

THE LIFE OF GAMPOPA Part 1 – Endurance

Gampopa was born in southern Tibet in the year 1079. His father was a great doctor, very skilled at healing people with herbal medicines and rituals, who trained Gampopa also to be an excellent doctor by the time he was 15 years old. So, Gampopa was called Lhajé, which means “doctor.” He also was a Buddhist scholar, because he studied Vajrayana Buddhist scriptures as a teenager, and he had a very compassionate and gentle personality. When he was 22 years old, he got married to the daughter of a powerful village chief, and soon after, his wife gave birth to a son and daughter.

But one day his little son died unexpectedly, and as soon as he was buried, the daughter also passed away. Gampopa and his wife were grieving the loss of their dear little children, and then several days later, his wife became very ill. Three tragedies within only a few days!

Gampopa gave her every medical treatment and ritual that he knew to try and heal her illness. But nothing helped. She remained very sick, and soon was very close to death. Day after day, Gampopa read many books of Buddhist scriptures to her, to ease her mind and body as it went through the process of dying. But she remained alive. As a doctor, he knew that she was suffering terribly and had no strength to keep her body alive, and that most people in that condition already would have passed away. He knew that something was holding her back, keeping her alive despite her extreme suffering.

He thought, “Though her body’s strength is at its end, still she does not die. She must be attached to something.”



He said to her, “If you are attached to any object, I will give it to the monasteries. Any wealth or money that you are attached to, put it to good use by offering it to the monks or by giving it to people who are in need. There is nothing you should be attached to. The two of us have met each other because of our previous good intent. But, because of the power of negative karma, you have gotten this illness, and everything I have done to help you has done nothing but cause

you more suffering. Whether you live or die, there is nothing for me to do but practice the genuine Dharma.”

His wife replied, “Now, I am ready to die. I have no attachment to land, food, or wealth, nothing at all. But, Lhajé I do have attachment to you. I don’t want you to take another woman to marry. So, I will send my older brother to stay with you. Anyway, the householder life in this world of samsara is never truly a happy one. Therefore, Lhajé, you must wholeheartedly practice the genuine Dharma.”

In response, he said, “Even if you do recover, husband and wife will eventually be apart. If you die, I will only practice Dharma and will not take another wife. Would you like me to make a solemn promise?”

She said, “You have never deceived others or lied, but this time, in order for me to have full confidence, please do make a solemn promise.”

He brought his uncle there to be a witness, to hear him make the promise, so there would never be any question of whether he really made the promise. Placing a volume of scripture written in precious gold on his head, he made the promise aloud in front of his wife and uncle.

His wife said, “Lhajé, I will be watching from the grave to see whether you practice the genuine Dharma or not.” She took his hand in hers and gazed at his face. Without a single tear falling from her eyes, she took her last breath and died.



After making offerings and participating in the funeral for his wife, he went to a lonely place away from other people to meditate and practice Dharma. His uncle found out where he was and felt compassion for him, thinking that he wanted to be alone because he was so sad. The uncle brought beer and food to him, and they talked. Gampopa said,

“Uncle, since my wife passed away, I am truly happy.” What a shocking thing to say!

The uncle became furious and shouted, “You will never be able to find such a good wife as the one you had! If her father were to hear of this, he would come after you!” Then he threw a handful of dirt at Gampopa.

But Gampopa said, “Uncle, have you already forgotten? You were the one who was a witness for the promise I made just a few days ago. Am I not practicing Dharma as I promised?”

The uncle said, "Nephew, you are right. Though I have become old, I seldom think of the Dharma. This really is a great fault. Nephew, practice Dharma. I will take care of your property and wealth." He realized that Gampopa must have healed his grief and experienced deep happiness by the practice of Dharma and meditation.

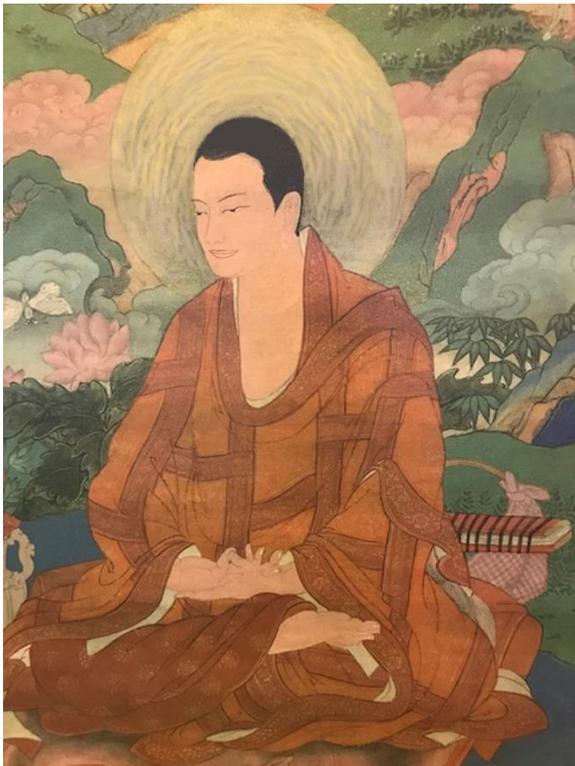
Then Gampopa, without telling his relatives, traveled far away to a monastery where there was a very well-known monk. He said to the monk,

"Precious guru, I have come for the sake of Dharma. Please allow me to enter the gateway of the Dharma and lend me some food."

The monk said, "I have no food to lend you. If you have some yourself, bring it and I will allow you to enter the gateway of Dharma."

Gampopa was puzzled, and he thought, "If I had food then I wouldn't ask. This seems a bit pointless. In the scriptures it says that the guru with compassion helps other beings. It seems this guru doesn't have great compassion." He didn't feel devotion toward the guru, so he decided to leave and go back to his homeland.

When he got back home, he packed a bag with some things to support his practice of Dharma, including some gold, to offer to Dharma teachers he might meet. Then he went to another monastery and was ordained as a Buddhist monk. His head was shaved and he wore the robes of a monk. After he received many teachings there, he thought, "Now I must practice."



He had great wisdom and compassion, and very few attachments. He had great faith and diligence to practice, and very little laziness. During the day he did Dharma work and studied, and at night he practiced meditation.

In those times in Tibet, almost a thousand years ago, it was very common for people to have lice and other types of insects and parasites in and on their bodies. But Gampopa's body was never harmed by insects or parasites.

He only ate once every five or six days, but he was never hungry, and he always experienced bliss. He could sit in deep meditation without moving for many days. Whatever attachments and aggressions he had, soon disappeared.

Meanwhile, Milarepa was staying at Poto Red Rock with the greatest of his students, called his heart-sons, including Rechungpa and Shiwa Ö. One of the students said to Milarepa,

“Now, Jetsun, your body has grown old. If you should pass away to another pure world, we will need someone who can come to replace you to purify our minds, help our practice, and allow people to gain merit by serving him. Jetsun, in whomever you trust to be able to do this, it would be good for you to give them the instructions completely, and give them the power. Without this, we won’t be able to carry on and protect our lineage.”

Milarepa, slightly displeased, said, “There is a student who will be able to spread the teachings and make them grow. I will look to see where he is tonight. Come back tomorrow and I will tell you.”

The next morning, Milarepa awoke earlier than usual and called all his students to him. He said, “The noble being who will hold my teachings, the vase who will be filled with the key instructions and who will be able to spread the teachings in the ten directions, is one who has been fully ordained as a monk with the name ‘Lhajé.’ He will come very soon. Last night I had a dream where I saw him. He will be like the sunshine of the Buddha’s teachings and will be able to help unlimited numbers of beings.” He laughed with happiness.

Then he explained in a song that the instructions from the great gurus Naropa and Maitripa were given to his guru Marpa, who gave them to him, but they are not given to beings who are not worthy of them. He sang that if a worthy person comes, he will give them freely; if his son the teacher arrives, he will give them to him. The students realized that this teacher he was singing about must be extremely special - the only person worthy of receiving all the instructions from Milarepa - even though his very great students Rechungpa and Shiwa Ö were right there with him!

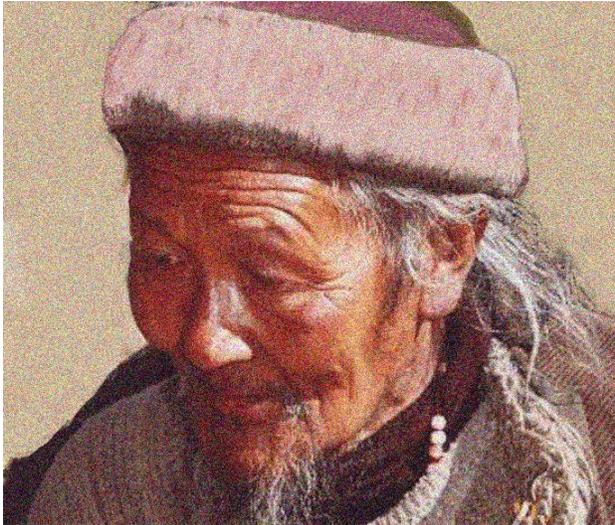


At that time, there was a great famine in the land; the farmers’ crops didn’t grow, so many people didn’t have enough food to eat. Just outside the gate of the monastery where Gampopa was staying, there were three beggars who were hoping to receive something.

One of them said to the others, “How wonderful it would be if this evening, the excellent monks of this monastery were to give out

food as charity to everyone because of the famine. If they didn't discriminate against anyone who comes, then we could get some too. Then after we ate our fill, we could gather some leftover bits of tsampa and sit near the monastery and enjoy ourselves as much as we like by eating what we collected."

Another beggar said, "I have an idea that's easier than yours. It would be nice if we could gather some greens and make a big pot of soup to eat."



The oldest of the three beggars said, "We're men! Even if we're hungry, we should still smile and laugh. If a bird is hungry, it will still fly. Don't just talk about your bellies. There is a monk with a pure mind who is coming to take a walk around the mountain. If he heard us talk like this, it would be shameful for us! If you want to hope, then have a big hope. Hope to be a pure Dharma king who spreads the Buddha's teachings throughout Tibet. Or else, consider the Lord of Yogis, Milarepa, in the western Lapchi Snow Mountain range, who lives on the food of meditation, wears only one cloth, and survives the cold winter

only by the heat from his own body. He meditates day and night and remains in deep meditation. When he moves to different places, he flies through the air. To be in his presence would be the greatest thing – how wonderful it would be to practice as he does! Or else, just to see his face would be so wonderful." As he spoke, tears began streaming down his face.

At that moment, Gampopa walked near them and heard the beggar mention Milarepa's name. That was the first time he had heard of Milarepa, yet such faith and devotion arose in Gampopa that he fainted and fell down, and just lay on the ground. He didn't become conscious again until midnight. When he awoke, he had tears in his eyes and he bowed in the direction where Milarepa must be. He begged Milarepa, wherever he might be, "Jetsun, Jetsun, please accept me!"

The next morning, he thought, "Will I meet the Jetsun Milarepa?" He went out of the monastery to where the three beggars were, and called them over to him. He gave them meat, butter, and other foods – more than they had wished for – and they ate their fill. Then Gampopa said,

"I wish to meet this guru that you speak of. It seems you know a lot about him. Could you please lead me to him? In my stash of wealth, I have 16 pieces of gold, and I will give you half, which you can use to practice Dharma yourselves."

The two younger beggars replied, "We don't know anything about this guru." But the older beggar said, "I can help you."

So Gampopa and the old beggar started walking on a journey together to the area where they might find Milarepa. Gampopa kept thinking, with great devotion and tears falling from his eyes, "When will I meet my guru?" When it was time to eat, he didn't feel like eating. He didn't want to stop and rest. He just wanted to keep on walking until they found Milarepa.

After some time, the old beggar pretended to be sick and said, "I'm not very familiar with the way from here on. But there's a monastery called Sakya up ahead, you can go there and ask for help."

So Gampopa's companion abandoned him and walked back the way they came. Then Gampopa was all alone, not knowing which direction to go, wandering around like a blind man. At night, laying alone outside, he wept with his face to the ground. He thought, with despair, how would he find his guru? Somehow, miraculously, the old beggar appeared to him and said,

"Son, you've almost made it, don't cry like this. I will show you the way." Later in his life, Gampopa believed that the beggars actually were appearances created by Milarepa.

Gampopa continued on, asking people along the way if they knew where Milarepa was. When one man told him that Milarepa was staying in Chuwar, Gampopa was so happy that he hugged the man around his neck. Gampopa walked on and on until he was totally exhausted, and lay down on a bench to sleep. He hadn't eaten in a couple of days, so his body became very weak and he fainted and fell off the bench. When he finally awoke at midnight, laying on the ground, every inch of his body ached and he was extremely thirsty. He lay there, helpless and unable to get up, from thirst and weakness, for two days. He began to think he might die. He thought,

"If I can't meet the Jetsun Milarepa in this life, in the next life I will be born wherever he is. In this life, the next life, and the bardo place between lives, there is no other hope except Milarepa."

Then a teacher who was traveling saw Gampopa lying there and asked, "Where are you going?"

Gampopa said, "I'm going toward Drin to meet the Jetsun Milarepa in person."

The teacher, noticing Gampopa's exhausted and weak appearance, said, "I'm going in that direction, too. Are you feeling sick?"

Gampopa replied, "My body is not well at all. I'm also very thirsty. Could you give me some water?"

The teacher gave him a bowl of water and Gampopa drank it to the last drop. After that, Gampopa felt fully refreshed and so they walked together in the direction toward Drin.



Meanwhile, Milarepa was teaching his students. In the middle of teaching, he suddenly stopped and meditated, or suddenly stopped and burst out laughing. One of the students, a lady, wondered what was going on with him, so she said,

“Jetsun, sometimes when you’re teaching, you sit there meditating, and sometimes you laugh. Is it because you are thinking of the qualities of the good students and sometimes you think of the wrong thoughts of the bad students?”

He said no, that wasn’t what he was thinking about. She asked, “Then, Jetsun, why is it that you laugh?”

He replied, “My son the teacher sat on a bench and his whole body was in pain, and he cried out, ‘Jetsun, please look at me!’ with tears of great faith and devotion. Having compassion for him, I blessed him. Then I became very happy, so I laughed.” Milarepa was so happy that Gampopa was coming to see him.

The woman said, “When will he arrive?” “He will arrive the evening of the day after tomorrow,” he replied. She said, “Do we have the karmic good fortune to meet this man?”

Milarepa said, “Yes, you do. Whoever puts down a seat for him when he first arrives will be blessed in meditation. Whoever meets and guides him when he arrives, I will lead to liberation and great bliss.”

QUESTIONS:

1. What are the two promises that Gampopa’s wife want him to make? (not to get married and to practice the genuine Dharma)
2. What hardships did Gampopa endure at home? (his children died, he couldn’t heal his wife, and his wife died)
3. What did Gampopa become at the second monastery? (a monk)
4. What hardships did Gampopa endure on the way to see Milarepa? (the beggar abandoned him, he didn’t know which direction to go, he didn’t have enough to eat or drink, he fainted and was too weak to get up off the ground)
5. Why did Milarepa laugh sometimes while he was teaching? (he was happy because he knew that Gampopa was coming)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Endurance:

“Meditation, diligence, and endurance in hardship, these three: these are the stallion of the mind. When it runs, you’ll quickly escape to liberation.” (100,000 Songs of Milarepa by Tsangnyön Heruka, translated by Christopher Stagg, p. 71)

“Diligence is the direct path to liberation. It is necessary for all genuine Dharma. If one doesn’t have it, there’s no hope at all. Ride the horse of diligence, and you’ll come along.” (p. 529)

“First you need to give service to the learned ones; Second, you need to have faith in the guru. Third, you need to have perseverance for yourself. May you have these three necessities.” (p. 422)

“At all times and in every way, . . . Beautify yourself with the ornament of discipline. Shake off and wear the animal hide of patience. Ride the magical horse of diligence.” (p. 440)

“Listen again, my disciple-sons, in this polluted age of the Buddha’s teaching, you should write ‘perseverance’ in stone.” (p. 573)

“Have diligence, and strive in virtuous action. . . . Faith is like an autumn mist; When it dissipates, you must have perseverance.” (p. 650)

Gampopa endured extreme loss, when his children and wife died so close together in time. He also endured extreme frustration, trying to heal his wife who was so sick, and wouldn’t get better no matter how much he tried to help her. Then, Gampopa endured extreme difficulties when the beggar abandoned him, he slept on the ground, and he didn’t know which direction to go but was just wandering around trying to find Milarepa.

He endured extreme discomfort when he didn’t have enough to eat or drink, and he fainted and was too weak to get up off the ground.

It was so extreme that he really thought he was going to die, alone with no one to help him.

He had great endurance – the strength to overcome his loss, frustration, difficulties, and discomforts, without giving up.

Meditation and Dharma practice helped him overcome the loss of his family.

The hope of finding his guru Milarepa helped him overcome the extreme difficulties and discomforts on the way to see him.

Endurance means being patient and strong while experiencing something that is difficult and takes a long time.

Who do you think of when you hear the word “endurance”?

Maybe you think of a sports star. Or someone running, swimming or bicycling in a long race. Or a mountain climber.

Can you think of some examples of when you had to have endurance?

Maybe you were in a long race, or you had to study for a difficult exam, or you worked hard on a long, difficult project.

We need endurance - to study and succeed in school, or in sports.

We also need to be able to have endurance for our success in the future – to learn a skill, to get a good job, to take care of a family.

But, especially in modern times, people don't have much endurance because they think that they should get quick results, and they don't want to work hard and long.

They are lazier and more impatient.

When they haven't developed endurance, perseverance, and patience, they often lose jobs, lose their temper, or have extreme anxiety or aggression when they face difficulties in life.

So it's extremely important to have endurance, also in practicing meditation and Dharma.

Try to remember a time when you had endurance.

What motivated you to have the endurance to finish and not give up?

Maybe you wanted to win, get a good grade, or be proud of something you made.

But, we need to develop endurance even when there isn't an obvious reward.

Next time you find yourself saying "I can't do this anymore", or "This is too hard for me," try to have confidence and patience to successfully complete what you are doing, and remember that you are developing your endurance.

If you practice patience and work hard to accomplish something even when it is very difficult, unpleasant, or frustrating, then you are developing your endurance.

ACTIVITY – Maze:

Help Gampopa find his way through the maze to Milarepa. There are two ways through the maze – see if you can find both ways. As you work through the maze and find dead ends, remember the patience and endurance Gampopa had to have in overcoming difficulties to meet Milarepa.

