields.

The children were malnourished, dirty, ragged, and covered with lice. The citizens of the town, who once adored them, now ridiculed them.

## **The Betrayal**

When, at the age of 15, Milarepa came of age, his mother tried to restore his inheritance. With great effort she scraped together all of her meagre resources to prepare a feast for her extended family and



former friends. When the guests had gathered and eaten, she stood up to speak.

Holding her head high, she recalled exactly what Mila-Dorje-Senge had said on his deathbed, and she demanded that Milarepa be given the inheritance his father had intended for him. But the greedy aunt and uncle lied, and said the estate actually had never belonged to Mila-Dorje-Senge, and so Milarepa had no inheritance. Then they forced the mother and children out of the servants' quarters and into the streets. The little family had to resort to begging and transient work to stay alive.

## **The Sorcerer**

The mother had gambled and lost everything. Now she seethed with hatred of her husband's family, and she urged Milarepa to

study sorcery. “I will kill myself before your eyes,” she told him, “if you do not seek vengeance.”

So Milarepa found a man who had mastered the black arts and became his apprentice. For a time the sorcerer taught only ineffectual charms. But the sorcerer was a just man, and when he learned Thopaga's story -- and verified it was true -- he gave his apprentice powerful secret teachings and rituals.

Milarepa spent a fortnight in an underground cell, practicing the black spells and rituals. When he emerged, he learned that a house had collapsed on many townspeople while they were gathered at a wedding, crushing to death, all within, save two -- the greedy aunt and uncle. Milarepa thought it right that they survive the disaster so they would witness the suffering their greed had caused.

But the mother was not satisfied. She wrote to Milarepa and demanded the family's crops be destroyed, also. Milarepa hid in the mountains overlooking his home village and summoned monstrous hailstorms to destroy the barley crops.

Villagers suspected black magic and angrily stormed into the mountains to find the perpetrator. Hidden, Milarepa overheard them talking about the ruined crops. He realized then that he had harmed innocent people. He returned to his teacher in anguish, burning with guilt.

## **Marpa**

In time the sorcerer saw that his student needed a new kind of teaching, and he urged Milarepa to seek out a dharma teacher. Milarepa went to a Nyingma teacher of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen), but Milarepa's mind was too turbulent for Dzogchen teachings. Milarepa realized he should seek another teacher, and his intuition led him to Marpa.



Marpa Lotsawa (1012-1097), sometimes called *Marpa the Translator*, had spent many years in India studying with a great tantric master named Naropa. Marpa was now Naropa's dharma heir and a master of the practices of Mahamudra.

But Milarepa's trials were not over. The night before Milarepa arrived, Naropa appeared to Marpa in a dream and gave him a precious dorje of lapis lazuli. The dorje was tarnished, but when it was polished it shone with brilliant radiance. Marpa took this to mean he would meet a student with a great karmic debt but who would eventually become an enlightened master who would be a light to the world.

So when Milarepa arrived, Marpa did not offer him the teachings of empowerment. Instead, he put Milarepa to work doing manual labor. This Milarepa did willingly, without complaint. But every time he completed a task and asked Marpa for teaching, Marpa would fly into a rage and slap him.



Among the tasks Milarepa was given was the building of a tower. But when the tower was nearly finished, Marpa told Milarepa to tear it down and build it somewhere else. Milarepa built and destroyed many towers. Still, he did not complain.

This part of Milarepa's story – cruel as it is – illustrates Milarepa's willingness to stop clinging to himself and place his trust in his guru, Marpa. Marpa's harshness is understood to be a skillful means to allow Milarepa to overcome the negative karma he had created by his evil deeds.

At one point, discouraged, Milarepa left Marpa to study with another teacher. When that proved to be unsuccessful, he returned to Marpa, who once again was angry. But now Marpa relented and began to teach Milarepa. And to practice what he was being taught, Milarepa lived in a cave and devoted himself to Mahamudra.



It was said that his skin turned green from living only on nettle soup. His practice of wearing only a white cotton robe, even in winter, earned him the name Milarepa, meaning "*Mila the cotton-clad.*" During this time he wrote many songs and poems that remain jewels of Tibetan literature.

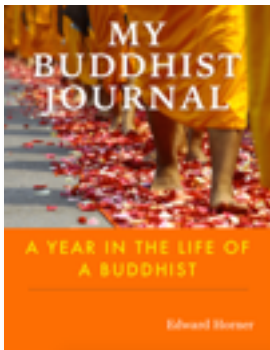
Milarepa mastered Mahamudra teachings and realized great enlightenment. Although he did not seek out students, eventually students came to him. Among the scholars who received teachings from Marpa and Milarepa was Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (1079-1153), who founded the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Milarepa is thought to have died in 1135.



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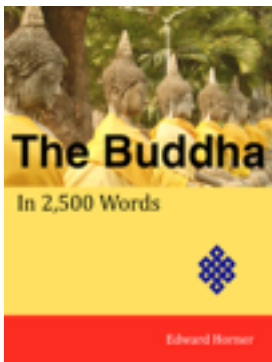
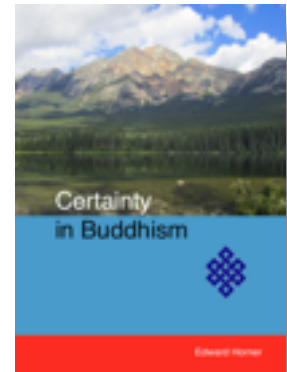
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