

## THE LIFE OF MILAREPA Part 12 – Reduce Attachments

Milarepa stayed in his village for a few more days, and Zessay heard that he was there. She was the girl who he was supposed to marry by an agreement made between their families. Now she came to see him, bringing him some food, supplies and beer. When she first saw him, she threw her arms around him, hugging him, and burst into tears. He was terribly thin, like a starving person. She told him about his mother dying and his sister becoming a wanderer, traveling around from village to village. Overcome with grief, Milarepa shed many tears.

He asked her, “Why after all this time have you not married?”



She answered, “The people in the village were afraid of your protective spirit, and no one would have me. If anyone had proposed marriage to me, I would have refused. But it is surprising that you have gotten involved in religion. What are you going to do with your house and field?”

Milarepa suspected she was wondering if he would still marry her. He thought, “I must tell Zessay that there is no hope of marriage with me, but I shall say many prayers for her.”

He said, “If I find my sister again, I will give her my house and field. Meanwhile, make use of the field yourself. If I find out for sure that my sister is dead, then you may keep the house and field.”

She asked, in wonder, “But don’t you want them yourself?”

He answered, “According to my ascetic practice as a yogi, I will seek food like the mice and birds, so I have no need of a field. My home will be an empty cave, so I don’t need a house. Even if one were Master of the Universe, at the moment of death we must give up everything. If one gives up everything now, one will be happy here and hereafter. That’s why – quite different from what others do – I have now given up everything and everybody. Don’t expect me to be like other men.”

She asked, “So, your practice is different from other religious people?”



He replied, “Those people who think of worldly goals – to be admired, to be popular, to be wealthy – they are content with studying a few religious books. They feel joyful when they are successful and others fail. Using religion, they collect as much wealth and fame as they can. They have holy names and wear religious robes. I turn away from them, and I always will turn away from them. But other devotees, if their minds are not corrupted like that, are like me, no matter what robes they wear, and I can’t turn my back on them. I stay away only from those who do not follow the essence, the important parts, of the Dharma.”

Zessay did not look pleased. She said, “I have never seen a religious devotee like you. You look even worse than a beggar. What kind of Buddhism is that?”

Milarepa replied, “It is the best of all. You give up the Eight Worldly Reactions to get Enlightenment in this lifetime. The way I look, as a yogi, is in accordance with that tradition.”

Giving up the Eight Worldly Reactions means that you don’t feel thrilled or upset by your experiences, but instead, you are detached. You just accept all circumstances, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. You don’t feel happiness from getting nice things and don’t feel disappointed when you lose them, you don’t feel the happiness of getting praise and compliments or the disappointment of getting criticism, insults and blame, you don’t feel the happiness of being popular or the disappointment of being unpopular, and you don’t feel the happiness of enjoying pleasant things or the disappointment of experiencing suffering or unpleasantness.

Zessay replied, “As you say, your way and the way of other religious people are quite opposite. One of them must be wrong. If they are both true, I would prefer their way rather than yours.”

Milarepa said, “I don’t like what you worldly people like. Even those monks in yellow robes who follow the same path as I do, they don’t seem to be entirely free from the Eight Worldly Reactions. Even if they are free, there is a huge difference in the time it takes to attain Enlightenment. This is what you can’t understand. If you can understand, then practice the Dharma. If you can’t, then go on living as you are and take my house and field.”

Zessay said, “I want neither your house nor your field. Give them to your sister. As for me, I shall practice the Dharma, but I cannot follow a path like yours.” And then she went away.

Word about what Milarepa said traveled from one person to another in the village, and eventually Milarepa's aunt heard that Milarepa no longer had any use for his field and house.

She thought, "Since he says that he will follow the instructions of his Master, I will see if I can get the field for myself."

She went to visit Milarepa, bringing barley flour, beer, and some dried meat. She said,

"The other day I acted stupidly. But since you are a holy man, you will forgive me. Now I, your aunt, will grow grain in your field and bring you barley."

Milarepa answered, "Very well, aunt, bring me a bag of barley flour each month and keep the rest for yourself."

She smiled, "I will do that."

She brought barley as agreed, but only for two months. Later, she visited Milarepa and said,



"People say that if I grow grain in your field, your protective spirits will cast evil spells on us. But you wouldn't let that happen, would you?"

Milarepa said, "Why would they do that, since it's good for both of us that you grow grain in the field and bring me food?"

She said, "Very well, then, nephew, since it makes no difference to you, it will make me feel better if you would promise not to let the spirits put spells on us."

Milarepa made the promise, because according to Dharma, it is good to make others happy. Then she was happy and returned home.

Milarepa tried to meditate, but he couldn't feel any blissful experience. He couldn't make his body warm by practicing Tummo. One night he had a dream in which he was plowing his field, but the earth was so dry and hard that he thought he should give up. Marpa appeared in the dream and told him to strengthen his will, have courage, and work, and he will be able to plow the field. Then, in his dream, he could plow the field and he had a full harvest of grain. He woke up full of joy, and resolved to go and meditate at Horse Tooth White Rock.

That day, his aunt brought him three loads of barley flour, a worn-out fur coat, clothing, some dried meat, and some butter and fat for cooking. She said,

“Here is the payment for your field. Take it and go someplace where I will never see you or hear of you again. People are saying, ‘After all the misery Good News has caused, now you are hanging out with him. Rather than let him kill the rest of us with his black magic, we will stay away from both of you.’ That is why it would be good for you, nephew, to go to another village. In any case, if you stay, they have no real reason for killing me. But as for you, my nephew, they might just kill you.”

Milarepa knew very well that the people of the village had not said that. It was a lie. He thought to himself,

“What if I don’t act according to Dharma? I didn’t promise not to cast spells on anyone who takes my field away from me. There is nothing to stop me from sending hailstorms the minute she turns her back. But, I won’t do such things. Because how could I practice controlling my anger if there is no one to be angry with? If I were to die tonight, what would I do with my field?”

Then he thought, “It is said that controlling anger is the best way of attaining Enlightenment. My aunt is the support of my meditation. It is thanks to my uncle and aunt that I have entered the path of liberation. In gratitude, I will pray always for their Enlightenment. In this life I can give them not only my field but also my house.”

So he said to his aunt, “Because I have no other way for attaining Enlightenment in this life except to follow the instructions of my lama, please take not only my field but also my house.”

He sang a song to her that included the words,

“Everything one collects becomes the property of one’s enemies. . . .

The price my aunt paid for my field is her greed; to have any part of it would cause me to be reborn among the hungry ghosts.

The words of my aunt are words of anger; if I were to speak the same language, we would destroy each other.

Aunt, take my house and field; take them and may you be happy.

Through my devotion to the Dharma, you will be released from blame, and I will make my way to the ultimate Truth.

It is through compassion that I overcame the demons.

I don’t care about bad talk about me; I turn toward higher goals.

O gracious Lama . . . bless me that I may fulfill my life in the mountains alone.”

After the song, his aunt said, “You, nephew, are a true and sincere seeker of Dharma. That is marvelous!” And she left, full of joy.



Milarepa felt disturbed about this event with his aunt. He felt overwhelmed by a terrible sadness. But at the same time, he felt happy and relieved to have gotten rid of his house and field. He thought again about going to meditate at the cave of Horse Tooth White Rock.



The next morning, he took what his aunt had given him and went to Horse Tooth White Rock without anyone knowing, and stayed in a pleasant cave. He placed on the ground a small hard mat as a cushion for meditation. And he made a vow - a promise to himself - not to visit anyone to get food or medicine, even if he is starving or sick, so he wouldn't get distracted from his work to become enlightened.



He stayed in the cave, meditating day after day. For food, he cooked a thin soup made with *tsampa*, roasted barley flour.

But his body became weak, so he couldn't practice breathing control exercises. He couldn't warm his body with the practice of Tummo, and he felt terribly cold in the freezing winter weather.

One night, he had a vision, in which he saw many women conducting a holy feast, and they surrounded him and said,

“Marpa has sent us to tell you that if you don't feel the warmth of Tummo, you may use these methods

of body, speech and mind until the blissful warmth arises within you.”

Then they demonstrated yoga poses.

So he practiced the yoga poses and the other methods they showed him, and soon the warmth of Tummo spread through his body.

He stayed in the cave for one year. One day, he had a desire to go out and look around and maybe beg for some nourishing food. He prepared to leave the cave. But then he reminded himself of his vow not to leave or get distracted from his meditation practice.

He was determined not to let himself get distracted, so he stayed in the cave meditating. After some time he didn't even know if it was night or day, he was so deep in meditation. His practice improved and he stayed in the cave for three more years.

Each year, he finished off another bag of barley flour. And now he had finished all three bags of flour. He wondered what to do. Should he go to a village and ask for food? But he thought,

“It is better to die than break my vow. I shall not go down to the village. I will not break my vow. But since I need to live for a Dharmic purpose, I must find enough food to stay alive.”

He went out from the White Rock cave and felt the warm sun. He could look far into the distance, and he gazed at the view.



Many nettles were growing there. He could eat nettles and stay at the cave, meditating!

So he didn't need to beg for food from people.

He gathered nettle leaves and boiled them in a pot to make a very simple soup. There was nothing except water and nettles in the soup. This is the food Milarepa survived on while living in the cave.

## QUESTIONS:

1. Why didn't Milarepa want to have his field and house? (as a yogi, he finds food like birds and mice, and he lives in a cave)
2. What did Zessay think of Milarepa's religious practice? (maybe it is wrong, and it's different from other religious people)
3. What did Milarepa's aunt really want when she went to visit him? (she wanted to have his house and field)
4. When Milarepa's aunt lied to try to make him leave the village, saying that the villagers talked about her hanging around him, what did Milarepa think about doing, that was not according to Dharma? (casting spells, sending a hailstorm)
5. What negative emotion did he have to control when she lied to him and tried to make him leave? (his anger)
6. How did his aunt support his meditation? (she provided food and clothes)
7. What kind of practice did the women in his vision teach him? (yoga poses)

## DHARMA DISCUSSION – REDUCE ATTACHMENTS:

*"A mind that is free from attachment is the Master of Contentment."*

- Marpa (The Life of Milarepa, p. 92)

*"Everything that exists is transitory and in constant movement.*

*And especially this world of samsara is devoid of essential purpose and value.*

*Rather than indulge in futile actions, I must devote myself to the essential purpose of the Dharma."*

- Milarepa (The Life of Milarepa p. 103)

What do we mean by being "attached" or having "attachments" to something?

The feeling of wanting to have or keep the things, people, experiences, and activities that we like.

The opposite is to be "detached" or have "non-attachment" – not to cling to the things we like. Not to be too delighted to have them, and not to be upset when we don't have them.

A similar idea is "contentment" - to be content with what you have and what you really need.

If we're too attached to things, we are not content.

We always want something else, because we get bored with what we have.

We want something more, or something else, something that others have, or something better, bigger, or newer than what we have.

It's like an addiction - we are never satisfied for long. We get something nice, and then we want something else that goes with it, and another one, and then a newer one, and then something that our friend has, and so on.

Milarepa was content with his simple life as a yogi.

He explained to Zessay that he wasn't attached to the things that most people want – a nice house, land, a wife or husband, children, being successful, and having wealth.

He knew that we have to give up everything at some point in our life, and certainly when we die.

And that we feel so much stress and sadness when we lose the people and things that we love. So he knew that it is better not to get attached to them.

He knew that the happiness he would get from such attachments is not as much as the happiness he gets from meditation.

And he knew that to become enlightened in his lifetime, he had to give up attachments – he had to be detached.

That is because if we are attached to many things, we spend most of our time thinking about them and then we don't think much about meditation, Dharma and Enlightenment.

At first, he had attachments to his house and field.

He wanted to give them to someone he loved or who deserved it, like Zessay or his sister.

And he didn't want to reward his aunt by giving them to her, when she is greedy, angry, insulted him, and lied.

But as he sang in his song, if he is attached to his field, then he would be greedy like his aunt, and then he may be reborn in the world of hungry ghosts, where greedy people are reborn.

And, he realized that she and the uncle actually helped him find his spiritual path.

How did they do that?

Because of their cruelty, he practiced black magic and had to leave the village, and then he felt guilty and wanted to learn Dharma, and found Marpa!

So he felt grateful to them, and then was willing to give his aunt his field and his house.

He realized that giving them away, being grateful and generous, and practicing detachment, is better than holding onto them, being attached to them, which might lead to more trouble, more work, stress and worry, or conflicts with his aunt, trying to take the house and field unfairly.

Can you think of a situation in which someone wanted something of yours, and you thought that it's better to be generous and just give it to them rather than have a conflict over it?

This is a way to prevent a conflict, and develop your virtues of generosity and detachment.

In the story, Milarepa mentioned the Eight Worldly Reactions.



He was practicing detachment from the Eight Worldly reactions – not being delighted or upset by being praised or blamed, getting and losing, popularity or unpopularity, pleasantness or unpleasantness.

For example, he was trying not to be angry or upset by what his aunt said or did.

As he sang in his song, if he used angry words against his aunt, they would just hurt each other again and again, back and forth.

He was not attached to having tasty food; he was content eating only barley flour or nettle soup.

Because he was a yogi, he practiced this extreme detachment, just accepting all circumstances, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, without getting upset.

Because you are young and not living as a yogi, you don't have to try to have such extreme detachment,

But you can make your life more peaceful by reducing your attachments, being more content:

Being aware of the things you are attached to, and remembering not to be too attached – not to get too upset when you lose them or don't have them.

Not being attached to too many things, not having too many "likes and dislikes," not intensely wanting too many things.

Not getting too upset when things don't go exactly as you want them to go, remembering that everything is always changing, and that you get exactly what you deserve according to your karma.

Remembering that contentment with what you have leads to more happiness than having many attachments, and always wanting more.

Remembering that bad experiences can lead to something good, like Milarepa's bad experiences with his aunt and uncle eventually led him to meeting Marpa and becoming a great yogi.

ACTIVITY – Being aware of our attachments:

1. Make a list or a picture of all the people, things, and activities that you like the most – that you are most attached to. This helps us be aware of our attachments.
2. Or, sitting in a circle, throw a ball or bean bag to another student as you call out something you are attached to – a person, object, activity, event, or place that you really like. The student who catches it calls out something he is attached to as he tosses the ball or beanbag to the next student. Keep going until every student has caught several tosses.