

## THE LIFE OF MILAREPA Part 13 – TOLERATE DISCOMFORT

Milarepa had been meditating at the White Rock cave for four years. He used barley flour to make a thin soup, but after it was gone, he picked nettle leaves to eat. He boiled them in a pot of water and ate it like a soup.



Every day he ate only boiled nettle leaves. After a long time of eating only these green leaves, his body became terribly thin, like a skeleton, and his skin began to turn green, the color of the nettles! Because it was so cold and he didn't have enough warm clothes, his body was covered with thin grayish hair.

Looking at his body, he began to wonder whether he could survive much longer. He took out the little scroll, paper rolled up and sealed, that his lama, Marpa, had given him for instructions in an emergency. He placed the scroll on his head, without opening it. And then he noticed that he didn't feel hungry anymore – his stomach felt full and there was a taste of food in his mouth.

Another year passed as he stayed in the cave, practicing meditation.

One day, some hunters walked near his cave. They had no luck hunting, and were very hungry. Milarepa, looking extremely thin and pale, with green skin, looked like a dead body in a sitting position.

When the hunters saw him, they cried out, "It's a ghost!" And they ran away in fear.

Milarepa called out to them, saying that he was a man and a yogi.

One of the hunters said, "It's hard to believe, but let's see." And they walked back to the cave.

They rushed into the cave, again feeling hunger, and demanded, “Where is your food? Give it to us. Later we will bring you back some food. If you refuse to give us food, we will kill you.”

Milarepa replied, ‘I have nothing but nettles. Lift me up and see. I have no fear of being robbed.’”

A hunter said, “We will not rob you.”

Another hunter said, “What would happen if we lift up the yogi?”

A third hunter said, “It might bring us a blessing!”



A hunter walked behind Milarepa and lifted him up, then suddenly dropped him down on the hard rocky ground. Then other hunters did the same thing, one after the other. Milarepa’s body was filled with pain each time he was dropped on the ground. He felt deep compassion for them, that they were so ignorant as to cause pain to a holy man for no reason. His compassion was so intense that tears came from his eyes.

One of the hunters had stood there without hurting Milarepa. He said to the others,

“Wait! This man seems to be a real yogi. Even if he weren’t, you don’t prove your manhood by harrassing such a bag of bones. It’s not his fault that we are hungry. Stop what you’re doing.”

He said to Milarepa, "You are a wonderful yogi. Since I have not tormented you, place me under the protection of your meditation."

The others said, "And we who lifted you up, protect us also."

One of them said, "Yeah, but there are different kinds of protection, believe me." He burst out laughing and they left the cave.

Milarepa didn't even think about using black magic to punish them. But his protective spirits went after the hunters anyway. The leader of the hunters was killed, and all the others were blinded, their eyes destroyed, except the hunter who had not hurt Milarepa and who had told the others to stop.

After another year had passed, Milarepa's clothes were all worn out, and the old fur coat given to him by his aunt was in tatters. He thought of sewing together the empty flour sacks and the rags that his clothes had become, to make a meditation cushion. Then he thought, it was no use, it was better to spend the time meditating than sewing. So he spread the tattered coat over his hard flattened cushion and pulled up the edges of fur on the coat to cover his lower body. He covered his upper body with the flour sacks.

After some months, the coat and flour bags fell apart, and he thought about sewing them together. But he didn't have any needle or thread. So he knotted the flour sacks to cover his body and held them together with some rope, and wore these as his clothes in the daytime. At night, he put the scraps of fur that were the remains of his coat over his cushion at night. And then he spent another year meditating in the cave.



One day he heard some voices of men nearby. It was another group of hunters. They were carrying the dead animals they had hunted. When they arrived at the entrance to the cave and saw Milarepa, they cried out, just like the hunters before,

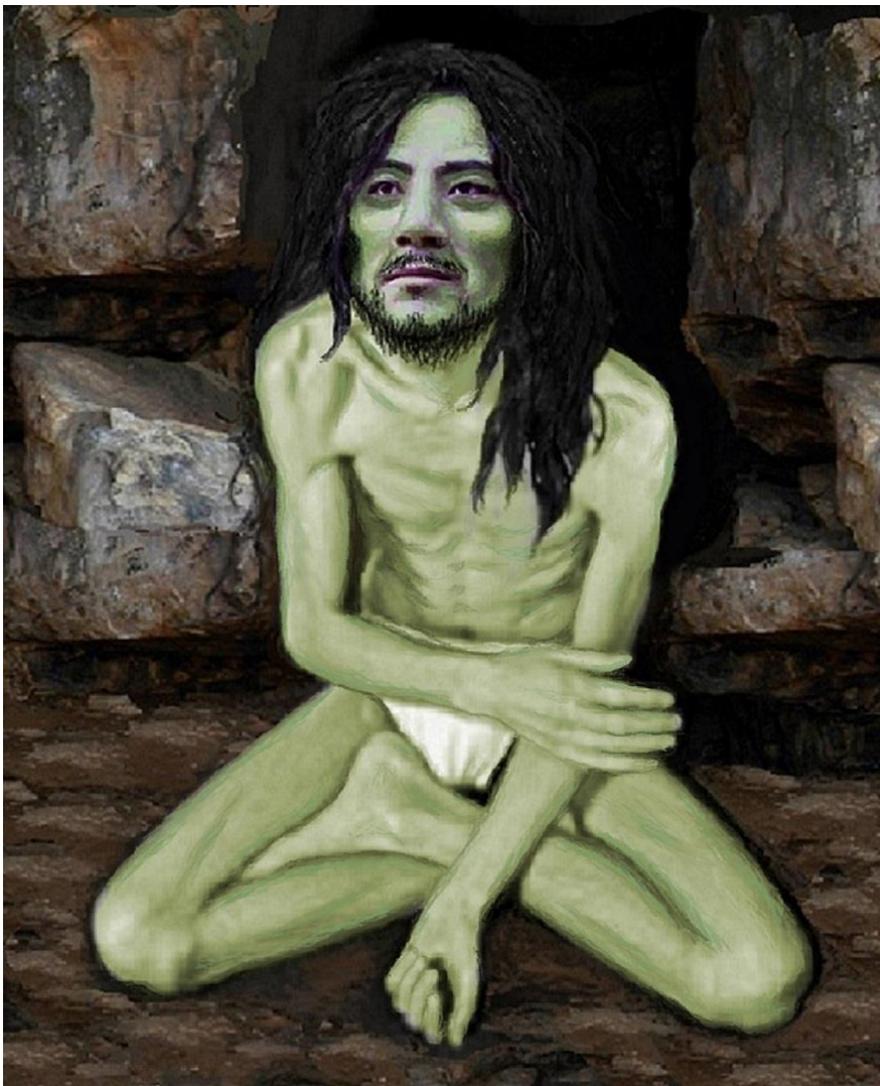
"It's a ghost!" and one of them ran away.

Another one said, "There are no ghosts to be afraid of in the daytime. Take a good look. Is it still there?"

Some of the hunters came forward and they too became frightened, seeing the skeleton-like body sitting in the cave. Milarepa explained that he was not a ghost, but a yogi meditating in the mountains, and that he looked so thin because he didn't have enough food, only nettles to eat. The hunters didn't believe that he could live without real food.

One said, "Let's see if it's true," and then they went into the cave. Indeed, there was nothing there except nettles, They felt deeply sorry for him, and offered him a big supply of meat and other foods. They said,

"What you are doing is miraculous. Please save the animals that we have killed, and let them be reborn in the heaven worlds. As for us, please wash away our bad deeds." They bowed and left.



Milarepa thought, "What good luck! Now I can eat like a human being!"

He cooked some meat, and after he had eaten, he began to feel much more peaceful and blissful. His health improved, and his awareness and meditation was much better. He realized that the few gifts he received in the mountain retreat was better for him than hundreds of offerings given in towns and villages.

He ate the meat in small portions, but what he saved for later eventually became filled with maggots - fly larvae. He wanted to pick them off and eat the meat anyway, but then he felt

compassion for the maggots, thinking that he was depriving them of their food. So he no longer wanted it, and left it for them. He went back to eating only nettles.

After another year passed, and now Milarepa had been in the cave for at least eight years. Again, another group of hunters arrived at Milarepa's cave. They were hungry, as they had not caught any animals to eat. They saw Milarepa sitting in the cave, with only a ragged flour sack tied around him. One of the hunters pointed his arrow at Milarepa and said,

"Are you a man or a ghost? Is it a scarecrow? It looks like a ghost."

Milarepa smiled and said, "It's me, I am a man."

They recognized Milarepa by the gap in his teeth.

"Are you Good News?" one asked in wonder.

"I am he," Milarepa replied.

One of them boldly said, "Okay, then, give us something to eat now. We will pay you back later. It has been many years since you left the village. Have you been here all that time?"

Milarepa replied, "I have been here all along. I have nothing good for you to eat."

"Okay, give us what you eat yourself, that will be enough for us," one of the hunters said.

"Very well. Make a fire and cook some nettles," Milarepa said.

When they made a fire and cooked the nettles, they asked for some meat to go with it.

Milarepa said, "If I had meat, my food would be more nourishing. I have not had any for years. Use more nettles instead."

They said, "Then we want bones to flavor the soup."

Milarepa said, "If I had bones, my food wouldn't be so tasteless. I have done without them for years. Just use more nettles."

"But we can't do without salt," a hunter said.

"Use the nettles as salt," Milarepa replied.

One of the hunters said, "It is certain that with such a way of eating and dressing you will never look normal. You are not a man. Even a servant eats his fill and wears warm clothing. There is no man on earth more miserable or pitiful than you."

Milarepa exclaimed, "Please! Don't speak that way. I was born the luckiest of men. I have met Lama Marpa, and from him I got the instructions which allow me to become enlightened in this life and with this body. By renouncing the world, giving up the worldly life, and meditating in

this lonely mountain, I am trying to reach the final goal of life. I have given up food, clothing, and status, therefore destroying the real enemies of life – desire and aversion – in this very life. There is no worldly man braver or with higher goals than I. Although you were born in a country in which the teaching of the Buddha has been spread, you don't even have the urge to listen to the Dharma, let alone meditate. There is no life more dangerous than piling up faults and bad deeds little by little – it fills up the hell-worlds. Now I am forever at peace, I am forever assured of happiness, and I shall have the ultimate bliss.”

He sang a song with the words,  
“I bow to the feet of Marpa the Compassionate One . . .  
I have renounced food and clothing in this life  
To become a perfect Buddha.  
I am happy with the hard cushion beneath me.  
I am happy with the cotton cloth which covers me.  
I am happy with the meditation belt which ties my knees.  
I am happy with this ghost-like body, neither starved nor full,  
I am happy with my mind which has gained insight into reality  
I am not unhappy, I am happy.  
If it seems to you that I am happy, do as I have done  
If you do not have the good fortune to be religious  
Consider the true and lasting happiness  
Of all beings, of you and of me, and do not mistakenly feel sorry for me.  
Now the sun is setting, return to your homes.  
Since life is short and death strikes without warning,  
I who strive toward Buddha-hood, have no time for useless words.  
Therefore leave me to my contemplation.”

The hunters said, “You have said many beautiful things. But however wonderful your example may be, we cannot follow it.” And then they went away.

Each year a great festival was held in the village, and the hunters were at the festival. They were in a good mood, and sang the song that Milarepa had sung to them. Also at the festival was Peta, the sister of Milarepa. She heard them singing the song, which touched her heart although she had never heard it before. She exclaimed,

“Whoever spoke those words is a Buddha!”

One of the hunters laughed and said, “Well, well, she is singing the praises of her brother!” He thought she must have heard him singing the song before.

Another one of the hunters said, “Whether your brother is a Buddha or an ordinary man, this is his song, and he is on the point of dying of starvation.”

Peta said, "My father and mother died a long time ago, Our relatives turned against us. My brother wanders to the ends of the earth. I am a beggar and will never see him again, so I don't wish to celebrate and have fun." And then she wept.

Zessay saw her and told her, "Don't cry. Your brother is alive. I saw him some time ago. Go to Horse Tooth White Rock and see if he is there. If he is, then we will all be together again."

Peta took a full jar of beer that she got from begging door to door, and she took a bag of flour and spices, and went to Horse Tooth White Rock. She went up to Milarepa's cave, and looked at him from the cave entrance.

His body was so terribly thin, like a skeleton, and his eyes were sunk in their sockets. All his bones stuck out. His skin was dried out and green, and looked like wax. He had thin gray hairs on his body. From his head, his hair was long, loose and wild around his shoulders. His arms and legs looked like they would fall apart.



Peta thought he might actually be a ghost, and was terrified. But she remembered that the hunter had said that her brother is dying of starvation. She asked,

"Are you a man or a ghost?"

"I am Mila Good News."

She recognized his voice. She came into the cave and embraced him in a hug.

"Brother! My elder brother!" she cried. Overcome with emotion, she fainted.

Milarepa recognized Peta, and felt joyful and sad at the same time. He did his best to wake her up gently, and she became conscious again. She placed her head on his knees and, covering her face with her hands, said between sobs,

"Our mother died of grief and loneliness for her son, and no one even came to bury her. I gave up all hope and left the house I went to another village far away to beg for food. I wondered if you too were dead or alive, whether you had found some happiness. But look at you! This is my brother's destiny! And this is the sister's suffering! There is no one on earth who is more wretched than we, brother and sister." And she cried.

Milarepa tried to comfort her, but her misery was too much. He sang a song to her, in which he explained his lifestyle, loneliness and discomforts, and his confidence that he will become fully enlightened by the force of his meditation. He sang that Peta should strive with perseverance to practice Dharma, instead of being overcome with frustration and sadness.

Peta said, "It's hard to believe your words are true. If they are true, then other followers of the Dharma would have practiced a similar path, but I've never seen anyone as miserable as you."

She gave Milarepa the food and beer. He ate and drank, and at that moment his mind became crystal clear. His meditation was much better that evening. But the next day, his body felt uncomfortable, as it wasn't used to eating proper food. His mind began to wander with positive and negative thoughts. He meditated with all his strength, but couldn't meditate deeply as he had before.

#### QUESTIONS:

1. What did Milarepa put on his head that made his hunger go away? (scroll, paper rolled up and sealed, that Marpa had given him for emergency)
2. What did people think Milarepa was when they saw him in the cave? (a ghost)
3. What was Milarepa's soup made from? (nettle leaves and water only)
4. How did the hunters hurt Milarepa's body? (they lifted him up and dropped him)
5. How did Peta hear about Milarepa? (she heard the hunters singing his song)
6. Why was Peta so upset? (she was a beggar, Milarepa looked like he was starving, and their mother died of grief)

#### DHARMA DISCUSSION – TOLERATE DISCOMFORT

*"I am happy with the hard cushion beneath me,  
I am happy with the cotton cloth which covers me. . . .*

*Even though my bones have pierced my flesh on this cold stone floor, I have persevered,  
My body, inside and outside, has become like a nettle, it will never lose its greenness.  
In the solitary cave, in the wilderness, the recluse knows much loneliness.  
But my faithful heart never separates from the Lama, Buddha of the Three Ages.  
By the force of meditation arising from my efforts,  
Without doubt, I will achieve self-realization (Enlightenment).  
And when one has attained deeper experience and illumination,*

*Happiness comes of itself in this life.  
And Enlightenment in the next.  
That is why I ask my sister Peta,  
Instead of being overcome with frustration and sorrow,  
To strive with perseverance toward the Dharma."*

- Milarepa (The Life of Milarepa, pp. 122, 124-125)

We don't live like Milarepa, so it's difficult to imagine all the discomforts he had. He had no proper food, no bed, no pillow, and no blanket for sleeping. He had no carpet, but only a cold, stoney floor in the cave. He had no chair or soft cushion to sit on, only a hard thin cushion. He had no clothes other than cloth bags and an old fur coat, and even that coat fell apart after some time. He had no medicines to heal him if he were to get sick. Of course he had no one to talk to, no one to help him, and no entertainment of any kind.

But he was content and tolerated that discomfort – and even sang that he was happy with the little that he had - because he knew it would be the best way to get real lasting happiness, from meditation and ultimately, from Enlightenment. That was much more important to him than being comfortable. Also, he knew that tolerating discomforts would make his mind stronger, more powerful, overcoming the urges to do what is easy and comfortable.

Do you tolerate any discomforts to get something that's more important? Sometimes you wait in a long line to buy something you really want. Maybe you practice a sport even in the hot sun or in cold weather so you become successful in that sport. Maybe you don't always like to do homework and study, but you tolerate it so you succeed at school. Maybe you don't like to sit still and meditate, but you tolerate it anyway.

We learn not to whine and complain that it's uncomfortable or boring, because we know the discomfort is impermanent and it is for a good purpose.

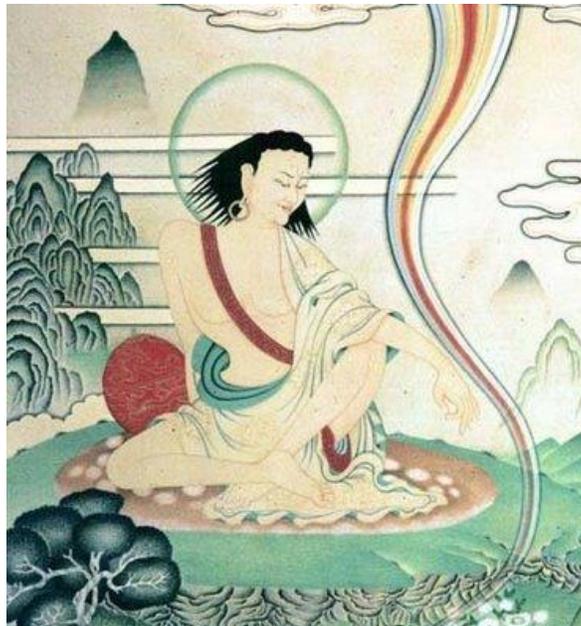
But what about things that are even more uncomfortable? For example, the discomfort of being scolded, criticized or punished when you do something wrong. When a person does something wrong, they may lie and deny they did it, to avoid embarrassment, criticism or punishment. But it's better to say the truth, admit what you did wrong, and accept the discomfort of being scolded or punished. That way, you learn your lessons, so you can be a better person. If you are dishonest to avoid punishment, you likely won't remember the wrong that you did, and then you might do it again and again.

Here is another example of being uncomfortable: waiting for a long time with nothing to do. In today's world, we are surrounded by entertainment - there are TVs, smartphones, computers, tablets, and music available around us most of the time. So we get spoiled, expecting to have something interesting to look at or hear wherever we are. Then it's more difficult to be patient when we must wait in some place where there is no entertainment.

But it's very important to learn to tolerate the discomfort of not having something to entertain us. Why? Because our brains become overstimulated, agitated, by often looking at a busy screen in front of us. Then it's more difficult to really calm our mind, to be mindful, or to meditate. We think we calm down by looking at the screen, but our mind is still very busy. For some people, the overstimulation causes anxiety or inability to sleep well.

So when you notice that you are feeling uncomfortable – such as being bored, hungry, hot, criticized, or served food that you don't like – think about Milarepa tolerating many discomforts, strengthening his mind so he could meditate better and become enlightened. Remember that the discomfort is impermanent, and by tolerating it without complaining, it can help you strengthen your mind.

ACTIVITY – Meditation Belt – Gomtag:



We see pictures and thangkas of Milarepa with a red belt over one shoulder. That is a meditation belt, or in Tibetan, “Gomtag,” which Milarepa sang about in the story, “I am happy with the meditation belt which ties my knees.” It is used during meditation retreats to maintain certain meditation postures and practice techniques that help meditation. It supports the person sitting in a certain posture. It also is used by advanced practitioners to stay in sitting position the whole night without having to lay down to sleep. It can support the back, to avoid back pain, when sitting for meditation. It is a strip of red cotton cloth with a length two times your arm span (holding your arms apart). The two ends are sewn together to make a long belt.

Students can practice sitting in different postures with an improvised meditation belt made of a scarf with the ends tied or pinned together. For example, they can try sitting cross-legged and wrapping the belt around their lower back and knees. They can try sitting in the same positions as Milarepa in the pictures above. Ask them which position they could sit in the most comfortably using the belt for a long time - for hours - without a cushion.