

THE LIFE OF MILAREPA Part 4 – The Four Thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma

After the huge hailstorm, Milarepa's magician lama, Terrifying Conqueror, seemed full of joy that Milarepa was successful with the magic he learned, destroying the wheat and barley fields, which was the food supply for the people of the village Milarepa grew up in.

But Milarepa was filled with shame for the evil he had done by magic. He wanted to learn the Dharma, the way of purifying the mind and becoming enlightened. He wanted to be taught the Dharma so much that he was obsessed with it, thinking about it all the time. He was so obsessed and anxious to learn it that he forgot to eat. When he went outside, he wanted to go back inside. If he stayed inside, he wanted to go outside. He couldn't sleep at night.

He didn't dare tell the lama how he felt or that he longed to be free of the suffering of samsara, the cycle of birth and death - being born, living and dying again and again - and to be enlightened. He kept asking himself over and over, "How can I practice the true teaching?"

Terrifying Conqueror was supported by a wealthy landowner, who provided for all the lama's needs. One day, the landowner became terribly ill, and died within a few days. Milarepa saw the sadness on the lama's face and asked,

"Oh Master, why are you so silent? Why do you have such a sad face?"

The lama replied, "Everything in the world is impermanent. Yesterday my very kind supporter died. That is why the cycle of birth and death troubles my heart. But above all, I am old. And from the time of my youth until I am in my old age, I have done harm to many beings by evil spells, magic and hailstorms. You also, though young, have done many crimes of magic and hailstorms. These crimes too, are my burden."

Milarepa asked innocently, "Haven't you in some way helped these victims to reach heaven worlds and reach liberation, freedom from the cycle of birth and death?"

The lama replied, "All sentient beings have the Buddha-nature within them. I know the basic teachings of how to lead them to heaven worlds and liberation. But when events come up that test my actual knowledge, I only remember words and ideas. I have no confidence in my ability to help other beings. But now I am going to practice the Dharma to be able to properly deal with anything that I am faced with. So, either you must take over teaching my students so that I can devote myself to the practice of Dharma, or you must practice the Dharma yourself and help us all to get to the heaven worlds and liberation. I shall provide you with all the supplies you need."



Milarepa's wish was fulfilled – he said, "I myself will practice the Dharma, and that will help all of us."

"Well then," said the lama, "since you are so young and have great faith and the will to do it, then practice the purest of all Dharma."

The lama gave him a yak and woolen cloth to offer as gifts, and directed Milarepa to go to a lama called Joy of Gods, where

he could learn the great teachings of Dzogchen and purify himself.

When Milarepa found the lama called Joy of Gods, he offered the yak and woolen cloths as gifts, bowed to him and said, "The one who comes to you is a great sinner. Grant me the teaching in this life which will deliver me from the cycle of birth and death."

Joy of Gods replied, "This teaching of great perfection, Dzogchen, leads to enlightenment. To meditate on it by day, one can become a Buddha in one day. To meditate on it by night, one can become a Buddha in one night. For those fortunate ones with great karma who merely hear it, even without meditating on it, this joyous teaching is a sure way of liberation. That is why I wish to give it to you."

And the lama gave him initiation and instruction in the Dzogchen teachings.

Milarepa thought, "In the past, I got great results with spells in 14 days, and 7 days were enough practice to make a hailstorm. But here is a way to reach enlightenment that is even easier than sending hailstorms and death through magic. I can be purified in one night, or in one day, if I meditate on it the whole time. And by meeting this great lama, I have become one of the fortunate Bodhisattvas who just need to hear the teaching and don't even have to meditate on it."

Thinking in this way, Milarepa didn't meditate, but spent a lot of time sleeping. After a few days, the lama said to him,

"When you first greeted me, you told me you were a great sinner. That is quite true. I was proud of my teaching, and I spoke about it to you too soon. So I am not able to guide you to liberation. Go to the monastery of the famous Marpa, the student of the great master Naropa

of India, and the king of translators, who has no equal. You and he have karmic links in the past. That is why you should go to him.”

As soon as he heard the name of Marpa the Translator, Milarepa was filled with happiness, so every hair on his body vibrated and tears came to his eyes. He could think of nothing else after that. He got ready to leave and find Marpa, thinking over and over to himself, “When will I see the lama face to face?”

The night before Milarepa arrived, Marpa saw the Great Master Naropa in a dream.



In the dream, Naropa gave Marpa a slightly tarnished blue Vajra and a gold vase. In the dream, Naropa told Marpa,

“With the water in this vase, wash the dirt from the Vajra and then put it on top of the banner of victory. This will please the Buddhas of the past and make all sentient beings happy, fulfilling your goal and that of others.”

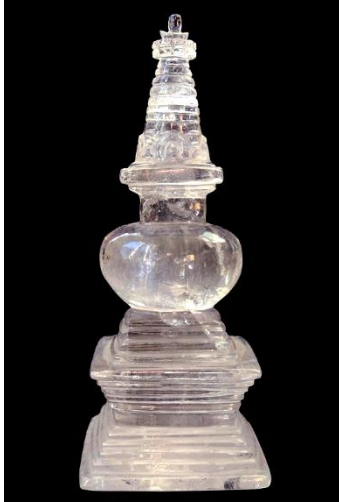
Then Naropa vanished.



In the dream, Marpa washed the Vajra with water from the vase and put it on top of a banner of victory on a temple.

Then the brilliance of the Vajra lit up the whole universe, and all beings were filled with light and happiness.

Somewhat surprised by the dream, Marpa awoke and was filled with joy and love.



And then Marpa's wife walked in with his tea, and said, "Oh Lama, last night I had a dream. Two women were carrying a crystal stupa that had some dirt on it, and the women said, 'Naropa commands the lama to purify this stupa and place it on the top of a mountain.' And you washed it with water in a vase and placed it on a mountain top, where it radiated light as dazzling as the sun. What is the meaning of the dream?"

Marpa thought, "These dreams are very much alike," and his heart was filled with even more joy, as he knew something very special was about to happen. But he told his wife, "I don't know the meaning of the dream. Now I am going to plow the field near the road."

His wife said, "But that is a work for laborers. If you, a great lama, do this work then everyone will make fun of us. So please, don't go."

The lama paid no attention to her, but asked her to bring plenty of beer. He went out to the field and buried the jug of beer in the dirt to stay cool.

Meanwhile, Milarepa was on his way to find Marpa. He asked people in the area whether they had seen him. They said they hadn't seen him. A little boy who was with them, who had a kind face, neat hair and good clothes. He said,

"Are you talking about my father? My father bought gold and went to India with it, and then brought back many books with precious stones on them. Usually he doesn't work, but today he is plowing a field." Milarepa thought, "The boy seems to be talking about Marpa. But would a Great Translator be plowing a field?"



At the side of the road, he saw a tall and rather fat man with the robes of a spiritual teacher. He had large eyes and a stern, powerful look. And he was plowing the field, guiding the yaks pulling the plow.

Milarepa felt incredible joy and happiness looking at him, and just stood, motionless, watching him. Then Milarepa said,

“Master, I heard that the great Marpa the Translator, the disciple of the glorious Naropa, lives in this area. Where is his house?”

The man looked at Milarepa from head to foot, and then said, “Who are you?”

Milarepa replied, “I am a great sinner and I come from Upper Tsang. Marpa is so famous that I have come to beg for his teaching.”

The man said, “Very well. I shall arrange for you to meet Marpa. Meanwhile, plow the field.” He dug up the jar of beer from under the ground and gave it to Milarepa, who drank a bit, and thought it was very refreshing and tasty. “Work hard,” the man said, and walked away, leaving the yaks and plow for Milarepa.

Milarepa worked hard, continuing to plow the field. Then the young boy he saw earlier came up to him and said, “Come to the house and serve the lama.”

The boy seemed impatient to introduce Milarepa to the lama, but Milarepa said, “I’m anxious to finish this work,” and continued until the whole field was plowed. The boy waited, and finally Milarepa went with him to the house.



The same man who was plowing was now in the house eating his meal, seated on a rug over two cushions, with a pillow at his back.

Milarepa thought, “This is the same man I saw before. Where can the lama be?”

Then the man said, “It is true that you don’t know me. I am Marpa. Prostrate!” That means to bow down with the body flat on the floor.

So Milarepa prostrated at his feet. He said,

“Lama Rinpoche, I am a great sinner. I offer you my body, speech and mind. I ask for food, clothing and the teaching.

Please teach me the way which leads to enlightenment in this lifetime.”

Marpa replied, “I don’t want to hear your ravings about being a great sinner. I have not made you commit any sins. What sins have you committed?”

Milarepa told the whole story, admitting his crimes of casting a magic spell that killed 35 people, and of causing a hailstorm that destroyed the harvest of food for the villagers.

Marpa said, “So you have done all that. In any case, it’s good you offer your body, speech and mind. But I will not give you food and clothes *and* the teaching. I will give you food and clothes, but you will have to ask another person for the teaching. Or I will give you the teaching, but you must look elsewhere for food and clothes. Choose between the two. But if you choose the teaching, then whether or not you reach enlightenment in this life will depend only on your own efforts.”

Milarepa said, “Well, since I came to you for the teaching, I’ll look somewhere else for my food and clothes.” He placed his book in Marpa’s shrine room.

Marpa said, “Take that filthy book away. It would make my sacred objects and my shrine dirty.”

Milarepa thought, “He said that because my book contains black magic.” Carefully, Milarepa put it away.

He stayed at Marpa’s house, and Marpa’s kind wife, Dakmema, brought him good meals for a few days. She had compassion for Milarepa, knowing he travelled a long way and was tired.

But then Milarepa knew that should go out and find food, as Marpa expected him to do. So he went begging at houses all over the valley. Many people offered him barley, and then with some of the barley he bought a cooking pot, meat and beer. Then he walked all the way back to Marpa’s house.

By the time he arrived, his body was trembling with fatigue. As he entered the door, out of breath, he dropped his heavy load, so the room shook.

Marpa exclaimed, “Little man, you are too energetic! Do you also intend to bury us under the ruins of the house with your magic? You are obnoxious! Take your barley away.”

He pushed it with his foot. Milarepa dragged it outside, and without any bad intent, thought to himself, “This lama is irritable. I will have to watch my behavior and my way of serving him.”

He returned and bowed to Marpa, and offered him the cooking pot. Marpa took it in his hands and held it for a moment. Tears fell from Marpa’s eyes, and he said,

“Your gift is auspicious, a good and holy gift. I offer it to the Great Master Naropa.”

He raised it up in offering, struck the side of it to make it ring like a bell, and then carried it to his shrine room. He filled it with melted butter from the lamps on the altar.



Milarepa was so filled with emotion and desire to learn the teachings, and begged Marpa to teach him.

Marpa said, "Faithful students come to me in large numbers, but robbers come from the villages of Yadrok Taklung and Ling and steal their supplies and gifts. Bury these two villages in hail. This will be religious work."

Milarepa sent fierce hailstorms to the two villages. Then he asked Marpa to instruct him with the teachings. Marpa replied,

"For the few hailstorms you sent, am I to give you a teaching that I brought back from India with such great difficulty? There are mountaineers out there who attack my disciples. You who call yourself a great magician, cast your spells on those mountaineers! And if you prove your magic, I shall give you the teaching of Naropa to become enlightened in one lifetime."

Milarepa cast his spells, which caused the mountaineers fought among themselves with swords.

Marpa, after finding out about the results of the spells, said, "It is true that you are a great magician." From then on, he called Milarepa "Great Magician."

Milarepa again asked for the teachings. Marpa said,

"Ha! Is it to reward you for your many crimes that I went to India at the risk of my life, and offered great amounts of gold? I hope you are only joking! Anyone else would kill you for that! Now, restore the harvest that you destroyed with the hail, and heal the mountaineers. After that I will teach you. But never come back if you can't do this."

Milarepa felt crushed and was overcome with sorrow. But the next day, Marpa came to him and said,

“Last night I was very hard on you, but don’t be distressed. Be patient. Teaching is very slow work. You have the energy to work, so build a tower that I will give to my son, Dharma Doday. Then I will instruct you and give you food and clothes.”

Milarepa said, “During that time, if I die without the teachings, what will happen to me?”

Marpa replied, “I guarantee that you will not die during this time. My teachings can be given in a few words. If you can meditate with perseverance according to my instructions, you will show whether or not you can become enlightened in this life. In my lineage, an enlightening energy is transmitted which has no similarity to any others.”

Milarepa was comforted and filled with joy by those words.

QUESTIONS:

1. How did Milarepa feel about the magic that he had done? (shame)
2. What did he want to learn? (the Dharma, to purify the mind, to be free from the cycle of birth and death, and to become enlightened)
3. What happened when Milarepa received teachings from the lama called Joy of Gods – did he practice the teachings? (no, he was sleeping a lot)
4. Why do you think Marpa and his wife had the special dreams just before Milarepa arrived? (because Milarepa was going to be a very special student of Marpa)
5. What was Marpa doing when Milarepa first saw him? (plowing a field)
6. Did Marpa seem happy to see Milarepa? (no)
7. What was the one thing from Milarepa that Marpa seemed pleased about? (the cooking pot)
8. What did Marpa call Milarepa? (the Great Magician)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – THE FOUR THOUGHTS:

“O sister, sentient being of the world, All joys and pains are ephemeral. But since you grieve in this way now, I am certain that for you there exists a lasting happiness”

- Milarepa (The Life of Milarepa, p. 124)

“Instead of being overcome with frustration and sorrow, . . . strive with perseverance toward the Dharma.”

- Milarepa (The Life of Milarepa, p. 125)

“Everything that exists is transitory and in constant movement. And especially this world of samsara is devoid of essential purpose and value. Rather than engage in futile actions, I must devote myself to the essential purpose of the Dharma.”

- Milarepa (The Life of Milarepa, p. 103)

“My illusory body nurtured by my father and mother, and the teaching of the holy lama, these two interacting brought me to the true Dharma.”

- Milarepa (The Life of Milarepa, p. 128)

“If someone does not practice Dharma when they have obtained a precious human life at a time when the Buddha’s teachings have spread, that is extremely foolish.”

-Milarepa (The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, Transl. by Christopher Stagg, p. 38-39)

What are the four thoughts that turn the mind toward the Dharma? (1)The preciousness of human life, (2) Impermanence, (3) Karma, and (4) Suffering of life.

When Milarepa realized the harm he had done, and felt the intense shame of having done such an evil thing, he suffered intensely. And then he wanted to learn the Dharma.

It’s quite obvious that suffering of life makes us turn our mind toward the Dharma – because when we suffer, we want to escape! Milarepa too wanted to escape. He didn’t want to suffer again like when he and his mother were treated as slaves, didn’t want to suffer shame again, didn’t want to make more mistakes again and again in future lives, and suffer the results of the bad karmas.

We too don’t want to feel shame, hurt, anger, illness, fear or sadness anymore, we want our mind to be peaceful instead! And, remember that all people suffer, even if they are rich, beautiful, powerful and smart, because of their karmas, and because they don’t yet have the wisdom, the full understanding of their mind, from practicing Dharma.

What about impermanence? In the story, Terrifying Conqueror thought deeply about impermanence when his supporter died. And then he wanted to learn the Dharma.

What do we mean by impermanence? Everything - everything that we can think of - changes. Every day, we experience different things. We get things, and we lose things, don’t have them anymore. We have friends, and then they are away from us. We are successful in something, and then we are unsuccessful. Someone likes what we do, and then someone doesn’t like what we do. We are lucky, then unlucky. We can’t keep things going just as we want them. We will always suffer disappointments, discomforts, and unpleasant experiences in life. So after some

time, we get frustrated that we can't have things just the way we like them, no matter how hard we work or how much money we have.

We start to think, "There must be a better way. Look how peaceful the lamas are, and people who practice Dharma. They seem to know how to stay happy and peaceful."

We learn to calm ourselves by remembering the Buddha's teaching that bad things won't last, they are impermanent. And we learn not to get too carried away by the good things, remembering that they too won't last, so we don't get so disappointed when they aren't there anymore.

And why does thinking about the preciousness of human life make you want to learn and practice the Dharma? If life is so precious, wouldn't we all want to just have as much fun as possible? Or try to get the most money so we can have all the best things? No. Why not? Because, even if we get everything we want, we don't feel happy for long. We get bored. We want something else, or we want to do something else. Having fun never lasts very long – there is always something unpleasant that comes next. So instead of wasting time trying to have fun and more fun, we should spend our precious life time trying to find a way to make our minds be peaceful and happy.

So these three thoughts – preciousness of human life, impermanence, and the suffering of life – make us want to find a type of peace and happiness that goes on and on.

And how does thinking of karma turn our mind toward the Dharma?

We know that by doing good actions, good karmas, like doing things that are helpful, generous, and compassionate, and avoiding doing or saying things that are unkind, we get good results, like good health, the things we need, good friends, and help when we need it. So we think about doing good karmas and avoiding bad karmas.

So, by following Dharma we can find the kind of peace and happiness that continues, and that leads to enlightenment, when we have wisdom and no more suffering.

ACTIVITY – Coloring or watercolor painting:

Color the Tibetan Buddhist symbols – the vase, the dorje (or vajra), double dorje, and victory banner - with markers, watercolor paints or crayon.

The vase, dorje and victory banner were the symbols that Marpa saw in his dream the night before Milarepa arrived.

The Treasure Vase and Victory Banner are 2 of the 8 Auspicious Symbols in Tibetan Buddhism. The others are the Dharma Chakra (wheel), Precious Umbrella, Lotus flower, Golden Fish, Endless Knot, and Conch shell.



8 Auspicious Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism

